

Under The Blue

The Blue Series Volume 1

By Josephine Dillon

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Smashwords Edition

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*This book is dedicated to my little brother Chris,
who helped me get the story out of my head
at a time when nothing interesting was on the television.*

Chapter One

Summer 1986

He couldn't wait to get out there. The ocean beckoned him with a gentle breeze and a nudge. *Come to where it will begin again...*

"I know," he whispered back, taking another long drag from his cigarette. It had been calling him all summer long it seemed, but then again, David thought his entire young life was simply a painful act of waiting to evolve. The repetition was killing him. *Was it a mistake to be alive at all? It sure feels that way.*

He scanned the shore and took in all the meaningless bodies of strangers, some colliding in the water, others walking around oblivious to his stare. He shook his head, flicking the ashes into the sand. They danced around in the wind under his hand, his cigarette perched between his index and middle finger like he was a rock star.

Reliving the moment in his bathroom two nights ago after a brutal fight with his father, David could still see the reflected light dance along the razor's edge as he turned it from side to side. He'd then positioned it at his wrist to cut but felt distracted, feeling suddenly crowded in the tiny, empty bathroom. The space seemed to be spinning all around him as he stood there trying not to hear the sound of many screaming, unrelenting voices encouraging him to end his life. He could swear as he sat there remembering the song now, several women were singing along, each voice taking turns singing a verse like a chorus of wicked witches marching around a brewing cauldron.

As the voices pressed him to finish his life, David also saw flashes of what the bathroom he and his siblings all shared would look like once he was done destroying himself. Blood splattered against white walls and his body on the floor in a puddle of the same would be the scene as Dillon walked in. Yeah, he thought as he held the razor away from his exposed wrist, knowing his luck, his little brother would be the one to find him because he was always around. Never more than a few paces away, Dillon was his shadow; it was as if the boy somehow knew something like this might happen at any minute. Shaking his head to dislodge the gruesome image of his suicide and Dillon's witness, David took a quick, calming drag on his cigarette and blew out in a long exhale as his mother watched nearby.

No, self violence wouldn't serve him in the next world he thought as he took another cleansing drag. He couldn't deal with any injuries sustained and carried into the next world

anyway.

Talk about creating a bad start to a new life – that’s not how I want to check out.

Drowning would be the answer yet again. This time, he’d go far enough out and beyond the reach of the lifeguards. David was sure the current would take him there. It was just so simple and easy – too easy. He shrugged off the instant panic trying to sneak into his psyche. Could something so easy ever be the right thing to do? Was the ending of his life supposed to be that easy? He sighed and didn’t answer himself.

David paused, closed his eyes, and thought about giving up on his life again. He was a teenager without a voice and no power to change anything about his current situation. Although he was exceptionally good at creating chaos at home, school and occasionally at church – to scare innocent people into believing he was the Anti-Christ – these were not reasons to stick around for very long. No, it had been more like a forced vacation until this point in time. He knew one thing for sure though as he took another long drag. He was tired of wasting his time here. Besides, he decided as he blew out smoke and tried to avoid the ever constant glare of his mother, who wouldn’t want to be instantly powerful where he was going anyway? He sure as hell wanted to be. He finally glanced over and waved at her with his cigarette perched between his fingers. She frowned and quickly turned away.

“Yep, that’s right, look away.” He snuffed his cigarette into the sand and paused in quick reflection. He nodded his head to agree with himself. *She was right after all. Mother was right. I AM morbid to a fault...just don’t belong in this family of perfect star citizens—*

Leave then—

Well...okay....

There was Dillon though - his anchor, his reason for being here. Dillon was so fragile. He loved him yet at times, despised him for his incredibly weak and demure spirit. Dillon was the kid every older brother couldn’t leave behind. He was the perfectly weak and insecure little side kick everyone loved and protected, so naturally David saw himself as his guardian, absorbing any hostility that could possibly be directed at the youngest.

“There! I think that’s everyone!” Mrs. Smith chirped in, putting away the sunscreen as she sat in her chair to read. David didn’t care that she’d overlooked him, for that was the way things were in the Smith household. Still, he thought as he lit his second cigarette, he did secretly enjoy the familial separation. He had always felt the butt of a divine joke by God

Himself whenever he would begin to inspect his family portrait up close. Why was he selected, placed and birthed into a family of devote and at times, fanatical, theocratic Christians? Well, that's easy, David thought. *God was bored and needed more Divine Comedy. Amen.*

He now cringed as he bemoaned his family's most endearing hobby – his parents' grass roots church organization they'd started years ago. As the pastor and spiritual advisor for his flock, Father took it upon himself to 'save everyone' from the corruption of modern day society. David looked around and quickly interrupted his own thoughts. *Save everyone from what - the perils of the beach and the surf?*

"Give me a break," he whispered as he shook his head and blew out smoke.

Father was indeed a modern day missionary. Although atypical, both his parents would break the mold of the traveling missionary family by NOT traveling. He shook his head in disgust as he thought about why his parents chose to be stationary missionaries. They sure wouldn't think to leave this fake Southern Californian paradise to venture off to pseudo-communicate with natives in far off Third World countries – nope, that would be interesting, dangerously cool and almost palatable - instead, Mom and Dad were determined to spread "The Word" in their own little hometown of Oceanside, California. A small oasis an hour or so – give or take nasty traffic – north of San Diego. It was a mostly middle class suburban town made famous by the coastal scenes from the recent mega huge hit movie 'Top Gun' with Tom Cruise.

"Now there's a man with interesting interests." Another ocean breeze brushed his hair off his face and David smiled. "Thanks - couldn't see for awhile under all that hair," he whispered softly.

Looking out at the Pacific, David quickly decided his life hadn't served him well in his almost seventeen years of existence, but today would be a climatic, cataclysmic day in the making. Concentrating on his freedom, almost to the point of meditating, he snapped back into the present when a visitor sat next to him. The invasion was quickly softened when he turned and noticed, as well as felt, Dillon's presence.

"Hey Dave, why not join us—"

"Don't start with me again about 'getting involved with the family' bullshit, Dil. Besides, you and I both know I don't play with Daniel the Baboon. He sickens me." He took a long drag from his cigarette and frowned as he watched Daniel watch him with disdain, repeatedly tossing his only prized possession – a stupid football – up in the air only to catch it again like a trained

circus animal. “Someone needs to drown him quickly.”

“Please d-don’t say that.” Dillon’s voice was always so soft and gentle when he spoke; it served at times, as a tool, to defuse and destroy David’s self deprecating and hostile emotions. “Daniel is just jockish at times, but he m-means well.”

David didn’t answer, for there was always something in that sad, nervous stutter that also succeeded in deflating his anger and hatred. Dillon was to David, a human angel; with his blonde hair and warm blue eyes, his little brother was quite the contrast to his shoulder length and messy, jet black hair and light blue eyes. David felt like a devil at times when he’d glance at his family portrait, since he was the only dark haired one among a group of blonde Christian puritans. He took another drag from his cigarette, glanced up at the sky and frowned again. *Damn it! I don’t belong here in this pious family! And why is my brotherly anchor so effective?! Nice one, God. Way to go! Put me in this Christian family I despise, and then give me a way out, only to make me feel incredibly guilty for leaving my angelic brother behind. Why did you have to give me a conscience?!*

Dillon sighed as he watched the cigarette’s end burn redder by the second. He hated the smoking more than the cursing. It was consuming his brother to be lighting all those poisonous tobacco sticks. Sometimes, when he’d watch his brother light up, Dillon could swear the match never lit the cigarette when struck. It was as if it spontaneously caught fire just by David holding it. He pleaded anyway, “Please don’t smoke, Dave—“

“*Please* don’t tell me what to do, *Dil*,” he blew out smoke only to watch it float back into Dillon’s face accidentally. “Sorry, can’t control the wind...yet.”

Dillon coughed and stuck his tongue out in disgust as he waved away the smoke. “It’s not good for you and I worry. Couldn’t you at least smoke less?” He lowered his voice and turned away from the direction of their mother sitting far enough away to be out of hearing range. He always used discretion as a tool to keep his older brother behaving and his parents from noticing. It didn’t work often but he used it anyway. “It’s so bad for you, Dave. Please quit – for me?”

“I’ve told you several times already, I’m involved in a secret government research project on chain smoking and children. I’ve freely volunteered to do this and I can’t quit now – it’ll fuck up the results.” David glanced over at his brother as he saw him flinch over his callous words. Was his tone of voice that bad? Was it the cursing? He always cursed around his little brother.

The only person he didn't openly curse around was his father. He made sure to mouth curse words then, reassuring himself they were just as good as vocal sins.

He suddenly looked away and thought about what he'd said to Dillon, feeling the guilt start to creep in like it always seemed to do whenever the little cherub was involved. David quickly realized maybe he'd gone overboard with the sarcasm and aloof attitude. He'd always tried to keep his cool with his younger brother from as far back as he could remember. The protective embrace had yet to dissolve between the two of them. They were connected in many ways – so many in fact it secretly scared him. He could never bear to hurt this one; Dillon wasn't like the other members of his family. To him, Dillon was the *only* member of his family. He suddenly felt the urge again to get up and leave, fearful Dillon would anchor him down again. The presence of someone so purely innocent and kind; the only person he truly cared for, was going to ruin his mission yet again.

He'll be well taken care of and you know this. He's the family gem, the apple of everybody's eye and he's loved. Just go, knowing he'll be better off without you and your second hand smoke...

Another long drag on his cigarette calmed him down enough to get up and leave. He shoved it in the sand as he stared at the waves of spraying salt water. He glanced over at his mother's side profile while Dillon continued to stare at him with a pleading look on his face.

Don't look at him, David thought as he kept his eyes on his detached mother while she sat there in her lawn chair and read, aloof. Could she feel him staring? Probably...funny and slightly odd, he thought, to think she obviously knew he smoked, but hadn't yet told his father – that revelation would be a fatal mistake if *Daddy* ever found out. None of the other kids had said anything either – did she keep them silent too? He thought all this, trying to figure out why she still hadn't mentioned his drug of choice to his heavy-handed father. *Maybe she does care?* He looked away again. *Need to switch gears...the ocean...right...going to do it right this time... damn I hate being here. God hates me.* A nice breeze blew by, nudging him to the water again, trying to keep him on task.

“I need to be alone Dil. Go play catch with the family baboon.”

He walked away hearing Dillon attempt several times to call out to him to return, but the stuttering kept full sentences from getting to him. *He'll be fine...I already know this and accept it already. Leaving is the only answer, for me and especially for him.*

Having quickly left Dillon back with the others and knowing he was probably watching him at the moment, David tried not to look too suspicious. The waves were crashing ruthlessly with moderate winds. Time was passing by leisurely for most, but painfully for him.

Where is Dillon now?

A look to the left found him desperately trying to play football with Daniel - the perfect eldest son and star quarterback. As if that wasn't enough to put on a college application, Daniel was also the future valedictorian of Vista High School. Of course that was all a cover for the real person only David was privy to, for Daniel was his nemesis and at times, his bully. An ass on a good day, pond scum on most other days, he had a slimy, sneaky way about him that imitated Eddie Hascall from 'Leave It To Beaver.' Watching them play together, Daniel giving Dillon pointers on throwing that stupid leather toy knowing fully Dillon had very little athletic ability to begin with, made David insanely jealous. It didn't matter anyway, he thought. *The corruption will become inevitable after my oceanic departure today.*

Waist high in the water, he stood there taking in the view. He slowly moved forward, so as not to draw too much attention to himself. Each wave passed through him and with each one, he felt as though he was going through a doorway. His heart was pounding but he turned his brain off. He didn't want to feel regret, remorse, guilt or fear. With that thought, a huge wave hit him square in the chest and within seconds his feet were no longer touching the sand. He began to swim smoothly through the water until he felt the gentle tug of the current and with that, he let go.

Within minutes the shoreline was small as he floated by the jetty. He was farther out now than he was a month ago when he tried this same move. The lifeguard was on him fast then, wrapping that damn red floater around his neck and dragging him to shore like this season's catch - not this time though. He drifted in the water and noticed the waves were gone. He also noticed how peaceful it was to be here in a place without people; a vast array of the unknown before him.

So many secrets under that blue blanket. The ocean rocked him back and forth as if he were in an infinitely large cradle. After floating like that for awhile, he began to swim to his left to go along with the current. More time ticked by and no sign of help. Wow, that was too easy David thought, almost too good to be true. He suddenly noticed his breathing getting faster. It was getting more and more difficult to stay above water.

David loved the ocean but hated to taste the saltwater; even a drop of it flirting near his mouth would elicit spontaneous vomiting. Suddenly he was finding himself slipping into that salty water and tasting it. It was harsh and stung his throat. He began to panic. With each mouthful of salt water lapping against his lips, the pain would sear down and sizzle in his chest, burning his lungs. He began to struggle to stay above. His legs felt like lead, pulling him further down like an anchor. In a blink of an eye he found himself looking up at the sun through the water, two inches below the surface. The realization he was too tired to swim anymore allowed a brief moment of struggle and resistance, followed by a quiet resolution to enjoy his last few moments alive.

Now two feet under water, David watched the sun began to sway side to side in a beautiful yellow blur of color. Looking at it longingly, he knew his suicide would send him away, shunned by God, to be locked up with everything else darkly created and rejected below. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness envelop him in the warm water of the Pacific as he thought of the only person in the world he'd miss and wouldn't be allowed to see or influence again. Dillon's face only lingered in his mind for a few seconds, but the hesitation was enough to unknowingly buy enough time to create for David, a second chance. He let his arms drift up to touch the ocean's surface, wanting to feel the air one last time against his fingertips.

Suddenly, like a cruel reply from God above - or maybe it was God, Himself? A tanned, muscular arm reached down into the water and grabbed him by the hand.

Why did I have my arms up?!

As he was being yanked upward to greet the sun, the red floater again met his neck.

Damn it all to hell and back again...

Chapter Two

The Smiths

After that fateful day, David was banned from visiting the beach for the rest of the summer. It was painful for him to watch and listen to that incredibly stupid lifeguard – the same lifeguard who'd saved him earlier in the summer – discuss his actions with his mother and siblings while he sat in the sand, a wet outlaw. He couldn't look at Dillon either, although he could feel his brother's heart-breaking disappointment mixed in with everyone else's loathing for him. It was an interesting blend, the Smith clan.

“He's alright, ma'am. Just keep the boy outta the water for awhile and-and,” he paused and glanced at David who gave him a silent, but deadly ‘shut the hell up’ look in reply. “Uh... maybe get him some counseling to deal with his issues because that's twice now that he's done... that...”

“My God in Hell, he can count,” David whispered with disdain to the sand loud enough only Dillon heard him.

Koby the lifeguard had golden, sun bleached hair that hung down to his shoulders and dark, tanned skin covering a well-toned body, along with a voice that screamed an eighth grade education. Rachel however, was absolutely smitten as she stood next to him wearing her pink and white polka-dot bikini. Nodding her head in agreement, apparently understanding him way too much David thought, she looked like a life-sized human Barbie doll. *Can't believe she's my sister.*

“I'm glad you're okay,” Dillon spoke softly, loud enough only the two of them could hear as he gently nudged David's shoulder. David closed his eyes in response and craved a cigarette, so he leaned over to his pile of clothes to pull out his pack but they were gone. Looking at Dillon in surprise, then Daniel, he suddenly frowned.

“I took the liberty of giving your cigs and that cool, black and red anarchy lighter to that homeless bum leaning against the pier. I figured you wouldn't mind losing your stuff since you'd walked out to the ocean to check out and all.” Throwing and catching his football as he spoke, Daniel's obnoxious horse laugh startled Mother and Koby, who were sharing small talk.

David copied his older brother's laugh to mock him, only to turn away and stare at the ocean's gentle roar, trying as best he could to disappear. Mother finally got out of her beach chair to address the lifeguard seriously and maybe David thought, to address him for once.

“Thank you, uh...”

“Koby. That’s my name and your welcome ma’am.”

“Well, Koby, I assure you this won’t happen again. He’s grounded from Oceanside Beach for quite some time after this little stunt—“

“But it was an accident! I was swimming and got swept out in the current!” David was finally pissed, so he spoke loud enough for all to hear, which was a shock since most of the time he hardly spoke to any of them except of course, Dillon.

Mother stopped her banter long enough to give her middle son an indecisive visual look over. *He might be telling the truth...no, probably not.* “That’s enough young man! Now I don’t want to talk about it anymore! And if anyone of you brings this up, especially to your father, I’ll make sure to hand out punishments to all of you—“

“*What?! So the little suicidal maniac gets off again?! Come on, Mother! He needs to pay by Father’s hand!*”

“He will pay Daniel! He’s seeing the beach and the pier for the last time today. Now, I suggest you all enjoy yourselves for the next hour while David and I sit here and dry off.”

Secretly thankful she wouldn’t have to witness another gruesome punishment by her husband’s hand again, Sara sighed then shuddered at the thought of her middle son - the black sheep of the family - always getting beaten. Hoping along with Father that the proverbial rod they’d used on David since he was young enough to actually run away from them had not changed him at all, she now gave her son’s side profile a disapproving glare as she finished her sentence but he didn’t notice. He had managed to finally meditate and tune out everyone there including his wet, sandy skin, in order to concentrate on the Pacific’s front door, and was far enough away in his mind’s eye, not even Dillon could bring him back.

It ended this way for David. The summer of ’86 would become just another disappointment. At least he had his dreams, he decided, until the ocean breeze suddenly shot sand in his eyes. Hands to face, David leaned down and rubbed them, grimacing from the sting. He felt he had it coming for not finishing what he’d tried to start sooner. Sitting there in the sun near his mother, he had to rely on one avenue now. Only one road left to take. Resolved to concentrate on his closet door and his dream world to escape into, he could at the very least, visit the other world. *It would be like a nightly vacation from my current, restricted and boring, teenage life...yeah, that would be okay...escape for eight hours every night while everyone else,*

including Dillon, slept...

Still, he couldn't stop the panic from slipping into his core. He slowly lifted his head, wiping away wet sand so that he could see again, David watched the ocean horizon with frantic worry that his options were now very limited. He had to deal with the fact that the doorway was only fifteen minutes away by fast car, but for him, it was as if Pacific Ocean was across the continent. He sighed as he mourned his isolation. It was a long end to the summer.

As a pastor for the little known and relatively new 'Grass Roots Congregation of Jesus Christ Our Lord,' John Smith lived and breathed his work whenever he could and for David that meant while they waited in line at the grocery store, the gas station, or anywhere else Father could minister to the poor, misguided people of Vista and Oceanside. David would have fun with it sometimes, much to Dillon's quiet grumblings, by grabbing scary bums off the street when his father wasn't looking, to bring over for what David considered to be 'Christian cleansing.' Father would comply because God forbid, he'd turn any downtrodden, petty thief or alcoholic away from receiving 'The Word.' It made for some mild entertainment in an otherwise, droll, uptight household.

Lately however, David was spared from having to attend church. After he was caught playing with fire in one of the pews during a sermon on Revelations, Father decided his second son wasn't worthy enough to represent their clan on Sundays. He'd rationalized that David would scare off or keep potential church goers away with his presence. Add to that, the many comments written down and left by fellow parishioners regarding his middle son's cold stare and dark presence, Pastor Smith felt his position as church father far outweighed his role of father and mentor to a son who had blocked his influence from the time he could walk away. The arson involved a song book and a black, skull faced lighter he delighted in finding in his coat pocket that day. It was the last straw for his more than frustrated father and a relief for David knowing he wouldn't have to pretend to enjoy God's Redemption every Sunday morning.

Chapter Three

Tuesday

Six thirty two a.m.

David rolled over and turned off the alarm clock. It was Tuesday morning and the start of another school day. *I can't handle another day like yesterday...*

He rolled back over in bed, not ready to get up and 'embrace the day' as his mother always sang to no one in particular. *How does one embrace the day?* All he could think of was to breathe in and out repeatedly. That was his version of embracing the day.

Yesterday

Yesterday started like any other day, except it was exceptionally longer than usual, even for a Monday.

David woke up slowly; another night of exhausting, physically draining dreams had entertained his mind. These active nights were becoming more frequent and much more intensely realistic lately he thought as he lay there quietly in bed, staring at the popcorn ceiling.

Dillon sat on the twin bed beside him, dressed neatly and watching him, a worried look on his face. They shared a bedroom on the second floor of their parents' home. Their room also shared a wall with the staircase, which had its benefits on more than a thousand occasions.

"Mornin' sunshine - is everything okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," was all David could breathe out as he sat up and stared at the ground. He was stunned thinking about his journey last night. He couldn't make himself tell Dillon how some of his dreams had turned increasingly darker since his first attempt at the beach; dreams of his death playing over and over again while he slept, only to be replayed almost against his wishes, while he sat at school. It was exhausting to watch the same images play out and at times when he felt he couldn't handle thinking about his own demise anymore, David would swear he was being haunted or hexed to live this way. Dillon cleared his throat and David snapped back into the moment. *I'll need to make something up. I can't very well tell him I dreamt about another version of my suicide - the fifth one this week, no less.*

Lately it seemed that every morning began with Dillon asking about the dreamscape adventures, along with all the characters and their interesting comments. David would pick and choose which stories to tell. Lately though, he could tell the stories were dragging on, burrowing down into his head and into the ground; the bottom of his mind a dark, endless drain hole. It was

definitely getting harder to water down his dream activities for his little brother's innocent entertainment. He silently rose and walked across the room to get dressed, too tired to begin to describe his adventure this time.

He pulled out his drawer from the bottom of a dresser they both shared and smiled as he looked down at his fairly large supply of black clothing. "Black on black to drive them all back" was his motto for dressing each day and it worked with his wardrobe, down to his boots. Black button down shirts with matching dress pants, along with his signature trench coat, allowed David to emphasize even more so, his darker side. Thinking the color choice would scare and keep strangers away, it actually drew unwanted attention his way. He half turned to see Dillon but his little brother was shuffling through his backpack to make sure he had all his supplies in order.

Inspecting his wardrobe again, David thought for a second how much he enjoyed dressing in trench coats, dress pants and combat boots. It just screamed seventies punk rock mixed with a dash of the current decade's glamour. He'd always thought he was meant to be a seventies teenager and anti-hippie war organizer instead of a current eighties victim of silliness. He felt like a lost child in the new world of expanding technology, music and television – absolutely none of it interested him. Thinking about eighties music and fashion as he searched through his clothes, only served to frustrate him more.

What's up with this new Music Television? Why the hell do people want to watch artists all dressed up like actors, sing their songs in a video clip on television when you could go to a concert and see them LIVE? I don't belong in this new decade of video music stars...where was the past in the present? What'll happen if everybody chooses to play music on TV instead of spinning a vinyl record? Total boredom, that's what'll happen...

Watching him dress, Dillon noticed again how painful his movements were. "Dave, you look sore, like you just ran a marathon." Silence followed, then, "Did you dream again last night?"

David turned around dramatically then stopped as if on a dime, posing as he spoke. "Well, now that you mention it, yeah! And it was awesome too because I had just placed first in a fucking marathon, and as I was running up to the podium, I tripped and fell—"

"Fine, I get it." Dillon looked down at his hands folded in his lap and mouthed without making a sound the word 'asshole.'

Smiling at the recognition of the word, David came over half-dressed and lightly pushed his brother sideways onto his bed. “Don’t be worried Dil, I’m fine - honest Injun.”

Trying not to smile, Dillon couldn’t help but mutter a few choice maternal words, although he couldn’t be serious with his brother right now if he tried, for David was wearing his favorite jacket without a shirt on. He looked like a rock star - all he needed was a microphone. “Please don’t use that expression about Indians, Dave. It’s just so racist and not an accurate description—“

“What? Come on, Dil. Lighten up.” He winked and Dillon only shook his head in mock disapproval, watching his brother turn around, his toned stomach giving him a much older, mannish look. Dillon glanced down at his own mid section and grabbed his concaved stomach and sighed. *There’s no six pack here ladies and gentleman, just a small, weaker version of David’s flesh and blood...*

“GOD, whatever do I wear on this glorious Monday?” Placing his hands together in mocking prayer form, David spoke with immediate, albeit fake, reverence. “Please show me the way to great fashion, oh Lord?” He asked the ceiling as he walked back over to his dresser.

“Probably the same thing you always wear,” Dillon replied as he rummaged through his backpack for the second time to make sure everything was still in order.

“Yes, yes, but this is a special day because I get the once in a lifetime opportunity to stand in front of my English class and discuss my favorite European author for several undying minutes of pure agony.” Answered with sarcasm, he took off his jacket and pulled out a black and grey striped long sleeve tee shirt, smiling and thinking it looked like a prison uniform.

“Really? That sounds interesting. Who is it?”

A pause followed while David slipped on his shirt then took it off again, opting out of the convict look and instead, feeling political. He pulled on a wrinkled, black and red anarchy shirt.

“So...who are you speaking about?” Dillon asked again, this time looking up and watching his brother change his shirt a third time.

“What?” David whirled around, irritation spreading across his face as he pulled on his shirt violently.

Dillon, eyes rolling upward, repeated his question. Another pause as they stared at each other in silence, then, as David grabbed his jacket he walked out the door, mouthing the words “No one.”

Dillon's jaw dropped open as he registered the reply. Long after his brother had left the room, he remained sitting there, still staring at the door. A single wooden cross with Jesus nailed to it in gruesome Catholic fashion hung on the wall next to the doorway. Dillon made it a habit to touch Jesus' feet as he entered and left his room each day, usually kissing his fingers first. It served as a reminder that he was never alone. Still, although Dillon tried not to think about it, he couldn't help but wonder as he sat there shifting his gaze to the cross that his not feeling alone had probably everything to do with the person who just left his room.

Walking over to the window to look out at the large, beautiful Eucalyptus tree, he stared beyond it at the horizon to watch the sun come up. "Here she comes," he whispered.

Turning again to the tree, he suddenly met eyes with a single crow perched on the closest branch, its head turned to the side to get a better view. "How strange," Dillon whispered.

"Dillon! Come down to eat or you'll miss the bus!" Mother yelled from downstairs, causing him to jump and smack his forehead into the window pane. The crow remained sitting there, as if checking out his bedroom for a future raid. Oddly strange, Dillon thought again. "Bye," he whispered, his voice annoyed.

Thinking of David made Dillon smile again, redirecting his thoughts and reminding him of his brother's outlaw persona. "My Lord how can he DO that?" He asked Jesus across the room as he turned around and grabbed his backpack. Thinking about David's rebellious nature as he went downstairs to the kitchen where everyone was, all in different phases of consuming breakfast, Dillon couldn't help but feel apprehension for his brother's unprepared speech.

What a pretty thing he is... A nice shiny treasure for the collection! The crow took flight.

Rueben, the family's Irish setter, greeted Dillon as he reached the bottom of the stairs, tail wagging and his long red fur coat leaving hair balls all over the floor. After a quick 'hello,' Dillon breezed straight into the kitchen just in time to watch the drama unfold.

David was already at the table, head held low as he shoveled in his cereal. By staring at the table and rapidly eating, he mostly avoided uncomfortable questions and stares by his parents and older siblings. Rachel and Daniel were both running out the door to catch their daily ride to school from Daniel's best friend Tommy, who played alongside him on the offensive line in football. Rachel kissed her daddy on the cheek as she ran by.

"Good luck on your speech today honey!" Father shouted as he turned with pride to watch her leave. Mother was at the stove brewing tea. As she walked over to say goodbye to the

oldest ones, Dillon entered the room. “Well, it’s about time sleepy head!” Mother gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I was just on my way up there to check on you. Hungry?” She beamed down at him. Sara was almost six feet tall with a willowy frame and long, blond hair always up in a bun, except in the mornings.

This time of day found Dillon enjoying his mother’s beauty. Looking up at her with her hair cascading down her back and wearing her red and white apron, he likened her beauty to nostalgic, perfectly spared antique furniture.

“Cereal works for me.”

While hugging him, Mother took the opportunity to smell his hair. She did this whenever she could. There was always something about her youngest and his smell, fresh and natural and especially with his hair, she felt electricity there. A current of positive electrical charge emitted from him all the time lately it seemed. She found herself unable to get enough of him, knowing that he was secretly her favorite.

Walking toward the breakfast table now, he sat next to David as usual. David looked over at him as he sat down, winking obnoxiously before his black hair fell back over his eyes and he bowed his head in avoidance again. Dillon smiled knowingly in return. At times like these, the two relived their younger youths, playing invisible along with other spy games, gave them both the impression they could disappear at will. Watching David now sitting there trying to camouflage himself, brought Dillon back to the painful present and his smile quickly faded.

Father stood at the kitchen counter and drank his coffee while listening to the daily radio morning talk show. The discussion concerned the Catholic Church and all its scandalous controversies. Religious scandals always made the headlines, making Father pace and frown as he listened to it. He was beginning to stew as the talk got more under way. Within a few minutes, he started mumbling to himself and before long he began shouting about the signs of the end of the world. “The world we know is Hell-bound, Mother. I tell you the end is coming soon - I can feel it!” He clenched his fists together in frustration, which actually looked like glee for reasons Dillon couldn’t quite figure out as he watched his father walk by the table and towards the counter.

Mother nodded her head in silent agreement like she always seemed to do when it came to Father’s many conservative opinions, but in that flash of a second’s time, everything did come to an end, so to speak, for Dillon had just enough time to watch it all unfold next to him.

As if on cue, David stopped eating his cereal long enough to mock his father; his head still lowered, he must have thought he actually *was* invisible when he silently mouthed his father's words.

A backhand from out of nowhere hit David square on the right side of his face, with most of the impact hitting his ear and stinging his lower jaw. The force of the blow threw him into Dillon's lap just as Dillon was pouring milk in his cereal bowl. The milk shot out everywhere, splattering the table and pouring on the boys, covering mainly the older.

The heat spread over David's face as he slowly picked himself up off his brother's lap.

Dillon looked horrified sitting there with his hands up in the air afraid to touch anything, staring between his brother and their father. He then watched as Father loomed over David, his eyes almost popping out of his head. He actually looked animated, with steam shooting out his ears and his face ready to explode from all the pressure building, expanding his head and enlarging his eyes. Dillon thought his father looked like a cartoon character.

Father stuck his hand out until it was less than six inches from David's face, pointing his trembling finger and saying with his teeth clenched to hold back the rage that was welling up in his throat. "I've told you many times over boy - DO NOT disrespect me in MY house! You are here ONLY because we LET you live here, so don't tempt me! If I had any money, you'd be on your way to military school right now and God help your smart-aleck mouth there!" He took a moment to breathe in more anger while David wisely kept his gaze down and focused on the table. Father paused for a second then sighed as if the next sentence was embarrassing to say out loud. "Unfortunately we don't have the money necessary to spend on getting you out of this house!"

Mother gasped and covered her mouth with her hand to keep from speaking.

Gee, isn't it a shame we're dirt poor and NEVER have any money to send me away?

Another long breath and Father had calmed down enough so that he could continue his lecture, glancing at his youngest as well. Dillon wasn't listening this time, just sitting there stunned while Mother ran around them wiping up the milk on the table. "So for the moment and however long that may last, you will abide by my rules MISTER!"

Mother finished with perfect timing. She turned around after her quick clean and gently grabbed her husband's arm to pull him away from striking range of David, who was now sitting back in his seat with his right hand over his ear, his eyes closed. Although the pain was searing

through his head, he took in every word spoken. Tuning out Father was never advisable, especially if his ranting ended with a question meant to be answered with a large heaping of respect and in as few words as possible to show submission. David did, however, keep his eyes closed for they burned with intense heat. It felt as though his eyeballs were actually on fire. He tried to water up some fake tears just to cool them off, but he knew it was no use. He never could cry – not even on demand. *Such a shame too! I could go much farther if I looked pitiful...*

“Finish your breakfast Dillon and get to the bus stop or you’ll be late for school,” Father said sternly, followed by a quick glare at David as he turned and left the room.

Mother remained standing there, torn between wanting to hold this tormented, dark child and feeling the old familiar obligation to follow her husband. As she stood there looking down at her second son, she couldn’t help but feel a renewed sense of sympathy. This particular child had always eluded her hugs and kisses from as far back as she could remember. Even as a baby, David was never receptive to cuddling. He cried at being held, as if it was painful to have his skin touched lovingly. At the time, Sara had brushed it off as irritability or teething - whatever excuse served the moment best – but once he started kindergarten, he never looked back at her, never showed fear to leave her protective eyes. Now, looking down at him, she had to fight the urge to hold him close. *Why can't he let me love him?*

He kept his head down and wouldn’t look up or speak. He felt her emotion and he quickly rejected it. *Leave me alone.* The phrase repeated in his head. He chose not to open his eyes yet, partly because they were still sizzling, but also because he didn’t want to see her standing there pitying him. Sensing this, Sara turned and left the room.

With her gone and the two of them left sitting there, David looked over but didn’t meet his brother’s gaze. *I just can't deal with those angel eyes today.*

Dillon got up and touched his shoulder. “Come on Dave, we’ll miss the bus and you have your report to do remember? Besides, isn’t English your first period class?”

David sighed as he opened his eyes. “Yep, first class of the day,” he mumbled, slowly getting up now that the room had stopped spinning. After picking off three cheerios from the front of his pants, David decided he’d better run upstairs and change, for his tee shirt was wet too with more cereal scattered up there. The anger began to seep through his skin as he almost blindly staggered towards the living room and the front door.

There was of course no time to change clothes, so the two brothers barely made it to the

bus stop in time to jump aboard as David took one last drag off a quick cigarette he'd lit before he even left the house, courtesy of the hidden pocket inside his famous coat.

As they sat there next to each other on the bus in awkward silence, David began to shiver as the dampness from his tee shirt clung to his chest and stomach. He had a splitting headache too and he longed for another cigarette but didn't dare on the bus – that would be pushing it too far.

Suddenly, but not surprisingly since it happened frequently, a neighborhood girl named Jessica sitting in front of the boys turned around and began her daily ritual stare. Today, not unlike most other days when he could just look out the window or turn to his sibling and start chatting, David couldn't take it and unleashed himself on the poor girl after a minute of waiting.

“Why in the name of Satan are you staring at me you sick, scary, little rodent?” He hissed in a whispered tone as he brushed the hair out of his eyes and glared back at her. Shocked to say the least, yet immediately mesmerized by his scathing charm and raw good looks, Jessica was without words for the first time in her fifteen years of youth. Stammering for an answer but not wanting to look away from the view, she stood there frozen, eyes glazed over and her mouth wide open. Other kids sitting nearby noticed this and started laughing and pointing at her, but she couldn't take her eyes off him.

Jessica Parker had long, thick, mousy brown hair she always wore in either braids or ponytails, glasses to correct her near-sightedness, and a somewhat frumpy body, which suited her best for a slot as a second string flutist for the school marching band. She lived three houses down and would tell them on numerous occasions that she could see into their bedroom from her room and wouldn't it be great if they could communicate at night by writing on signs and posting them on their windows? David would just gawk at her rudely. It was so painful every morning at the bus stop that lately Dillon would step in and start up conversations with her. But today she was truly without words Dillon thought as he watched her sadly.

Suddenly David snapped his fingers in her face and she blinked. “Hello – anyone home?” He smirked.

“Come on Dave, just leave her alone okay?” Dillon grabbed at David's coat sleeve as he whispered his plea.

“I-I-I'm sorry for bothering you but you have a...a cheerio on your uh...chest. I know because it's...uh...my favorite cereal.”

“Gee, really? Did you get a good enough look at my little pet cheerio because unless you’d like to adopt it, I’d suggest you close your mouth and turn the fuck around?” Seething, David turned his attention to Dillon. “And don’t tug at my coat. Besides my boots, it’s my only prized possession.”

Jessica took the brief opportunity to continue to stare silently at his side profile.

While not looking at her, he spoke even louder. “Don’t make me break your glasses. That’s right, turn around - good choice.”

Dillon, looking sour, turned his eyes down to his backpack again, while Jessica turned back around and sat looking straight forward in her seat with her eyes closed. Only the kids around her could see the triumphant smile that had spread across her face.

David, in the mean time, picked and rubbed off the soggy cheerio on his chest, along with a few others he hadn’t noticed, cursing under his breath but still audible to the others listening intently nearby and behind him. All of them, secretly worshipping his every word.

The bus couldn’t get them to school fast enough as far as both boys were concerned. Dillon got off the bus before his brother and went to leave in a hurry, but not before his arm could be grabbed, stopping him mid-step.

“Hey, hold up? Don’t be mad. I’m obviously pissed at the world and you just stepped in the way. Besides, that girl bugs the shit out of me and unlike all the other God forsaken days on that hell bus, I just couldn’t take it today, alright?” Continuing to grab his arm to check out his face, David could tell his line had worked.

“Okay, but please try to stay out of trouble today, Dave? I worry about you all the time.”

“Fine, sure, your wish is my command.”

Dillon smiled as he watched his older brother half bow and grin in his unique cavalier sort of way. They parted and went their separate ways.

School Daze

David walked over to his locker and started working his combination. As he stood there, three girls approached him slowly and awkwardly, pushing each other over in a mass of fidgeting estrogen excitement mixed with fear.

He knew they were standing next to him but he didn’t look over or acknowledge their presence. This wasn’t the first time these girls, as well as countless others, had tried to approach him. All the notes stuck in his locker, the numerous failed attempts to step in front of him as he

walked the halls and drop books like damsels in distress, the light taps on his shoulder in class, and the hovering at his locker were all desperate, albeit brave, attempts to attract his attention. David's reputation at school among the girls (and some of the boys) was legendary however, despite his antisocial attitude. He was secretly in the hearts of most of all the student body in some twisted form or another. He was the subject of hundreds of fantasies and dreams and the escort to every prom dance. If David only knew how many times he'd been to each fantasy dream event at Vista High School, he'd be sick to his stomach and broke from all the dates a thousand times over, however, none of it ever interested him. The attention was distracting and at the very least annoying for him to endure. He found himself in a predicament every time he turned around at school and no matter how rude and sinister he was, they kept coming back for more humiliation. It was as if they either thought they could change him, or they would accept his insults as worthy attention. Either way it blew his mind every single time. The insanity was almost entertaining.

The bravest of the three came over and leaned against the locker next to him, the other two stood huddling behind her. "Hey David...uh...um...have any plans for lunch today?"

He yawned then flinched as he reached up and lightly touched his achy jaw. He then opened his locker so that her nose was within two inches of the red metal door with the black and white sticker frayed at the edges that read, 'Enjoy the Silence.'

"Read the sticker." He clicked his tongue as he shoveled through his messy locker.

Sliding into his seat at the back of the room nearest the door, David had a moment of apprehension. *Knowing Mrs. Tristan, I'll be the first victim to address the class.*

The room was noisier than usual in preparation for the reports, with most of the students walking in carrying poster boards of collages and other visual aides for their projects. He began to worry slightly for just a few seconds, wondering if maybe he should have prepared for the day, but the thought quickly left him as he watched everyone chit chat and show off their work.

"Losers," David whispered as he drummed the top of his desk with his fingers. He felt the rage well up inside just thinking about school work. Here it was only October 5th and they already had a project due. He'd thought for sure he'd have till after Thanksgiving before he'd have to do actual work.

Everyone filed into the class followed by Mrs. Tristan. David could hear her coming a mile away with the swish-swish of her polyester, high-waist pants rubbing against her ginormous

thighs. Mrs. Tristan was a large woman, short in stature, barely hitting sixty inches in height, yet she topped the scales at more than a quarter of a ton. She wore a smug look on her face that suggested she was always constipated, he thought, chuckling softly as he watched her go by. She also chose to wear the same shade of creepy seventies pink lipstick everyday regardless of her mood or the clothes she wore, and when she talked, David could only see the top of her head and her gray wire hair always placed in a bun as she walked back and forth across the length of the front of the room. She never ventured to the back because all her star pupils were living up front in seats she had assigned – supposedly at random.

He sat there smirking, reliving the first day of school when she made the desk assignments as they all entered the door, one after the other in single file like they were facing a firing squad. The discrimination was so obvious. It felt like a slap across the face. After taking one look at him and of course knowing his reputation among the other teachers, she chose the seat closest to the door and farthest away from her.

At the time, some of the other kids were jealous of his placement, especially the girls sitting in the front row. Of course today he'd get to stand in front of those same girls to endure the timeless stares. *What the hell am I going to say?* As he sat there and Mrs. Tristan called attendance, he closed his eyes and slowed his breathing down. *How could this gnome be married? Just get in a trance and check out...*

“Dude, it'll be alright okay? I'll give a shout out to ya no matter what you say.”

Hmm, David thought, his eyes still closed. That voice would belong to Jason, pot-head skateboard junkie sitting off to my left, tapping on my desk. Should I answer him? No, because then he'd continue to talk like an idiot and when I'm at the podium, the words coming out of my mouth would sound like his. This is going to be a nightmare.

“Dude - you okay?” Jason whispered again.

“Boys?! Would either of you like to start your speech since you can't seem to keep quiet?” Mrs. Tristan's hair bun asked as she cleared her throat.

“N-no, thanks anyway dude. 'Preciate the thought though.” Jason said as he slid down in his chair.

David whispered to himself, “One, two, three—“

“How about you, Mr. Smith, do you care to share your report?”

A flurry of girl whispers and hands to mouths in unison was both seen and heard across

the class as Mrs. Tristan stared around the room, shocked at the response after simply saying his name. “Be quiet class! Would you like to start us off this morning Mr. Smith - class! Quiet please!” She sighed in frustration then repositioned her hair bun. “I’m curious as to your inspiration since we haven’t heard from you yet this year?”

David sat there with his head supported upright by his hands. Opening his eyes, he could see the sea of multiple eyes looking back at him. *Great*, he thought. *If ever I needed to ad lib something brilliant to carry me through for the next ten minutes or so, now would be the time to experience an epiphany.*

A second clearing of Mrs. Tristan’s throat and he knew he’d have to answer her.

“Sure...” David mumbled as he threw his hands up and slowly lifted himself out of his seat. More hushed, semi-controlled giggling continued from the class as he strolled up to the front of the room. “So this is what it looks like,” he whispered as he walked around to the front, greeted by his disapproving teacher as she stood there with her hands on her hips glaring up at him. A couple of girls sitting in the front giggled as he looked around the podium curiously after making his comment.

“Okay then, the podium is yours. You have ten minutes. Just talk about your inspiration and how he or she has contributed to your love for reading literature.” She said these words like she couldn’t possibly believe he actually read, which made him smile even more so. “Class! Quiet - GIRLS! I want everyone to stop whispering! The giggling has got to stop! Angela?! That means you, my dear.”

“Sorry Mrs. Tristan,” Angela replied sweetly as she sat right in front of David, middle front row, twirling a piece of her long, overly bleached blonde hair. Of course she spoke right at him as she said this, an inviting grin on her face.

He looked away and met eyes with about six more girls in the general area, all smiling and twirling something - earrings, hair, pencils. He felt like a poster boy for Teen Magazine as he began to panic. *Who the hell do I look at?*

Just then, at the back of the classroom, Jason’s face came up out of a sea of heads to be in full view so that David could see his encouraging, goofy smile.

Suddenly, a small voice spoke from inside his mind and he closed his eyes to listen, then before he could pause he opened his eyes and started to speak this voice’s words. “The Marquis de Sade was a visionary of his time, however highly misunderstood. His many writings have

influenced my own desire to pursue reading because of the adversity of the conditions in which he wrote, having written most of his works from his prison cell. Some of his best writings were done in his own blood.”

The class was quiet as they all listened intently.

Looking out at the sea of faces as the voice spoke for him, David felt the bodily intrusion and immediately accepted it. He wanted to disconnect, but this was so much more. As he stood there listening to his voice speak someone else’s words, his eyes began to see the world around him from a new perspective. For the first time ever, David was able to see right through everyone sitting there in front of him. Their outwardly physical details - stupid, silly grins and flirtations - were no longer visible and their faces now, blank and formless. As he scanned the room of faceless kids all giving him their undivided attention, he could see what appeared to be their insides – bodies of dirty water sitting there exposed – and he became overcome with disgust. He suddenly realized he was looking at a sea of ordinary souls.

They don't compare to you...and you don't belong here, my dear...

The voice was charming, disarming, and alluring, however slightly masculine in sound and nobility. David paused to listen to more but there was none, then, as if on cue, his monotone voice from earlier returned. He continued on, not realizing the entire class was on the edge of their seats, listening to his every word. In the middle of his speech about the Marquis de Sade, David was suddenly interrupted by his teacher, jumping out of her chair to yell, “That’s enough! Time’s up! I think we’ve heard enough!”

“The Marquis was addicted to inflicting human pain and suffering, and this came across in his—“

“Your choice of topic for this class is completely unacceptable and inappropriate!” Speaking like she was addressing the class and he was on the witness stand, Mrs. Tristan continued. “Furthermore, I have the distinct impression you chose to shock me by the author you selected! I think you’re enjoying making a mockery of my classroom.” She finished in a calm voice, although her eyes were bulging out of her head and she was tapping her foot as she stood there. There was no other sound in the class but one could sense an overall feeling of disappointment wash over the faces of everyone drawn into his speech.

David paused, looked around the class to see everyone once again with all their annoying details present, however this time, their faces showed a mixture of awe and admiration. He

blinked twice to pause, then turned to his teacher and hissed loud enough for everyone in the back row to hear, “Well maybe if you’d sit down long enough to actually LISTEN to what I have to say, you might learn something NEW, but like everyone else, you’re too shallow and closed off to embrace something that might make you uncomfortable! Not every work of fiction is a fucking rainbow and white bunny experience!” That was all he could say before she, in all her five foot frame, began to tighten her grip on his arm and guide him towards the door.

“You just bought yourself a seat in the principal’s office Mr. Smith! Now let’s go!”

Walking towards his seat after quickly pulling away from her, he could feel all eyes on him again. Funny, he thought as he grabbed his stuff to leave, but he couldn’t recall ever seeing anyone the way he saw his class while he was up on that podium. It only lasted a minute, but he had felt this incredible surge of current flowing through him and it lingered now; sparks flying out his fingertips, charging his hair as he ran his hand threw it.

“That was fucking tight, dude. I wanna hear more ‘bout this Markie guy,” Jason whispered, extending his hand out for a guy’s smack. David ignored him of course.

“See you around,” Jason whispered hopefully as he watched David exit the room.

“Jason! Front and center now,” screamed a very shaken up Mrs. Tristan as she tapped her foot and waited.

On his way to the principal’s office, David took a moment to enjoy the silence in the halls. Vista High School was the largest high school in California. They were the reigning State football champions four years running. Because of the constant hype surrounding the domineering success of the football team, most of the players shared celebrity status everywhere they went, which annoyed David greatly because Daniel was one of the chosen celebrities.

The school was spread out to appreciate the outdoor space, with open hallways and three grassy courtyards, each meant to separate one grade from the next. With a student body reaching thirty five hundred students, it was a massive school. To see it from the road, including the stadium and baseball fields in the back of the school, Vista High looked like a little city.

The community of Vista represented many towns inland along the expensive California coast. There were parts of Vista segregated and marked with graffiti by the local gangs, yet in other places on the same side of town, there stood multimillion dollar homes. It was obvious who the few ‘have’ families were from the rest of the ‘have nots.’ A town east of Oceanside and sharing borders, the small city of Vista mostly had the reputation for gang violence, massive drug

distribution, and many poor neighborhoods, all linked together by a high school with such an impressive record for sports and team spirit, it had earned a shiny place on the map of Southern California. Football united the community and created a sense of pride. Still, there was always at least one cop car parked out front in the circular driveway marking the entrance to the school.

David knew about Mrs. Sands from other male students. All who spoke of her had a tendency to stare off in a dreamy state whenever her name was mentioned. This was his first visit to see her and although he sat outside her office and waited, he knew from the countless tales he'd heard from other students' rumors, supposedly Mrs. Sands rarely saw the students sent to her. She usually left the disciplining to Mrs. Finch, her secretary and School Warden as David always thought of her.

Sitting there on the uncomfortable wooden bench outside Mrs. Sands' door and waiting, David could still feel the current flow through him. He raised his hands above his lap and opened them to extend and stretch his fingers. He could almost see the energy shooting out from his finger tips in sparks. Suddenly, he sat very still. He held his breath, afraid to breathe out as he looked at his fingernails. They were black and dull, but he hadn't painted them. It wasn't allowed at his father's house, although he had tried numerous times to suggest it to him and even had Dillon be the go-between a few times. Now, sitting there, he was having trouble believing his eyes. Something was happening to him. He surely felt it but couldn't guess what it was. "Great...that's great and all, but why today?" He raised his hands to his face to admire them up close.

"Come in!" A voice from inside the room yelled out.

David remained seated, oblivious, continuing to stare at his hands. The sound of the door opened and the trim, neatly dressed silhouette of a beautiful woman in her early thirties stood next to him, tapping her black stiletto heels. "So, you must be the infamous David Smith? I've heard about you. Nice manicure. Now come into my office and quit wasting my time." A turn on her heels and she glided back into her office, her sweet smelling perfume lingering in the air around his head. David stood up automatically, grabbed his backpack, and sauntered in, dazed but feeling suddenly empowered.

Mrs. Sands walked to her desk with an air of confidence. She was average height, but her body was much more than average, with shiny, dark brown hair neatly falling on her shoulders. Every hair seemed to be exactly where it was supposed to be. She wore a white blouse with the

collar pulled up and a form fitting black skirt that complemented her very high heels. Only a woman with incredible confidence could pull off wearing those heels at this school with all the grassy courtyards, David thought as he smiled and pictured her struggling to pick up her three inch spikes as they sunk into the ground.

He casually dropped his backpack on the floor and sat in one of the two interrogation chairs positioned in front of her desk. She sat down at the same time he did and they both locked eyes to watch each other sit. It was an electrically charged moment. It seemed like they were both breathing in unison as they stared at each other. Clearing her throat, Mrs. Sands was the first to break the silence.

“So...I just received the call from Mrs. Tristan. It was made quite clear to me that she was pretty upset over your speech today.”

David chose not to answer, since she didn't actually say anything requiring a reply, but continued to stare at her, looking over her facial features. She sure is attractive, he thought.

Mrs. Sands cleared her throat again and flung her hair back with a smile. “So, who was the author you spoke about?”

David sat back in his chair and once again enjoyed the silence for a few precious seconds. “The assignment for the class was to discuss your favorite inspiration in literature and the only requirement was he or she had to be European – no other exceptions were given to us, by the way.” He paused as he began to notice her unblinking stare, shocked and half-expecting her to jump in and argue with him. It seemed to be the popular thing to do whenever David discussed anything with an adult. He found his train of thought and continued. *She's acting like a zombie.*

“I chose the Marquis de Sade, which in itself made her uncomfortable, which in turn biased her against anything I had to say about him, so she interrupted my speech and dragged me away.” He concluded with a simple shrug of his shoulders. He waited for her to answer and when she didn't, he sat back and put his arms on the chair rests while he picked his feet up and placed them one on top of the edge of her desk. “You don't mind if I do this, do you?” David whispered sweetly as he brushed the hair out of his eyes and smiled at her.

“No, no, uh...of course not, that's fine, sure,” Mrs. Sands gushed as she sat there continuing to twirl her hair.

He waited for another long minute. “So...” He raised his hand as if coaching her to speak. Surprisingly, it worked, much to his continued amazement.

“I don’t understand what the problem was then. It sounds like you were doing your assignment as instructed, but just to promote peace in her classroom this period, you can stay here for the remainder of the class and then maybe I can walk you to your next class? How does that sound?” Her voice cheerful, yet monotonous as she sat there entranced, staring at the young man before her.

“Fine, sure, but what about my English grade for this assignment?” *She looks hypnotized, just like all the others.* David leaned back in his chair, still focusing his gaze on her. *Speak...*

“Oh...don’t worry. I’ll talk with Mrs. Tristan and remind her that you had attempted to complete the assignment but was interrupted. I’ll make sure you get a pass for today, okay?” More smiles from her and he began to not only realize his new found talents of persuasion, but he was also beginning to believe it.

“Great, thanks Mrs. Sands. You’re the best. The other kids were right about you.”

“You can call me Lisa when we’re in my office, David.” The remainder of first period class went by smoothly.

At the sound of the bell, the two of them walked in the halls together. The secretary paused while on the phone as they strolled by, dropping it in her shock, then scrambling to pick it up while apologizing to the person on the line. Mrs. Sands opened the door to the outside hall for David and he walked through, squinting in the bright sunlight. She followed him, smiling and talking about the weather. He let her ramble on while he looked across the courtyard for what seemed like the first time. The kids were pouring out from their classes. He received several gasping, lingering stares from everyone as he walked side by side with the super hot principal. Guys were hitting other guys to look over at them. Mrs. Sands was actually talking and walking with one of the students in the halls. Secret, imaginary high fives were felt as David walked by the boys, while looks of jealousy mixed with horrifying stares and whispers from all the girls in the corridor were enough validation for David to know he’d struck gold.

The energy still coursing through him was now growing steadily. The attention was fueling his invisible fire. David now felt amazing, light on his feet, his eyes seeing everyone around him, yet not focusing on anyone in particular.

Suddenly, as they turned the corner and reached his second period class, Dillon hurried by looking haggard and disheveled, books bulging out of his arms as he barely held them. At the

sight of David and Mrs. Sands together, he nervously dropped his things in surprise, and then scampered around to grab his flying paperwork.

“Well, uh, this is my class, so thanks for the tour,” David said, reaching out a hand, not looking, to grab a sheet of paper out of the air as it began to fly by him.

“Oh, right. Well, have a great day and maybe I’ll see you—“

“Yeah, good bye for now, Mrs. Sands,” he answered her before she could finish. Turning to his shocked brother and handing him his paper, David winked and stepped into class right as the bell rang.

Second period class was European History with Mrs. Anderson. It was interesting enough to have to sit through, better than English on any day of the week, David thought as he slid into a seat towards the back of the room and pulled out his book. Girls were staring as he sat there. Tap, tap, tap on his shoulder but he didn’t turn around.

“Class? Everyone turn to page seventy-eight please? Today we’ll be discussing the English occupation in early America and the first American settlers, since Thanksgiving is just around the corner.” Smiling as she spoke, Mrs. Anderson turned and started writing on the board.

Yeah, he liked her teaching style, he thought as he watched her write. Her penmanship was amazing, almost erotic to watch as she swung her arm in large cursive along the chalkboard so confidently. *What is it with women who write pretty?*

Tap, tap, tap on his shoulder again. Angela - the same Angela from English class - sat behind or in front of him or to the side, wherever she could get closest to him in History class, and was always tapping him, sometimes five or six times a class period. She was a cheerleader along with Rachel and he loathed cheerleaders. He only loathed football players more.

David closed his eyes and relished the thought of assigned seating, hoping someday all the teachers would get on board with this simple yet effective concept, for Angela was one of those girls he could only handle from a distance and now she was touching him and breathing on his shoulder. Her excitement at snagging the seat behind him was almost too much for her to quietly handle. He tried to picture her pretty, empty head exploding and it was enough to create the hint of a smile. She wouldn’t stop though, and after a few minutes of silent torture, David half turned around, looked at her, not saying anything, but trying to give the impression he cared very little for any words she might throw out at him. It didn’t have the effect he wanted.

Shocked to see him do this, Angela stammered. “Uh, uh, hi...hi there - how are you? I loved, absolutely LOVED your speech today – I wish I could’ve taped it!” leaning forward in her desk as she said this, Angela was barely breathing as she awaited his response.

“Thanks. You can undress for me later to show your appreciation,” David whispered back, face serious. Gushing, Angela began twirling her hair and as she started to speak, but he interrupted her. “Don’t speak. Just sit there and stare at the back of my head for the rest of the period okay?” With that said he turned around and did his share of staring at Mrs. Anderson’s beautifully written words on the chalkboard.

Can’t believe I just talked to her. What the hell has happened to me today? Am I becoming what I hate the most...socialized? No, no, can’t be true because then I’d be normal and friendly – gasp!

When class was over, David went to leave but not before Angela could stand up to block his way. “I-I’m just two rooms down from you for third period, so...could I walk with you?” Angela smiled and batted her eyes.

Looking her up and down obnoxiously but getting immediately disappointed when it didn’t bother her, David relented.

Walking to third period turned out to be painful to say the least and he hated himself for being so incredibly stupid, deciding that the bad judgment call was directly related to getting his head thwacked earlier today. Angela however, was in cheerleader heaven, floating on a cloud.

“Would you like to hold my books?” She gushed, smiling way too much.

“No.” He answered abruptly, walking faster so that he was slightly ahead of her.

She kept the pace, not appearing to be at all affected by his rejection, she chimed in, “That’s fine. I think guys who hold girls’ books are just trying to impress them and besides, we’re strong enough to carry our own supplies, right?” No response from David, but he shot her a side glance that screamed his disinterest. People were stopping in the halls and creating traffic jams to watch David walking at a fast clip while Angela ran alongside him.

“Okay, here’s my class.” She reached out to grab at David’s arm as he continued walking by her.

Turning around, looking more than annoyed, he answered her, “Yeah, great. I’m glad you made it to class safely, Bambi.”

“It’s Angela,” giggling, she reached out and pulled him to the open doorway so that

everyone in the class could watch them. Saying loudly to the room behind her, “Well, when will I see you again?”

My God! Is she expecting a commitment now? He stared in shock at her, trying not to laugh. “How about tomorrow - same time, same place, European History, second period class?” Pointing at her with his hand like a pistol and pretending to shoot her as he said this, David turned and left. Smiling, Angela grabbed at her heart and floated into class.

Dillon made it to third period right as the tardy bell rang. Advanced Biology 101 was a college prep class. He was the only sophomore in a room packed with seniors which made his presence even more unwelcoming. He was forced to take this superstar class, like all the other incredibly hard, ‘can’t-have-a-life’ classes he was also forced to take thanks to his academic test scores.

Sitting up front with his papers still a mess in his arms, Dillon couldn’t help but feel watched today. Of course he had heard about his brother’s taboo speech and had seen firsthand, the walk with the principal that was sure to make the school newspaper by lunch time. Still, there was something else about David he couldn’t quite figure out. Watching him pick papers out of the air without looking was one thing to be slightly amazed about, but the way he moved, so light on his feet and quick, was another startling new detail. Even beyond these newest observations, what bothered Dillon most was what he couldn’t see – there was something in those eyes. They were haunting and beyond their normal mischievous look. Dillon could swear he saw something else there too. The chill that crept through his body as David looked at him was still lingering. He suddenly felt so cold standing there, his papers in disarray, watching his brother turn to leave without a care in the world and now, for the first time EVER, he thought, David looked *happy*. How did he feel? Not so happy. At that thought, Dillon suddenly felt a more familiar emotion. Guilt.

Sitting there, Dillon extended his fingers to stretch them out. They were ice cold and beginning to feel numb. His fingertips were turning blue. Hmm, interesting, he thought as he cupped his hands in front of his mouth and blew warm air on them.

Mr. Crutchfield walked by in his circuit seventies beige leisure suit. Dillon would never give in and follow along with the other students, the snickering and mocking whenever Mr. Crutchfield would come in wearing something from a decade and half ago. It surely wouldn’t hurt him to embrace the eighties but Dillon wasn’t going to be the one to mention it.

Unfortunately for Dillon and Mr. Crutchfield, the rest of the class mentioned it frequently.

Seating in his seat up front, center row, Dillon watched several kids point and laugh as the nerdy biology teacher began writing on the chalkboard. Serving as his toupee, Mr. Crutchfield's long piece of gray-brown hair flopped up and down behind his bald head as he wrote frantically like there was a bomb on campus and he needed to write the code out in less than five seconds to save everyone. Dillon felt sorry for him. The class erupted in laughter watching the long hair piece move up and down like a worm on a hook. "Okay, okay! Let's start people! That fire alarm spoof yesterday got us all way behind the power curve. We've a lot to discuss today before the test next week, so I hope you all came prepared."

A kid from the back of the class yelled out in a sugary sweet voice, "Where can a young man find a suit like yours, Mr. Crutchfield?" More giggles and a couple of high fives from neighbors. Dillon cringed and closed his eyes.

"Not now Randy! I've already told all of you my choice of wardrobe is not up for discussion." Mr. Crutchfield said this without even pausing as he continued to write cryptically across the blackboard.

"Psst!" Lindsey leaned forward to whisper.

"What?" Dillon whispered back, slightly annoyed.

"I just think it's so great to hear about your brother. Is it true that you're both really close - like twins?" Lindsey was always saying something stupid. This was the first of many times she'd tried to talk to Dillon. She was the type of pretty girl who thought she was too good for everyone else, and when she did talk to you, it was supposed to be a privilege. Of course, Dillon didn't feel that way, thinking instead that Lindsey was one of God's creatures who could possibly, eventually turn into a good natured, nice person, so he tried to tolerate her.

"Yeah, we're related...so?"

"So, what do you think about his speech today?"

"I'm n-not thinking about his s-speech right n-now," Dillon half-answered, frustrated with his stutter as he looked forward in his seat again.

"Jealous?" She scoffed.

He didn't answer her, but he could feel her smirking behind him, playing with her hair. He suddenly had to fight the urge to turn around and say something mean to her. Instead Dillon sat there fuming and not paying attention to the teacher. When he realized he was supposed to be

taking notes, he grabbed his pen to start writing, but Mr. Crutchfield was erasing his insanely cryptic notes to write more notes. Dillon clenched his fists in frustration as the words quickly left the black board. Lindsey giggled loudly behind him.

Lunch couldn't come fast enough. The staring and the whispering as he walked by were almost too much to bear today. Dillon wasn't used to all this attention. He was never really aware of the staring at church, the grocery store, the post office, and the beach, but at school, he felt the unwanted attention, knew he stood out blaringly at times, and it made him absolutely miserable. In less than two months, he'd surmised a simple truth: he didn't fit in at Vista High School. Thanks to Rachel and Daniel, word got out fast that he was the only Smith child taught at home up until the ninth grade. Dillon also figured this newest information probably didn't paint a nice picture of his stability, since word had also spread that he was too fragile to enter the public school system at a young age. *And I'm sure it gives the impression I'm better than my brothers and sisters.* Either way, Dillon was beginning to witness first hand, the taunts and teases as the day unfolded.

Dillon's intelligence was above and beyond everyone else's, which didn't help his acceptance to any of the social circles at school. Most of the kids in his classes felt either fearful that they'd say something to make themselves look stupid or that David would be lurking if they should choose to say something mean instead. The kids feared David's retribution more than anything else and it showed. Dillon tried not to notice this, but he knew David was his scary body guard. *Maybe now that David's popular, he'll be nicer to the kids at school and on the bus and I'll get to know everyone and have friends? Just one friend maybe...?*

The brothers would always meet by the large cement sculpture shaped in a letter V situated in the middle of the first of three quadrants that divided the school. There were three large steps going up to it and plenty of room for people to hang out on. Dillon was looking forward to it now, given the way his day had gone by so far.

When the lunch bell finally rang, Dillon jumped out of his seat and bolted out of fifth period, ignoring the group of girls who had been prepared by the door to question where he was going and could they possibly follow him. Walking to the meeting place now, Dillon noticed his legs were getting heavy. He felt so tired today. *I must be coming down with something,* he thought as he continued walking, at one point raising his hand up to his forehead to check for fever. In the meantime, he did his best to avoid the shouts of "Hey Dillon! Seen your brother

lately? I need to talk to him!”

Which one?

He knew though. He knew David was growing in popularity by the second and the thought made him uneasy. David was *his friend* and nobody else's. “I won't let them take him away from me,” he kept saying over and over again, except he didn't realize he was talking out loud.

Suddenly someone yelled from across the corridor, “Hey Dillon! Where's your brother, freak!” Kids began laughing and snickering at this comment, then the same person spoke up again. “What's that *freak?*”

Dillon turned around just in time to see David arrive out of nowhere. Moving faster than most could register, he threw a punch into the tormentor's abdomen, hitting him so hard, the poor victim looked like he jumped in the air just to make it look good. Dillon recognized the kid now on the ground as Daryl, one of the notorious bullies at school.

Dillon could also see his brother looming over Daryl, yelling explosive expletives, waiting and wanting him to rise and challenge him some more. Luckily for Dillon, he couldn't hear any of David's words but he could make out a few choice ones. *Dave, please stop now... you'll get in trouble...*

Daryl had wisely curled himself into the fetal position. David towered over him for a second and considered inflicting more harm, but instead spit on him then turned to walk towards his shocked brother, the crowd around him parting silently to let him pass through.

The kids who had gathered there suddenly began cheering for David. Dillon watched in shock, unable to comprehend the lightening fast switch in loyalty most kids his age displayed. *They went from cheering and laughing at me in order to make themselves look good to Daryl, only to cheer David on after he smashed their hero to the ground.* It was nauseating for Dillon to realize how cheaply bought and sold most young people were.

Looking at them one at a time and yet, not focusing on anyone separately, David began to replay the earlier scene in Mrs. Tristan's class. He saw through them again and they were all the same. Boring and gray he thought as he stood there, disgusted and repulsed at the sight. Each and every one of them solid, faceless beings, void of form. He couldn't explain why they were all the same, but he knew it wasn't a good thing.

What am I?

He turned to check on Dillon, but the light was blinding and he shielded his face with his arm instinctively to block it. He also closed his eyes but not fast enough. They began to sear with pain and burn, not like they'd felt this morning during his confrontation with his father. After what seemed like a very long minute, David opened his eyes and attempted to look at his brother again.

Dillon reached out to rest his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Are you okay, Dave?"

He could hear the words so sharply they hurt his ears. Grimacing as he flinched, David answered. "Yeah, I just thought I saw something that wasn't there, that's all. I'm fine, but you're talking really loud and I have a splitting headache."

Looking around the courtyard semi-dazed, David could see the kids standing around talking and looking over at him cautiously. Daryl was getting up with help from his group of boy idiots. Looking over at him now, the school bully gave a tentative glare but didn't say a word. It was obvious to everyone there that even Daryl was afraid of David.

While some of the kids were talking to him, gathering around and trying to get his opinion on everything and anything, David just stood there and breathed in and out deeply, focusing on trying to hear that voice in his head again. That amazingly powerful and confident man whispering his next spoken word would guide his next move. All the voices melted away except for one.

"Dave!" Dillon screamed.

He suddenly became refocused. "Yeah, I'm here. I'm fine," David whispered, still holding the side of his head with his hand. "Come on. Let's go before the rent-a-school-cop shows up." He reached out for his brother's shoulder to pull him along towards the statue.

Sitting there with their sack lunches, the brothers tried to eat in silence. People kept interrupting them by coming over and congratulating David on the punch felt around campus, only to follow with a series of questions about the mysterious writer he tried to educate the school about. 'Censorship sucks' and 'you rock' were repeated to the point of nausea.

Violence and education go well together, David thought as he sat there, smiling while he watched kids come and go. Once they overstayed their welcome, he'd move them along by saying something rude, and then smiling, which would completely throw everyone off.

As the lunch period dragged on, David couldn't help but revisit in his mind, the image of the blinding light earlier. Dillon's face - his soul - had literally burned his eyes. All the kids he'd

looked through were murky gray and void of substance, like old newspaper or recycled plastic containers, except for Dillon. How did he know this? David shrugged his shoulders to answer his own question. He just knew, and now he felt different.

“D-Dave? Dave, I’m so worried about you. P-pplease tell me what’s going on?” Dillon pleaded.

David looked up, realizing he was thinking and apparently had his worry and concern written all over his face. “Yeah, we need to talk, but not here. I promise you I’m fine, but some weird shit has been going on today and I feel like for the first time ever, I can control people and get my way.” He felt suddenly foolish for opening up to Dillon about his fears, so he spoke quietly, “It’s been so easy lately.”

“Well, it should never be an easy thing to do because that gives a person power and control and those two generally don’t mix well in the mind and body of a teenager, Dave.”

“It’s easy to do though! You could do it too if you could just be confident in yourself. I mean, I’ve seen the way you walk around here, with your head down and your shoulders hunched over?” David mimicked him perfectly and Dillon scoffed in response. “Your presence invites others to control and overpower you, when you should be the one in control. Just look at yourself! You’re a beautiful person inside and out, and you hide it. Why?” David sat there searching Dillon’s face for a response, hoping the change of subject had worked. Stammering and getting red in the face, Dillon looked down defeated.

“There you go again, looking down when someone talks to you. You know, someday you’re going to have to fend for yourself because I might not be around.”

Dillon gave him a side glance then tried to lighten the mood. “You’ll be around...you’re always there for me, Dave.” He watched his brother suddenly change his look from fatherly to guilty, and he almost asked why, but chose not to. Dillon had a tendency to ignore the obvious when it came to David. He quickly changed the subject. “Well, could you at least tell me about your dreams? You haven’t mentioned them in a while and I was wondering,” His voice drifted off as he waited for a response. Of course, as if proving David’s original argument, Dillon cringed after hearing his words sound weak and pathetic. He quickly looked down again.

David sighed. “Okay...yeah, I guess I could tell you, but you have to promise me you’ll keep it just between us - no one else can know - right?”

Dillon looked up and nodded in response, eyes watching intently.

“Well, you knew about this other world because of what I’ve told you before right? Well, lately it seems like more than a dream. The last few times I’ve traveled there, it feels like an actual place - with interesting people and amazing fantasy creatures...more than a dream even.”

“Wait—are you trying to tell me you’re beginning to think this particular story is *real*? Because that can’t be Dave, they’re just dreams—but they’re amazing and lifelike—“

“No, Dil! They aren’t dreams! I have the same fucking experience every night after night with the same people!” His voice began to spill out in an enthusiastic rendition after seeing the mysterious man enter his mind again. “There’s this one person who has been visiting me. I can tell he’s very powerful...although I think he tries to hide it from me. Still, I can feel his presence and when he comes around, no one else seems to matter. It’s like nobody else is even there when I’m with him...” Finally taking a breath, David’s voice drifted off and he felt suddenly surreal. He was in a daze reliving the dreamy adventure and the gentleman’s amazing face.

“And who’s this *guy*?” Dillon’s heart began to pound, not knowing why, and his palms began to sweat. “He sounds charming and overly friendly, like say...the Devil, if you ask me?”

David laughed loudly. “The Devil - are you kidding? He doesn’t exist, Dil. How many times do I have to tell you?” He shook his opened hands up to the sky as if pleading for agreement from God. Dillon half-smiled at the image then quickly looked down again. His stomach tightened up and he dropped his half-eaten sandwich in his bag.

David continued, voice quiet and guarded, he glanced around cautiously as he spoke. “His name starts with an A but it’s long and I can’t remember it, however he warned me not to mention his name to anyone. Good thing I can’t remember it, huh?” Confident again and looking way too happy to be talking about a male stranger, David paused long enough to smile sheepishly down.

Dillon couldn’t believe the look his brother was now sporting across his usually stern and emotionless face. *Was he actually blushing? Could he be taken in and charmed by this person? Can’t be, he’s never acted this way before...no, not Dave, he wouldn’t let someone affect him this way.* Dillon began to panic as he watched David gushing and smiling like he had a lovely secret to keep to himself. “Dave - look at me? This guy sounds different from the others. He sounds like he wants something from you. Does he visit you every night?”

“No, just the last few nights and last night was the first long, uninterrupted visit. He

invited me to his castle or home I guess, since I never actually saw the outside of it.” His face became puzzled for a split second then animated again much to Dillon’s dismay. “And we drank this incredible liquid drink- bright yellow and fluorescent. It tasted unlike ANYTHING I have ever had! It warmed my entire body and for a second, it seemed as though I was glowing in the dark! And tonight, he wants to meet me at this Fifth’s cavern place to talk about something important. I think he wants my opinion, my perspective...on something...” David suddenly became so animated sitting there that a couple of students came over to try to listen. “Fuck off!” He said, not looking at them. They hurried away.

“Dave?! Why do you have to be so rude?” Pleading, Dillon watched everyone leave.

“This is not their conversation, Dil. You, and only you, are privy to this stuff. Besides, I’ve had my fill of people in general to last a lifetime and everyone bugs me - but I’m still the same old me. It’s just that today I feel better than usual, that’s all. This place I visit is unlike anything I could write about or try to attempt to explain...it’s like some magical fantasy world. I felt everything - the cushions we sat in, the marble of the fireplace, the soft rugs under my feet – all of it – like I was there!”

“Was Emen there last night? He’s my favorite character you know.” Dillon looked at his hands to keep from watching the idol worship continue on David’s face. He wanted to desperately change the subject away from this ‘guy’ his brother was infatuated with. *Is there a devil whose name starts with the letter ‘A’?* He couldn’t think of any creature from the Bible off the top of his head.

“No, I told you, last night I spent with *him*, and no one else. By the time we finished visiting it was time to wake up and go to school.” David gushed over his words, giddy as can be, not wanting to tell Dillon how much he wanted to stay there and NOT wake up.

Dillon remembered his brother getting up so slowly today and acting sore, thinking now that the dream couldn’t have been too thrilling. “Answer me this question? Why were you so groggy this morning if you had such a good time last night? Could it have anything to do with that yellow stuff you drank in your dream? You know, that could have been poison! Or maybe this guy, whoever he is, sucks the energy right out of you when he visits you?” Dillon began to fret with worry, while David looked down at his hands, absorbing the words but not believing any of it.

“Dave! What happened to your fingernails?” He grabbed his brother’s hands and

examined them closely. David didn't respond fast enough, so he continued. "When did you have the time to paint these today? You are so busted when we get home. And you know how Father is already with what happened this morning. Oh please, Dave? Please take it off before he comes home tonight?!"

David pulled his hands away and looked over now, slightly annoyed. "They aren't painted on Dil. They just turned color all by themselves while I was waiting to speak to Mrs. Sands. I can't take them off because it's not a nail polish. It's like my fingernails turned black from underneath, and don't worry. Father, as you like to call him, never *fucking* LOOKS at me anyway, so I'm sure he won't notice. I'll just stay away from Daddy tonight and my nails will return to normal tomorrow, okay?" He said the last sentence while admiring his nails. They looked so pretty he thought. Dillon began to sweat again.

The bell rang and David went to get up, but Dillon was still sitting there stunned as he looked up at his much stronger brother. *He's so vengeful and so...vulnerable. Please God, watch over him?*

"I'm fine Dil," David spoke with just a hint of caring in his voice as he extended his hand down to help him up. They walked across the quad together in silence.

A single crow took flight.

The rest of the day went by without incident. As usual, Dillon met up with his brother while waiting for the bus. When David came out of school, a group of kids surrounded him as they tried to walk along side. He had everyone transfixed.

My God...I take it back - vulnerable? Not on a bad day...he looks so powerful, Dillon thought, standing there watching him approach.

As David walked right up to him, Dillon became weak standing there and started to drift backwards as if repelled by something unseen. As he fell, David reached down and grabbed him fast enough it looked like Dillon actually sprang up to meet his hands.

Shocked over his reaction to David's closeness, Dillon turned bright red. A few of the kids giggled behind David, but as he began to turn around, silence resumed. Turning back to his brother, concern in his eyes, David wrapped his arm around him and walked him to the bus.

Dillon still felt the sting of embarrassment, but gave in to his brother's control. He couldn't help but feel weak when David was around anyway, and that was pretty much all the time these past few days. No one need know, he thought. At that moment, David looked over at

him and winked. Dillon started sweating again.

Evening Hour

Once they were all home from school, the Smith kids finished their homework promptly and without question. They each had requirements to succeed in school. Father was strict and unrelenting when it came to academics. He showed his heavy hand whenever school was involved, and even David buckled up to do the minimum required in order to avoid the negative attention his father would unleash should he let his grades slip. He had nothing to worry about however, and neither did the others, because everyone excelled academically in the Smith household.

Once schoolwork was done, music and art usually took over. Having the responsibility of providing the music for their church services, the Smiths were all musically inclined in at least one area. ‘One more reason not to have the television around’ was Mother’s motto and she reaffirmed this belief at least weekly when she would take the time to sit back and watch her talented family focus on artistic endeavors.

Mother greeted the younger boys as they strolled up the driveway. “How was your day?” She asked no one in particular as she eyed both of them, but David felt it was never directed at him.

“It was okay. I’m so tired though,” Dillon answered as he looked up at his tall mother.

“I’m sorry to hear that honey. Are you getting enough rest?” She looked concerned as she played with his light blonde hair, brushing it off to the side of his face and tucking it behind his ear.

David stood off to the side and waited impatiently, looking away, always looking away Sara thought. She flinched when he actually spoke to her today.

“Well, my day was just peachy, but you already knew that since you were *present* during my warm and tender send off this morning, right *Mother?*” David spoke sarcastically without looking at her, only to continue walking by with a purposeful skip in his step.

Shocked to hear her son speak to her, she turned back to Dillon to say something when he interjected quickly.

“He’s fine Mother. You’d think he’d be foul and quiet because of this morning, but it’s like Father slapping him woke him up or something. He’s been talking a lot, and acting s-ssso-cialized.” He was rapidly nodding his head as if hoping it would be contagious; he always

defended his brother mercilessly. Dillon smiled and moved himself in position so that she would have to look at him to reply. She forced a weak smile but didn't answer. She followed her youngest into the house however, a feeling of disbelief mixed with the strongest emotion known to women – Mother's guilt – weighed her down in a heavy blanket across her back.

David stayed up in his room until dinner was called. He had been sitting on his bed and practicing guitar all afternoon to the point his fingers ached. He had to stop and stretch out his hands as U2's "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" played on his record player nearby. He would tell Dillon on numerous occasions that he was the spitting image of the boy on the album's cover. David wanted Dillon to be tough somehow, to become a soldier so that some of the guilt he'd felt about leaving him could lessen. He took a moment to air drum as the chorus kicked into gear then grabbed his guitar to play along again.

He recalled his new gentleman friend telling him in his dream last night that he was a lover of music and song. Thinking about it now, David heard the mysterious gentleman speak about how much he missed music, how empty his life was without it, how it was the only thing from his previous life he wished he could take with him and how punished he felt without it around. That revelation shocked and excited David, who at the time, didn't bother telling this interesting person that he *and* his brother both played and sang. As a matter of fact, he never discussed his family, let alone his brother, to any of his acquaintances in the dream world. He felt the need to practice guitar today though, as if on a mission to improve, and almost broke out in song when Dillon walked in to get him for dinner, standing outside their closed bedroom door for several minutes beforehand listening to the guitar solo first.

As everyone sat around the large, old-fashioned dining room table, Father gave an extra long blessing. David sat as far away from his father as he could, drumming the tune in his head he'd practiced earlier while the prayer was underway. As he bobbed his head up and down slightly to the beat, David glanced around the table occasionally to make sure no one was watching.

Prayer finished and they all began to eat. The noise hit the ceiling and David was able to zone out again. *Yippee! Gotta love the noise and distraction to keep all eyes off me*, he thought as he sat there playing with his broccoli.

"It seems like you've been the talk of the day, *Dave*. What gives *Buddy*?"

David purposefully took a larger than life bite of broccoli and started to chew, making

hand gestures imitating his sudden inability to speak. Dillon, always sitting next to his idol, looked over at him nervously. The table became very quiet. Mr. Smith sat at the head; Mrs. Smith sat on his right hand side, and Daniel - 'his copilot' or his 'Tonto' as David would call him - sat at the other end of the table. Since David had to sit as far away from his father as he could get, that placed him right next to his nemesis.

"Are you going to answer me, *Dave*?" Daniel had stopped eating and was growing impatient, placing his fork on his plate with a forced sense of fatherly control. He was trying to act as the second in command, but he failed miserably as far as David was concerned. He continued chewing his broccoli and looking down, trying not to smile at the thought.

"I'd say it's not an exaggeration to state that a majority of the conversations I've had at school today both *in* and *outside* the classroom had to do with you. Now why would that be? Considering how until lately, you've been the poor, misunderstood, distraught, black wardrobe wearing, depressed poster boy for the entire school since the beginning of your career two years ago at VHS?"

Now why would anyone except maybe the few die-hard high school enthusiasts that buy into the whole 'these are the best years of your life' crap, use the acronym VHS with such vehement emotional stupidity? Try nobody but say Daniel and Rachel. "Gee Danny, I guess I've finally bought into the idea that maybe going to V-H-S could be an enriching 'best years of my life' out of body experience that you seem to sing about whenever you grace the halls? Or maybe—"

"That's enough from you! So, tell me Daniel, what's been going on?" Father avoided eye contact with David and looked only at his oldest.

At this point Daniel kicked him under the table hard enough to cause a mini earthquake. David immediately responded by coughing up his broccoli, then mouthing a silent *Oww* down at his plate.

Daniel leaned in close, ignoring his father's questions. "And don't call me Danny, or you'll be drinking your broccoli through a straw!" He hissed, leaning forward so that he was inches away while a piece of white rice shot from his mouth and landed on David's plate. They both watched it land. Daniel smiled in victory then sat back on his throne.

"Daniel!" Father exclaimed.

"I don't know Father," Daniel answered, his voice in pseudo-disbelief as he glanced

again at David, who at this point put his fork down and resigned to another lecture and possibly, a thwack for his dessert.

“I’ve just been dealing with kids all day coming up to me from everywhere and every grade asking about my secretive brother and what his likes and dislikes are and who, if anybody, is dating him, and all this other nonsense!” He threw his napkin down, continuing to glare at David as he spoke in disbelief. “They’re treating him like he’s some kind of celebrity!”

Jealous? David couldn’t help but smirk as he listened.

“It’s true Father,” Rachel chimed in, always a baffled look on her face.

She looks so stupid - there’s no way we’re related. David forcefully swallowed the last of the broccoli as he looked at her sitting straight up in her chair across the table. Always perfect posture described Rachel.

“I had like, several girls who all came up to me throughout the day to like, ask about David and what he likes and doesn’t like and some of them even had the nerve to ask if they could spend the night – like I would just let any girl sleep in my room and all! Can you believe it?” Gushing, she took another bite of her food and answered herself, “So weird.”

David and Dillon both stared at her and then at each other and snickered.

“Boys!” Father glanced at Dillon and that’s all it took. He sat straight up in his chair and looked down at his food obediently.

David looked away from his father, accidentally looking at Daniel who was still staring at him like he was some kind of criminal or circus freak – he never knew with Daniel - then darted eyes to Rachel, who was looking at him differently for the first time. *She must be realizing I exist and now that I’m suddenly popular, I have value. And she’s realizing all this while keeping the stupidest look on her face - twirling her hair.* He decided right now to be safe and stare down at his plate too. *I can’t believe I’m copying Dillon right now, but nothing ever happens to him, so it must work – conformity at its best.* He began to feel a large lump forming on his left shin and he grimaced as it began to throb.

“Well, looks like I’m going to have to place a call to the school tomorrow and have a talk with Mrs. Sands,” and as Father said this, he emphasized the next part as if to invoke fear, “The Principal, to get to the bottom of this so expect to be handed some consequences if you decide to step out of line, young man.”

Father obviously hasn’t seen Mrs. Sands...fear isn’t a word I’d use to describe a meeting

with her. David sat there thinking of the pain in his shin to keep himself from smiling at the thought of Mrs. Sands as a fierce disciplinarian in her high heels.

“Do you hear me boy?!” The table was silent.

David could hear Daniel’s heart skip a beat at the sight of his interrogation. *Asshole...*

Dillon nudged his brother under the table to answer.

“Yes sir.” He sat there quietly looking at his plate of mostly untouched food, resigned to not eating another bite after the contaminated rice had landed on his plate.

“Now finish your dinner and go to bed.” Spoken sternly, Father sat up straight in his seat and enjoyed his authority. Daniel leaned back almost simultaneously while hiding his smile with a hand.

David sighed and picked up his fork. *Where did that rice fall anyway? Oh, right! Twelve o’clock...avoid twelve o’clock.* He began eating gingerly at six o’clock when Rachel piped in again.

“Like what’s up with your fingers Dave?”

David flinched, and then paused, trying to calm the voice in his head. It wanted to spiral out of control. *Why is she and everyone else suddenly calling me ‘Dave?’* Everyone looked over at him again. His fingers were all taped up with band aids twice to hide the black.

“I had to tape them up for guitar practice today because they’re sore. All that practicing, you know?” His voice drifted off in a forced show of pleasantry. It was difficult to talk to her in a calm, casual voice when his inner monologue was screaming obscenities. He even attempted to look at her, but quickly turned away to keep from yelling his thoughts across the table.

“Huh,” Rachel began to eat again, but not before saying something else David judged as mortally stupid. “Well, I guess that’ll be one more thing my friends will be talking about tomorrow.” She said this ever so sweetly while looking at Mother, who had a very worried look on her face as she stared back at her daughter.

David was ordered to clear the table and do the dishes by himself. For a family of seven and a three course meal of pot roast and mashed potatoes, this was no easy task. Although the Smiths didn’t have a lot of money, they ate well and Mrs. Smith was a firm believer in the evening sit-down meal. The mess was usually assigned to two siblings, but not this time. Dillon stayed however, and helped clear the table, until Daniel walked back in to get a snack and purposefully yelled loud enough to wake up Father, who had fallen asleep already on the lounge

chair.

“Dillon! I think YOU and I both know it’s not YOUR place to be helping the house servants with clean-up. Now leave and let Sissy clean,” turning towards the living room as he said this last part so as to stir his father, Daniel turned back at David and smiled slyly.

“I can help him if I want to D-Daniel,” Dillon spoke softly, not comfortable with arguing to anyone, let alone Daniel. This comment shocked all of them for a second.

“Don’t talk back boy, now get out,” Daniel spoke firmly now, not for show, looking first at Dillon then at David.

“It’s okay Dillon. I can clean up the family’s gluttony all by myself.”

Dillon remained still, holding a stack of dirty dishes in his arms, refusing to give them over to David’s outstretched hands. Facing Daniel, he answered quietly and not too convincingly.

“I’m helping David. It’s t-t-too much w-work for him t-t-...,” pausing at this point and not able to speak, he turned red and just stood there frozen.

David felt sorry for him. Dillon’s stuttering problem only came out when he was really stressed or scared. He’d always had the speech impediment, but lately it had gotten worse. Now it seemed to afflict him all the time. David would have to tell him to stop talking and breathe because he wouldn’t make sense, freezing up every time. Dillon was teased relentlessly for this, which in part explained why his older siblings guarded him so carefully.

“Breathe Dil,” David spoke softly as he walked over to take the dishes out of his hands. “Go sit down at the counter and keep me company,” he put his hand on his brother’s shoulder and guided him towards the kitchen, then shot a mean look at Daniel. “Besides, he never said you couldn’t keep me company while I did *all* the work,” then turning to Daniel to finish his sentence, David said “Right?”

Dillon nodded his head in silent agreement and sat down on one of the kitchen stools.

Daniel, also feeling sorry for Dillon’s lack of speech, turned and left. He knew he’d have the opportunity to get David another time and preferably without Dillon watching. He couldn’t bear to have Dillon judge him. He loved the fact that his little brother admired him. *I’m his role model and idol*, he thought, smiling as he ran upstairs to make all his social calls for the night.

It was dark outside by the time David was finished. Daniel made sure to walk by the room a few times to make sure Dillon wasn’t lifting a finger to help.

As he wiped the counter quickly and rinsed the sink, he turned to leave. Making eye contact with Dillon, who was still sitting there staring at him with new found interest, he paused to ask. “What’s the matter with you Dil? You’re beginning to freak me out with the staring.”

Snapping out of his trance, Dillon blinked then answered. “No, I’m fine, just tired. Sitting here has made me so tired,” he hopped down and began walking out of the room. “I’m going to bed...goodnight.”

David stood there in the kitchen and relished the quiet, enjoying it again like a warm fuzzy blanket wrapped around him tightly. He leaned up against the sink. It turned on and water began to run. He jumped and looked at it in disbelief. As he stared, the water began to change color. It ran out fluorescent yellow and bubbly, beginning to pool at the bottom of the sink, looking like run off from a toxic waste dump. He blinked repeatedly, pausing between blinks to register the picture right, but it didn’t change. Swirling bright yellow water was shooting down the drain in an imaginary funnel. Reaching over and turning off the faucet, David noticed the silence fill the room again. He stood there staring at the drain hole as if waiting for someone to come out of it.

Why would I think that?

More silence followed. After a few minutes, turning again to leave, he almost ran into Daniel, who was standing there quietly watching in the dark. *He looks as sinister as I do on a good day*, David thought.

“Move out of the way you little puke,” Daniel sneered, holding an empty glass with ice cubes still in it from before. Daniel was at least four inches taller than David and about forty pounds heavier. He also drank a lot of water, was fanatical about it, and would piss like a race horse several times a day to the annoyance of mainly David, since the kids all shared one bathroom that also bordered David and Dillon’s bedroom. He’d even wake up sometimes at night to hearing the long drone of the pissing waterfall that was his older brother.

Motionless at first, taken back by the unknown presence of his nemesis, David moved to the side but not fast enough. He received a well placed football shove right into the cabinets nearby. The handle to the cabinet drawer came into hard contact with David’s lower gut, and he bent forward into the side of the counter, grimacing as the pain shot through his abdomen.

Suddenly deciding it wasn’t a good idea to have his back to his brother, David turned to face him again with the counter supporting his weight, watching his brother touch the same

faucet he had just turned off. The water came out clear this time, and Daniel filled his glass, all while David held his breath. *I hope you get the worst case of jungle rotting diarrhea this side of Vietnam.* He clenched his teeth as he watched his much bigger brother stand there tall and cocky, like he owned the world.

Daniel kept his eyes on at David as he finished his glass of water in one quick drink.

Great, here's to another night of pissing to look forward to.

“Ahhh!” Daniel placed his empty glass on the counter, acting like he'd just won a water drinking contest, and burped loudly in David's face.

Standing there alone again, slightly shaken from the scene, David looked at the glass. *Asshole can't even put his own glass in the dishwasher.*

As he grabbed it now, David noticed the brown water line of filth left inside. Looking inside, he noticed not only the brown residue on the glass, but there were flecks of either dirt or what appeared to be little bugs. A smile spread across his face as he traced the rim of the glass with his bandaged fingertip.

Later that night, after everyone had gone to bed, David went and got in the shower. He was always last to get in the only bathroom upstairs every night thanks to Daniel's surveillance. By the time David would turn on the shower and get in, the water would be barely lukewarm.

Samantha and Dillon were fairly quick in the shower, but Daniel stayed in there for at least thirty minutes at a time, doing God only knew what, while David sat in his room and waited.

As he stepped in the shower tonight and started the water running, David felt uneasy. For some strange, unknown reason, he kept looking down at the open drain near his feet. Barely lukewarm water was hitting him in the chest and he frowned. *Great, here's to another cold shower.* Suddenly, he felt watched and vulnerable standing in the bathtub with the shower curtain between him and the door, wondering as he stood there if Daniel would repay him after the comments at dinner earlier by kicking the shit out of him while he lay in the bottom of the tub naked curled up in the fetal position? The thought reminded him of the scene with Daryl earlier.

“Daryl deserved what he got,” David whispered to the invisible jury around him.

There is someone here with me...someone is judging me and somehow, I feel...liked?

Looking down at the drain, David became transfixed on it, swore he could see something

move in there. As the water continued to flow steadily, barely lukewarm in temperature against his chest, the stream started coming out in spurts only to stop abruptly. David had his eyes closed but opened them to stare up at the shower head. It looked different to him, almost like a camera. He inspected it for a minute then fiddled with the knob below it, turning it off and on but nothing happened. He began to shiver.

“Whoever is watching me, I hope you’re taking film because this is a great celebrity photo op,” David said loudly as he stood there with his arms across his chest, clutching his sides.

As if answering his words, the shower turned back on and a single stream of icy cold air snuck through and tickled his mouth and chin, like a finger from a friendly hand; it lingered around his face then disappeared, only to be followed by very warm, soothing water spraying him longingly down the front of his body.

Oh my! Warm, inviting water..

David began to smile shyly. He blushed and closed his eyes as the water flowed down his front. He finished his shower and went to bed.

Dillon was already asleep in the twin next to him. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he watched his little brother sleep like an angel. Eventually, he climbed into his own bed and laid there, excitement building inside as he anticipated tonight’s journey. Suddenly, lying there in the dark, he heard what sounded like Daniel running into the bathroom, moaning and saying out loud, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” repeatedly, then the toilet seat slammed down, followed by a flush of liquid and bowel sounds not meant to be heard by anyone.

David lay there in the dark, forced to listen to the attack, but smiling at his victory. *I guess that will do for now. My thoughts have meaning and I think I’m beginning to like the new me.* “I could get used to this,” David whispered in the dark.

Chapter Four

The Collector

One soul will do no wrong, one soul will keep me strong, and this soul I'll have before long...

“Enter,” he spoke in a dull monotone, his yellow eyes fixated on the blue flame flickering in the dining room fireplace. There were several dozen fireplaces in the House of Nine however none of them permeated any heat. They were never to generate warmth, only a dim, freezing light danced across the walls and furniture.

It was a cold existence, Nine. Azmodeus enjoyed it so, but loneliness was sinking into the walls around him. Much time had passed with nothing to show, nothing to hold onto; the past century was painful but he made it through all the same. He needed to grow, to evolve, and most importantly, he needed a new muse. His last concubine was stale and proven time and again to be unsatisfying. He was ready to try something new. The crescent of a new existence was beginning to cycle. It had been at least a couple hundred years, he was sure. It was time and he felt more than ready. He finally felt the solitude begin to disperse away from him as he stretched.

“My Lord, they are here for you—“

“I know, you fool. I will be present shortly. I need my witch here. Where is she? I’d think by this time of night she’d already had her fill of idiot male specimens to satisfy her need to feed?” He sat at the head of the thirty foot rectangular cherry wood table. He drummed his fingers along the edge as he continued his gaze on the fire. Esmeralda was always late - typical female – and her behavior, always so overdramatic, but unfortunately for her, the taste for human blood, predictable and insatiable. It was as if she became a vampire to suffer the constant feeling of hunger never quenched. It suited her personality perfectly. Azmodeus smirked as he thought this. Esmeralda enjoyed the suffering.

A pretty, dramatic vampire witch always scheming and never satiated is so...what's the word? Oh, right...tragic. He laughed softly as he thought this. I am resigned to be finished with females of any race or creed. They are all the same. At least males are unpredictably entertaining to humiliate. With females, it's so expected; I much prefer now a male to break in two...yes of course I do...I feel the need to select upward from the human food chain.

Sandor took a step into the dining room gingerly from the doorway. As if reading his

mind, the Dark Lord spoke again, this time his voice slightly annoyed.

“Come in you fool. I’m too bored to make any effort at the moment. Right now you’re as safe as you shall ever be in my presence.” He leaned back in his chair and reached out for his wine. Sandor wisely approached the table by taking a few steps.

“She is up above my Lord, but she should return soon. I will stand at the entrance to wait for her.” Sandor bowed awkwardly. Azmodeus chose to ignore it but his hell hound laughed softly. She was positioned in her favorite spot, next to the fireplace and near his feet.

“Now, now Syrianna, be nice. Not everyone can be as graceful as you, my dear,” he glanced down at her as she lay by the fire, her white eyes glowing up at him in adoration. She smiled wickedly as she lowered her head alluringly, her long, razor sharp, white fangs a stark contrast against her shaggy blue coat.

Syrianna was the largest of three hell hounds the Dark Lord commanded – not owned. The question of ownership was a tricky subject with these volatile fire creatures. Several requirements needed fulfilling before a hell hound defended any creature and most were aligned to a master only if it suited their needs. Respect, along with an abundance of confidence and power, was required to house such a beast. Azmodeus was the only ruler of the Underworld to have ever associated with three cunning and notoriously dark creatures. He thought this as he took another sip then continued. “No one can match your intelligence, Syri, however, everyone has a purpose here, remember? We must force ourselves to look upon the downtrodden and the weak with an unspoken understanding.” He dropped his empty glass of wine and watched as it bounced then quivered to an eventual standstill on the table.

Sandor remained there, head bowed and too afraid to turn back to the door. He would never leave the presence of the Dark Lord unless directed to do so and after a long minute of watching the stone ground, tracing the rectangle blocks as they made their pattern across the floor, Sandor could hear only the panting of that nasty, vile hell hound as he waited. He was beginning to reconsider his decision to stay and felt stupid as he stood there when he froze again, shocked to hear more words spoken his way.

“Are they all present and accounted for?” Azmodeus’ voice was soothing this time as he breathed out the rest of his drink.

“Yes, my Lord, they are waiting for you. All Eleven are accounted for. They...appear to be already bickering amongst themselves as they wait,” Sandor hesitated after saying this last

comment, hoping not to sound too demanding. The Dark Lord had become so dangerous lately. Two servants lost their souls yesterday for getting in his way. Sandor felt that he was by far, the most loyal in the courtroom of Nine. He served multiple roles: servant, waiter, interpreter, doorman, and public announcer. *Surely I am irreplaceable*, he hoped as he stood there, as tall as he could make himself.

“You aren’t,” The Dark Lord whispered faintly, no one close enough to hear, his long, cold fingers brushing his chin as he stared off into the fire again.

Waiting for the moment to present itself, Sandor became giddy as he watched the Dark Lord check out the fire, allowing him a few seconds to stare at him longingly. Azmodeus was quite the vision. His long, blonde, almost white hair fell mid-way down his back. His physique was lean and long, and his poise - the way he carried himself - was quite a sight to watch in motion. The Dark Lord had impeccable manners and a grace that suggested he came from the highest caliber of upbringing. With a heavy noble distinction, he ate, drank, and spoke with an English accent that if he willed it so, transformed his voice to place just about anyone at ease. Lastly, those strikingly cold light blue eyes, if they weren’t yellow and menacing, were at times seductively alluring to match his voice. He had a masculine jaw line, perfect facial symmetry and beautiful lips always ruby red, which was quite a stunning contrast to his pale, almost white skin. He wore tailored suits in velvet mostly and always appeared well dressed and perfectly presentable, no matter what time of day it was. He hardly ever let his hair down, preferring instead to pull it back into a tie so that just his face and neck presented a show. Azmodeus was admired secretly for his incredibly beautiful features, but he never acknowledged it and chose not to use it to his advantage. He didn’t have to, for as the Ruler of Nine and the Underworld, the Dark Lord never had to charm for his advantage. He had might and power and always used this to obtain what he wanted. His beauty was unfortunately for most, a fatal distraction.

Rising, Azmodeus grabbed his staff and walked across the room to the door, Sandor scurrying out of the way with his head still bowed, although he tried as best he could to secretly catch another glance of him as he strolled by.

“Send Esmeralda to me whenever she decides to show herself,” his words barely a whisper as he walked out the door, Azmodeus had a way of barely speaking audibly from across the room, yet the person he was speaking to could clearly hear every word intimately. Sandor pulled up his shoulder instinctively and shyly. He swore to himself he could actually feel the

devil's breath on his neck as he heard his melodic words.

Time to put on a show, the Arch Devil thought as he begrudging left the room. It dimmed to a dark blue color with his leaving the space, for his presence was strong enough to light any room.

A smile spread across The Dark Lord's face as he thought about his future visit tonight with the young human. The only soul in existence now that could make him somewhat amused was walking around above, hopefully practicing his newly found skills. *I shall visit him again, this bright young soul for my Collection. He will do nicely. I hope he is enjoying my gifts...*

Chapter Five

Tuesday Morning Revisited

Six thirty two a.m. and the alarm went off. David reached over and smacked it quiet. *Tuesday morning and I'm not ready for it to be here.* He rubbed the sting out of his eyes. *This is a repeat of yesterday. GOD, I can't handle another day like yesterday.* He rolled back over in bed.

Dillon was dressed and sitting on his bed looking out the window. Today was different. The air was thick and changing dramatically like a brewing storm. Why he felt this way he didn't know for sure, but deep down *something* or *someone* was coming. He closed his eyes to keep from reliving last night's scene. It was going to haunt him today, he was sure of it.

This person David had talked about yesterday was on Dillon's mind again. He dreamt about him last night; dreamt he was sleeping and this person was watching him while he slept. At three o'clock in the morning, this mystery man was the air and every particle floating in the room was his essence; a fragment of his soul he had chosen to disperse in the room like a cloak suspended above his bed. Dillon still felt watched right now, sitting there staring at the air around him as if waiting for his face to appear.

I'm losing it! I'm staring at air, for crying out loud! What do I expect to find? It was just a dream, Dil...just a dream...

Still he thought as he sat there stunned, if he could describe it in words, he felt like he was the next prize up for sale on the human auctioning block.

Shaking the thoughts from his mind, Dillon walked over to the only window in their room and looked out at the large eucalyptus tree that bordered his and his neighbor's yards. Suddenly, a small dark shadow shot by his window. Dillon looked over to his right and focused his eyes on a large, black crow landing on the top of the telephone pole nearby. It turned and looked at him, stretching its neck to get a better view. It then flew closer, landing in the eucalyptus tree on the branch touching the window and turned again so as to get an even better look at the boy. It was a repeat of yesterday.

Dillon froze, watching his breath condensate on the window. "Go away," he whispered, intently staring at the bird.

The crow turned its head, ruffled its feathers indignantly and spread its wings.

"M-move along," Dillon spoke softly, then repeated it louder, and the bird lifted itself off

the branch and hovered in the air, flapping its wings and then, as if changing its mind after hearing the boy whisper, “Good,” it returned to the same branch and cawed back at him.

Dillon began to sweat. *Fine, stay if you want and take a good look, because that’s all you’ll get.* Still, he had to look away first. Looking now at his hands, they began to tremble. He could see the tiny lines of sweat gathering in the creases. It’s just a bird, Dil, he told himself. David waking dispersed his fear, so he gratefully turned and jumped on his brother’s bed to greet him, happy for the distraction.

“Wow, you tossed and turned all night, Dave. I was worried. Do you remember any of your dreams?” He sat waiting, quickly glancing over to the window then back at David again, knowing there was always a good story from David’s head each morning. Considering how yesterday went, he was breathless, waiting for a response.

“No, nothing special, just more of the same, and yes, before you pester me, he did visit me but it was short and I don’t want to talk about it now so don’t ask and get off my bed...you know it creeps me out when you sit on my bed while I’m still IN IT! Why can’t I have my own room?” David looked up and asked the ceiling.

Dillon turned and got up. Yep, change was definitely in the air. He had called it right and he knew it. “I’ll see you downstairs.” He sulked as he grabbed his backpack, but before leaving the room, he glanced out the window again and gasped. Five crows sat there motionless, staring at him from the tree. The branch was swaying slightly from the added weight but they didn’t seem to care. *I have never seen that many crows on one branch before, but I remember reading about crows and legend. A murder of crows...that’s what I’m looking at.*

“Dave?” his voice apprehensive, “Come over here...please?”

David was still lying in bed with his pillow over his head when he muttered, “In a minute.”

Dillon waited five seconds. Sighing, he walked over and grabbed David’s arm, attempting to pull him out of bed.

“Okay, you’re going to piss me off again!” He threw his pillow so that it bounced off of Dillon’s head, then sat up in bed, eyes still closed.

He is so NOT a morning person.

“Move,” David ordered, and sliding out of bed, slowly walked wobbling slightly to the window. “What am I looking at?” He grumbled.

Dillon came over and stood next to him and stared at the single crow sitting there.

“Oh...right - a crow in the tree.” David grabbed Dillon by the base of his neck with one hand and squeezed slightly, “Gee, that’s *neat!*” He hissed, leaning towards him as he continued, “I hope Jessica the freaky bus girl is watching right now and taking pictures of me in my fucking ‘have a nice day’ boxers!”

Dillon pulled away and watched as David turned around, pressed his ass against the window pane, the yellow, smiling face sending a jolt of a message to the crow sitting there. It cawed back at them as it ruffled its feathers, refusing to leave. David stomped over to sit on his bed again.

Well, that was good - nice one, crow. Dillon rubbed his neck while looking at the crow as it studied him carefully in return. *Is it the same crow from yesterday? No, can’t be. They aren’t that complicated,* he thought, reassuring himself. *Besides, they all look exactly the same anyway, so how would I know?* He walked backwards two steps while still looking at the bird, not wanting to turn his back right away, and then turned to walk out of the room, stopping to touch the cross near the feet of Jesus.

“Wait Dil. Did you hear Daniel last night?” Suddenly appearing to have found life again, David gave Dillon a mischievous look, “He must have slept on that toilet all night. As a matter of fact, go right now and see if he’s still in there hugging the porcelain pillow!” He smiled genuinely for the first time in a long time as he pointed at the door. “Hurry!”

Dillon paused before speaking, trying to hold onto the image of his brother’s smile for as long as he could before changing it. It was indeed a rarity as of late to see a nice smile from David so early in the morning – or any time of day for that matter.

“That’s mean Dave.” He tried to frown, but turned and left instead.

“Are you grumpy *again* today?” David called after him.

Great, now I’m alone. He smiled at the revelation as he sat there on the edge of his bed. He was rapidly outgrowing it and at that moment it looked a lot smaller than usual. Smiling still, he got dressed, put on his coat and turned at the same time.

Swoosh and a breeze hit him as he went to go out, however the window wasn’t opened and the room was closed, but he was in the clouds oblivious to it all. Saluting the crow military style, David turned to leave, kicking his foot out as he did so.

Floating down the stairs, he felt a sudden surge of strength in his walk. His body felt

incredibly warm and light. Stopping at the bottom of the stairs to touch the side of his face with his hand, he realized he was actually emitting heat like a furnace. “I feel good today,” he said aloud as he walked toward the kitchen.

Rueben came to greet him as he walked by, but as he stretched out his hand to pat the dog as he always did every morning, something had changed. Instead of allowing the pat, Rueben shied away and squatted down on his hind legs. He then let out a low guttural sound while his ears pointed backward. However, David didn't notice. He glided by swiftly.

Upon entering the kitchen, Dillon greeted him with a half smile while he sat eating his morning ritual of cold cereal. Father stood nearby trying to absorb the radio news show like he was in the studio directing the announcers.

Television was never an option in the mornings; only thirty minutes each day, reserved for after dinner and before bedtime, applied to everyone. Dillon, along with most everyone else in the house, was okay with this rule, mainly because he loved to read. David however, was in constant agony at not knowing the state of the world or the events that would be going on around his little hole of existence on Terry Street. He wanted to stay informed on the issues, but his father considered himself a separatist, turning every political issue into a religious one. It was downright annoying. *Why would God care about politics anyway? Surely He saw it as simply a more organized and public means of promoting someone's personal agenda by packaging it up as 'an important national issue' and then selling it to the masses for personal gain, right?*

‘The world is on its way to Hell in a hand basket’ is the saying his father would preach almost daily. Sure, he'd mix up the words and phrases, but to David, it was all the same and today, as well as yesterday, would be no exception. Still, he usually kept quiet around his father. John was a strict disciplinarian and had a heavy hand. Until today, he would use it frequently on his second son.

“The world is doing it Mother! It's going to Hell in a—“

“Great! What are we waiting for? Let's all hop on board, get first dibs on seats,” David spat out loud, not thinking as he walked by his father in the kitchen. Before he could think he dropped down and spun around in time to block his father's hand as it came at his face. His hand around his father's wrist, David locked eyes and noticed for the first time in his life that his father was without words. The sudden quiet had the entire house suspended in time. All eyes were on Father.

In that second, John looked at his son and thought, *I've lost him. He's now a stranger in my house. Where did I go wrong? Why God? Why did he come from me?* After looking into those black eyes and seeing nothing, Father was convinced his son was indeed already gone. David's body stood before him just for show, but his spirit had left him a long time ago. Now Father had to deal with not only mentally crossing out David from the Church family, but also giving up on the thought that someday his son would become born again. Although he never spoke a word to anyone of that interchange on Tuesday morning, John knew those eyes had changed from blue to black and in them, he saw nothing remotely human.

David turned and walked toward the table, not realizing what had just happened. He felt numb as he grabbed the cereal. Pouring it into a bowl, he looked up to see Dillon sitting there holding his spoon in mid air, milk dripping from the edges, having not taken a bite from the moment he had stepped into the room.

Oh no...things are going to be different now. Dillon blinked twice then dropped his spoon in his bowl. Neither of them said anything as they sat there, David shoveling cereal into his mouth and Dillon watching him eat. Father backed out of the room still facing his boys in silence with Mother quickly following him.

"W-what was that?"

"It was nothing. Just eat your cereal, Dil and know that things are going to be different now – that's all."

While David continued to eat alone, Dillon couldn't help but notice his nails were still black. "Looks like they're here to stay, huh?" Motioning to David's hands, Dillon pointed at them with his spoon. "Did you get hit by lightning yesterday?" He whispered.

"Hmmm, two questions in one...yes and no. My nails are staying, but it's okay - actually it's good. They give me energy somehow. I like them and I'm old enough to do whatever the hell I want to my body anyway. The parents are just going to have to deal with it."

Dillon sat there and absorbed the information like static electricity. *Say something! Yell, scream, and knock some reason into him!* But nothing came, and he felt so helpless watching his brother spiral downward. He turned away and looked at his cereal defeated without saying a word.

Everyone else had left the room except for the three of them, Dillon, David and Rueben, who had scurried in during the episode earlier. He sat beside Dillon with his head on the boy's

lap, looking up at him and then at David as if he knew too.

Shaking violently to the point where he had to drop to his knees and clutch at his Bible, John sat looking up to God from the comfort of his bedroom, his wife standing behind him, her hand on his shoulder. “What do I do now, Lord?” was all he could muster to say as he looked upward. He blinked twice as the tears began to come, and then bowed his head in silence.

Morning Hour

Walking to the bus stop in silence was painful to say the least. David lit his morning cigarette and took a long drag as he walked along, with Dillon noticing how quick his gait was, with so very little effort. He could also hear David sing softly to himself in a sweet sarcastic tone, smoke blowing up into the cold morning air as he belted out the words verbatim to the song “How Soon Is Now,” by yet another of his favorite rock bands, The Smiths. (Music and Lyrics by The Smiths, Meat Is Murder, Rough Trade Records, 1985)

Dillon frowned as he thought of all the times back when David would actually socialize outside their two person circle, and he’d have to hear him tell all the neighborhood kids at the bus stop time and time again that the lead singer of The Smiths was his real father and that he and his little brother were going back to England, ‘any day now’ to join him on tour.

Do you really feel like you don’t belong here, Dave? And do you really feel like your life has no meaning? He sighed as he watched his brother and his brother’s voice get further and further away from him on the sidewalk. David was moving so much faster, Dillon finally gave up trying to catch up. “Fine, go ahead and leave me.” He whispered, standing there for a minute to watch the image of David’s coat flowing so beautifully behind him; his body image perfect against the rising morning sun, his head down to take another drag like he was playing the part in a movie. Dillon closed his eyes and thought, *who am I next to him? I’m nothing but his shadow, and today he doesn’t even notice that.*

As they approached the bus stop on the corner of Terry and Nora Streets, the usual crowd of ten kids all parted and moved outward, some of them grabbing and moving their backpacks as if afraid they’d block his way. For the first time ever, they all backed away silently, their voices suddenly hushed as they allowed David to walk right up to the edge of the corner. Watching breathlessly in a unified group, they took in his image. Totally unaware, he balanced his boot heels on the sidewalk’s edge with his head down, ambivalent to all of them. He finished his

cigarette James Dean style.

Dillon looked around and noticed everyone as they all watched his brother. Was it fear and trepidation or was it worship, fear and trepidation? He was temporarily stunned by the parting of the crowd. *They're gawking at him as if he were a god!* "Why?" He whispered as he too checked out his brother as if for the first time, inspecting him for invisible changes.

Apart from the kids at school, the neighborhood kids were usually a little bolder in the way they tried to communicate with David. Most of them had history with the Smiths from way back when, before they all hit puberty, but he'd not ever seen them cower and back away when David appeared, until now.

Dillon watched as his brother stood there continuing to rock back and forth on the curb with his heels, smoking the last of his cigarette as the bus rounded the corner. He callously flicked it off to his side, within a few feet of Jessica and Nick, the two residential nerds on the block. Dillon frowned as he watched, almost voicing his displeasure at the obvious litter and harsh disposal of a cigarette butt so close to the others.

Arriving at school, David couldn't wait to get off the human cargo bus. Jessica made sure to step ahead of them so that she didn't have to watch them leave and waited on the curb. Dillon walked by her without looking, partly because he didn't want her to suffer any of his brother's verbal assaults, but also because he had a hand pushing him from behind with too much force. After clearing her and feeling the hand pull away, he stopped suddenly. He just couldn't bear to hurt her feelings, so he half-turned, knowing she was watching them. "See you later Jessica," Dillon yelled in ear shot of everyone, forcing a quick smile as he continued walking away, trying his best to ignore David's glare.

"Bye Dillon!" She gasped, throwing her arm up in a wave as if she'd never see him again, then she screeched. "I'll talk to you later okay?! At lunch maybe? Bye!"

David took off walking, not looking back, until he felt a bolt of electricity touch his arm. He turned around to face Dillon.

"Hey! Wait up Dave."

"Look, if you want to get an actual girlfriend, I can hook you up with something a lot better looking than that," he pointed obnoxiously at Jessica who was still watching them from across the quad. She waved back smiling. Dillon pushed David's hand down as he walked by like it was a gate latch. He kept walking until he felt the bolt of electricity return to grab at his

arm.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” David went to pull out a cigarette in his frustrated state, but wisely tucked it back in his jacket when he saw a teacher walk by.

“I’m fine Dave.”

“Well, just be invisible and try not to talk to yourself okay?” He softened his voice as he watched his little brother look paler and paler by the second.

“Fine, see you later,” was all Dillon could mumble as he turned to leave. With each step he felt stronger. *No, that can't be...*

The bell rang and Dillon was already sitting there in class, front row middle seat, waiting for Mrs. Rumsfield to tap on the podium like a third string conductor each morning to call the class to attention.

The bus ride was painful, with very few words spoken between the two of them, and David not answering questions from the other curious kids on the bus while being his usual rude self, was difficult for Dillon to take in. *Why do they continue to talk to him when he's so mean? My brother has legions of kids willing to take his crap for free!* Strange, but he had never noticed that before. This new revelation was unhinging and as he sat there in his seat staring at his pencil, the lines began to blur. Blinking, Dillon looked up and saw his teacher looking at him, her mouth moving but no sound emitting from her lips. Panicking, he dropped his pencil and began to look around the room. The other kids were all staring at him, some were beginning to laugh, and then suddenly the room disappeared and Dillon woke up in the Nurse’s office lying on a cot with a cold washcloth lying on his forehead. He bolted up only to be shoved gently back down by a large woman.

“Your Mother’s coming doll, so just sit tight.” Nurse Delilah smiled down at him. She was a larger than life African American woman in her forties, who always wore something fun to compliment her wardrobe. Today black and orange pumpkin socks adorned her feet, peeking out from under her nurse pants to jazz things up a bit. That was Nurse Delilah.

Sitting up to register the room after she shuffled away, Dillon swung around on his cot and sat up, feeling fine for the moment. “What happened? How did I get here?” He asked, staring at the back of her broad shoulders as she sat reading what appeared to be a romance novel with a woman wearing a long, flowing yellow dress half-buttoned on the bodice with some hunky guy holding her like she was getting ready to faint.

“You walked in here with a couple of kids - lie down now! Don’t be getting up when you don’t need to, alright? Most children come in here and I can’t get them to leave!” Laughing softly as she shook her head, Nurse Delilah leaned back in her chair to look at him while it squeaked and groaned under her weight.

“Like your socks,” Dillon smiled, staring at the nurse’s shoes.

“Oh, these old pumpkin feet?” Looking Dillon over from her chair, then deciding it was worth getting up to check him out, she walked over and went to feel his forehead, while he leaned backward on the bed slightly away from her.

Looming over him, she grabbed his head with her massive hands and felt him, then turning his head up to meet her gaze, like he was a rag doll, she stared into his eyes. “Boy, I bet the girls just love those eyes!” Winking, she reached over for the otoscope and proceeded to check him out.

“I’m fine ma’am, really.” Thinking fast, he continued, “I didn’t eat breakfast and I got weak...low blood sugar, I think. But I’m fine now.”

Nurse Delilah muttered an “Mm, hmm.”

“My mother doesn’t need to get me. I’d like to go back to class if I could?”

“Well, I’m going to leave that one up to your mother, child, but honestly, I can’t believe you’d actually want to stay?” Pausing and looking down at him again, she asked, “Is there some sweet young thing you can’t live without having to see today?”

Rolling his eyes slightly, he replied in a grumble of words. “I need to keep an eye on my brother, Dave, and if I go home, he’ll be alone here without me.”

Another “Mmmm, hmm,” and Nurse Delilah turned to her chair, right as Mrs. Smith entered the room.

“What’s the matter?” Mother asked, with a worried look on her face as she looked from Nurse Delilah to her son then back again.

“He said he’s fine, but like I told you on the phone Mrs. Smith, he passed out in class earlier and he doesn’t remember any of it,” sending Dillon a side glance, she continued, “I think he should get checked out, so you’re free to take him.”

Dillon panicked and jumped into the conversation, “Mother, I’m fine. I didn’t eat and- and s-s-stt-ttstarted having low blood sugar...that’s all.”

Getting up to walk over to her, he hugged her and looked up to meet her gaze. *Please let*

me stay, he thought over and over again, smiling and trying hard not to sway on his feet. His eyes felt like they were burning.

Mrs. Smith wanted to take him home, wanted badly to spend the day with her youngest, her baby. Looking down at him, she played his hair, as if answering his thoughts, she said softly, “If you think you can finish the day, then that’s fine, but you can come home with me and relax too. I’ll even let you watch TV?”

Nurse Delilah, listening to the conversation while sitting with her back to them at her desk, rolled her eyes and said a silent, “Lord Jesus.”

Sliding into his seat as the warning bell for first period rang, David leaned back in his chair and wished himself gone, invisible, or both. They started surrounding his desk and talking to him from the moment he sauntered in, each one acting as if there was nobody else there. He couldn’t register, nor did he want to register, any of the voices directed at him. He finally heard a voice semi-interesting and turned to meet eyes with Jason again, skateboarder full time, student part-time.

“Dude, you’re like a god or something man! Rock on!” Turning up his hand in a heavy metal gesture, and pumping it up and down, Jason gave out his own version of what a laugh should sound like.

Why am I still here? And more importantly, why can they all still see me? David looked up to the ceiling again, eyes rolling upward as he took in all the gray, prison tile patterns hovering above him.

“Class?! Class!” Mrs. Tristan was tapping on her podium harshly, her arm rolls rocking back and forth like wings.

The three girls standing around David weren’t listening as the rest of the class slid into their seats. Jason was snapping his fingers in front of David’s face and saying loudly, “Dude, come back...you’re in class man, *do that* after she starts talking...”

“Girls! Come sit down before you all get sent out of here!” Mrs. Tristan could be heard in the distance, but David had already tuned her out.

All that he could see was the teacher’s head, and as far as he could tell, it was turning redder by the second. Suddenly, the predictable busy shuffle and swish, swish, swish of thighs came down the row and there she was in all her glorified thunder, staring down at him while the

girls scattered off like mice.

“Sorry dude...tried to warn ya,” Jason whispered as he sunk back into his own seat.

“Well!” Mrs. Tristan took in a deep breath preparing for the verbal assault. “I can see that you’ve just outgrown this class young man! Now that you think you’re a celebrity...”

Tuning out her voice, David slowly slumped back into his seat, the room spinning and his heart beat distant. His hands caught his head as he spun there, feeling suspended in his desk, floating above everyone in the air.

Am I dreaming again? Did I pass out?

He couldn’t decide, but it was nice being above everyone else, hovering in the air. He could see the top of Mrs. Tristan’s head, her hair a lot thinner from this aerial view, and seeing everyone else turned in their seats to watch the onslaught of words as the teacher pointed her finger at his body while she spoke. Suddenly, Jason jumped up in his seat as if poked by something sharp and started yelling back at her.

Now Mrs. Tristan was yelling at Jason while he, in turn, leaned back in his seat and glared back at her indignantly.

As he continued to float in the air, David decided he liked it up there better, but as soon as he thought this, it was over and he smacked back into his body like a load of bricks. Shooting his head up out of his hands, but still feeling incredibly weak, he could just make out a large, floppy arm shoot across his desk and point at Jason, who was so upset, David could see the spit flying out of the boy’s mouth as he finally yelled back at her.

“Whoa! Okay, okay I’m getting up now,” David said to no one in particular as he slid out of his seat and stood there next to Mrs. Tristan.

“Just pack your things and go to where you’re most welcome young man!” Then pointing at Jason, who was already collecting his things, she screamed, “And take your partner in crime with you!” The class started humming with excitement and the girls sighed in a coordinated gloominess. David turned and left the room, followed quickly by Jason, face red and breathing heavily.

“I’m sorry man, but I couldn’t sit there and listen to her squawk any longer without saying something!” Walking alongside him, Jason, tall and skinny, had no trouble keeping up. “Dude, how could you sit there and not say somethin’? She was ripping you apart, but I was totally amazed at your checkin’ out and all!” Bouncing around playfully, Jason ducked then

punched David lightly in the arm. “Hey, you’re gonna need to show me how you disconnect okay because I could use that shit against my old man!”

David didn’t reply to any of Jason’s talk, but smiled at the last comment. Looking over at this kid who’d just defended him, he realized they might actually have something in common.

Getting to Mrs. Sands’ office, they sat in silence outside her door while she talked on the phone. Sitting there next to one another on a small, two person bench for a few minutes in silence, Jason couldn’t stand it any longer and spoke. “You don’t say much do you?”

His voice actually sounds normal right now, David thought. *Could he have been putting on an act?* Breathing in deeply, and then looking over at him, David smiled and paused, wondering if the guy was worth talking to. He glanced over at him and almost spoke, but didn’t have to, because at the last second he was saved by the door. Mrs. Sands ordered David in first, and Jason to wait outside.

Sitting there waiting for her to talk, David sensed her frustration and spoke first. “You look very nice today Lisa, I wish all the teachers here dressed like you...I’d pay better attention in class,” smiling at her, making eye contact after she tried to look down, she smiled back and began twirling her hair. That was way too predictable he thought, as he leaned back to watch her talk.

At the end of their gab session, Mrs. Sands’ said casually, “Your father called. I’m to pull you into my office and discuss some repercussions for your behavior yesterday. He didn’t like the fact that I let you off with a harsh warning,” smiling way too much, she continued, appearing very proud of herself for the next comment about to be made, as if she were rewarding him. “I thought maybe you could spend lunch time today in here with me?”

David looked up in shock, caught off his game.

“And then after school today, you can finish detention in my office until I get my work done, then I’ll drive you home.” She looked so triumphant. He wanted to vomit in her pretty designer waste basket.

Sweat began to surface on his forehead as David sat there paralyzed by the thought of having to spend so much time with someone other than Dillon. It had never happened before and he didn’t think he could handle the company of another who was not his blood. Add to that, the obvious initial shock of hearing his punishment sounding too much like an invitation, and he was now momentarily stunned. “Why do I have to have two detentions?” He couldn’t believe this

was happening. She was acting way too giddy, he noticed.

Pausing, a questionable look on her face, Lisa said, "Well, I'm sure Mrs. Tristan didn't send you in here for good measure? She sounded very upset on the phone." Studying his face, she liked every inch of it. *He has no flaws. He'll probably become some beautiful Hollywood rock star someday soon.* Lisa had a thing for Hollywood fantasy, with half a dozen celebrity magazine subscriptions coming to her house several times a month.

And look at those amazing blue eyes - they pierce my soul. He's like the perfect bad guy. She lightly brushed her neck with her free hand, the other one still busy working strands of her hair. David saw this and decided to act during her dazed, 'I'm gonna get an eyeful before the bell rings' look.

"Great. So, you don't even want to hear my side of it?" He made sure not to raise his voice, instead speaking softly, brushing his hair with his hand off his eyes again, then getting out of the chair, he walked to the desk and leaned forward on its edges like a lawyer in training. Standing there directly in front of her, looking as confident as ever, he continued, "I was sitting in my seat waiting for class to start, but the girls gathering around me wouldn't leave me alone." Watching Mrs. Sands flinch as he spoke his last words harshly David was glad to see his speech affecting her. "Mrs. Tristan was mad at everybody there because they weren't listening to her head speak. Jason, sitting out there waiting his turn to see you, stood up for me and told her I wasn't doing anything wrong," pointing to the front door, then turning back to face her like a lawyer again, he leaned closer to her and finished with, "I never said a word to the woman, not-one-word." Pronouncing these three last words as he stared at her, he watched her look down.

"Well, I guess maybe that wouldn't be worthy of detention then," Mrs. Sands remained looking down and readjusted herself in the chair, her cheeks slightly pinker than her outfit.

David realized he'd hurt her feelings, and tried to soften the blow, jumping ahead to his closing statement. "So, maybe we could just enjoy our time together now until the end of the period and then you can call me in here during one of my afternoon classes, just not lunch or after school since I've already made some commitments." He smiled at her as sweetly as he could, but doing so made his face hurt for it was painfully unnatural for him.

"Well, what are these other commitments? I can't imagine what a young man of your age would have to do during a school day?" She looked upset again and David felt his hold on her slipping. The conversation they were having was a date negotiation, and he was still in a state of

shock. He began to speak, but she cut him off, his hesitation gave her fuel. “I think your lunch can be your own time, to fulfill your ‘commitments’ as you call them, but after school today your time will belong to me,” thinking about this last comment made her smile. “And my car needs washing, so maybe you can do that too.” Pushing her chair away and getting up to walk over to him as the bell rang, she had recovered and felt like herself again.

“But that won’t work...I-I have chores at home and my parents won’t be happy with a stranger—“

She cut him off with “I’ll call your father back right now and tell him the situation.”

“But he won’t—“

“And I’m sure he’ll understand.” Putting her manicured hand on his shoulder and lightly squeezing it, she was suddenly all a glow. “Your father seems like such a nice man. I think he really cares about you.”

David felt the knots tighten in his stomach, and he went to pull away from her hold on his shoulder, but she let go and brushed his now fallen hair out of his eyes and tucked it behind his ear. *I hate that*, he screamed in his head as he shook it to make his hair fall over again.

Laughing, she slid her arm around his and pulled him to her side. Guiding him to the door, she began to gab again and most of it he ignored, except for the last comment. “...I hear your father is a pastor and has started his own church? Is this true? Because a few of the teachers, some of the students and *me*,” her hand on her chest as if she were the Queen, “are thinking about attending your church to hear him speak, since football has been the religion of choice in this town. We could use a good community church to balance our lives, you know?”

David began to panic again at the thought of all the church meetings and social events held at his personal home already. *I’m in hell, God hates me, and Dillon is right - there is a Devil after all and her name is Mrs. Sands.* He rolled his eyes to the ceiling as she opened the door. Jason shot up out of his seat, nervous and fidgety as he stood there shuffling his feet.

Clearing her throat, the suddenly transformed authority known to most as Mrs. Sands took over. “Jason, you will have two weeks of after school detention in the cafeteria for general clean up. Try not to step out of line in class again.” *She must have looked at him for two seconds*, David thought as he started to walk away from both her and Jason, after enduring another squeeze of his shoulder.

They walked down the halls in silence, David and Jason together. People watched them,

some staring, some whispering, all of them shocked David had a friend – or at least another person other than his brother – at his side. A girl he didn't know strolled over so that she was right in front of them, forcing them to stop. “Hey Jason,” she glanced at David and smiled, “I didn't know you had a new friend...who's walking who to class?”

She was different David noticed, with long, dark brown hair and sun-kissed skin; she had pretty brown eyes and was the first girl who didn't play with her hair in front of him. Jason continued to walk a few steps then realized David was standing still.

“Hello? Jason!” Pushing his chest with enough force to make him stagger, she stood and waited. David, in the mean time, looked her up and down. Amazing body, beautiful dark hair... did he prefer dark haired girls? This new revelation made him smile.

“What are you thinking about?” The mystery girl turned to lock eyes with him and for the first time in his life, David was dumbfounded. *She's right in my face...how bold.*

“Uh...what?” He couldn't think of anything to say.

Jason jumped in for the rescue again. “Umm, yeah, Julie, this is David Smith, a junior and an excellent speaker,” his hand pointing toward David. “David, this is Julie Edmonds, school debate captain and an excellent chess player,” his arm extended to Julie. Smirking, Julie extended her little hand out only far enough for appearances. David shook the delicate piece, still feeling like he'd just been hit by lightning. As they let go, he felt a spark hit his fingers, shooting through his body, ricocheting off every corner of his being. *Wow! Talk about an introduction...*

“Is he going to say anything Jason?” Julie stood there, rocking back and forth on her boot heels. She was wearing a pink argyle sweater with a white collar shirt peeking out from underneath. The sweater was slightly fuzzy, and the temptation to pet it was almost irresistible. Looking down, David noticed she wore a black, ruffled mini skirt and white leather boots zipped up to right below her knees.

“Well, nice to meet you David Smith...it was thrilling conversation, enough to carry me through my next class,” she smiled at him and although she spoke with slight sarcasm, he couldn't believe how beautiful her everything was.

“Right, nice to meet...” He drifted off as she turned to walk away, but just as he thought she was gone, she turned around, still walking backward, and yelled. “Bring your talkative friend to lunch with you Jason!” Julie whirled around, her hair and her mini skirt flipping in the

breeze.

“Dude, that was wild,” Jason tapped him on his shoulder, and then did a silent wave goodbye six inches from David’s face, opening and closing his hand together like a puppet, as he started walking away.

David couldn’t move. *Where are we meeting for lunch?* Waking up, he yelled, “Where are we meeting for lunch?!”

Jason turned around with the biggest smile on his face, his hands cupped around his mouth, “The cafeteria dude! And bring your fuckin voice with you this time!” A laugh only Jason could make bounced off the lockers as he turned to walk away, but not before a teacher stepped out from one of the nearby classes and pulled him over for a language warning.

I knew there was a reason why I tolerated him today.

The bell rang and a girl grabbed David’s arm and yanked him to the side and into second period class while he stood there semi-dazed. Angela was fuming as she positioned a still half stunned David in front of his desk and then sat down in front of him. A pout that could buy her all of Paris spread across her face.

“Silence class!” Mrs. Andersen began writing on the board. David slid into his seat and stared straight ahead.

As soon as the teacher turned to the chalkboard to write, Angela turned around in her seat still fuming, and glared at him without saying a word.

“What the hell is your problem, lunatic?” He whispered, baffled by her behavior.

“Well, why were you talking to Julie? She is such a *slut*.” A few kids looked over at her, eyes big and curious. “Turn around,” she hissed at them. David had to fight the urge to hit her pretty face square on the nose as she turned to glare at him again.

Leaning back in his seat so he could be as far away from her as possible, he thought carefully then spoke only two words. “Turn around.” He then closed his eyes and grinded his teeth as he was forced to listen to her cry.

Several classes went by in slow agony. Now it was fifteen minutes until lunch period and David began to get nervous. *What the hell is this sweating, jittery, butterflies-in-my-stomach feeling anyway? What is it about this girl and her power over me? She makes me weak.* David tried but failed to convince himself it was a bad thing. In fact, he felt the opposite. For the first time in his life, David felt he had something to look forward to that didn’t involve watching

Dillon light up at Christmas time, or scaring innocent kids on Halloween, or belittling his sister Rachel. He was beginning to feel good about life as he sat there in his seat and squirmed. It wasn't natural to feel this good. It shouldn't be such a thrill to wait for a moment to come. This kind of change was strange and unsettling the more he thought about it as he watched the clock on the wall tick closer to the number twelve.

Life wasn't supposed to turn out good for him. He was meant to suffer this time around, he was sure of it. *Wait – do I believe in reincarnation? No, not really. I mean after all, if I had been alive before now, I'd have heard about myself somehow...yeah, I would have made a dent in the world if I'd lived before; a big fat, fucking destructive crater in the middle of the blue Pacific Ocean.* Life was only supposed to bring him pain, he was sure of it, and now he sat there giddy with anticipation over eating crappy cafeteria food with some girl? It was indeed strange and not expected to have all these conflicting, contradicting emotions in one single day.

Wasn't Rome built in a day?

David smiled as he tapped his pencil on the desk, being the only student without a book while the rest of the class pretended to read for thirty minutes. Nobody bothered or dared to look over at him, but he could see their bodies tense and frustrated. The substitute teacher chose to ignore him too. He glanced back up at the clock again. His existence added up to a life of unhappiness if he stuck around, but he had accepted that – wanted it even – and grew to despise his relationship with Dillon the older they were because he knew that would change too. *It had to! Dillon was inevitably going to become someone important and memorable. Probably, knowing his luck, he'll be the next fucking Messiah – wait, that wouldn't be lucky if he ended up getting nailed to some cross in Jerusalem so never mind...he's too blond to be Jesus anyway.*

He kept tapping his pencil, the nervousness allowing his mind to continue to work overtime. *Nothing was worth sticking around for anymore so why bother looking forward to doing anything? And now I want to have lunch with a girl I don't know? Why? So that she'll disappoint me too?* But it wasn't working. His thoughts weren't convincing him he wasn't really excited to see this girl again.

Suddenly, he remembered his lunch routine. “Holy shit,” he whispered. “I forgot about him...for the first time ever, I forgot Dillon.” Panic for what seemed like the fiftieth time today, struck him in the chest. *I'll just have to run across the quad, grab him and take him with me. He's great at being quiet, so he won't interrupt me as I sit there trying to talk...*

David dropped his pencil on the desk and watched it roll off to the floor. He didn't pick it up, and ignored the repeated attempts by the girl sitting next to him as she picked it up and placed it on his desk, only to watch it roll off again and again.

The bell rang and he shot out the door, running to his locker like a sprinter possessed. As he ran across the quad to the meeting place, kids tried to stop and flag him down.

Dillon had just arrived and was sitting there at the statue steps by himself, knees up and touching, arms across them with his head resting there. David held his breath for a second as he stopped in his tracks and looked at his brother sitting there alone, kids walking by him to stare, but not talking to him. He looked like a beautiful swan in an invisible cage, David thought. He looked so out of place, so helpless, everyone paying attention to him, but no one really engaging him. It was some sort of fucked up human zoo and his brother was the main attraction.

Slowing down to stand in front of him now, he watched as Dillon looked up just in time to beam a smile. "I didn't talk to myself today, Dave," he said this while moving over to let him sit down, not having opened his lunch until his brother had arrived.

David felt a twinge of guilt. "Uh...yeah, great, listen, I have to stay after school for detention with the principal, so ride the bus home without me, okay?"

Dillon nodded his head yes, then waited, knowing there was something else, while David remained standing there, fidgeting, glancing towards the cafeteria.

"I was also thinking we should go to the cafeteria and meet some of my new friends there." Seeing the disappointment on his brother's face, he shot his arm out to emphasize his next sentence, "You'll be sitting with me, and you won't have to say anything to anyone if you don't want to? Just sit with me and hang out with us...you'll like them...uh, Julie and Jason - nice kids."

Dillon's heart sank. *They're taking him after all and I'm not going to be included because I'm a freak and everybody knows it.* "J-just go, Dave. It's-s okay, I'll stay here."

"No, Dil, you're coming with me and that's that. Even if I have to drag your little ass over there kicking and screaming, you're coming with me." He stood over him with authority, then reached down to grab his arm, yanking Dillon up as if he weighed nothing, shocked to watch him whimper and wilt like a flower.

"Damn it! Stop *doing* that! Stop the crying!" David turned his back and stuck his fingers in his ears. He stood there waiting for him to stop whimpering and collect himself, while

trying unsuccessfully to not hear him.

A couple of sniffs later and some long, deep breaths, Dillon said quietly, “okay, f-fine, but you really h-hurt my arm.” He rubbed his upper arm with a look of defeat on his face as he waited.

David turned, sighed and rolled his eyes upward. “Let me see your miserable little arm,” pulling up his sleeve, he saw a purplish blue ring there.

“Oww,” Dillon whimpered, wiping a lose tear off his cheek with his free hand.

David couldn’t believe he’d left a mark. *I barely grabbed him - do I not know my own strength?* “Sorry Dil, I-I didn’t mean to do that,” he whispered as he put his arm around his shoulders. They started to walk together. “It’s just that you weren’t listening to me. You always listen to me, so this wasn’t what I wanted or expected.” David sighed after feeling Dillon’s head on his shoulder, knowing right then his apology was accepted.

Walking into the cafeteria, no longer holding Dillon up at his side, David searched the large mess hall. He was amazed at how quickly he could scan the room. His vision was extraordinary. There were at least four hundred students in there sitting, and at least one hundred in the various lines waiting to buy food. He found Jason and Julie quickly enough. They were at one of the tables packed full of loud, obnoxious kids. Julie’s back was in front of the boys, and David began to get weak in the knees as he got closer to her. His hands felt sweaty and his heart started pounding. *What the hell am I doing here?!*

Some of the kids at the table were looking up at him and smiling, the excitement at his being there was spreading across the table in a wildfire rush of whispers. Immediately, and without thinking, he turned on a dime and retreated out the double doors, grabbing Dillon’s shirt sleeve as he did so and pulling him along.

“What’s the matter...Dave?” Dillon ran after him, keeping pace as he watched David round the corner and step outside, the sun smacking his face with its blinding light as he did so. It actually hurt to feel the warmth and brightness so he threw up his arm to block it, ignoring Dillon’s repeated inquiries. He retreated back to the statue V with a purpose to be alone, but Dillon was two steps behind him. When they got there, there were quite a few girls sitting where they usually sat, all of them congregating and whispering.

“Move,” David ordered in a calm, but commanding voice. They all looked up and in unison, moved over enough to allow the boys to sit. David almost collapsed on the cement step.

Dillon, sitting down next to him, had a puzzled, yet semi-relieved look on his face. “Don’t say anything about what just happened—understand?” David whispered sternly.

“Okay.”

They ate in silence, shoulders touching and Dillon fighting the weak sensation that always took over when he was near what he called ‘greatness.’ “I dreamt about him last night, Dave.” Dillon finally looked over at him, intimidated to reveal this information.

David sat up and turned to him for the first time since they sat down. “What are you talking about?” His voice began to waver.

Oh shoot, shouldn’t have said anything. “Umm...I...uh...dreamt about him—“

“I know! You said that already,” he began to grind his teeth together in frustration. “Did you dream about going into the closet?” he asked, searching his brother’s face for clues.

“N-no. WH-what closet? N-nooo, I hid in your, your b-b-b—“

“Breathe Dil,” David interjected, “Just breathe and relax...I’m not mad,” he lied.

Breathing deeply and rubbing his hurt arm, Dillon attempted his words. “I hid in your bed with you, and, and, watched him h-h-hover over my bed while I slept,” Darting a look at him and flinching, as if he were waiting for the yelling to ensue, Dillon continued, after not receiving the blow from his brother. “I somehow left my-my body, and went to lay with you, while he studied me sleeping there in bed. His image was see-through - like a ghost.” Pausing and looking down at his sweating hands and feeling the space begin to spin around him, Dillon had to close his eyes and concentrate.

“How do you know it was him?” David turned his gaze forward through the front gate of the school, wanting desperately to walk out, to not have to be here afterward with that stupid principal, but it was a modern day cage this high school, and he was stuck.

“I-I just know. He had something about him, a-*presence* if you will.” He paused again not sure whether or not to continue, still stroking his bruised right arm.

“Go on,” David spoke, resigned to look away from the gate. *I’m not going anywhere...*

“I can describe him to you. Long blonde hair pulled back in a pony tail, dressed all in black robes and black boots, tall and sort of handsome...I guess. He was dressed nicely...”

“Holy shit,” David whispered, burying his head in his hands and massaging his temples with his fingers. *Well, I guess that answers my question about whether it’s him.* He sat up after what seemed like forever, and sighed. Then he began to rub his right upper arm, while trying to

take in what Dillon had just told him. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?” He whispered, trying not to speak too loudly, as if the dark and beautiful man was somehow listening. “Why am I whispering?” He whispered, looking up to the sky.

“I-I don’t know.” Dillon was trying to control his own breathing, but his chest was hurting, “You acted so strange today...different and closed off to me...and I’ve been feeling so weak,” Looking over at him, Dillon could see concern on his face, watching him watch him back, looking at every corner of his face while he spoke. “I passed out in the beginning of first period—“

“WHAT?!” David jumped up and startled the girls sitting next to him, all three of them quietly trying to listen to the boys’ conversation. “NO FUCKIN WAY!” With a look of utter shock, he stood there over Dillon like he had earlier.

No, they can't be related...two separate incidents Dave...don't freak out. I can't believe this is happening. He sat back down, his legs feeling weak and buckling under the weight of this revelation. Should I tell him, he thought, as he sat down, rubbing his right arm and biting on his lower lip.

They both sat there in silence, neither one knowing what to say. Two girls sitting nearby came over to check on Dillon, but after seeing David’s warning look they backed away. “So,” watching the girls leave, “What else happened?”

“Umm...nothing...that was it and when I woke up this morning, I was actually in your bed.” His scared voice kept him from getting a quick punch to the same injured arm.

David tried to fight the urge to speak something ugly and hurtful or to hit him for sleeping with him, and instead opted to not do either. “Okay...so you slept with me and he watched you in your bed...except you weren’t in your bed, you were in mine?” He had his eyes closed as he pointed his finger into the air in front of him with a confused look on his face.

“I can’t explain it, except I somehow could be in two places at once. It was like my second self - my soul - left my body and hid.” Looking at his hands again as they trembled, he ended with “I’m pretty sure he knew that I was hiding with you, but he didn’t seem to care...it felt like, like, like he was biding his time, waiting for the moment to present himself. Has he ever mentioned me to you?”

“No, not at all,” speaking way too quickly, “He only wants to talk to me when he visits.” Trying not to sound jealous but failing miserably, David sighed long and slowly, watching the

front gates again. *I didn't mention him at all. We sat at the cavern and talked about me - just me! Dillon was just dreaming...I must've mentioned what Louis looked like to him before and he dreamt about it...of course, that's right—*

“You said this morning that you'd dreamt about him last night, so...was it like my dream?” Dillon had gathered some confidence and felt the best he'd felt all day, sitting there watching his brother look so distressed.

“I told you this morning to not ask me about that, and I meant it.”

“But I just opened up to you!” Dillon was enjoying this rush of strength, “So now you want to clam up? Fine,” he spoke as he looked away. “I guess I'll have to remember that one in the future.”

“Shut your mouth, Dil,” Standing right as the bell was ringing, looking at the front gate again, David spoke sternly. “I can still kick your ass and make it to sixth period before the tardy bell rings.” Turning around to help his brother up, he half smiled, and Dillon lit up inside watching it. Smiles from his brother were a rare treat. He slowly rose and walked with him in silence across the lawn, content with his brother's rudeness.

The crows, two of them perched on top of the statue V, took flight at the alarming sound of the end of lunch period.

Besides seeing Daryl walk by glaring at him in a dark haze after seventh period, school ended quickly and David walked alone to his locker to gather up his things for detention. He enjoyed being alone at school, but these last two days had made it virtually impossible to have a moment to himself. If he wasn't being followed and talked to, his rude comments didn't seem to work half the time he'd used them. Opening his locker and putting his books away, a hand closed the locker shut, almost slamming one of his fingers in the latch. He pulled his hand away annoyed, “What the...?” He turned and there she was - a smile to make his heart stop beating.

“Why didn't you come over to the table at lunch, mute boy?” Julie, still having her hand against his locker as if knowing he'd try to open it to block her out, smiled at him confidently. David was momentarily stunned again. She waited patiently for a response, taking the moment to study his facial features closely, since she'd already studied his body from a far.

“I, I...didn't want to sit with all those idiots who were around you.” He breathed a sigh of relief, having found his voice again, this time with a shorter recovery.

“Oh, couldn't handle the competition?”

He blinked twice at the biting reply. *My God, she's quick and sarcastic all in one little female body...and fully equipped with a sharp, sweet tongue. She could smack me around any day—*

“Hello? Anybody home?” Julie did what he did yesterday and snapped her fingers in front of his face, still smiling at how pretty he was.

Okay, Dave, wake the hell up...right, you can do this. “What competition?” He whispered to the locker as he opened it.

Julie laughed sweetly. “Well, you have the opportunity to redeem yourself by escorting me to Jason’s house.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, staring at him with her arms across her fuzzy sweater, waiting for a response. “I don’t like to walk there alone – it’s a rough neighborhood in that part of town - but he ditched eighth period and he’s my ride, so... come with me?”

David couldn’t believe this was happening. I can’t, he pleaded with himself, then sighed loudly. “Sorry,” the pain creeping into his chest made it hard for him to continue, “but I have after school detention with Mrs. Sands today...and Jason has detention in the cafeteria, so he wouldn’t have been able to take you home anyway.”

Julie began to panic, “What am I supposed to do? I don’t even know what bus I’m supposed to take!” Saying this, she grabbed his shoulder and lightly shook it for good measure.

“Right, well, you could come with me to the principal’s office and wait? She promised to take me home, so maybe she’ll take you home...or you can call your parents?” He didn’t know what to do. *Damn it Mrs. Sands!*

“Nobody’s home,” Julie looked down at her boots, then looked back up at him smiling slightly, “Thanks anyway, but I’ll try to find a ride.”

As she walked by him, he reached out and grabbed her arm. “No, you’re not going to do that. I’ll help you find your bus.” He started walking to the bus lines, and she followed along beside him, her heart pounding so hard she felt she couldn’t breathe.

I can’t believe I’m walking slowly. David looked over at her.

I can’t believe he cares. Julie sighed sweetly while he reached out to grab her books for her. They walked to the buses creating quite a stir of commotion.

Running into the main office soon after that, breathless and worried, David almost slammed into the secretary’s desk, much to her dismay as she eyed him suspiciously. “Yes?”

Mrs. Finch glared up at him.

“I’m here to see LLLis - I mean, Mrs. Sands?” David tried to catch his breath.

“She’s been waiting for you, young man,” Motioning to the principal’s door with her eyes, Mrs. Finch gave him a look of repulsion.

He ran down the hall and knocked on the door. “Come in,” Mrs. Sands’ voice showed the slightest amount of irritation.

David paused at the door, looking up to the ceiling, his hand on the door knob. *Please let this not be too painful.* He shook his head again, trying to figure out right then and there why he chose to look up to the heavens every time he needed assistance. He felt humiliated thinking about the act of asking for Divine Assistance. Looking over at the secretary, who was staring back at him with a disapproving look on her face, David opened the door and walked in.

She was talking on the phone, trying to hurry through the conversation as he entered the room and stood there, not wanting to sit down to get too comfortable. “Can I call you back, Marge?” Looking over at him, Mrs. Sands smiled and then quickly hung up the phone. “Well,” a huge intake of air and she let it all out, standing there with one hand on her delicate hip, the other leaning on the edge of her desk. A look of deep contemplation and decision making across her face as she thought about what to do with him.

David broke the silence. “I’m sorry I’m late. A friend of mine couldn’t find her bus, so I helped her out. I made sure she got on it safely,” waiting for a ‘that was nice of you,’ or a ‘what a nice thing to do,’ comment, he instead got an eyeful of female frustration. *Please tell me she’s not jealous...please tell me she’s not jealous—*

“You’re late and that will be more time spent with me this afternoon,” pausing to enjoy the moment, she continued. “I definitely need my car washed and I have company coming over tonight for dinner, so we’ll need to run to the grocery store for that.”

David’s jaw dropped. *What the hell...? Now I’m your new errand boy? This can’t be legal.* No amount of disrespect or organized rebellion was worth this as punishment. He couldn’t believe this was happening. “And my parents know about this little errand business we’re doing?” Trying not to look too dismal, he stood there waiting while she happily gathered her things off her desk, putting everything in her purse, or handbag, or mini travel suitcase. He couldn’t believe how many items she could throw in there without anything peaking out the top of the bag. Amazing, yet slightly disturbing, David thought.

“Well, like I told you earlier, Dave,” he flinched over hearing his shortened name, “I spoke to your father already and he was fine with it all. He said you’d be a great helper, but to report back to him if you stepped out of line.” Leaning towards him to emphasize this last phrase, she said, “I assured him that you would NEVER step out of line with me.”

Wanting to throw-up, but swallowing it instead, David spoke with much control, “So, we should go if we have ALL that stuff to do in just ONE day.” He made sure to emphasize the important, key words in that sentence.

Smiling at him, Lisa grabbed her keys, but chose to hold them in her hand instead of throwing them into her gigantic purse along with the rest of her things on the desk. They walked out passed the nosy Mrs. Finch, who was trying to look busy at her desk, but couldn’t find anything to grab, so she picked up the phone and started dialing, casually yelling over her shoulder “Good bye Mrs. Sands,” then looking behind her as they went by.

What an idiot, David thought.

Walking to her shiny, silver convertible 1977 corvette with all over chrome and black leather interior, David was love struck for the second time today. Stopping in his tracks in the middle of the parking lot, he gawked first, then whispered, “Holy shit - I mean - sorry...nice ride,” a weary look on his face and a side glance at Mrs. Sands, who had quickly transformed into Lisa. Her lighthearted laughter put him at ease quickly.

“Yes, ‘holy shit’ definitely describes the shock most people feel when they see my baby!”

Riding in that car with the top down was worth the ordeal of having to be there, he decided. The weather was a perfect seventy degrees and sunny, without a cloud in the sky.

The grocery store experience was harmless, but a complete waste of time. David decided it was easier to just let her talk and smile at her occasionally, nodding his head in silent agreement when it was needed...or not. He quickly found out that his opinion really didn’t seem to matter. *She needs more friends, or a tape recorder, or someone to listen to her talk.* He couldn’t believe how much just one person had to say. He swore she spoke more today than he had in his lifetime. He wanted to ask her about her husband or if she had any kids, but he noticed in the car ride, she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. I don’t think I want to know, he thought as they both strolled down the aisles at Ralph’s Grocery store in Vista. After they were done there, she quickly got in her car, while David loaded the back with the groceries.

When they arrived at her house, she gave him the grand tour. She didn’t have kids. The

house was immaculately clean and there weren't any kid rooms, just two empty bedrooms, a huge master bedroom, decorated to a woman's taste - all in pink - and another bedroom converted into a den. The house was nice, but David didn't feel warm in it. Sterility came to mind as he glanced around. He definitely wasn't what this house needed, he concluded as he walked around the living room, taking in the two story gigantic walls and massive windows. The place needed laughter – taped, fake and obnoxious laughter.

And I don't laugh unless I'm making fun of people.

Mrs. Sands changed her clothes while he wandered around, and when she reentered the living room, she wore a canary yellow cashmere tank and matching sweater ensemble, paired with black form fitting dress pants and of course, matching high heels. She had managed to change her hair as well, sweeping it up in a fancy bun with fresh lipstick on and dangly ear rings.

My God, how long was she gone? He began to panic. “Umm, you look...nice – what time is it?” He asked hurriedly.

She laughed softly, walking by him to go into the kitchen, her perfume also newly applied, hit him like a slap across the face. He let out an obnoxious little cough, and then turned to follow her. “It's 4:15 and thank you for the compliment. Would you like something to drink?”

“No thanks, I'm fine,” he answered her, a puzzled, distressful look appearing on his face as he watched her pull out a glass only to quickly fill it with red wine. *Great...and she's driving me home? Or maybe not...*

He started sweating and fidgeting again. “Can I start my work now? I have homework to do and I still have chores at home.” He paused as soon as he spoke, realizing how easy it was to tell lies. He then smiled as he listened to one of his favorite songs by Thompson Twins; the words to “Lies, Lies, Lies,” played in his head so he closed his eyes to relish the audio memory. (Thompson Twins, “Lies, Lies, Lies,” Quick Step and Side Kick, 1983, Legacy Recordings/Sony Music.)

I just love the Thompson Twins...It's an interesting concept in a name: two fashionable guys who don't look at all alike, along with some hip, blonde chick with funky hair created one hell of a song to describe Yours Truly...

Lisa turned back to the sacks of groceries David had brought in and placed roughly on the large black granite counter. He waited for her to complain, but instead she laughed softly then began sorting through the bags, putting things away. She was humming a tune he didn't

recognize and she wasn't addressing his question. His face began to warm up in frustration as her obnoxious Willie Nelson tune was drowning out his Thompson Twins music.

After a few painful minutes of watching her rock out to some seventies' classic, David decided he'd do something bold. He jumped up onto the counter across from her and sat there, legs crossed in front of him and boots touching the counter. She turned slightly to see him and smiled, continuing to do her work.

Huh...that didn't work—

“You know, you can take off your coat Dave. Make yourself at home.”

He cringed. *No thanks lady, I don't want a home.*

After watching her unload her food and sip her wine, David braved the question again. “Can I start washing the car?” Making his voice louder, so he was sure she heard him above her humming.

“Yes, I suppose, but don't you want to call your folks to tell them you're here?” She turned and stood in front of him, smiling and holding her glass like a pro alcoholic.

“According to you they already know, right?” David jumped down, landing closer in front of her. Meeting her gaze, his being a good four inches taller than hers, he noticed she was swaying slightly.

“Uh, fine then,” she began to tap her wine glass, but he remained standing there watching her. “I think you should take off your coat before you wash the car though.”

“Fine, I'll need you to come with me to show me where everything is.” He answered her so quickly it made her swoon. Still staring at her, he waited for her to make a move, knowing he was already invading her personal space. *Go ahead, Principal Sands, make my day and do something bad...you know you want to and I'd make the perfect victim – misunderstood troublemaker with a mammoth sized chip on his shoulder. Who'd believe me if you took advantage of my innocent youth and overwhelming sense of trust?*

David saw her struggle, so he decided at the last second to take control and back off. It was an uncharacteristic move on his part, and he couldn't help but feel shocked over his sense of justice and maturity. Still, he thought as he turned then took a step back to allow her to lead him to the garage, he was too tired to create any more drama in his life right now. Besides, she wasn't worth destroying, and although he couldn't explain it, a part of him knew she would serve a purpose in helping Dillon. Sensing this, he also had a sick sense that things were already

changing rapidly. He felt his fingers begin to pulsate again.

It was a quick car wash, but he did a good job. The car didn't need washing, that was obvious from the beginning, but once again, David thought, it was better than mopping the huge cafeteria floor.

Lisa sat back and enjoyed his form. She wasn't surprised to see that he had a nice, muscular - but not too muscular- chest and shoulders. He had perfectly tanned skin, courtesy of multiple lawn maintenances around his neighborhood. David earned all his money this way and he did well enough to support himself; minus the roof over his head and the food he barely ate at home, he provided for himself. She sighed watching him work on her car.

After the washing was done, David did a bold move and excused himself into the house to use the bathroom. When he came back outside, he had his shirt and jacket back on and his things with him. As he approached her, he said rather hastily, "I called my house to check in and told my mother I was done working. She needs me home now."

Lisa bought the lie and quickly agreed. She drove him home, talking the entire trip. When she pulled up to his drive way, she gave a weak compliment. "Your house is so, so...sweet and lovely," Her voice contrived and fake.

"Gee thanks - bye." He got out of the car and as he closed it, he leaned inside. "See you around," And he pushed off the car and turned to walk up the driveway, knowing she was watching.

"Good bye Dave! Say hello to your mother—"

Closing the front door and leaning against it like he'd just escaped the enemy, he looked up and saw Dillon sitting half way up the stairs and watching him, a gloomy look on his face.

Daniel had stayed home from school, having had diarrhea all night, he woke up this morning and vomited profusely for hours. He was laid out on the living room sofa, cold wash cloth on his head, and what appeared to be dried drool or vomit on his chin. He watched David walk by, but he was too tired to make a mean comment. David glanced at him and smiled as he whispered, "I bet it sucks being you."

Dillon followed David into the kitchen as he poured himself a glass of water. Mother was there making dinner. She looked at him but didn't say a word and David could sense that she didn't look happy. He hadn't talked to either of his parents all summer. Since he'd started dreaming this fantasy world he lived in at night, he'd closed himself off from their influence, and

it was now the beginning of October. He didn't think he was to blame, rationalizing that they'd never expressed an interest anyway, never spoke to or came to school for any of his teacher open houses. He was genuinely surprised his father had expressed enough interest to call Mrs. Sands yesterday, and even more surprised to hear he'd taken time from his busy day to follow through on the phone call today. That was a first for him, and the thought that he'd now possibly begin to take interest unnerved David. He thought all this while standing there motionless in the kitchen drinking his water and staring at his mother's back. She was purposefully ignoring him.

So what else is new with her? I guess I'm a non blonde so I don't fit in. He felt uncharacteristically disappointed as he watched her cook.

"Well, I had a great time hanging out at Mrs. Sands' house today *Mother*. She's a cool older friend who's taken an interest in me, with a great big house and lots of money," no response although he could tell it was getting to her, "She sends her greetings by the way." He turned to leave with Dillon silently following him upstairs to their room. Mother sighed and stood there unmoving, until the meat began to burn.

Closing the door behind him and leaning against it, Dillon watched his brother take off his boots and fall onto the bed. "So, how was it?" Dillon asked, slightly annoyed over the way David had treated their mother.

"I don't want to talk about it. I want to sleep so please leave me alone." David put his pillow over his head and laid there on his back. Dillon came over and laid down next to him on his bed without a single hesitation. He kept his hands to his sides like he was in a coffin, staring at the ceiling and expecting to get a harsh beating.

"If memory serves, I do believe you have your own bed." His muffled voice showed an obvious irritation, but Dillon didn't move. They laid there in silence side by side. Continuing his conversation with himself as he laid there, David knew he couldn't leave Dillon behind, not yet anyway. He sighed, forcing himself to relax with Dillon lying next to him, resigned to stick around for at least one more shared birthday.

Chapter Six

Last Night's Seduction

*The Wretched will come to me.
And in their eyes I will see my future.
And in their ears I will hear my voice,
And out of their mouths they will speak my thoughts.
For I am Their Beautiful Nightmare,
The Collector of Souls*

Azmodeus enjoyed his short visit with the human soul in all its vulnerable, mortal state, stuck and restricted in lovely flesh and bone. That brilliant darkness was waiting in there somewhere, begging him to release it. He couldn't believe the raw physical texture of the young man's features and perfectly smooth skin—

Was that just youth or was it true that every molecule of epidermis had aligned itself as God would intend it to be? A human image like Adam – made from God Himself! Who would have thought He would create my future most prized possession? A gift for my suffering, a ransom for my pain...and the irony couldn't be more suitable – a lovely human created from a failed species. He must think I haven't a memory at all, but I do. I saw the original template! AND I still find humans absolutely disgraceful...but this one...he could break the mold and evolve into a vertebrate.

The Collector could only smile as he thought of David's rebellious spirit and ruthless disposition. Yes, it was becoming a habit to visit him now, to watch him interact so harshly with the world around him; the young man commanded fear, admiration and a following of worshipers willing to accept his brutality blindly. The human was already a leader, a powerful presence in a mediocre world.

Until just recently, the Dark Lord was simply existing and waiting. Centuries of repeating the same routine were now in reverse. This one would be the star of his personal Book of Revelations. "He is worthy of my eyes. Repeatedly I can visit him and never bore myself," he'd said to his witch Esmeralda as she pouted and brewed in her jealousy – that was a mistake to not make again, he silently noted. He certainly didn't need female contempt brewing.

Having out lived his predecessors as ruler of the Underworld by centuries, The Collector, or Dark Lord, or Azmodeus - depending on his company - was arguably the longest ruling Arch

Devil in history. His rule spanned over eight hundred years. He was one of several dark angels descended from the Heavens for disagreeing with, plotting against and simply not performing to God's standards as either Arch Angels or angels of influence. It was also made quite clear how much Azmodeus had despised God's creation of humans and the anointing of souls. His vocal displeasure angered God, however He chose not to destroy them all; He needed to be reminded of tyranny, greed, betrayal and deception in His universe. He also felt at the time that these fallen angels could serve a purpose in the end, for He knew of balance in the universe, having created such a concept.

It was still necessary to have such a demonic hierarchy in place, but this wasn't always the case in Underworld history. At times when chaos reigned and a ruler could not be maintained, the Living World suffered as well. The Dark Ages in human history coincided with such a turbulent time in the Underworld. The worlds were mirrored this way, becoming influenced by each other, and were either in balance or chaotic. Separated and cushioned from the Seven Heavens, the Living World or Material Plane and the Underworld were always in a volatile, dynamic state of dual existence.

With his eventual rise to power at the end of the Dark Ages, Azmodeus ruled with an iron fist, trusted no one, and lived and breathed power. It was meant for him, this calling, this perch at the bottom of all the Nine Planes of the Underworld. He unknowingly was pleasing God by maintaining a strong and powerful sense of order and controlled chaos. The Age of Renaissance and the rise of monarchies coincided with the beginning of Azmodeus' rule and he in turn, spent a majority of his time in the Living World during this era, absorbing the people and the influences of these centuries; his own mannerisms he derived from such a reawakening in human history. It inspired his current existence and in many ways, he chose to hold onto this time in history as his present reality, not happy or impressed with the current times he was forced to watch. For according to Azmodeus, it seemed as though the Twenty First Century was becoming more and more complacent; the global boredom above was killing his drive to collect. He was tired of waiting for another human revolution to take place.

...If it EVER does...

Azmodeus held claim to the Ninth Plane, for it was his personal home; there were no fortress walls, no mountains to scale or climb, no rivers to swim, and no sky to look upon or fly

across to get to such a place, for it was a magically created sublevel, below Hell itself, a place inaccessible from the outside. As a cold fortress, its walls, its doors, its floors, were all under the control of the ruler who inhabited its realm. All preceding rulers banished and annihilated were absorbed into Ninth Plane, so that it was almost its own entity, growing with each new addition; a living breathing graveyard. In many ways, Nine was like a star, and the levels of the Underworld were the planets revolving around it. Azmodeus, having lived within its bowels for as long as he had, was now only just beginning to feel its influence. He was building in strength and power with each minute he remained there in service. Most of the Underworld already considered him a deity; a being not capable of termination.

He had his enemies too, not just in his world, but in the Upper World as well. Since the Underworld had in its realm six Arch Devils, so too did the Upper World, or The Heavens, also having opposing Arch Angels. Only six in each world; a total of twelve beings of a higher order were allowed in existence at any given time.

Because he was hunted relentlessly, Azmodeus had created quite a reputation over the centuries as The Collector of Souls, and was most wanted and hated in the Upper World because he was never satisfied with staying in his world; his lust for life and souls to use, corrupt, and absorb drove him above to risk his own existence for the chance to take advantage of the living humans and make his selections early. He did this because he wasn't alone in harvesting still living human souls; the other five Arch Devils did so as well. Human souls fueled their fire, so to speak.

Unlike their counterparts, the Arch Angels kept their power in the Living World, hardly ever venturing down below for the very same reason. It was a check and balance system created by God Himself, giving and taking away power if boundaries were crossed. All the entities of the Underworld lost significant power when traveling beyond their worlds, placing them at a disadvantage - sometimes significantly - against the angelic bounty hunters, and vice versa. It was God's way to keep the darkness in check, in their domain, locked up and away from the living, and His workers away from danger. It worked, most of the time, but it was always a difficult concept to keep evil contained, and it was even more difficult to keep heroes at home.

Azmodeus sat in recollection of the previous night's events. He had been allowing the young soul to visit his realm for the past month, an unheard of vacation only granted to a few

over the centuries. It was risky to allow a mortal human to venture down, however he was willing to make a few exceptions, knowing fully he could be caught and refused entrance above by God Himself should He ever decide to take notice and intervene.

Bordering above The Entrance, floating in a sea of mist and fog, was Purgatory. It was here in this place, where neutrality existed between the upper and lower worlds. If God selected for redemption from this chaotic sea of souls, a particular human, He frequently sent Arch Angels down to perform this 'purging' task. This act infuriated Azmodeus. To rectify the situation of soul snatching in his domain, the Dark Lord set up guards, or Gatekeepers, and granted them powers to see without eyes, any angelic activity above the First Plane. He was notified whenever his guards 'saw' angelic intruders and would ascend up to meet them.

The Collector remembered the first visit, having marked David, along with a few others he had been watching in the Living World, as his for future taking, if and when he so desired to pick them out, like ripe fruit off Life's Tree. So when David entered his kingdom, unnoticed to him, The Collector put a quick identification or tag on his soul.

The marking of the living souls was after all, his idea. His power, he derived from acquiring so many souls this way. Still this one particular human was costly. Requiring so much of his time and energy, it was a game really, a way to allow the young human to enjoy his surroundings and bond with the creatures purposefully placed there for him to meet; a façade to feed into the young one's grandiose notion of what would await him in the Underworld. Power and the ability to achieve it easily, along with recognition and freedom without rules - these promises would seduce David into killing himself in order to come to a place more worthy of his existence. In so doing, his suicide would bring him falling down right into the lap of his captor; another soul for the taking, damned for all eternity.

Suicide ideation – thinking and planning one's own demise – was a tool Azmodeus used and abused over and over again. Being one of the deadly sins, it was an abomination to God and the Heavens. Self destruction before one's time was the greatest disappointment and for good reason, considering God held humans in such high regard, giving them souls with a purpose. To have His most prized creation quit and give up was the worst offense, or sin, a human soul could do. So of course, Azmodeus encouraged such activity, knowing he would collect in the end without any resistance from above, and more importantly, he would own the human soul.

Keeping the Underworld simple and inviting in order to convince his newest collection

into thinking it was nirvana was no easy task. It was time, money, and magic to re-create the fantasy world and place the players where they needed to be to convince the unknowing human into thinking this was where he belonged. The stage was set.

Fifth's Cavern was a small, quaint establishment created for those travelers privileged to get into its protected doors. It was a safe haven, located in a turbulent plane - Fifth Plane.

Allowing David's closet to act as a portal into Fifth's Cavern was a brilliant idea, suggested to Azmodeus by his witch, Esmeralda. Who else but a female vampire would know a human's domicile or home above and how every bedroom chamber had such tiny places called 'closets' with doors leading to nowhere?

By using the closet as a portal, he could control the human's entry in and out of the Underworld, and he could make sure to protect him by bringing him to the same place every time he entered; David's whereabouts always known and supervised. Esmeralda tracked David this way, and she served the Dark Lord as his personal witch. In return for her services, like other witches who served their masters, she had his protection.

Protection in the violent Underworld was the highest priority, for if a creature perished there, it was dissolved and absorbed by whoever destroyed it. There was no rebirth, no second chance, no reincarnation to a higher self; no other place to travel to if one's human soul met an unfortunate end there. To the non human creatures of the Underworld, there were no souls to recover, for they weren't touched by God in such a fashion to inherit such spiritual grace. They were flesh and bone in a world where life was not valued, not even by the Creator Himself. In many respects and especially when it came to the humans sent down, the Underworld was God's version of the garbage disposal and the Arch Devils regulated and redistributed the trash.

Last night, the Dark Lord made it clear from the beginning about his plans for the evening. Entering Fifth's Cavern and walking over to the owner, Gemineye, Azmodeus had secured the place, paying the owner one hundred gold pieces for one evening's rent and cooperation. He was slightly irritated at the cost and excessive energy he was putting into this one particular soul.

He had better not disappoint me, he thought as he surveyed the cavern, now empty at his earlier command, then turning to his witch, he gave her his demands, who he wanted there, all the same familiar players returning for show and bonding with the human, and how he wanted

the surrounding area outside the cavern to look like. The dark expanse of landscape with its purplish black sky, dense forest surroundings and threatening mountain capes transformed into the familiar Living World, with its less darkened sky, moon and stars. Clean, kept roads and all traces of filth and grim removed from view, replaced with nicer replicas and creatures only the living could imagine.

Walking through his closet Monday night, more tired than usual after so many visits to the Underworld, David unintentionally tripped and instead of entering in the cavern like before, he arrived in the forest nearby. Stunned and slightly fearful of his surroundings, he stood there unsure where he was supposed to go and in what direction he was to travel in. After standing there for a few minutes dumbfounded and feeling like he was actually in a dream, he decided to move and do something to wake himself up. Walking down a path towards the noise of the cavern, David was slowly becoming vaguely familiar with the landscape, it was unlike the other places he had visited in his dreams.

This past week, David's trips to the Underworld were never unescorted. Emen, his friend and companion always seemed to find him. A clever elf with a slightly dark nature, Emen was naturally good at traveling to places undetected. He shared his talents with David slowly, so as not to overwhelm the newcomer. He knew his place in the game, and followed his orders carefully, but he added his own flare to the experience when he was with David. Emen, although being paid to escort the pretty one around, enjoyed his time with him, willingly sharing more than he should for no reason other than to talk with this strange inviting human.

Catching up and walking alongside David, Emen couldn't help but feel like he would protect him if he needed to. He was shocked to see the human traveling alone in Fifth – that was dangerous on many levels – but he had heard him stomping around from some distance, so he was able to quickly intercept him. Knowing David was almost safe with the Dark Lord's invisible hand around his neck, and more importantly, claimed, Emen still felt attached. It was unlike anything the dark elf had ever felt before. He was traveling alongside his pretty human, his feet barely touching the ground, feeling suddenly very giddy to be near him again.

“So, how long can you stay here tonight, David?” Emen jumped up on a four foot tall tree stump, did a forward double flip, and landed on his feet. He gracefully bounced in the air, light as a feather.

“Umm, I don't know. I usually gauge my time here on when I start to feel tired and

drained, then my eyes start to get heavy and I fight to stay awake and focused. When I begin to feel that way, I usually only have a few minutes to get back.” He continued to walk, glancing at Emen as much as he could while trying not to walk into something. He couldn’t keep his eyes off the creature; his walk was so interesting, and each movement graceful and faster than the eye could register. Emen’s short, choppy black hair, pointed ears, light eyes, and smaller features made him slightly dainty and smaller in height and stature than David. And although he looked fragile, Emen was far from the description David had given him. His image of the elf was what he was allowed to see and nothing more.

They walked up to the steps of Fifth’s Cavern and into a large crowd of people, most of them young men, rangers in cloaks, carrying their belongings on their backs. David noticed a few elves - probably guides. It was a large group of at least twenty, and they were talking very loudly, oblivious to David and his friend.

The two gatekeepers, Borr and Ogdon, stood guard. They usually met the human inside the Cavern, guarding the inside of the doors to protect him from outsiders, although he would never know he was the one being guarded as a future possession. They were both extremely large in stature, ten feet tall and bald. He would call them twins, but David knew that couldn’t be – *Who ever heard of twin monsters?!*

The gatekeepers stood there with their massive arms across their chests. For the first time ever, David noticed a pair of identical markings, one on each left arm, of a half circle opening down, and what appeared to be a spear or sword piercing through the circle with the pointed blade also facing downward. The markings were black, but David only noticed them now because he caught them out of the corner of his eye, flickering fluorescent yellow for no more than a second.

Each Keeper wore a dark brown leather vest, and loose fitting black pants with knee high boots. Everything about Borr and Ogdon was larger than life, and the only weapons David could see were long sickles sticking out from behind their backs.

Their faces were intriguing as well. Their eyes, if they had any because they weren’t visible, were covered by dark brown leather blind folds, they had two small holes for noses, however their most noticeable feature were their mouths; they were incredibly large, with what appeared to be too many rows of teeth. Frightening at first to look at and approach, by now David felt fairly comfortable with them both, although Borr was the only one who ever spoke to

him. As they approached, Borr dropped his head down slightly as if he was able to see David and smiled, his teeth making a crunching noise as they touched together with his grin.

“It’s you again. I see you ventured along a different route this evening – no matter. Your presence is requested inside. He is here to see you tonight, so make haste and don’t keep him waiting.”

Transfixed by Borr’s blindfold, David wanted desperately to uncover it to see if his prediction was true. He was sure Borr and Ogdon didn’t have eyes, or eye sockets for that matter, just large, flat faces. *Someday I’ll ask him*, David thought. He had yet to ever speak to the two creatures.

Smiling with just the slightest hint of hesitation as he passed by them, while trying not to look at Borr’s teeth, David went to walk by him as Ogdon opened the gate. Emen, who was behind David when they approached the steps, suddenly was in front of him and already passing through the gate. *My God he’s fast*, David thought, as he followed him in.

The cavern was brightly lit, with what looked like a thousand candles and torches hung off the sides of the walls and the ceiling. There was a roaring fire in the two story fireplace that opened to two large meeting or dining rooms, separating them as well. Dozens of wooden tables and chairs were scattered around, candles on each one. All of the tables were occupied, and the noise was escalating as conversations became animated and involved – another party David thought as he smiled upon entering.

The building was wood framed and stucco interior - very rustic, environmentally warm and comfortable. David loved visiting this place, and this was one of about a dozen visits since the beginning of last month for him. He would dream walk into the Underworld on average two to three times a week. It wasn’t frequent for sure, but an amazing experience every time he was allowed entrance. This outing made trip number three for the week, and he had felt the strain waking up for school the following day. *I don’t want to know how I’m going to feel tomorrow*, he grimaced, thinking about the drain on his body. *I must be traveling here. There is no way this is a dream. Each time this happens, I open the door to my closet and enter here, to this place. This is an actual place!*

Looking around the room and recognizing several people and creatures he knew, most of them stopping in their conversations and nodding at him as he stood there, he had met and befriended a dozen creatures, all different in some way, some of them human, each with some

slight morphing of a bodily feature; Another pair of arms, extra long fingers, larger than life mouths or extra teeth, as in the case of the Gatekeepers. They were all unique, no longer from the same human race, yet David felt a connection. They were all freakishly similar, yet he liked and admired the differences. He did notice however, that with his last two visits with Azmodeus, his time in the Underworld was shorter lived; he became weaker quicker, and felt the need to leave sooner. This was unfortunate for him, he decided, because he found himself drawn to the stranger.

Walking into the cavern, David noticed first the bar off to his right and the massive fireplace at his far left. The walls around the large main room were tall enough to equal a three story building. Directly in front of him the wall was opened by a railing three fourth's the way up, with what appeared to be rooms for rent, like a hotel, he thought, smiling. He saw a few shadows walking by up there, most noticeably a woman. She leaned against one of the wood beams connecting the railing and appeared to be hiding from view, but David could feel her eyes, and looking up he met them, green and bright. As he looked, he tried to make out her face. He caught a glimpse of her long dark brown hair as it shot out while she whirled around and was gone. He held his breath as he stared up at the spot she once occupied.

"You will meet her soon. Come sit," Azmodeus was sitting two tables to David's left, by himself, a large goblet of something sitting in front of him. The crowd gathered around him parted ways to allow his viewing. As he leaned back in his chair and continued drumming his long, beautiful, pale fingers on the table, he forced a friendly smile David's way to welcome him.

Seeing him sitting there, David felt suddenly weak in the knees, feeling like he could faint. *That would be really embarrassing, so please move or say something Dave.*

Those eyes, glowing light icy blue in the dark of the busy tavern, made David feel even more nervous, and what was troubling him most was his fear. Fear of someone he'd already met before. Why tonight he felt this way only made him fret more.

Say something Dave! What do you say when you're in the company of someone so striking? I don't fucking know! Think of something!

As if reading his mind, Emen nudged him gently towards the Dark Lord and whispered as he leaned in, "I think you need to take a seat."

With the voice of his friend somehow waking him, David walked cautiously over to the table, his legs almost not cooperating as he shuffled over to present himself. His face turned red

as he realized he probably looked like an idiot.

Sitting down at the small table across from Azmodeus, he continued to feel uneasy – was he being sized up, and why? No, he rationalized, this was a man he'd befriended already a few times before now and he liked him, genuinely liked him, so there was nothing to mistrust.

So what gives Dave? I just don't know! Just stop talking to yourself and be confident for fuck's sake...idiot. But before he could attempt to say anything, Emen came over and placed a goblet of clear liquid in front of him. Nodding and bowing slightly at Azmodeus, who looked as though he didn't care to notice him, Emen silently walked over to the table next to them and stood there, arms crossed, watching the men play cards, but continuing to glance over at David when he wasn't looking.

After reading David's thoughts and smiling, the Dark Lord spoke again. "He's a clever one, by far one of the best guides here, and to think he's so young too." He spoke each word so gracefully and casually, his slight English accent making his voice sound smooth and gentle, Azmodeus almost lulled David to sleep. He also knew how to play to young humans, especially males. *Just feed into their egos. Make them think their age or lack thereof, isn't a character flaw. Let them believe they can be great without all the experience and wisdom age can give. It's just too easy...*

David appeared suddenly interested. "How...uh...how old is he? He's an elf, right?" *Two questions Dave - you idiot! You hate it when everyone else does that and now here you are front and center! Why in Hades are you rambling on with more than one question anyway?! Shit...I need to take a piss.*

Azmodeus cleared his throat and smiled at his table mate. The innocence and naivety the human exhibited was very thrilling and for the first time in centuries, refreshing. "Yes, yes, he's an elf and very young, probably your age if he were human—"

"You know my age?" *How does he know my age? I didn't tell him and he hasn't even bothered to ask...*

"I can tell you're young David, but it shouldn't be held against you. That's the reason why the world you come from is on a downward slide. They choose not to embrace the worthiness of one's soul, just one's mature age. Young humans such as yourself are kept under lock and key at a time when you should be set free. It wasn't this way in earlier times, when the world was volatile and chaotic – you know - Medieval Times? Back then, young men your age

held positions of power and influence. Kings younger than you lead armies into battle. Your young age is considered to be when a human soul is most powerful and *influential*. Times have changed however and now, in this day and boring age, your elders have and are still refusing to see your talent. They instead use their increasing age to justify their importance – like say, your father – when they’re just keeping you from realizing your true worth, keeping you in the dark, suppressed by their religion, their goal being to stifle and quiet your aching soul. But I’ve seen its true worth when you’ve come here to visit. It is very powerful. It brought me to you.” He watched David listen to every word transfixed and ready for the next. He watched the youth absorb his ideas like he was already a god. He tried to hide his glee but his eyes started to turn color. He quickly finished his monologue, not feeling quite himself suddenly. “Your age should never be your worth and Emen over there is a perfect example of that. He’s one of my finest guides and he’s also my *youngest*.”

David didn’t even blink. He was immediately smitten and actually felt the room begin to spin. He suddenly held onto the edge of the table for support and closed his eyes.

“Are you tired so soon?”

David quickly opened them but the room was still spinning and he needed to lie down. He almost asked to do this, but intuition made him think this was probably not a good place to sleep. “Yes, umm, I feel tired and drained tonight...why is that?” He waited patiently; finally able to look his table mate in the eyes, however his voice couldn’t keep itself from wavering. Funny, he thought, but although the room was doing crazy things to his eyes, the beautiful, confident gentleman before him stood still, so David focused on him. It was easy to do now that they were close. He felt mesmerized.

The eye contact shared between the two of them, although making David nervous and insecure had an effect on Azmodeus as well and it was building on itself. Hard as he tried, the Dark Lord couldn’t make his eyes stay blue. Realizing this quickly, he brought his hand up to his forehead to rub it, thinking hard to stay focused. Answering David this way while he looked at the table, he said, “It is hard to come here and not feel weak because you are where you belong, however, your physical body limits your ability to stay, for this is not your world yet. In effect, you are trying to occupy two worlds at one time - a young man undecided and torn - but your place should be here, for if it were not so, then explain why you continue to visit this world? When do you think you’d like to stay? You’d be important here and I certainly wouldn’t

keep you locked away and silent, David.”

Feeling his power return as the human turned his gaze upon Emen and the next table, Azmodeus looked up again, his eyes now blue. Watching David’s side profile, he also felt a surge of power return. Amusing, he thought. *Why does his gaze upon me make it difficult to appear in disguise? I haven’t felt so humanlike in centuries!* Then thinking quickly, as he always seemed to do, Azmodeus came to a conclusion that warmed his cold interior. Smiling, his blue eyes having returned as David glanced at him, he continued to ponder the thought. *He makes me pure, his presence, my soul, it is meant to be. I will not need to convince this one much longer. He’ll come down soon enough on his own.*

Reaching for his drink, the Dark Lord glanced up at the balcony to meet eyes with Esmeralda. He frowned as he noticed her. *I’ll deal with her mistake later.* He gouged his fingernails into the table briefly to release some of his aggression, and then smiled at David as if on cue.

David looked back at his intriguing older friend and asked, “What should I call you, since you had asked me yesterday not to say your name to others above?” David felt a surge of electricity shoot across the table as Azmodeus drank, placing his goblet down to look at him. David couldn’t believe what he was thinking and tried to stop, but it was no use. *Wow, he is amazing to look at, almost too perfect to gaze upon...and he’s a guy.*

“You may refer to me as...” and Azmodeus paused to think. Describing how this soul, his future captive, needed to speak to him with respect and fear was not what he had in mind at this point to discuss. He thought quickly, thinking the human could know his personal name, the name he chose to use when he frequented the Living World during the glorious centuries of the Age of Renaissance - no one knew that and lived to tell in this world or the Living world, for that matter.

“Louis...you may call me Louis, but please know you will be the only one who’ll know me by that name.”

David felt another surge of electricity, and he stretched his hands out and extended his fingers, looking at his black nails, then looking over at Louis’ nails and seeing them glow yellow, then change to red, then quickly back to yellow. “I feel privileged to know your real name, but why do you have two separate names?” He looked up at the Dark Lord, and then back at the man’s nails as he began drumming them on the table again, their color changing with each

touchdown. Noticing this, Azmodeus thought he could divulge some personal information.

“I lived in your world in the Fifteenth Century. I was born into nobility, the son of a Persian King. I ascended the throne at the age of fifteen, and ruled for twenty years. I died in battle, defending my crown, after two decades of acquiring land and wealth. I had legions of men in my service,” pausing to look at Sandor, hiding under a dark cloak, walking behind David and making a semi desperate gesture to get his attention, Azmodeus ignored the servant and looked back at his visitor, smiling at the captivated audience of one he kept company.

David was transfixed again, barely breathing as he sat there realizing he was in the company of a king. Sensing this, the Dark Lord continued his deception. “I entered this world powerful already, acquiring more than I could ever dream of having. I’ve already made my mark here...as you can see by looking around you.” *Not really lies - I did in fact, occupy the human body of the son of a Prussian King off and on for a few decades...he just wasn't me...*

David glanced around the room and noticed several of the creatures there watching his table guest with awe and admiration, many of them looking at him as though they'd rather be at his feet than where they were, sitting at their tables drinking ale and talking.

“I-I can see that, Louis,” gulping and beginning to squirm in his seat, David felt out of place, “So, I can't help but wonder why I'm here...in the company of greatness,” pausing again and looking down at his fingers, “I don't belong here...I'm the son of a pastor and I certainly haven't acquired any land or wealth and I'm seventeen – not fifteen - and certainly not the son of a king...” His voice trailed off awkwardly.

“But you do belong, just look around you. In your short time here how many have you met and felt at ease with? How do you feel now?” The Collector studied his captive's face with amusement as he watched him try to ponder the illusion with much thought.

David tried to smile, looking down again feeling out of place at the thought that he, David Smith, could actually be social. “I feel tired, but comfortable here...like I belong, I guess,” a puzzled look on his face again, he couldn't believe he actually felt this way. *I've never felt this way before...this sense of belonging feels kinda nice actually....*

“I assure you, you are destined to make your mark here as well. I can help you. In due time, I will tell you why you are meant for this world, not the mundane world you're in now, so you must trust me when I say to you the time you spend above is wasted time, keeping you from being here, where you belong.” Azmodeus' look became serious, “So, knowing that, because I'm

sure you feel the eternal wait you suffer there, when are you going to finish what you've started?"

David looked up to meet his gaze, his heart pounding and his head beginning to race with thought. Emen glanced over at him and smiled. David thought of all the power, wealth, and recognition he could have by simply coming here. *Was I to be his apprentice?* But then there was Dillon. And he had to cough to loosen up the pain that had hit his chest like a ton of bricks at the mere thought of his brother.

Could I end my life for this life and could I do it now? I can't leave Dillon yet, could I? Maybe...after all, the boy is looked after by everyone in the family. I'm only one of six other people who matter to him. Maybe I could visit him in his dreams later on, and maybe after a while, I could convince him to come here and join me? Maybe...

He felt as though he was pleading his case before a jury of his peers, or maybe just God, Himself. *Where is He anyway? How does He play into all this? Is the Underworld Hell? Do I care? As if I'd get into Heaven anyway. No, at least down here I could be powerful with this one's help.* Glancing up at Azmodeus, not knowing his thoughts were freely written down above his head to be read easily, he hesitated, thinking he would agree right then and there if it weren't for his brother. He sighed and ran his fingers through his dark hair, feeling completely conflicted.

Azmodeus finally spoke after enjoying the silence for awhile and watching the torment before him. "You would be my apprentice, for lack of a better word, and I would show you anything you desire to learn. I am very selective as to whom I allow into my service, and I think I've made it quite clear that I choose you to be one of many in my inner circle of friends." Watching him intently, Azmodeus smiled at his little victory. "Think about it and let me know," and looking up at Sandor who was jumping out of his skin to get his Master's attention, he concluded, his voice somewhat restrained. "Excuse me, but I have someone I need to deal with." Spoken with much restraint, he rose like a king and walked across the room, all eyes on him as he approached a cowering Sandor.

David sat there thinking, his back to the Dark Lord, about the powerful words just spoken, the promise of fame and power being offered from across the table and swallowed harshly, his throat feeling tight and sore. *I can leave Dillon, I can come here and make my mark...there isn't ANYTHING for me in my world. I don't belong there...my place is here, every*

ounce of my being cries every night to be here! He looked around the large room and felt the warmth of the fire. He felt something else there too, something clinging to the innocent appearing stucco walls, seeping through like bleeding paint, trying to breathe and take shape. He felt the old familiar feeling he was used to, that feeling of fear seen every day in his parents, the kids at school, and his teachers. It made him stronger, this crippling fear of the unknown and he thought about what it meant to him. *It's that presence you think you can feel in the darkness that hovers above you waiting to swoop down and take you away. So why is that kind of fear here too?*

At this point, he allowed his mind to drift around. He thought of how much he enjoyed the night, would sneak out of his house at midnight, to embrace the cooler air and dark atmosphere with no one around to disturb his peace. It was an almost daily summer night's journey this past year and then he'd return to the house, fall asleep and dream a journey into his closet. This embracing of the unknown was something he had always carried with him though. He truly believed he felt no fear; very little actually unnerved him. Walking down the halls at school, he had felt and smelled the fear from the stares of others, as they hurried out of his way, and he thrived on it because he didn't think he owned it.

He now sat in his medieval chair and stared at his silver goblet. *I should make a toast to the fear residing here and drink.* Then, as he went to reach for his glass, he saw the friendship bracelet Dillon had made for him last year for Christmas, peeking out from under his shirt sleeve, hanging loosely on his left wrist. The guilt crept in and he sat there, crippled under its weight.

“What is your *dilemma*, fool?” The Dark Lord hissed at his scared servant.

“My Lord, the crows are outside and request your presence,” looking around as he said this, a timid Sandor continued. “They say it is more important than you'd care to dismiss, and they mean to tell you this night.”

Looking at him trying to gauge his fear, The Dark Lord relented. “Fine, tell them I will be outside shortly. If they are not there waiting, I will disperse them in pieces and feathers.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Sandor bowed.

The Dark Lord rolled his eyes and whispered back, “Move, you imbecile,” and the servant hurried to the front doors.

Walking over to Gemineye, he made his wishes clear. “Keep him here until I return,” the

nodding of the bar keeper's head was all he needed and with a quick glance upstairs to his witch, he shot his eyes to David's back then turned to leave.

Waiting outside, the crows hopped around the ground looking for trash and yelling at each other for the lack of its presence. A flutter of wings could be heard in response to the Dark Lord's sudden appearance, his Gatekeepers at his side accompanying him. "Speak, you fools, and if I find it rewarding, you may earn your bodies back, eventually," holding his staff, its end glowing yellow and red was very distracting for the four crows standing there on the meager dirt ground.

The leader hopped forward, ruffled his wings, and then spoke upward. "My Lord, we have great news! There is another half to your treasure that is unaccounted for! A rare find indeed! A soul worth—"

"Quit your fumbling around and speak!" The Dark Lord was growing impatient.

"My Lord, the human inside has a gift for you. A younger brother purer than any soul the Living World has to offer and their souls – somehow *connected*. A shiny treasure indeed, for each is a part of the other." The crow bowed his head, trying to control the excitement he was containing, for surely now he'd get his body returned to him intact.

"How do you know this?" The Dark Lord suspicious and cautious, waited for a response but chose to continue anyway. "Is this pure soul you speak of - this brother - is he not bound and marked for the Heavens?"

"I saw him, my Lord, this morning and looked into his eyes - they revealed his soul - and it was mostly pure, however there was a small blemish if you will, a speck of something stained there." Continuing on with the silence allowed to him, the crow spoke with excitement, "I was flying by the house and I saw a shiny treasure looking out the human's window, it was so bright, I had to stop and take a closer look at it. He was there, sitting alone and sad. His soul so bright, yet pulsating dimly, as if its power was about to run out."

Listening intently for the first time, with new found interest, the Dark Lord whispered, "Go on."

"Yes, of course, my Lord, I think he is worthy of your eyes, for they share sleeping quarters. You could see for yourself tonight, while his other half resides here, for I believe he will be visible to you given his connection with his darker half. Having watched this younger one all day, I have seen the connection they share. I have also seen his soul grow *dim*," and

stretching its neck out to make his point, the crow spoke, “In the company of his older brother.”

Azmodeus dismissed the crows with new orders. They were not to spend their time recruiting more souls, for now they had a new mission.

Going back inside, he became nervous – was it excitement or apprehension? For the first time in centuries, he felt this way. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he was not able to fight the incredible urge to visit this soul his spies had spoken of. He was not allowed to see or touch living souls unless they were dark natured. The clear souls were simply that - too clear to see, too blinding to look upon - and that was only if one could *see* them. And for the most part, he could not. The invisibility was for their protection, a camouflage of sorts, but if his crows, his spies in this world and the living world, could see upon this particular beauty, then maybe so could he. There must be a flaw, a speck of something impure to this clear soul, a dark spot to look upon, and possibly, to take when the time was right. The older brother would be the key to acquiring this new treasure and he already wanted it without having looked upon it yet. He deserved it, he decided, as he strolled over to his table.

Looking down at David as he circled the table, as if for the first time not assuming the prey he was inspecting was truly dark, he looked hard for flaws. *Ah, yes, I see him. I see your flaw, and he is beautiful indeed. One fragment of light to your dark soul describes your brother best, my dear – a weakness to be exploited on a later date.* “I do apologize for the rude interruption, but my servant has just informed me of a meeting I must attend to, and I need to depart now. Please accept my apology by joining me for a visit tomorrow night, but this time at my personal home? I have yet to show you the entire grounds of Ninth Fortress. You only had a limited viewing during our last visit. I am sure you will be amazed and...” He paused to add extra value to his last few words, “You can decide tomorrow if you’d like to stay here, under my protection, to start your new life? Think about it.” He smiled as he looked down upon the human soul.

David nodded in agreement, trying not to blush after meeting eyes with this amazing, intense and thoroughly interesting man before him, yet feeling more guilt over the thought of leaving his brother. *I can’t help it*, he thought, sitting there. He tried to hide his admiration for Louis, but he was sure it was apparent on his heated face as he tried to casually look around the room before speaking. Realizing he’d have to speak soon, he looked up, then quickly looked down at the table as he noticed Louis smiling, a look of what appeared to be amusement on his

face. *He knows I'm acting like an idiot, yet he isn't laughing...odd.* “Yes, of course, Louis. I feel tired anyway, so I should return home in a little while, I just wanted Emen to show me around for a few minutes.” He sounded dazed, but he could hear his embarrassment.

“Of course you can stay with Emen, however do remain here until it is time for you to depart. Emen can walk you to your door.” With their conversation over, he departed quickly, strolling out the front door like he owned the place because he did. *You can and you will leave your brother, for me, and when the time is right, my sweet, he will follow you.*

Later that night, David returned home, walking through the doorway easily after Emen lead him through the woods along the same path taken earlier. He stepped into his room and turned to close his closet door. Walking over to his bed, he looked over at his brother sleeping there like an angel, while he felt like a wreck. He slid into bed, not fully aware that his body was already there, asleep.

The very next day, sitting on his majestic throne of gold and jewels pilfered from those less fortunate, Azmodeus contemplated how tonight would be. “I told him he could come here, so everything needs to be in its proper place,” turning and pointing a long, pale yellow tipped finger at his house servant, Mendel, he continued. “It will again be an intimate dinner for two, set with all of his favorite foods—I will give you a list shortly—but most importantly,” turning now towards Sandor, “I will not have ANY interruptions whilst he’s here. He, and only he, will be my priority tonight. The rest of my kingdom can melt and burn, but tonight, he will keep my company - understood?”

“But My Lord,” Sandor with his head bowed, shocked to his bones to here such adoration for a fellow human, spoke wisely to the pristine, sparkly floor of Nine. “There is always activity here, and most, if not all of your visitors choose to brush me off when I attempt to carry out your wishes.” Gingerly speaking the last few words, he felt a surge of happiness at serving his Lord.

“Fine, find Esmeralda and bring her to me,” pausing and adding with a slight hint of annoyance, “And have Théoden find those crows for I need more answers.” And with a slight brush of his powerful extended hand, Sandor felt the invisible push on his bowed head.

“As you wish, My Lord,” he turned and left with a smile on his face at the thought of turning Esmeralda in.

Azmodeus sat there alone again to be with his thoughts. Having visited the younger

brother last night to watch him sleep, he was now transfixed on destroying him. *I must bring David here, I must make him end his own life.* His head began to race with a thousand ideas lighting up in his brain for the first time in centuries. He welcomed his mind's return with great pleasure. Acquiring David could bring a bonus twist to the game; a new and improved prize could now be awaiting him for all his efforts. "Dillon," he whispered, smirking over the similarity between the two, given their obvious polarity.

Esmeralda entered the room, followed by Sandor, yelling after her, "He requested no one at this *time*; he wanted you to come *later!*" Pleading with her back as she strolled in, he finally gave up, exasperated, looking over at his Lord.

Looking back at Sandor standing there frustrated behind Esmeralda's shoulder, the Dark Lord felt amused. Such an interesting human slave, he thought. Having lost an eye on his descent into the Underworld in a gruesome fight, Sandor was about to lose the other when he intervened on the young man's behalf, having sensed the potential to serve in him. He also saw a willingness to please in a young man brutally killed in the Living World by a jealous overpowering lover. That was one hundred years ago in a human's lifetime. Looking at him now, The Collector smiled at his continuing loyalty. Dark brown curly hair, one pretty brown eye, the other a black leather patch in its place, Sandor was a simple decoration to do his bidding.

Reaching him finally, Esmeralda bowed her head briefly then looked up at him, ready for the world to fall around her. She knew it was a mishap to have the human enter the Underworld outside of Fifth's Cavern, knew it was her fault he had somehow been teleported to the forest outside, where no one was to greet him.

But what went wrong?! She racked her brain trying to understand why he wasn't transported to the cavern. Luckily for her, Emen was coming to the cavern for his part in the deception and ran into this dismal human. It was a great cover-up and recovery, but she knew she would have to answer for her mistake. *It shouldn't be my fault this bumbling human can't walk upright through a door!* "My Lord, I came as soon as I heard you requested me," moving over to the left to allow him to get up, Esmeralda watched the Dark Lord rise from his seat gracefully and begin to walk around her.

"You are to make certain there will be absolutely no interruptions during tonight's meeting with this soul, David," standing behind her now and waiting for her to turn, he stared at the back of her head.

She was a beautiful witch from the Coven of Madera, located in the Sixth Plane; a place for witches to practice their craft in order to make them suitable aurors for the powerful ones in need of their services. A protected fortress with many doors, only a few of the most powerful had direct access inside Madera's gates.

For over two hundred years, this latest witch had been in his service, having replaced his then male witch who was not performing up to his personal standards. Having returned to Madera demanding a replacement, Esmeralda offered herself immediately to the Dark Lord, begging him to take her. She was young, newly descended into the Underworld, but her drive to please once again pulled him in. Her beauty helped her immensely, since it was common knowledge that he had a weakness for beautiful faces, music and song. She had long, dark brown, wavy hair cascading down her back, speckled with jewels and smelling of jasmine, perfuming every room she walked through. Her brown body, curvaceous and supple, looked amazing in every lovely gown she wore. Puerto Rican in nationality originally, with amazing bright green eyes and ruby red lips, she was a sight to behold. Half vampire, half witch, she had multiple talents and had to beg to get entrance into Madera, since vampires were strictly forbidden. Being female in the Underworld, even with her vampire traits, Esmeralda was a beautiful target for the taking. She was able to convince the witches of Madera to hide her and help her. Standing there with her Master behind her now, Esmeralda knew she had to face him.

Turning around, she stood with her head bowed, "My Lord, I will make sure there will be no interruptions tonight, you have my word." Walking after him as he began to stroll toward the door to the courtyard, she walked alongside him, relieved he had silently accepted her apology.

Suddenly, as if on cue with her thoughts, an invisible hand grabbed at her throat and squeezed as he walked her backward four feet to rest against a massive pillar, one of several that were decorating and holding up the expansive courtroom. Slamming her into it, making sure she felt the blow, he could feel her body go limp. As she lay pinned there, his invisible hand gripping her throat, her feet dangling two feet above the ground, she tried to breathe.

Leaning in, inches away from her panicking face, he whispered. "Do not disappoint me again, my Sweet. Your impeccable service keeps you here, however without that, I have no use for you. Remember those words." Callously he let go, walking swiftly through the opening doors, Sandor running after him, a smug look on his partially hidden face.

The witch's graceful body collapsed on the floor in a heap of green silk and beaded

jewelry. Gasping for air, she lay there weeping.

I love him...endlessly...

She grabbed at her chest, the chill from his cold touch still lingering there, and sobbed.

Chapter Seven

The Brotherhood

Still lying there next to each other on David's bed, the brothers fell asleep late in the afternoon. An hour crept by and Dillon began to wake slowly, feeling something watching him. Bolting up in bed looking towards the window, he saw the longest branch of the eucalyptus tree swaying in the breeze, only to rest empty. He turned to look at his brother, still asleep and looking very pale, with large dark circles under his eyes. *I hadn't noticed that before but he looks...dead.*

David stirred and woke, looked around, then up at his brother. "How long was I out?" He mumbled as he scratched his head then rubbed his eyes.

"Umm, not long Dave, maybe an hour. Did you dream?"

David looked at him with a puzzling expression. "I only leave at night Dil, daytime dreams are simply that - dreams." Getting out of bed slowly, he looked at his nails. He really didn't want to cover them up.

Then don't.

Strange to think he had another voice having dialogue with him. Maybe that was what everyone experienced? An alter ego, a personal devil's advocate, David thought. *Okay, maybe I won't.* He fell back in bed and placed his pillow over his head again.

Dinner was tense, with an extra long opening prayer and everyone holding hands at Father's request. David held his little brother's hand but didn't make his left hand available to Daniel, who in turn, didn't push for it either, but kicked him under the table again to show his disapproval.

Wow! He hit the same fucking spot! This is like a repeating nightmare! He glanced at Dillon and they grimaced in united pain.

"Nice nails freak," Daniel whispered with a wicked grin.

David clenched his fork tightly as if ready to stab a large slab of meat, trying not to listen now to the little voice in his head again - more dialogue. Still, this time it spoke with a calm resonance; a quiet, determined voice. He found himself actually pausing in his breathing to hear it.

Poke his eye out. Poke it – stick your finger in it. Then we can watch him bleed...

He gripped his fork tighter then let go after Dillon laid his hand on his.

Dillon felt his own anger building up. Once he heard the comment, he glared at Daniel. Concentrating on the glass as it called to him, focusing his attention there for reasons he wasn't quite sure of, Dillon watched the glass shimmer, brighten, then sparkle like a hand held firework.

A blink and a flinch followed as the glass exploded and shot across the table, miraculously missing all family members, hitting and lodging in hair, and ricocheting off dishes and chairs. The glass then dispersed along the white tablecloth like diamonds.

The explosion created chaos, but worse than the expected chaos – a moment of silence was observed first. It was a brief pause while they all stared at each other. In what seemed like a flash of time captured by an invisible camera set in slow motion, David saw Daniel lurch forward, screaming out in pain. The episode of glass shattering happened so fast, nobody actually saw where it came from.

The blood on both the white tablecloth and china plates created a brilliant contrast of color. David thought of a virginal sacrifice as he smiled wickedly. He marveled at how much blood could spill out of such a little slit of flesh. He sat back and enjoyed the scene unfold.

Daniel's life source was indeed everywhere. It was in the bowl of green beans. A drop sat precariously on one of the pink daisies serving as a center piece for the table – an 'I'm sorry' gift from Father to Mother for the breakfast incident with David. Blood soaked glass pieces reflected the light from the over head chandelier glittering across the table, with the farthest one sitting on the edge of Father's plate, tittering there. Everybody jumped up, except for David of course. Mother, along with all the others, had a prolonged pause followed by a scream as she ran over to help Daniel.

Interesting, David thought as he sat there amused, trying to hide the smile that had taken residence on his face. At least he had forgotten his throbbing shin.

“Grab a towel Mother! That's right! Firm pressure and raise his arm, now go to the sink and run cold water on it!” Father sat leaning forward on his throne, barking orders and pointing with his finger. “Rachel! Grab the glass pieces...I should have never let your mother get those cheap glasses! That's the second one in two days!” And then, as if his world was ending, Father gasped as he threw his napkin down in frustration, “Great! With his hand injured, how's he gonna play football now?!”

David sat there eating, his appetite having returned in full force. He smiled, watching the puddle of blood in front of his plate shake and dance with each movement of the table.

The Visit

Daniel's hand required ten stitches on the inner palm along his thumb line. Everybody went to the hospital to support him in his misery, except for the boys. They were able to stay home – a first in the Smith household. Sitting side by side on the couch in the living room watching television, both of them were gloating over their sudden luck; two sets of feet propped up on the coffee table, as they enjoyed each other's company without either saying a word. It was the nicest night David could remember ever having. He smiled as he watched Charlie's Angels on television.

Knock, Knock.

"Stay here." Spoken with authority, David hopped off the couch first and went to the front door, checking his watch as he walked like a typical father figure. Opening the door to four giggling teenage girls standing there, with a beat up, barely running station wagon in the background shooting out nasty exhaust in spurts as it tried to idle, he was taken off guard. He and Dillon had both showered earlier and weren't dressed to receive company. Having suddenly realized this, he went to shut the door to within six inches of closing, just opened enough to see their smiling, goofy faces as they checked him out.

"Yeah, what the hell do you want after ten o'clock on a school night?" His face looked stern, his voice, paternal and deep, as he looked at the girl up front, the others suddenly hiding behind her.

"Ah...yeah, is Rachel here?"

David noticed her pink hair and pale lipstick, but he didn't hear a word she said. After a short pause and more giggling, the girl smiled and said, "Hi, is Rachel inside your house and if she is, may I converse with her?" Her voice was sounding more sarcastic.

He clenched his teeth and tried not to think about smacking her smug face with the door as she leaned in. He had to blink and breathe in simultaneously to fight the urge. It was getting stronger everyday he thought as he brewed the anger on simmer for the time being.

"Let's see." And he half-closed his eyes and pretended like he was answering a double trivia question on a game show. "No, and...no," opening his eyes again to look at her, he saw her smile grow.

"You're cute. You can come instead," and looking over his shoulder at Dillon, who was standing awkwardly behind him, she continued. "And you can bring your brother too. With his

face, I could easily glam him up with some makeup and he would be fierce competition.”

Dillon rolled his eyes and turned away.

“No thanks, it’s past our bedtime - nighty-night,” and he closed the door on her then realized something and quickly opened it again to her still standing there in shock. “FYI—for future reference and your personal safety - my sister Rachel will NEVER be able to run the suburban streets at night with you EVER and my brother doesn’t need makeup to look pretty.” He quickly slammed the door and locked it.

Turning to Dillon and putting his hand on top of his shoulder, they silently started going upstairs. Half way up they heard something again, but much louder this time.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

They froze on the stairs. David could hear Dillon’s heart beat loudly against his side. Anger forced its way out his mouth. “Go upstairs and wait. I’ll handle this night call.” He almost leaped the full length of the stairs, landing perfectly in step on the ground, and strolled to the door, unlocked it, and threw it open. “What the hell...?!” He stood there and looked out, then stepped outside and looked around some more while Dillon sat on the stairs, knees pulled up to his chest and breathless as he watched.

Dillon felt panicky. “Dave? Come back in okay?”

Outside, the night was calm and still, a perfect seventy-two degrees with an array of bright stars to light up the night sky. David couldn’t help but come out just to enjoy the night for a few seconds, and to look around too. A crow sat on top of the nearest telephone pole and cawed. He looked up at it curiously.

*Been seeing a lot of those lately...and I thought birds never flew around in the dark?
Just owls and...and bats...*

Glancing up and down the street, he couldn’t see or hear anything else except for the neighbors’ dogs barking, but he could feel something gathering in the air, like a storm brewing on the horizon. The temperature change, the wind picking up, and the wrestling leaves both hanging off the trees and on the ground gave this particular autumn night an interesting chill. For David though, when it came to protecting his brother, fear was never an issue and tonight wouldn’t be an exception he thought confidently as he stood there in full view of whatever was coming.

Walking around the perimeter of the house now, looking in the bushes and making sure

the back gate was closed, he strolled with confidence down to the mailbox so that he could glance up and down the street again. He saw a shadow walking towards him with a dog leading. It was Jessica, his so-called neighbor from hell.

“Hi David! Oh-My-Gosh! You’re...uh...never-EVER out this time of night! And,” Pausing in her fast ramble, she watched as he stood there looking toward his house like a teenage god.

David, hands on his waist, still half dressed, was just beginning to realize how incredibly lucky Dillon was to be inside. He looked back at her and noticed she was checking him out and her dog was sniffing around his groin. He jumped back and tried to cover his chest with his arms, then crossed them over, then pulled them up so that he could begin chewing on a fingernail. He mumbled, “Uh...*shit*...” and he quickly shuffled up the driveway into his house. Dillon was still sitting on the stairs looking at him while he leaned up against the front door, both of them listening to it click shut. “Well, that was a nightmare I’d dare not repeat.”

“Why, what happened?”

KNOCK! KNOCK!

“Holy shit,” David whispered, his body still vibrating from the obnoxious bang of the door. *That couldn't be Jessica! No one knocks that loud, let alone a girl. Crap, the door isn't locked yet...*

He felt a cold draft move under the door, hitting the back of his bare feet and sending chills up his legs. He held his breath. It wasn't cold out, but he shivered. Making eye contact with Dillon, they both froze there.

Knock, knock.

A sweeter version from the one before, almost a beckoning knock summoned him to act. *That wasn't quite so ominous, was it? No, it wasn't...*

David turned around and looked out the peek hole with a slight hesitation, for the fear was lingering and beginning to take effect. He felt the cold air stroke his lower legs and tickle his knees with what he thought could be fingers, but once again, he couldn't make himself leave the peek hole to turn his head down to his feet. He didn't want to see it but he imagined it; the fear slid into his mind and he saw the ghostly white elongated fingers come up to greet him. Blinking hard, he remained transfixed on the hole in the door, finally able to look through it only to see nothing but the front porch - the ugliest part of his house as far as he was concerned -

receiving second prize compared to the obnoxious oversized picture of Jesus coming out of the wall above the living room couch. He put both hands on the door and rested his forehead there, more for extra support in order to keep from falling than to get a better view. Suddenly, the charming, noble voice in his head said, “Open it and come in...open and enter yourself,” but he just couldn’t do it. Fear was stopping him for the first time ever.

Knock...knock.

More sweet wooden music from knuckles he couldn’t see. He looked again in the hole, not wasting time, wanting desperately to see someone relevant. There was nothing to view, but he didn’t feel alone. He reached for the door knob—

“Don’t do it. Don’t you dare open it.” Dillon stood right behind him and whispered in his ear, “It can’t come in unless you open the door - so don’t.” Reaching out to turn the dead bolt, and then putting his hand on his brother’s, Dillon pulled it away from the door knob and turned him around. He noticed beads of sweat on his brother’s forehead and he looked deathly pale. It stunned Dillon for a brief second as he watched such young skin look so transparent. “Come on up, Dave. You-you need to get to bed and sleep - when was the last tt-time you actually d-did that?” His fearful, pleading voice snapped David awake, but he didn’t answer, however the usual fighting resistance in him was all but gone. Shocking himself a second time, Dillon helped him up the stairs, allowing a few brief pauses to occur as David glanced back at the door as if still drawn to it.

Once in their room, Dillon took over for the first time ever, sitting David down on his bed and telling him to take his shoes off and lie down, only to do it in the end when he realized his brother was a shell of a rebel without the ability to follow directions.

It was strange to be the leader and Dillon didn’t like it at all. It made him nervous, but he was so worried about his brother’s sleep deprivation, he couldn’t help it. David was acting as if he were already in a sleep coma. *I should be shaking in my skin, because I know what’s out there, and I know the crows brought it here, but I won’t let the darkness corrupt him. He has a future and I can’t be the only one who sees that.*

Shaking his head, he spoke out loud but half-convincingly, “Stop thinking that way Dil. It was just those creepy girls. Just go to sleep and stop the nonsense.” Taking off his pants and turning around, he saw that David had sat up again on the edge of his bed, staring straight ahead, not blinking, not speaking and barely breathing.

“Uh...okay sleepy head, *time for bed,*” he sang, his voice cracking with uncertainty. He gently laid his brother back on his bed, then pulled his covers over him to keep him there, but seeing David’s eyes wide open and staring at nothing was greatly disturbing. Stammering to act, Dillon didn’t know what to do, so he turned out the light and climbed in his brother’s bed. Lying there next to him, facing him, Dillon reached over and closed David’s eyes with his fingers. He remained on guard until he finally drifted off to sleep.

Absence Makes the Heart Grow...

David sat up in bed and looked down at his brother, sleeping there next to him, peaceful as always. *Why can't I sleep like that?* He slowly got up and moved to the closet. *I'll deal with the 'sleeping in my bed with me incident' in the morning because this is becoming a trend.*

He was too tired to deal with it now. Walking to the closet, it felt like the room had elongated. He tried to focus on the door but it kept getting farther away, stretching out like rubber. Taking several steps, enough steps to have walked three full lengths of his bedroom, David felt the need to run, to break through the closet door to get to the other side.

How strange...

He started walking and walking faster, taking full strides but not getting anywhere. He finally stopped at the foot of his bed and turned around, realizing how very little he’d traveled. While breathing heavily, a wave of fatigue passed over him like a shadow. He suddenly felt overwhelmingly tired, and if he hadn’t had his hand on the edge of the bed frame to support himself, he would have fallen right there. Reaching for the mattress in the dark, he climbed and slowly melted in, connecting again first with a shuffle and a vibration, then a blur of sedation took over.

It was 6:32am Wednesday and Dillon reached over to turn off the alarm clock. Lying there facing the opposite wall, trying to wake slowly, it dawned on him that he usually never turned off the alarm clock. That was always David’s job. It was positioned on his brother’s side of their table. It suddenly dawned on him. He wasn’t in his own bed. He felt heat on the back of his neck. Turning around, he met eyes with his very much alert brother, staring at him intently, trying to decide whether or not to beat him for being in his bed or just push him off and watch him land on the floor.

“Oh, hello and uh, good morning...?” Dillon smiled, ruffling up David’s hair so that it stuck out even more.

David continued to frown, not saying a word.

“Okay, look...last night was weird, and you were like a zombie after the door knocking prank, so I put you in bed, but you weren’t sleeping, so...” He stopped talking to study his brother’s reaction. It was pure and utter frustration, he thought, watching him glare. “What the heck Dave? It’s not the end of the world!” Hopping out of bed, he whispered quickly and with an annoyed tone, “Get over it.” Wow, he thought, that was a first – he actually got in the only *and* final words in a conversation with David.

With a sullen expression spreading on his face, David reached over and pulled his pillow over his head. He couldn’t admit it, but last night was the best sleep in a long month. He wouldn’t divulge this information to anyone, but Dillon calmed him down when he was near and last night was no exception. He remembered the door knocking and wanting badly to open it, but his brother kept him inside, pulled him upstairs and took care of him. *I cannot believe that happened, and I didn’t fight it either...I don’t think I had any energy left in me to fight at all last night.* Worst still, he realized that he didn’t dream into his closet, although he remembered vaguely trying to get to it. “What the hell happened last night?”

Dillon whirled around, startled by his voice.

“Did I just say that out loud?” David asked, rubbing his head again while shoving the pillow back under his neck.

Walking over cautiously, dressed in his usual blue jeans, light blue polo shirt and black and white converse sneakers, Dillon always looked neatly dressed and color coordinated, much to David’s annoyance. With his light blonde hair gelled back from his face and parted on the side, tucked in behind his ears, he looked so innocent. David watched him approach and thought if the world were suddenly a black and white television show, Dillon would be center stage and unfortunately, alone. *He truly has no flaws, and he certainly doesn’t need to be in color to stand out, like the rest of us do. Wish I could be so nostalgic.*

“Yeah, you said it out loud...are you feeling okay, Dave? You look a little pale - but better than last night. Maybe, although I know I’m just wasting my breath by saying this, maybe you should stay home from school and sleep – you know, recover?” Sitting down next to his brother, Dillon put his hand on his knee. “I thought you were going to die in your sleep, so I watched you for a long time and I prayed you wouldn’t dream.”

“You know Dil? I hate to say it again, but here goes. PLEASE stay off my bed when I’m

on it?” He pushed Dillon’s hand off his knee in frustration and threw his legs out, feet slamming on the floor. “Christ...” He got up annoyed and stomped over to his dresser.

“Please don’t say that word, Dave? You know it’s wrong and it upsets me,” still sitting there not moving, head down and looking at his hands, Dillon felt dejected.

Sighing, David walked back over and sat down next to him. “Fine...I won’t say His *last name* but what about His *first name*?” Nudging his shoulder with his own, he tried to get his brother to smile. David’s mood seemed to change with the weather patterns usually, but lately, Dillon noticed his moods seemed to change more by the minute hand of every hour.

“That’s not funny.” He got up and started making David’s bed, since his was not even wrinkled. David got up to watch him, not moving to help.

David finished dressing, and then walked over to the mirror to look at his hair. A crow’s nest, he thought. Seeing a black mass off to his right, he turned and looked out the window. There were several dozen crows sitting in the eucalyptus tree with so much weight, its branches were swaying back and forth and up and down. They looked like they were all comparing notes and watching a teen movie, each fighting for the best seat up front.

“Jesus.” David swallowed hard as he whispered at them all.

“That’s not funny *Dave!*” Dillon grabbed his backpack and glared at him.

“Umm, right, sorry.” He quickly grabbed his coat and shoes and hurried his brother towards the door.

“Wait,” Dillon reached out in time to quickly kiss his fingers. He then placed them on Jesus as he was pushed out the bedroom door.

“Yeah yeah, later Jesus,” David whispered still annoyed, and turning to see the crows, all gone except one, he closed the door behind him.

Walking downstairs with Dillon in the lead, Rueben sat waiting to greet him only, following him into the dining room without looking back at David.

Damn dog just gave me the cold shoulder. I’ll have to throw his Frisbee across the freeway tonight when I get home.

Walking into the kitchen and dining room, one large room divided by a sit-down counter and cabinets, the entire family was there. The news was playing on the radio as usual, with Father walking around the room drinking his coffee and intently listening.

‘Soldiers for Christ’ was Father’s term of endearment for the Smiths, beaming and

making sure to touch every family member as he said this, while walking around the dining room table like he was playing Duck, Duck, Goose. The little game created rushes of pride on each child's face - except for David of course. Still, it was comical to watch and he would laugh about it afterwards with Dillon, trying as best he could to place his hand on his little brother's head in a proclamation of Christian sovereignty. Dillon would usually give his signature frown and maternal shake of his head in disapproval, which kept David in check most of the time. It was amazing to imagine a larger than life dark hero being kept in line by such a frail, angelic boy.

When Father would do his rant and rave of his 'Soldiers,' touching their heads like he was the Pope, David always shied away from his hand, so that after a while, he didn't attempt to touch his second son at all. Standing now with his hand on Daniel's shoulder, he looked over and made eye contact with David. Everyone became quiet, as if they were all in a theater and the movie was about to start.

"Dillon," Mother was standing in the kitchen, nervously wiping her hands on a towel. "Come sit down and eat. I put your English muffin on the table over there for you. David - your father and I need to talk to you in our bedroom."

David and Dillon both stood there, motionless, neither one of them moving.

"You heard your mother boys, now let's go - David - MOVE!" Father pointed to the back doorway off the kitchen that led down a short hallway into their master bedroom.

Dillon slowly walked to the table, watching his brother leave the room with his parents following. He was greeted by Rachel and Daniel, both already sitting there and eating with Samantha. Nobody talked for a few painful minutes.

David turned and walked down the hall he'd been down maybe less than six times since they bought the house ten years ago, following his mother and being followed by his father, who had wisely placed his coffee mug on the counter first.

Upon entering the bedroom, his mother pointed to the chair that was placed in the middle of the room just for him, staged just right. David went over to it. "Do I have to—"

"SIT DOWN!" Father ordered as he entered the room, staring at him intently.

David turned and sat, feeling like it was useless to resist them at this point. They knew something was up and like every other time he'd messed up, gotten in trouble at school with counselors or teachers, or tried to be defiant at church meetings, or appeared too sour or pissed

off to deal with, they'd pull out the Bible card and use it on him. It was an ultimatum of sorts – to conform or perish in the eternal flames of Hell, or your bedroom, or maybe boarding school for the religiously challenged ex-pastor kids of the world. *Hell wouldn't be that bad*, David always thought. *I've always liked fire*. His mind quickly scanned his brain thinking if there were any religious schools near them.

Clearing his throat, Father began his big, spiritually channeled speech as if God was whispering in his ear.

Concentrating on his boots, David knew his father would do most, if not all the talking, so he began to chew on the inside of his cheek while attempting to stare at the closest bodily feature that wasn't his father's eyes – his nose. It was shiny today.

"Your mother and I were up all night and frankly, we're at a loss as to what to do with you!" Looking over at Sara, Father noticed the tears beginning to well in her eyes. He paused then continued, while David, arms crossed and wrapped around his chest, sat looking at the floor in front of him, refusing to look up and risk seeing her drama. Watching his mother begin to cry was too much theatrics to handle at his expense.

"We have entertained the idea of boarding school. There's an excellent Christian school for troubled boys."

Here we go. David panicked as he closed his eyes.

Father stood with his arms on his hips, holding himself tall and looking down at the boy, his face serious and colored crimson red as if he could explode at any minute, and his voice preachy. "And the good news is this: I know the head director. Although they're full—"

Let me guess? He'll kill some poor kid off to make room for me? David thought this in all its gory detail, chewing on his cheek some more.

"He has assured me he'd make allowances for you."

David heard sniffing and looked up at his mother without thinking. *I shouldn't have done that.* She was wiping away tears - just like he'd anticipated. He wanted so badly to say 'Do you feel better crying over me like I'm already gone,' but he bit his tongue instead and the pain distracted him. He closed his eyes again, his tongue now throbbing.

"Are you listening to me boy - because this can happen!" Reaching for the Bible on the dresser behind him, John held it in his hands, looking like he was silently praying. "It's okay Mother, we'll get through this."

She tried to smile at him while dabbing her eyes. David made the mistake of looking up at her and tried not to puke, but coughed instead, then glanced up at his towering father and seeing the Bible in his hands, sighed and put his head in his own hands, leaning forward in his chair to prepare for the onslaught of words written before the dawn of modern man.

“Yes, sir, I hear you, but I’m not sure what you want me to say,” David mumbled a politically appropriate answer, still looking at the floor.

“Well, that’s easy son! Say nothing but you *look* at me when I’m talking to you and show me RESPECT!” His eyes looked like they were getting ready to pop out when David gingerly glanced up at his nose.

“Yes sir.”

“Now I know how close Dillon is to you, and that worries both your mother and I, for obvious reasons. We’ve considered moving him in with Daniel to try to separate the two of you,” a short pause before he continued. “But after yesterday’s chain of events in the kitchen, and your sour attitude and change of appearance,” he motioned his Bible at David’s black nails, “I think a more drastic plan of action needs to take place so...we’re taking you by car to The Disciples. It is a Christian school for teen boys located in San Bernardo. Pastor Rick Sampson will be expecting us around noon today.”

This can't be happening...I can't leave Dillon now! He needs me around to protect him and watch over him at school...they'll eat him up there and here - it'll be worse. They'll brainwash him with their Christian influences for sure...he's not strong enough without me here...and what about my closet door?

He looked up at his father, who in turn, was watching him, holding the Bible with an already decided look on his face. Thinking quickly, David spoke up. “What about Dillon?”

“Dillon will be fine. He can visit you...along with us...every other weekend because it’s only a two hour drive.” Father then squatted down to look David eye to eye, his voice lowered to just above a whisper so that not even Mother could hear his words. “Now, you and I both know what happened between us yesterday morning,” a long drawn in breath and darting eyes at mother, he continued, fidgeting there holding the Bible and flipping through it as if trying to find scripture to support what he was about to say. “Now I can’t have that kind of evil in my house, my church, my home.” He stopped flipping and landed his finger on a random verse in the Book of John and continued with new found resolution. “Now, because you’re my son, I’m too close

to you to free you from this evil that has taken hold, but Pastor Sampson can...he's the best."

David piped in quickly, "But that's the problem Father," trying not to gag as he used the term to define the man squatting in front of him, "You don't know me and you aren't close to me, so that would make you the perfect choice to be the one to help me." He looked up at his father, a pleading expression on his face, waiting for a response but not getting one. Instead, he saw it; the all too familiar look of resolution on his father's face – or was it repulsion? It must have been the 'my hands are tied' look he absolutely hated because he didn't see anything he could work with there amongst the wrinkles. "You can't just get rid of me when you want to! I'm not disposable!" David's voice started to sound desperate.

"Lower your voice boy! Now it's done! If you do real well up there, then you might be able to come home by Christmas." Turning to his wife to touch her shoulder, as if he were saying that last comment for only her benefit, he comforted her as she let out a small sob then turned to hug him.

Unable to calm the many voices in his head, David began to steam up with anger. "So, now what happens? Will there be an exorcism at this school or is that an extra charge?" He stood up to meet his father's gaze.

"If that's what it takes, and God wills it, then His will be done!" John began clenching his teeth, still standing there holding onto his wife, placing her back to David as if shielding himself from what he considered to be Satan's son.

"Look father," David bit his lip, to distract himself with the pain. "I honestly don't know why I grabbed your arm yesterday, but it wasn't to hurt you and surely you already know I'd never hit you! So why not just punish me for grabbing your arm - although it *was* a reflex - and we can start over?" Pleading as he looked at the man's face for any sign of doubt in his already made decision, David couldn't find any.

"It's done. I have prayed and my prayers have been answered. They are taking you in without tuition, and that was all I needed for it to be a sign from God." He looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. The Lord had spoken.

David flopped back down in the chair.

Table Chat

Sitting there at the table, opposite Rachel, Daniel and Samantha, Dillon felt awkward for the first time ever amongst his siblings. His cheeks felt red as he looked down at his English

muffin and tried to take a bite. Daniel broke the silence, the two girls giving him eyes back and forth, prodding him to start.

“Hey, Dillon, how’d you sleep last night?” Daniel leaned forward in his chair and took a drink from his coffee like he was a grown up.

Dillon answered without looking up. “Fine.”

“We wanted to talk to you because we’re all concerned about you and the effect,” he cleared his throat then tried to continue, but Dillon shocked him with a well placed interruption.

“There is no ‘effect’ on me and I resent your implying that he does.” He looked from sibling to sibling, the girls both looking away, but Daniel stared at him intently. *Wow*, Dillon thought, *I have a voice!*

“Well, I think, as does everyone here, that your opinion of *him* would put you in the minority, because we all feel—“

“So. I don’t care if I’m a m-minority. I know what’s right from w-wwrong and no one, especially *you*, has that much influence on my life. I ch-chose my own path and so far, I haven’t gotten l-lost.” Dillon quickly looked back down at his English muffin he still hadn’t touched yet, feeling the confidence quickly dissipate like steam rising in the air.

Daniel started to get red on the ears, and he placed his coffee mug down on the table with a thud. “You know, Dil, I have had just about—“

“Dillon, we all love David, but he’s chosen a path that doesn’t fit with the family. He’s turned his back on God and us and now he needs help, our help as well as the help of others who can be in a better position to show him God’s Love.” As the oldest sibling, Samantha, hardly ever speaking her mind in family discussions, shocked everyone at the table by interrupting Daniel with a gentle hand placed on his clenched fist.

Looking at her with disbelief, Daniel started with, “Sis, I thought we discussed this already and I was to be the spokesperson for the group?!”

Turning to look at Daniel, then looking back at Dillon to continue, Samantha reached out and touched Dillon’s hand. “We love you and David honey, but he has to find his way back to us and you need to let him do that.”

“Sam! I was to talk to him about *that*,” Daniel pleaded, knowing she was the only sibling he couldn’t bully.

Dillon began to understand what they were saying and looking over at his parent’s closed

door, he rose out of his seat, the adrenaline beginning to course through him.

“Sit down Dil,” Daniel said with authority again.

“Go to hell, Daniel.”

Daniel got up and started running around the table to grab him, but Dillon was too fast, and since his side of the table was closest to the hall, and Daniel had to get by Samantha, Dillon got to the door and burst through followed by his frustrated older brother screaming, “I told you to sit down!”

David was sitting on the chair, hands clasped together and hanging off his legs, head down and his boots rocking back and forth from heel to toes. Mother and Father were both hugging each other and she was crying. Father turned to Dillon and said, “Go catch the bus now boy, or you’ll be late for school and the next time you barge in on a closed door, I’ll whip the tar out of you!”

Dillon continued looking at David, not yet making eye contact with his father, not registering his parents’ presence at all. He felt a sharp pain in his throat as it became tight. Grabbing at his chest, his voice wavering a little, “Come on Dave, llllet’s go.”

“He’s staying son. Say good bye and get going now. Daniel will walk you to the bus.” Father spoke calmly, walking towards Dillon and grabbing his shoulder to turn him away.

Daniel stood next to Dillon, arms on his waist and glaring at him, as if he were trying to burn a hole in the boy’s temple with his stare. “Yeah, I’ll walk him after I smack him in the head for telling me to go to—“

“GO WITH HIM DANIEL!” Father quickly found his normal, authoritative voice again. David smirked as he kept his head down. *Asshole just can’t help but yell all the time.*

“Yes, sir,” Daniel watched as he quietly enjoyed the view of David submitting on the chair. He turned and grabbed Dillon’s arm.

Dillon started to raise his voice, much to his and everyone’s surprise. “What’s going on?! Mother?” He then looked up at his father, who still had his hand on his shoulder, and pleaded. “Father, what have you decided to do? You’re not sending him away are you - I deserve to know! Let me see him? Please?! DAVID, LOOK AT ME!” His voice choked in tears as he realized what had just happened. “You’re not letting me say good-bye! I HAVEN’T SAID GOODBYE—“

Father continued to walk him to the door to leave. Mother stood there crying, but David

would not look up. Simply put, he was afraid to. Once again for the second time in his life, fear drove him to paralysis. He knew that if he saw Dillon crying and saw the family around him pushing him out, he would lose it and blow any chance of being able to return. He knew his only chance of coming home was to cooperate. Otherwise, they'd have disposed of him for good, like Wednesday's trash. *Hey, isn't today Wednesday? Even the family dog shunned me.*

So he sat there, head down, trying to drown out his brother's pleading, but the slamming of the bedroom door abruptly stopped it. A single tear hit the tip of his boot and exploded across the black leather. *That'll leave a stain.*

Trash Day

Daniel and Rachel ended up walking with Dillon to the bus stop. All the kids stared and whispered. *Here we go, Dillon thought, life as I know it will now become a freak show and I'm the main attraction.* Jessica braved an attempt to walk over and talk. "Umm, hi Dillon, where's David?"

He looked at her to speak, but he couldn't form his words, his mind still reeling from minutes before, as he revisited the master bedroom scene. "H-h-h-he's n-n-n—"

Daniel interrupted, placing both hands on Dillon's shoulder with authority, only to lose hold of him in a second as Dillon moved away. "You won't be seeing David for a while Jessica. He's gone to a different school far, far away from here, but if you're lucky, you'll get to see him next summer." He smiled behind Dillon, standing there military style with his legs side to side straddling the ground; both arms behind his back like it was early morning weapons inspection. Dillon didn't even have to turn around to get the accurate visual.

Asshole...

"Oh my God." Jessica's searching gaze met Dillon's eyes and she felt his pain weighing her down immensely. The bus, moving her hair lightly with its engine squeal, made her turn away as well as the other kids there, allowing Dillon to breathe a sigh of relief.

...Just eight more hours and I'll be finished with today.

As they got on the bus, with Jessica letting him go ahead of her, she again whispered to his neck, "I'm sorry Dillon."

School was a medley of whispers and stares. Everyone took their turn coming up to Dillon throughout the day. Rumors were spreading through the corridors like wild fire thanks to Daniel. Dillon chose not to say anything in response to the questions except nod his head if they

asked if his brother was gone. But he didn't give details because he didn't know any and as the lunch bell rang and he walked to his locker, both Julie and Jason were standing there waiting for him. "Hey there dude. I'm Jason, and this is Julie. We're friends of your bro - is it true? Is he at another school, a school for like, religious people or something Jesus focused?"

Dillon opened his locker, frowning at the last comment while not looking at them. He wanted to address them since at least they knew David, and he had at least approved of them enough to talk to them, but it was a long pause before he could answer. They stood there quietly and waited, surprisingly. He finally decided to answer. "Yes, it's true and n-no, I don't know when he'll be b-back okay?"

They both looked at each other with visible disappointment, just like everyone else, Dillon thought, and then looked back at him, not saying anything. "Well, I have to go now," he answered, feeling suddenly invisible.

As he walked across the quad alone, he heard a medley of yells and cat calls, most of them unkind and provoking, interspersed with a few screaming yells asking him if David was dead and who killed him. Dillon ignored them and continued to walk with his head down, but when he got to the statue, everyone there looked over at him and stared, as if they'd never seen him sit there before. He felt unwelcome, and furthermore, he couldn't stomach eating alone. He stood there for a second and scanned the sea of faces, quickly realizing he didn't have any other friends – just David.

He sat down at the edge of the first step up to the statue, far enough away from the other students to not be a threat to any of their gossip. He looked into his brown bag but nothing appealed to him. He felt something hit his shoulder and land there briefly, only to fall and drop to the cement at his feet. It was ketchup, covered French fry. He chose not to look over at the group of sinister, sneering mixture of boys and girls nearby and instead looked up to the sky.

A single crow perched itself on one of the points to the letter V, and looked down at him, its neck stretched out, its little black eyes getting a full view. Dillon quickly got up and began walking across the quad when out of nowhere, just to add drama to his miserable day, he received a harsh shove from behind. It caught him off guard and he hit the ground, arms flung out across the grass like he was trying to slide into home base; grass and dirt were in his mouth and on his chin. He looked up and saw a large group of shoes surrounding him, and turning to look into the sun, he met eyes with Daryl, standing there laughing and pointing down at him.

“Check out the little faggot! He fell down and went boom! I barely touched the little stuttering shit!” Snickering in his version of a twisted baby voice, Daryl began his bullying taunt. “Awwh! Wh-wh-what’s the matter b-b-baby? You gonna cry cause your only friend’s gone ba-ba-bye-bye, hmm?” More laughs from the crowd. He stood there triumphant, hands on his waist like a giant.

Dillon got up slowly, feeling the rage he’d felt from this morning building quickly. He made eye contact with the crowd still sitting on the statue V behind Daryl, he then looked at the bully making kissing faces at him and, without thinking, spat grass and dirt on his leather burgundy and very expensive Italian penny loafers.

The crowd gave out a simultaneous “Oh, no...”

Daryl charged him, knocking him down on his back; the force of the contact made the air leave Dillon’s lungs in a gust of harsh wind.

Daryl’s body weight, a full thirty pounds heavier than Dillon, pinned him down while his arms flailed all around, punching him in his chest, gut, and eventually hitting him square in the mouth. Suddenly an English teacher pulled at Daryl’s shirt and grabbed him up, but not before Dillon could get his one and only hit in – a direct punch to the left eye. Daryl screamed and tried to kick back, his hands holding his eye, but he was forced back on his feet and pushed in the other direction. Just then Mr. Seal, the school safety officer, grabbed Dillon and helped him up. He knew his lower lip was busted, and his stomach throbbed, but his left hand hurt the most, pulsating pain up and down his arm.

Escorting both boys to the principal’s office, then to Nurse Delilah’s for a screening, Mr. Seal was a no nonsense ex-military policeman who, although retired, was as buff as any professional body builder.

While Daryl was getting his suspension in Mrs. Sands’ office for initiating the fight, Dillon sat on the bench with Mr. Seal and waited with an ice bag on his hand. “That was some punch you threw young man - not that I allow fighting on my campus - but I was secretly glad you got a hit in.”

Dillon didn’t answer, in order to keep the tears from coming; he had to keep his mouth closed so that he could concentrate on breathing through his nose. It had been a rough half day with the name calling, the stares, and now this. It was his first fight too, the first time in his young life he’d actually thrown and made contact with his fist. The adrenaline was pumping

through his veins, but he kept it contained. He was also feeling guilty for his part in escalating the encounter with the school's biggest, nastiest bully. *What was I thinking?* He glanced over at the principal's door and caught a glimpse of the red stain on his shirt. He quickly glanced away.

"Looks like you got some blood on your shoulder there, little guy. You know, you're pretty tough – like your brother – only you don't cause trouble." He leaned over to wipe away the blood then leaned in to smell it, his face puzzled.

Dillon sighed. *But I do cause trouble. I just get away with it because of how I look.* "It's k-k-ketch-chup. I guess I was chosen for ttt-target practice at lunch."

More silence followed as they both sat there, each feeling awkward. Dillon cringed at the thought that the worst was yet to come, because when he got home, he'd have to face a half empty bedroom, dresser, closet and no one to sleep in the bed he had made so well this morning.

The door opened and out came a strolling Daryl, confident and cockier than ever, one hand holding an ice bag on his already swollen black and purple eye, the other hand opening and closing in a fist.

Mr. Seal got up quickly and pointed to his seat, "Sit down son, and don't think about giving me trouble."

Dillon tried to get up before Daryl could sit down next to him on the small two person bench, but his gut ached and his stomach muscles weren't working. He struggled, while Daryl sat next to him, a smirk spreading across his face as he watched.

"Need some help, young man?" Mr. Seal grabbed Dillon's arm before he could answer and lifted him. A look of defeat tried not to surface on Dillon's face as he watched himself get pulled up like a rag doll. He caught Daryl air kissing him as he stood up, then Mr. Seal did the unthinkable and straightened out his shirt collar, then put his arm around him and opened the door. As the door closed behind him, Dillon could hear his nemesis laughing softly. *He needs to die.* He immediately felt guilty for thinking it. *Forgive me Lord and while You're at it, forgive me the rest of this day, for I fear there's more I might do against my better judgment.*

"Why hello there, you must be David's brother, because I can definitely see the resemblance - blond hair instead of black and," she walked around him, "maybe two inches shorter, but that's it!" Dillon felt his ears turn red. "You two are practically twins, my dear...oh, your poor mother."

After fifteen minutes of nice chatting, as he walked out of Mrs. Sands' office with a

puzzled look on his face, Dillon felt saved. *She was way too nice to me*, he thought, but he didn't dare complain, not the way the day had gone so far. He was given after school detention and had to perform clean up and assist the football team at the next two games for a total of two weeks; an hour a day picking up and washing dirty gym towels. He cringed.

"Well son," Mr. Seal was waiting for him on the bench, luckily Daryl was already gone. "At least you'll get a break from having to see that jerk for the next two weeks, since he's just been expelled." Smiling triumphantly, Mr. Seal walked Dillon over to Ms. Delilah's office for an exam.

Yeah, he thought, that was a relief, because Daryl was no small fry. As one of the star players on the varsity football squad, and although only a junior, he was a tough competitor, having a reputation for knocking out at least one player a game. His motto was, 'make 'em pay to play,' but Daryl was mean on and off the field.

He was attractive enough to have girls following him around, with his clean cut look, obviously created to hide the devil inside. He sported short light brown hair always spiked up. He was a mixture of half Samoan, half Irish American, with most of his charm in his eyes. Bright green and sinister looking, with light brown skin, so that he fared well with the Samoans, the Hispanics, and especially the rich upper and middle class white, snobby kids. As a matter of fact, his two gorilla sidekicks were two overly sized white boys – identical twins Allan and Alvin. David would affectionately refer to them as 'The Chipmunks' and then he'd do the really cute theme song from the show in a high voice while grabbing and vibrating his throat. Dillon smiled at the memory.

Daryl was originally expelled from school for a week, but by the end of the school day, as word got out that they had fought and Coach MacFearson would be losing his star running back on the varsity squad, the sentence quickly changed to three weeks of after school detention at the discretion of the coach and Mrs. Sands.

Dillon however, found out the hard way, not by hearing it from everyone, but by seeing Daryl walking by him on the way to his last class, giving him a baby wave as he strolled by with his fifty or so groupies, and of course the chipmunks.

He stood there frozen, and as they walked by, Alvin screamed out, "We own this school bitch!" He followed this with a distant scream, as he yelled out an obnoxious, "See you around Cupcake!" Laughter and screaming mingled together up and down the hall.

Chapter Eight

Disappointed

“Enter,” he said, as he sat at the head of his dining room table and sipped on his wine, a platter of what appeared to be black apples was placed in front of him untouched.

Esmeralda waltzed in wearing a velvet purple evening gown, one of many in her collection that she prized mostly because Azmodeus had given it to her, along with most of her royal, vintage gowns, each made with the richest material imaginable. His motto was always to have the best linens on his bed and the softest material touching the skin of those he chose to admire. Esmeralda was one of the beautiful creatures he adorned in his courtroom and she stood there before him now holding an edge of her long gown in one hand and posing like a medieval model.

Azmodeus was drifting off as he sat there, a frown on his face as he watched her approach. His mind would not let him forget the meeting with the human earlier. He leaned back in his chair and sighed, rubbing his forehead as he debated his next move in the game of chess he was playing. He could control his wicked nature easily, and even though his physical beauty was unchanging, he was helpless sitting there knowing his eyes were giving him away. He just could not believe the scene at the Cavern. He was in the company of the one person who had that capability. This human was able to bring it out in him by simply sitting across a table. He was just recently allowed to be in the presence of this soul – a human, no less - with that rare talent to illicit such tendencies, and since then, his mind was consumed by the experience.

As she approached the grand wooden table that could easily sit twenty people, with a massive black iron multi-candle chandelier hanging from the three story high coffered ceiling, a chair sitting next to him pulled out for her to sit.

“My Lord, I have news. The crows are in the front room requesting a visit,” she went to continue, but he interrupted her.

“But that is not your news. What have you found?”

“I have ventured into the Living World and have seen the connection between them, and yes, although they have separate, opposing souls, they are linked together, each only thriving alone when both souls are in balance. A disturbance of power in one soul, either positive or negative, affects the other.”

“Go on.”

“Yes, well, knowing their bond, it is safe to say one cannot survive without the other. I have it today and I know it to be true, my Lord.” Leaning forward on her arm, she spoke, “The crows have witnessed the boys together, and they have observed this: the boys have a basic sense of telepathy and they feel each other’s physical and emotional pain and happiness. Today, the younger, Dillon, spoke of a dark visitor in his room last night, watching him sleep while he left his own body.” She leaned back in her seat, proud of her accomplishments and feeling a small amount of redemption from the choking incident earlier.

“Yes, I have already counted on both being able to separate. I’d go so far as to say the younger one can probably enter our world intact, body and soul, especially given his unusually bright soul. Maybe he is part angel after all. With a soul such as his, there is little doubt in his ability to travel; however, I already know this...what else has been discovered?” The tapping and drumming of his fingers on the table was usually a sign he was becoming impatient.

Thinking of anything else she might add, the witch spoke again. “It seems as though neither boy really knows for sure why they can separate. And, although I am not sure of its importance, the older one, when asked about you by his brother, became quite upset and chose not to divulge any information. This last piece of information I obtained from the crows.” She leaned back in her chair again.

“I want the older one tonight. As time passes he will doubt his ability to leave his brother, since you say they have recognized their bond, and now,” turning to her to make his point, “that he knows I have visited the boy and he has displayed his displeasure...he may now feel his presence there might be needed more than his wanting to descend here, making him more difficult to *collect*.”

“You are brilliant my Lord, and I will always be the one to bow to *you*,” near breathless, she gazed at his side profile while he looked ahead, tapping his fingers again, pausing to gouge them into the wood. The table shivered in pain and agony, since most wooden tables in castles such as Nine, Dis, Madera and Firebane were reincarnated witches recycled into furniture, and this particular table was abused frequently. The rest of the dining room was now silent except for the panting of the hell hounds. Esmeralda sensed the table’s discomfort, so she gingerly rose to stand away from it. “I will send the crows my Lord, and return to my study to procure more information for your assimilation.”

“That would be wise, my dear,” and his slight smile made her heart leap.

Five crows swaggered in, hopping across the floor, the fifth one spreading his wings to fly over, then was quickly clipped by another, the leader, who whispered, “You fool! Do not fly in his presence! We hop to him or we get stepped on! Just follow my lead you idiots,” and the four stood, heads bowed and watched him hop ahead and walk the long distance across the cold, cement block floor. As the crow approached the far end of the table, the Dark Lord stood up from his chair and walked over to sit next to his hounds on one of the large lounge chairs by the fire. All three turned their heads to look up at him as he sat down, pleading to him with their eyes to let them have crow meat.

“No,” he said softly, then sat and crossed his legs, his head resting on his hand, perched on the arm chair. He looked incredibly bored, like a kid on Christmas Eve, with nothing to do but wait until dawn.

The leader approached and tried to bow, balancing on one foot, then hobbled and readjusted, ruffling his feathers as he did so.

“Speak,” the Dark Lord whispered, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

“My Lord, we can report that after watching these two you seek, we have noticed their closeness increase. I have personally seen the older one watch his brother with a look of sadness, a troubled expression on his face. I believe he has decided not to leave his counterpart, and he has also met new friends at school which may be troubling.” The leader of the crows paused as he watched the Dark Lord’s eyes narrow. He ruffled his feathers and continued. “He has become quite popular and has noticed his new powers of quickness, strength and most obvious to him, his ability to persuade, for this David character has become quite good at it as of late.” Pausing to watch the Dark Lord watch him, trying to gauge a response, then continuing again when he felt none, “I am sure, after following him today, that this one is not aware of his dark eyes. I saw his eyes twice turn black as coal as he displayed his anger towards others. He is quite a sight to look upon when his anger reigns.”

Becoming more interested, the Dark Lord sat up, “Go on.”

“Two times today David has turned. The first was this morning at his home. I watched through the kitchen window and saw him grab his father’s arm before it struck, and his eyes blackened to his father. The second time was with another dark soul at lunch, a harsh, mean spirited boy named Daryl.”

The Dark Lord nodded his head, as if he had recognized the other boy previously.

“And he attacked this Daryl for picking on the younger, uh, Dillon.”

“Did anyone else see his rage, his eyes?”

“No, my Lord, only I could see him with my quick eyes, for they only turned for a mere second or two, enough that I could see his potential; his power in his stare is quite noteworthy, and I can tell—“

“Yes, well, that is not your concern.”

The crow hopped forward one step, then ended with, “I can also report that with the older one gaining power today, the younger one has struggled and that is all I have for you my Lord.” He bowed again, staggering off to one side, then corrected himself.

“Very well then, you might want to leave now.” The Dark Lord spoke casually at the crow, his hand motioning to the door, while his hounds looked up at him and smiled.

“But my Lord, when can we possibly...?”

“Your bodies are waiting for you, and you will have them, when this ‘David character’ as you put it, is in this room. Until then, stay useful, try to stay away from eagles and other predatory birds,” he smiled at his own sense of humor, “And I assure you, you will be rewarded, for this project has great value to me. However,” pausing long enough to point his finger down at the crow, “Having said that, I will also assure you that if you fail, my disappointment will be the end of you in ways you could never imagine.”

“Yes, yes my Lord,” the poor crow spoke with a resolution to make the hell hounds snicker. He had worked night and day for several days now, exhausted and weary. All the work he was doing to gain entrance into the Underworld a free agent was making Lascivious exhausted. Once human, among others stuck in The Entrance, he had been hand selected to serve the Dark Lord as a spy. It was hard work, but the alternative wasn’t an option for him or the others. He hopped backward two steps then turned to walk the long road to the large double doors, where his buddies all waited for him.

As he rose from his chair, the Dark Lord sighed heavily and began to pace the dining room, feeling a panic to finish what he had started – to do exactly what he’d suggested David should do back at Fifth’s Cavern. He realized he had been playing the game and enjoying it, hoping that with all the thrills, magical gifts and useful insight he had taken the time to show and give the troubled young man would have surely ended his miserable little existence by now. He began to feel the puppet strings loosen and fray. Taking a mortal soul by suicide for the Dark

Lord meant holding exclusive rights to his soul as his rightful owner. It was so easy to procure a soul this way; there truly wasn't an alternative he considered worthy enough to try, especially when it came to those marked souls he desired strongly. Still, with David, self-sacrifice wasn't happening quickly enough for him to wait out. Yes, he thought, now was the time to finish what he had started, whether the human kills himself or not. *He's not going to kill himself...this I already know.* Stopping to stand in front of the fireplace, he stood there in the blue glow, hands behind his back

Sandor approached the Dark Lord timidly, slowly walking over. "My Lord, can we start preparing the table for your meeting tonight with the human?" Head bowed and waiting, Sandor shuffled his feet.

Looking over, watching his servant's subservient nature and suddenly despising him for it, the Dark Lord was ready for deviance. Yes, he thought, it had been awhile since he had to break and mold a resistant one. He looked forward to it with all his attention. "Yes, it is time and you can start. I want Esmeralda here to oversee. Where is she?" He suddenly became annoyed, his voice demanding.

"My Lord, she will be here shortly," bowing and stepping backward, Sandor looked up to his master.

"Fine, then go. I will return to check your work." He didn't turn to face his servant as he spoke instead, he chose to stare at the fire. *Maybe I should visit the unruly specimen of a human for myself right now, in his element? There must be some way I can convince him to follow me down?*

The temptation was strong to do this, but every time he stepped into the world of the living, it required so much energy, and besides, he thought, he was much weaker when he was outside his own element, and traveling through the levels of the Underworld wasn't the issue, however being up above in full view of the heavens most certainly would be. He'd be exposed to the Arch Angels and bounty hunters he so despised and hated. Of them all, the hunters Sebastian, Uriel and Raphael were notoriously out for only his shadow. He grimaced as he thought of Sebastian, not wanting to even entertain the idea of a meeting with that smug, bald bastard.

It was probably too much of a risk to visit he thought, but he wasn't convinced. Something just wasn't right. He had overlooked an important player and it frustrated him

standing there now, knowing this boy, Dillon, was someone he could barely see. Trying hard he could just make out this soul's outline, its brightness too blinding for him. Not knowing how to predict or determine this soul's potential bothered him. He paced back and forth across the fireplace, thinking deeply and considering all the possibilities for every action that could take place. As Sandor walked to the door that would lead to the kitchen to begin his planning, the Dark Lord called out, stopping him in his tracks. "I will be absent, so do not wait for my return before starting your work."

"Yes, my Lord."

Sandor looked up and the Dark Lord was gone. He didn't even leave the room through the doors, he thought. The last few days, Sandor had grown more and more worried. His Master, as he would refer to the Dark Lord secretly, was becoming obsessed, all his attention focused on this stupid little waste of a human soul, and everyone else was suffering for it. He stood there and leaned against one of the two gargoyle statues that held the huge fireplace up in the dining room, brewing in his jealousy. He knew, leaning up against that stone beast that this David, not having any experience to speak of, would be somehow worthy of the Dark Lord's company. He had to fight the urge to poison the food this undeserving human would eat tonight. *He'll make a foolish mistake and when he does, the Master will turn and embrace me, for I know where I belong, and I know what matters most in this world.* Ruffling his dark, curly hair with the shake of his head, he pushed himself off the gargoyle and strolled into the kitchen.

Astral Travel

Passing through the ethereal space and ascending to the light of the Living World, Azmodeus shot through the air and dispersed himself on the shore. As the waves crashed and sprayed around him, he collected himself and gathered his strength, pulling the water around him in order to take form. The moon was always so helpful during times like these, he thought as he smiled and looked up. This will have to be quick. He stood there temporarily amazed as was always the case when he ascended into this ever changing Living World. Staring at the busy lights of Front Street and Oceanside Boulevard, he let his gaze drift to the pier on his right, so many times destroyed in the past decades by the violent storms of the Pacific Ocean.

They keep rebuilding it and my sister Gabriel keeps tearing it down. People are so insistently stubborn; they resist what they cannot control. He decided then and there that he liked that quality, and could vaguely remember it when he was visiting and 'borrowing' as he

termed it, the many powerful and interesting mortals he chose to inhabit over the centuries. It had been quite some time since he'd practiced doing just that – could it be no one was worthy in this current century? He reminisced for a few moments as he stood there in the sand, letting the ocean water slide down his legs like glue. *Let's see...there was Alexander the Great, Caesar, Attila the Hun, Napoleon...and to downsize just a little, there were also the mostly hidden characters of questionable reputation and integrity but brilliant imaginations such as Van Gogh and Beethoven.* Most of the time, he enjoyed controlling and seeing through the eyes of the purely dark and sometimes, depending on the host, either sinister humans or deeply depressed and haunted humans of the previous centuries, Jack the Ripper, Dante, Edgar Allen Poe—

Only for his self-imposed and at times, insane poetic misery—

Lastly, but certainly not least in terms of pure, unadulterated entertainment, the Marquis de Sade was his latest acquisition. *I wonder what David thought when I spoke of this character the other day? He didn't mention the subject I gave him for his silly report...was he not pleased with my inspirational choice? Did I not entertain the teenage masses?*

He paused to reflect on human history borrowed and experienced through his own eyes and shook his head, suddenly remembering how much he really did despise them all. The thought of human souls in his world was still not something he wanted to embrace yet, not unless they served in submissive roles did he consider humans worthy of the space they occupied. He cringed for a second time since briefly pondering the human race as he acknowledged his role as Ruler of Hell to serve God by begrudgingly allowing humans two glorious planes to live in once they were cast down to his Underworld. *Let's not forget The Entrance, where they all congregate and stink up the place with their piss and excrement.*

Maybe it was only to spite God, or maybe it was his way of rationalizing why he was never meant to assist humans as a previous Arch Angel from Seventh Heaven, Azmodeus felt regardless of his reasons for destroying them, or helping them destroy themselves, he still enjoyed playing with them – a chosen few anyway.

As he shot up the long sandy beach of Oceanside in one step, Azmodeus let his thoughts drift to the state of the Living World and the changes having been made since his short time there. It was different in the Middle Ages when he visited more frequently. He enjoyed watching humans fight for survival; struggling for the ability to live meant more than fighting for land, wealth, or political favor.

Times have changed and yet, I stay the same. If I'm lucky in this game, I will see history cycle all over again, and people will fight once more for their survival. Viruses and plagues will once again become pandemic catastrophes, which will culminate in humans of the Living World becoming easier to pick through, their numbers greatly deflated because let's face it: They have multiplied out of control this past century, reproducing like rodents in a sewer and they need to be weeded out.

He clicked his tongue in a moment of disgust as he considered once again, the ability of the human race to rapidly proliferate under God's uncaring nose. Glancing up at the sky, he watched the gray clouds fly by at an unnaturally fast pace, announcing his arrival. It was unnerving yet at the same time, flattering to watch the world react to his presence.

The seagulls were flying above him and waiting for food. He'd always wondered why the birds could see him, why cats and dogs ran away when he ventured near, but humans remained unaware. Most people, he decided, couldn't see the tip of their noses if they tried, and that made it so easy for dark spirits to roam the Living World, moving in and out undetected and unchecked. Just two hundred years ago, witches burned at the stake for sensing and communicating with the 'unseen' spirits. They knew then that they shared space; they were the *enlightened* ones. As a matter of fact, he thought, he still knew a few of them still inhabiting Madera. Those dark souls turned witches were now serving him.

He remembered sitting back and laughing at the chaos that had reigned back then, in the so-called 'Enlightenment Era,' when humans felt closer to God and lived pious, supposedly religiously upheld lives. He smiled as he thought about the hypocrisy of humankind's legacy. In their pious state, they killed off so many innocent souls. All the hangings and drowning of innocent people thought to be witches and devil worshipers made him smile and shake his head.

Back then several centuries past, chaos reigned free and he loved it. Now, the world had gotten caught up in technology. Damn the whole Industrial Era and what came to follow, he grimaced as he shook his head. Nobody thought about anything anymore, especially the supernatural. It was as if faith was now scripted and blindly followed, but without all the lovely violent emotional judgment he craved. *Could someone please bring back The Crusades?*

Walking by a drunk, homeless man who was laying there, in a disheveled heap against the stucco wall on the north side of the pier, Azmodeus leaned down and looked at the empty bottle of whiskey held in the man's hand, secured to his chest like it was his only prized

possession. Reaching out and touching the bottle with his electric finger, he watched it fill up with whiskey, the weight allowing the bottle to lean back against its owner.

Moving a little and holding it tighter as he slept, the man hardly stirred, not realizing or sensing the monumental dark shadow standing in front of him. He noticed in the man's other hand was a shiny black item. He slide it out of the man's grasp and held it in front of him, tracing the outline of the lighter with his thumb, he felt somehow drawn to it, mesmerized by its energy. "This didn't belong to you now did it? My guess is you stole it...whatever it is..." The design was interesting, especially the red capital letter A with the edgy circle around it. He remembered seeing it before then laughed when he recalled a shirt David had worn with the same symbol. He fiddled with it then flicked the lighter only to watch somewhat befuddled, as a tiny yellow and blue flame appeared. He smiled as he watched it dance around awaiting something close enough to ignite and burn. He thought of David again and inspected the lighter closely, even smelling it. "It feels familiar, yet it resided in your nasty hand – how strange." He tucked it into his pocket anyway as a memento and took another moment to inspect the sleeping drunk.

Useless fool, drink and stay numb. You're not missing much anyway.

Having summoned the crows earlier, he glanced up to see the leader landing on the pier railing briefly, then taking flight and flying as the crow does so well, to the familiar destination.

Landing on the telephone pole and waiting, the crow Lascivious, looked down and watched the half-dressed young man standing on his driveway trying to walk away from the girl standing there with him.

The darkness of the night crept across the street in a whirling fog. The dogs were barking with a stronger sense of urgency, and running around the well-worn paths of their little plots of fenced in land. The crow waited, stretching its wings.

Jessica's dog was out of control, barking at the street and scurrying behind her, tangling her up in the leash, and spinning her around. David had already walked up the driveway and was shaking his head, the noise from the dogs like nails on a chalkboard to him. He stuck a finger in each ear like a ten year old as he walked up the driveway. How he loathed dogs. He was a cat person through and through. Without looking back, he was soon in the house closing the door behind him.

Jessica shot down the street, being pulled frantically by her little mutt, trying vainly to

call out, but getting dragged away by her half-crazed canine.

Smart little beast, Azmodeus thought, as his dark shape ascended up the driveway in a black haze, taking form as he shot out from its center and walked up the cement steps to the front door without missing a beat and in perfect step.

Approaching the front door, the Dark Lord leaped forward with a gust of supernatural wind and placed his black and silver tipped knee high boots down at the same time like he was playing a game of Hop Scotch. Next to the doorbell he noticed a wooden sign that proclaimed ‘Welcome all!’ Painted under the letters was a family of seven stick figures waving. Underneath the stick people were even smaller letters, ‘Soldiers for Christ’ in a rainbow of colors. Staring at the welcome board, he couldn’t help but frown. Oh, how he could think of several more appropriate terms to write on that welcome home sign—

But why bother? People want to think they matter to God or whoever they chose to worship, when the sad lonesome truth was and always will be this: He really doesn’t care on a personal level. Once a Creator, now He’s turned into a Mediator – no, a Spectator – in the eternal game of galactic chess. Allowing each insignificant piece to move all around that great chess board of Life and Death in so-called free-will; sometimes choosing to smack them on their little ornamental heads when they make a wrong move - or not as the case always seemed to be. Maybe He’s bored? He certainly doesn’t give a shit for the little creatures scattered across the playing field – all those disposable humans He throws out there, so why do they continue to involve Him anyway? Why all the blind, absentee Worship?

In the all important game of Eternal Chess, Azmodeus firmly believed it best to become a more important player. *Be the Queen. Let’s see what chess piece this David will evolve into...*

Turning to the door and knocking, he could smell what he knew was putrid Christian stink permeating the walls and lingering like much reused kitty litter. He grimaced as the smell clung to his person and quickly knocked again, this time painfully softer. He leaned into the door with his hands bracing him and could suddenly feel the prized heat transfer through, warming his fingertips, and illuminating his wickedly evil face in the dark.

“Open says me,” he whispered, then louder, “Open it and come in...open and enter yourself...”

He stood there waiting, hands leaning on the door and his eyes looking back into the peek hole determined to reach out and touch such a lovely piece of fruit.

It was wrong to be there, risky to spend so much time in the Living World, and Azmodeus knew this as the thoughts flew through his mind, but he decided, standing there feeling this soul's heat, that it was worth every minute of his time. Spending moments such as these in the Living World made him weaker with the passing time, like an hour glass draining. He needed to act soon. Glancing behind him and up to the night sky, he was getting nervous the longer he stood there waiting to take the living soul, knowing he was not welcome and couldn't forcibly enter their dwelling, he began to rethink his plan. A visit from above could literally wipe him out right now.

Suddenly sensing another presence nearby, his eyes opened widely. Then he felt it. Something strong and positively charged on the other side of the door repelled him back, but only slightly did he feel the push backward. That presence must be the younger Dillon, he thought, smiling now as he thought of the boy's future without David. *His faith will inevitably, slowly leave him when he finally realizes his older brother is who he fears most.* He laughed softly at the predicament.

After waiting long enough, more than he should have waited, he reluctantly turned to leave, looking back at the front door then up at the sky anxiously. He glanced once more at the front door before leaving, taking a few steps backward just to keep his eyes on for as long as possible, only to reassure himself that at least he had tonight to look forward to. "He'll come to visit and stay forever, or until I get bored..."

Walking into Nine's dining room, taking in the bustle of activity as servants went back and forth delivering the food and dining ware, with the fireplace lit and roaring softly in the background, the Dark Lord sent the hell hounds away to hide in the fireplace to lighten the air. He was pleased to see the dinner coming together now.

Esmeralda stood there at the head of the table and supervised, then turned to see him and slightly bowed her head. "My Lord, everything is in its place and I am ready to summon him. The portal will bring him directly to this room." Smiling she watched his satisfied expression at saying those words.

"Did you change the portal's location yet?"

"Why, no my Lord, for I need to wait until he opens the door and enters, only then can I redirect his descent here. It is difficult to do to begin with, my Lord, given the protection already

in place here in Nine.”

“What makes you think he will even come tonight?” He interrupted her, the slight hint of doubt in his words.

Surprised at his question, she paused, feeling a hint of insecurity, not knowing how to respond. The vulnerability made her uneasy though and she didn't like to see him in such a human state, unnaturally doubting himself. “My Lord, you openly invited him last night at the cavern, and his soul accepted. Whether or not he is strong enough to leave his body so many nights in a row will not be an issue tonight, for his soul accepted your offer. If his soul dies in the descent down, it shouldn't matter.” Walking toward him gingerly, she studied his face, but he chose not to look at her.

Still, she decided, as she studied his facial features as he remained twisted up in his doubt of tonight's activities, Esmeralda enjoyed the view from where she stood. She thought and fantasized about how his face would look when he experiences pleasure, how breathless she would become if she could witness and help bring him to that level of being.

She didn't realize it, but she was lightly stroking her upper chest and shoulders as she stood there in her dark purple beaded gown, watching him and longing to reach out. Her thoughts attempted to seduce him lightly. He glanced at her and tried to look disinterested, keeping his look cold, but seeing her face crumble, he looked away again. He wasn't in the mood tonight for idol worship. He cleared his throat.

“Shouldn't he be here by now? I sense something wrong.” Walking by her as if she wasn't there and over to the table, he sat down, the chair having pulled out by itself to greet him.

Sitting there, he stretched out his arms and admired the beautifully decorated table, the two sets of blue and gold trimmed china plates and saucers, one set placed in front of him, the other off to his left, and the chair empty, gold utensils on top of white linen napkins - everything in its place as hundreds of candles lit the full length of the table.

As the night drew on, the candles lost their shape while he continued to sit there waiting. Having also sent Esmeralda, Sandor and Mendel away, he was finally alone. He knew the human wasn't coming, knew something or someone had prevented his departure. After having sat there most of the night, he stood up and started pacing the dining room. What did he do to botch the job? Could the human be at Fifth's Cavern as he paced his dining room? Should he leave to rescue the poor lad from what would most inevitably be a gathering of foul, hungry and

greedy spectators? “Enter,” he answered, to the lingering presence at the closed double doors in front of him. Esmeralda slithered in like a snake entering a bird’s nest.

“My Lord, David was not able to come. His brother blocked his entrance, I am sure of it, for I saw him through his window, lying there, speaking aloud to his God to keep his brother home. His will was so strong, all his older brother could do was collapse there.” Looking up at him, she tried not to act and sound too upset, for she knew he could probably see right through her. Esmeralda was secretly ecstatic over the intruder’s absence, but the Dark Lord was too busy to read her.

Turning around, his back to her, he walked over to the table again and leaned forward on it, hands bracing his weight over the chair. “*That* is not good news,” he whispered.

“Would you like dinner company my Lord? You should eat something...all this lovely food...shouldn’t be wasted.” She paused feeling uneasy and waited. He turned and walked away from her, leaving the room without saying a word.

Chapter Nine

The Disciples

His parents didn't waste any time gathering up his things that morning. David sat there and watched in misery from the living room couch where he was told to 'sit and don't move Mister,' while they went up and down the stairs repeatedly. He felt watched from above as he tried to ignore the looming presence of Jesus in two dimensional form hovering above him on the wall. A telephone call interrupted his parents' mission, and when Father hung up the phone, he walked into the living room, passed David, and called up the stairs to his wife.

"Honey, come down! That was Pastor Sampson on the phone. The boy only needs his personal items and night clothes," he paused to glance quickly at David, who was giving him the 'what the hell are you saying' look, then continued in a quieter voice. "They will provide the rest of his clothes."

David frowned. *Oh, great - prison uniforms - how conformist of them.*

"What dear?" Mother came down the steps holding a half-filled duffle bag in one hand, his tooth brush in the other, and a baffled expression on her face.

"They have school uniforms and they also give the boys regular, after school clothes for gym and worship." Holding out his hand, he walked her down the stairs like it was Prom night.

"Well, what about church clothes?" She asked with an exasperated look on her face.

David rolled his eyes to the ceiling and pretended to stretch as he turned his back to glance upward, whispering barely audible words, "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"We can pack a pair of slacks and a nice shirt and the boy will look better than he has ever looked here," and glancing again at David, this time his eyes glaring, Father finished with, "Let's get going. Pastor Sampson also mentioned not dilly dallying around because we could change our minds."

She looked at him with fresh tears in her eyes. "Honey, maybe we should think about this some more, I mean, the boy hasn't even turned seventeen yet," pleading, she looked at her husband, then at her son.

David sensed her vulnerability and grabbed the opportunity, his eyes meeting hers as she looked over at him while she finished her sentence.

Please don't let me go, he spoke with his eyes. He thought he saw her give in, thought he could read her words she formed as she began to speak them in protest to her husband, but his

father grabbed her by the shoulder and gently pulled her to him, unlocking the gaze they shared.

“Now this kind of talk is all the ‘dilly dallying’ the pastor was telling me about on the phone - let’s go NOW.” He was losing his patience quickly.

David couldn’t believe the tremendous hold this Pastor Sampson had on his father. *Who uses the phrase ‘dilly-dally’ anyway?! Oh, I’m going to have so much fun ripping this pastor guy apart, and is John buying into all this? He must be afraid of me.* Adding to the conversation as quickly as he could, he spoke up, still sitting on the couch. “Father, please listen to her? I know I’ve been disrespectful and stupid, but I can change? I’m not this twisted ‘Omen’ remake you think I am.” He tried to look convincing.

“I AM NOT DISCUSSING THIS ANYMORE! NOW MOVE!” Father pointed to the door, the vein splitting his forehead in two was bulging and pulsating.

Driving in silence, Mother cried softly off and on while David stared out the window and watched the scenery go by at warped speed, trying to hum a tune in his head to drone out her tears and the painfully contrite mellow and ‘clap your hands together’ contemporary Christian music on the radio. It was almost maddening. They were driving away from the coast, away from what called to him all summer long, and moving in the direction of the desert and hard packed moisture ridden dirt – tons and tons of it.

David thought he’d better try to connect with his mother, to leave an impression of doubt in her mind that maybe he wasn’t so bad after all. He began by asking her about what interested her in her boring life, speaking to her for the first time in years with much fake interest. He listened as she started her chatting monologue, looking back at him and smiling as she talked on and on, hesitant at first, but quickly warming up to the stranger she hadn’t known for so long. He asked her about her Women’s Club and if she was going to head the annual bakery sale this year. He told her how much he admired her ability to take care of so many people and keep the home clean. Flattery worked well with the female gender, he decided. *Especially mothers – they eat that shit up.*

Father drove in silence most of the way, smirking occasionally as his son gave out false compliments. *Oh, he’s good,* John thought, staring straight ahead after repositioning his rear view mirror so that it didn’t reflect David’s face and those haunting eyes. He started steaming up as he listened to David’s prodding Mother along in her monologue. *This little manipulator will*

learn that you can't hide from God. He already knows your moves before you make them and only He will be the judge. He smiled in relief, for he was secretly afraid of his offspring sitting behind him.

The scenery changed slowly from coastal greenery, wild flowers and palm trees along the side of the freeway, and tons of traffic, to desert surrounding him and a dry landscape of nothing. David hated it immediately. Time crept by slowly and after nearly four hours of driving just slightly above the designated speed limit, along with listening to his mother's mouth travel one hundred miles an hour, David was ready to jump out the car door.

They finally arrived, having pulled up to the electric gate of the complex. He sat up in his seat in amazement. *Why the chain linked fence tall enough to house a giant? Where the hell am I supposed to go if I choose to break out of this prison anyway?* The place looked like a fortress, out in the middle of fucking nowhere. A ten foot fence wrapped around the place with barb wire along the edge as it jettied up and slanted inward. Getting out of the car and stretching his legs, David looked around in disbelief. The place was huge, and worse, there was absolutely nothing to look at for miles and miles. As he stood there turning circles and staring at barren landscape, he immediately thought of Moses and how much it must have sucked to be cast out into the desert. He couldn't help but laugh softly to keep from crying, thinking to himself that at least Moses had a great relationship with God. *He helped him out at least.* Glancing up at the clear blue sky, David grimaced. *Yeah, don't think I'm gonna get anything but wind in my face and dirt under my feet. And just this morning I was looking forward to seeing Julie's face at school and now I'm fucking Moses the Prophet – no wait! That's right! Check the sign above the school...The Disciples...And now I get to be a real life Disciple...I have to get back to life with Dillon. It may have sucked to live under such restraint, but at least it was in color.* He could see the distress in his mother's face too, and she came over to put her arm lightly on his shoulder.

"Let's go," Father said gruffly, turning to them both and then motioning to the entrance of the largest building directly in front of them as he slammed his door shut. David could see three people - two men and a teenage boy - walking toward them.

"Well, dear...it's not-that-bad." Mother hesitated as she looked over at David and tried to smile, but she knew he was going to prison. She was sick to her stomach with worry. *I am a horrible mother.* She began to cry again.

David hugged her lightly, putting his arm around her waist and closing his eyes, so as not

to see the expression on her face.

Surprised, Mother looked at him, for she was still at least an inch taller than him at six feet, and put her hand on his head to play with his dark, mysterious hair. She whispered so as not to get her husband's attention, "It won't be for very long...you'll see...once you find and accept Jesus." She thought she smelled David's scent right then - was it musk and the ocean? Or maybe she couldn't smell him at all she thought, and she panicked.

David smiled, for he knew he had won her over. Collecting himself and quickly thinking of Dillon, he looked up at her. "Please don't leave me here Mother? I need you."

"There's nothing I can do Honey. Your father has made his decision, and I stand behind him on that," but her voice wavered and he persisted.

"Don't you love me anymore Mother? Please don't give up on me, Mother - please!"

She pulled him to her and hugged him as she began to sob again.

"For crying out loud, Mother!" Father stood about twenty feet in front of them. After having already walked towards the greeting party, he hadn't realized his family wasn't with him. His face burned red as the two men eyed him strangely only to look around him at what they could see as the mother and son reunion. Father yelled, voice controlled but tense as his forehead vein pulsated again. "Let's not *dilly-dally!*"

Never arguing with her husband, Sara gently walked David forward with her still holding him up like she was taking him to his firing squad.

By the time they reached the greeting party, Father had already shaken hands and had gotten to know the two men and the young teen with them. David approached holding his mother, having milked her sympathy for as much as it could be worth, but as he got to within four feet of the strangers he pulled away from her and stood there, looking up at them with distaste and a look that screamed distrust.

"Why, hello there! You must be David?"

No, really? How'd you guess? A smirk matched his disgust.

Pastor Sampson hesitated as he caught a quick look into David's eyes while the breeze brushed his hair off his face for a split second. He glanced up at the sky as a cloud passed under the sun, creating a moment of darkness. "It's very nice to meet you, young man." He spoke with hesitation watching the shadows darken David's face, his hand out for a shake.

Looking at it, David didn't know what to do. He had to fight the urge to either spit on it

or turn and run, but where to?

“Don’t be rude, boy,” John whispered, his voice a sneer, sending a look that could kill.

Sensing his father’s silent rage, David raised his hand up and said, “Hey,” then quickly lowered it. *You are not getting the privilege of touching my hands. They are extensions of my soul, you fake, smug bastard.*

Clearing his throat, Pastor Sampson, wearing all white - slacks, shirt, tie and suit jacket, even his shoes were white - spoke as he looked up at David, who was two inches taller than he.

You’re bald and that’s all there is to it, so just pull that last tuft of hair and be done with it. David tried without success to keep a smile hidden as he listened to the words. That now familiar inner voice was funny to the point of getting him in trouble if he reacted to the comedy outwardly. He placed a hand over his mouth instead.

“Now, son, (throat clearing followed by a pause), around here in these parts, we extend a hand of friendship to our guests, and although the option is there to return a hand shake - like in the outside world - as a Disciple, or one of my students, however you want to refer to yourself, you have to return the favor and embrace the friendship, or else suffer the consequences,” and Pastor Sampson paused again. John went to answer for his son but the pastor raised his hand to silence him and it actually worked.

Damn, this guy’s got balls, even if he is short and ugly. At least I’m still growing. And is there some kind of secret, pastoral hierarchy I’m not aware of that allows this idiot of God to silently control another idiot of God?

“Now, I’m going to extend my hand, and you will shake it embracing the beginning of our friendship.” Said with an air of authority, the pastor stood there and presented his hand, a smug look on his face as if saying without speaking, ‘resistance is futile.’

“Please, honey, just shake his hand? He’s a wonderful man with your best interest at heart.” Putting her hands on David’s shoulders and whispering in his ear, Mother gently squeezed and released her hold on him.

I hate my fucking life. Dillon’s face flashed before his eyes in a psychedelic haze. His brother always held him down, a ball and chain on the ground with him in the air, unable to float away. He stuck out his right hand, not willing to give the pastor his prized left, and held it out only as far as it would go at his side, and the action reminded him of Julie. He sighed in defeat.

“That’s right, nice to meet you,” and Pastor Sampson stood there shaking his hand up and

down with a stupid grin on his face like he'd already won the war.

"Can I have my hand back now?" David whispered sarcasm gently, forcing his words out slowly, as he pulled his hand free from Pastor Sampson's creepy, damp and firm grip. The pastor in turn, intently looked at him as if trying on this first meeting, to size him up and figure him out.

Laughing heartily and then turning to look at his male friend, Pastor Sampson spoke again, this time purposefully avoiding David's vengeful glare. "Mr. and Mrs. Smith, I'd like you to meet Professor Marty Jenkins, the eleventh grade counselor and main teacher."

Mr. Jenkins smiled and held out his hand for David's parents to shake. He wisely avoided David's now hidden hand.

"And this fine young man standing behind me is Jimmy, my son, and one of the exemplary students here at The Disciples." Grabbing his son's arm and bringing him over to stand in front of him, Pastor Sampson beamed with pride.

Puke, David thought.

"I decided that since we're such good friends and," leaning towards David's father to speak to him specifically in a whisper loud enough for everyone to hear, "you were in such a financial bind, I decided to have Jimmy personally see to it that David gets familiar with the school surroundings and most importantly, the way we do things around here."

"Thank you pastor, that was nice of you." David's father answered quickly, then looked at Mother and smiled. She in turn looked like she was going to puke too.

"It is school policy to assign a veteran and star pupil to the new kids when they come on board, as a graduation to going back out into the 'real world.' Of course, my son chooses to go to this school, and he does quite well."

David chose not to look at Jimmy during the entire introduction, but now he was forced to once again submit his hand. "David, this is Jimmy," Pastor Sampson positioned his son right in front of him.

David was temporarily stunned as he took in this kid's presence. Jimmy was Opie reincarnated from the Andy Griffith Show – only paler - with short, bright red, geeky hair, sleeked back with way too much hair product, big buck teeth, blue eyes and freckles across the bridge of his nose. He finished his retro fifties look by sporting black, Buddy Holly glasses that apparently kept sliding off his nose. He was about three inches shorter than David, and skinny to the point where his stomach actually had that caved-in look to it.

How the hell does this kid survive out here in desert country with pasty white skin? David couldn't resist it, and had to speak, while Jimmy stuck out his hand to shake his. He whispered, "Must not get out much, do you?"

Jimmy smiled and raised his eyebrows up and down, which made David pull his hand away like he was just hit by a jolt of electricity. Feeling the moisture there, he quickly wiped his hand on his shirt. *Sweaty handed half-breed.*

Jimmy looked up at his own dad and smiled.

"So Jimmy, when we're done showing the Smiths' around, you'll take David to where he'll sleep and get him acquainted with the others." He paused while David continued to frown, "please make sure to tell him the rules up front, okay Son?"

"Sure thing Dad," Jimmy gave his dad the thumbs up sign while David watched him incredulously and chuckled.

The adults started walking toward the main building, with Father having to hold Mother by the shoulders and escort her, as if he was afraid she would bolt at any moment.

Jimmy looked back at him for a second as if continuing to size him up. David made it obvious he didn't care by looking away and gazing back at the family car, begging for the opportunity to have keys fall from heaven and land at his feet.

Suddenly, Jimmy called out to his father. "Dad?! I think since I'm David's peer advisor, and there's a spare bunk in my room with Charlie gone now, maybe he could stay with me?"

The pastor turned around with Marty and stopped for a second to listen and contemplate the idea as if there suddenly was a monumental decision to make. Jimmy took the pause as permission to continue. "I mean, I know who he'll be bunking with - the Tailor boys and Joel - which I think would be bad influences on him for sure," He turned and smiled at David's back.

As if pushed to respond, David woke up. He whirled around and glared at the troublemaker. He decided not to speak however, for fear it would only guarantee his bunk change.

"Well, let's see what happens, Jimmy. I think right now we should start by showing the Smiths the grounds and having lunch, okay?" Then laughing softly, he started to brag about his son's caring nature and how so many of the students here look up to him as one of the actual Disciples for Christ. "You know, he may not be much to look at on account of his size and small frame and all, but that boy's got a heart of pure gold, and he's tough too, don't underestimate

him.”

David scoffed as he tried not to listen to the pastor brag as he stood there still facing Opie, while the adults walked up the path to the school.

“What are you waiting for? Come on, I’ll show you around,” Jimmy spoke so quietly, David got the sudden impression he wanted to make sure he heard every word, so of course, he chose to yell his response loudly, while leaning in for added effect.

“SURE, WHY NOT?! I DON’T HAVE ANYTHING ELSE ON MY AGENDA FOR TODAY!”

Jimmy flinched as he jumped back startled, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looking baffled.

Smiling in triumph, David walked by him.

Strolling around the school grounds with Jimmy becoming a permanent decoration at his side was painful and distracting. Every time he’d move, change direction, or slightly turn his head one way or another, there’d be Jimmy, either checking him out or smiling, or sizing him up – he didn’t really know or care. David was used to Dillon being his only side kick - a much, much nicer arm piece than this back country bumpkin - and he wouldn’t stop talking. Every time they’d get just the least bit behind the adults, Jimmy would open his mouth and unleash, talking so quietly, at first, David had to bring himself into the boy’s space just to pick up what he was saying. After a few minutes, he just tuned Jimmy out all together.

The main building actually looked like a high school administrative building. *What a hoax*, David thought. There were big windows looking out at the desert landscape, since the school was on a small hill overlooking the desert valley, just barely high enough to look out at the landscape without having to view the overbearing barb-wire fence that wrapped around the school.

The other buildings were situated so that the main courtyard where all the physical activity and social gathering occurred was well insulated and protected. Each of the buildings was positioned in a large circle, with the courtyard approximately one half the length of a football field. The school went from tenth to twelve grades, and most of the classes were mixed because of space and academic skill, since The Disciples was one of the most desired and sought after Christian school in the country for troubled teen boys.

With that said, it was a school for boys only, and even the administrative staff were

mostly men, with the only woman being the secretary, also known as Mrs. Pastor Sampson.

There were two hundred and forty nine students at the school, and David made two hundred and fifty – the maximum number of students allowed to satisfy safety requirements.

There were three dormitories or buildings, one for each grade. Each dormitory had several rooms, with each bedroom able to accommodate four boys. There was a community shower room and bathroom facilities on each floor.

Touring the main building, where most of the religious classes and the main chapel were located, David was slightly impressed with the indoor gymnasium and full basketball court with built in benches for seating. The hidden arena also sported state of the art lighting and sound with an announcer box visible – or was that a guard station in hiding? He couldn't decide on first glance. As a matter of fact, David thought, as he continued to take in the nice, well-decorated administrative building, it was almost hotel-like in its appearance – a far cry from the rest of the prison-like surroundings of the dorm buildings and mess hall.

It looks like the school for troubled, nonconformist boys was making a shit load of money. He couldn't help but laugh aloud when they all walked into the gym, making the adults turn around, giving him questionable looks. David paused then, deciding to be nicely mannered, said, "So, what's our school mascot?" He thought of Jesus sporting matching forehead and wrist sweat bands, decked out in the school uniform running around the gym during games to rouse the crowd and coughed out loud to keep from laughing at his own thoughts. "I bet this place gets to a nice, respectable level of school pride and patriotism when you guys hold games here with other schools, right?" He winked at Jimmy, who quickly looked away, then pushed his black rimmed glasses back up his long nose and checked out the gym, as if for the first time ever. *He's a hoot.* David decided. *He's a real chip off the old man's dopey block.*

"Why yes, we do enjoy our basketball. It's the boys' favorite sport, so we play the different classes against each other, and try to mix it up." Smiling at John and Sara, Pastor Sampson chose not to make eye contact with David as he air-played a little one on no one.

"Yeah, that's neat and all, but what's our mascot supposed to be? What *are* we?" David just couldn't wait to hear what 'The Disciples' had for a mascot, if they even had one, ruling out Jesus the Cheerleader as possibly sacrilegious. A big human-sized cross with legs quickly came to mind as he pondered it again, so he coughed some more.

Clearing his throat and looking at Marty, Pastor Sampson whispered, "Do we even have a

mascot, Marty?”

Marty, who had been quiet all this time, smiled at David as if he knew what he was trying to prove. All this school money sunk into a gymnasium, yet they chose to be out in the middle of desert country, with nothing else around and no other schools nearby to compete. *Seems a bit showy, doesn't it?* Marty thought these things too on the first day he was hired last year, and now in his second year, he had to admit to himself, this David was different...finally...a challenge.

“Well, David, you have brought up an interesting point. Our school should have a mascot, and maybe we should compete against other schools, since school pride helps kids learn to relate and support one another. It also allows them to bond in the team spirit of competition. However, with all those nice things being said, here at The Disciples, our goal is to reunite our kids with their families as soon as possible, so that they can go back to their own schools, if for no other reason, than to maybe appreciate their mascots and those ridiculous costumes they have to wear at sporting events.” He smiled and pointed a finger at the boy, then touched his own temple and gave a look of deep thought.

David couldn't help but smile in return, and for the first time in a long time, he was the one who turned away. *I think I like this guy, and that's one so far out of a million of Jesus' disciples...not a bad start.*

David's mood quickly changed when they toured the dormitories. There he received a firsthand look at what he perceived as pure torture and captivity. He couldn't believe he prayed to the ceiling every morning asking for deliverance from Dillon's annoying clinginess. He stood there and looked at Jimmy's dorm room. *Why are we in Jimmy's room? This isn't my room! This is like a bad ending to prom night and I'm not even drunk.* He frowned as he tried not to notice Jimmy watching him again, getting closer and repeatedly invading his five foot mandatory personal space rule.

“This is what the dorm rooms look like, not too much to distract the student from what matters most - education and worship,” and as if to point out his one visual aide in support of his speech, Pastor Sampson pointed to the wooden cross hanging over the two sets of twin bunk beds, each set positioned against the back wall, separated by one single, pathetic window.

David couldn't help but notice the vertical bars running the full length of the window as well. *Nice touch, another distraction meant to keep me here.*

As they all stood in the room, which was twelve by twelve feet, Sara noticed the single

desk tucked in the corner, barely fitting between the one set of bunk beds and the opposing wall. Its twin desk was in the same place on the opposite side of the room. “Each boy gets a desk to share with his bunk mate,” and pointing at the four rows of cubby holes along the wall next to the door, the pastor paused to allow them to take in the splendor of minimalist interior design.

This last observation almost brought David to his knees, and he staggered to sit on the closest bunk bed, grabbing its edges and gasping silently as if he was just punched in the stomach.

“Each boy gets a cubby hole, big enough as you can see, for clothes and personal items. We try to limit space so as not to clutter the living areas,” and turning to Father, Pastor Sampson said, “It also allows us to view what they have and *don't have*. Closets take up too much room and tend to hide things.”

David couldn't believe the crap this pastor was dishing. How were they supposed to get anything out in the middle of nowhere to smuggle in here anyway? *Can you smoke cactus?! He sat there on the bunk bed and held his head in his hands. I need a cigarette.* He felt sick, couldn't believe his bad luck, not being able to at least escape in his dreams was going to be the end of him and he knew it. It was as if God knew this too, he thought, allowing his mind's thoughts to fly. He indeed felt blocked, felt like someone was keeping him from his chosen destiny. *But why?! Why would God care?! He's set me up to rot here! This is one hell of a God smack—*

“This is my bed, here, up top,” as if invading his thoughts, Jimmy whispered this annoying piece of information like it mattered, patting the bed above David and standing there trying to get his attention.

“Go away,” David whispered back, not looking at the boy.

Jimmy turned to his father and quickly said, “Father, I think David should just unpack his things and stay, since we're already here.” He held out his arms and motioned around his room.

Pastor Sampson laughed softly then turned to John and Sara, “Would that be okay with the two of you, since my son seems determined that David get a good start here?”

David still held his head in his hands, not bothering to look up or speak up for that matter...why bother? The lack of closet space had him suddenly giving up.

“I think that would be just fine, right Mother?” She nodded in agreement, but Professor Jenkins spoke up after watching David quickly fall apart in the short time they were in the room.

“I think we should maybe leave that decision to David, don’t you think Pastor Sampson?”

Pastor Sampson laughed again and replied, “Professor! It’s fine like this! The boys can spend the rest of the day catching up in here, and Jimmy can help David unpack, then bring him down for lunch to meet the others. The kids will be fine! As a matter of fact, I’d like to leave the two boys here while we go fill out the paperwork and finish our discussion - fair enough?”

Pastor Sampson turned to address John and Sara, who both seemed okay with leaving the small, boxed in room, however, Sara was chewing on her thumbnail with a look of doubt on her face as she stared over at her son. “You can see him again in an hour or so. I think we’ll be finished by then, since it’s coming on noon and Professor, you should probably get back to your class here soon.” Motioning Marty with his hand, then ushering the Smiths out of the room after physically taking David’s duffle bag out of Sara’s firm grip and placing it on the floor next to the empty cubby, they slowly filed out of the room. David chose not to look up as his parents left.

Jimmy stood in the middle of the small living space, between the two bunk beds, and let out a loud sigh of relief. Turning to observe David, still sitting there motionless, he pushed his sliding glasses back up his nose and rocked back and forth on his feet. Five minutes passed and the silence was killing him. After standing there studying every dark hair on David’s head as he still sat there defeated, Jimmy finally spoke. “Umm, you probably don’t want to unpack, because that would make it permanent, but we should, so...do you need some help?” Another two minute pause with David not moving or replying so he continued. “Okay, fine, umm, I took the liberty of getting your uniform while you were touring the library, and it’s in the bag by the door. I also got your after school clothes too...and your shoes,” he paused again looking quickly at the boy’s black boots, then pointing over to the bag.

Jimmy sighed and scratched his head, thinking he should probably go sit down next to the mysterious one and console him, but something held him back; keeping this new student at more than arm’s length was an option he’d never thought of before, given his position at the school, and he couldn’t figure out why he felt so repelled by someone so charming and physically alluring. He felt awkward and unsure of himself being in the presence of this new student, which in turn upset him greatly, for despite his gangly physical appearance and small frame, he was quite confident and phenomenal at being able to speak to just about anyone when it came to spreading the Gospel of Christ. Jimmy was a dynamic speaker, fluent debater and persuasively resilient at reaching out to the troubled youth around him. He thrived on seeing the

transformation and acceptance come over the converters as they would learn about and accept God's Love. He was one of the main reasons why The Disciples was so successful, and had pen pals set up across the country with ex-students and re-born Christians, once under his guidance, now still communicating with him and also spreading The Word as his disciples. He was known and loved by most as an old soul sent by God to do His work, and he knew it too.

Summoning the courage to act, Jimmy finally walked over and sat down next to him, but David shot up off the bed and walked over to the empty cubby. Leaning on it, he stared into its wooden frame, trying hard to accept the fact that it wasn't a closet, but failing miserably.

Jimmy sat there and watched, mouth opened. He was transfixed by this troubled soul, suddenly drawn to him now, and he knew right then and there that he needed to help this one find salvation, although it would be incredibly difficult. This new converter could be his life's work! Still, there was something else in the room with them, emanating from this David, and frankly, he thought sitting there wiping his hands on his pants, it made him sweat.

"Don't say a word, just leave me alone...since we're 'roomies' now, I think you should know I don't take advice from anyone *in this world*, and I certainly don't need whatever it is you're selling...so you can just relax now and move on to the next poor sap sent to rot here. Call out the next number on the ticket to salvation and let the saving begin with him." David kicked the bottom of the cubby stand with his boot lightly and closed his eyes, trying to calm himself down through his breathing, always thinking of Dillon's influence.

It didn't take but a lightning second for the disciple to respond. "Uh...well, you don't get off that easy David. I would think you'd know that you're destined for better and greater deeds...better than the typical 'I hate the world and everybody in it' philosophy every upset teenager carries around nowadays. A rebel without a cause is such an outdated image - trust me." He continued to look at David's back, pushing his glasses up his face again, his fingers trembling. He felt his own approval at his choice of rebuttal. *Then why am I trembling?*

David chose not to turn around and face him, and Jimmy rose, standing up to meet him at eye level. Here we go, David thought. *One, two, three...*

"And I *will* try to help you, not because I have to, as your advisor - well, I would help you anyway because that's what an advisor does, and I'm naturally very good at it."

David started lightly hitting his forehead on the wood frame serving as his closet...*make him go away, please just make them all go away...*

“But because I sense something in you that cries out for greater things, greater accomplishments,” taking a step closer to him, he continued, pausing as David suddenly turned around to face him, glaring. Still he continued, although momentarily stunned by David’s brutal beauty, “You have potential to be more than how you...you look.” He stopped and suddenly lost his words. Watching him falter, David smiled and breathed in deeply in order to rip into the poor boy when the pain came down from nowhere and hit him hard.

The air remaining in David’s lungs shot out his mouth and he blindly grabbed his midsection, dropping to his knees. He fell to his side, the wind having left his lungs while Jimmy stood there looking down at him, one hand on his shoulder, the other held above David’s head in an ‘I’m innocent and I didn’t do anything’ stance.

“David, what’s happening to you?!”

According to Jimmy’s account later that afternoon, David just dropped to the ground, as if possessed or struck down by God for arguing with a chosen disciple, depending on who Jimmy was talking to, writhing in pain and agony because he was resisting Salvation.

David gathered himself up off the floor after five minutes of recovery, with Jimmy at his side watching over him, debating whether to go get help or stay. The pain had left David quickly, but an ache remained, and it gnawed at him while he unpacked his things in silence, Jimmy now watching from his top bunk, more curious than ever at his new acquaintance.

Dillon was in trouble, probably fighting, David thought, and considering how he felt right then, his brother was getting the shit kicked out of him. He clenched his teeth and tried to fight the urge to scream out in frustration. He was very much aware now that they were connected, he felt it before, had a vague suspicion for years before that, but this was it. He needed to be back there with his brother, protecting him if for no other reason, to rid him of all the bullies in the world

If Daryl was the one to hurt Dillon today, I’ll make sure every part of his body pays in a currency of pain. As he grabbed his new white and black striped sneakers, he felt a sharp pain in his left hand. Extending and flexing it in a fist, pain shooting down his fingers, a smile spread across his face. *Way to go, Dil.*

When he had finished unpacking and throwing all his new clothes into the cubby hole like it was a bon fire, he turned around and met Jimmy’s gaze. “Let’s go down to lunch.” He attempted to look up at Jimmy, but instead quickly looked over to the window, smiling and trying

not to laugh at the skinny, dopey prepubescent looking farm boy above him. *I'm sure he hasn't even embraced puberty yet – too sinful for a disciple to have armpit hair...*

“You have to change first,” Jimmy spoke with his chin propped up on his hands, lying prone in bed, an air of fake disinterest in his voice.

Ignoring him, David decided to try a little humor to lessen the load of crap he was dished today. “So, have you ever tried to squeeze through those bars in the window?” He also couldn't help but heap a little meanness on the boy too.

“Nope, don't need to. My presence here is totally voluntary.”

Laughing and shaking his head in disbelief, David pushed his hair back, holding it there as he gawked at the boy like he was a circus freak. “You've got to be fuckin kidding me right? I mean—”

“Please don't curse, it's against—“

“Yeah, yeah, school rules or commandments...whatever,” David waved his right hand above his head then made the sign of the cross over his chest to mock religion. “Seriously though, you know, you could do ‘God's work,’” his hands in quotations as he said this, “in the outside world where people who aren't forced to take it in, might actually appreciate hearing about it.” He copied Marty and put his hand with his finger pointing to the side of his head. “Think about it. Think about the possibilities.”

“I know my possibilities lie here, with all of you. *That's* God's work, not out there, but in here,” and Jimmy in turn pointed sarcastically down to the floor from his perch on top the bunk bed.

“Yeah, sure, but why not save people out *there*,” and pointing out the window with both hands as if wanting to shove him out, David mocked him. “Where you can enjoy doing...other things too like...” Geez, he thought, wiping some of the dried blood off his lower lip where he'd bit into it earlier. *What does this kid do besides jerk off, hide from the sun and memorize Biblical verses all day?* “Maybe having your own bedroom for starters, and a stereo, or a keyboard, or maybe friends who aren't forced to spend time with you...” He tried not to smile but the temptation was too strong.

Pushing his glasses back on his face, Jimmy, face red and trying not to play into the well controlled hostility, finished by clearly enunciating his words. “You-have-to-change-into-your-school-clothes-before-we-can-go-eat.” Smiling smugly again, he stared down at David.

Laughing softly, David replied, “You gonna lay there and watch me then, Jesus boy, considering you haven’t reached puberty yet and I wouldn’t want to make you feel inadequately inferior?” He grinned widely, he couldn’t help himself. *I’m just so witty.*

With the frustration finally welling up in him, Jimmy glared back, having regained all his confidence, “Just change your clothes and quit giving yourself a superiority complex - I don’t have all day! Besides,” pushing his glasses back up, “I was told not to leave you alone.”

David’s smile quickly disappeared, and for the first time since his tour of the school, he suddenly felt imprisoned, stripped of dignity and privacy. The anger seeped in through his mouth, and he breathed it into his lungs like fire. Turning away, his eyes a sinister black hue, David walked over and ripped off his shirt while kicking off his boots, each one slamming into the wall loudly as Jimmy flinched and held his glasses to his face, holding his breath and feeling suddenly afraid. As he did this, David called out, “You should think about asking your daddy to get those glasses fixed. I’d think with all the money he pockets from this façade of a school, he could afford a gold rimmed, diamond studded pair!” Smiling again, he finished changing his clothes, his eyes bright sunny blue again.

Jimmy continued to lie there, glancing over a few times, while trying as best as he could not to look at David’s body in envy.

When they got down to the courtyard, the only place where any greenery was located, there were approximately one hundred kids eating lunch, some sitting at tables scattered around, others sitting on the grass in the sun, lounging. For a split second it looked and felt like a normal high school scene, at least until David noticed the guards patrolling the grounds, six of them walking back and forth, not talking and not engaging the boys, and of course the other obvious fact – no girls to be seen anywhere. Did he miss the weaker sex, and what did people mean when they coined females that way? Weren’t women stronger on every level higher than the physical? He wasn’t quite sure, especially considering Jimmy was male and he knew Rachel could probably kick his ass in the physical level easily. He sighed, since thinking of girls only seemed to give him a headache. There were too many variables, too many unknowns when it came to the opposite sex. At least with his gender, everything made sense. Guys have no mystery to them, they were easily created by a basic template – but wasn’t he different? He surely thought that, and yet he was male. *Maybe I’m androgynous?* He shuddered. He thought at that moment he could be alone in a sea of people and not care what gender dominated the

scene. He felt above it all and he frowned as he looked out at the courtyard of troublemakers all in the same boat he was sinking in. Oh, how he just wanted to be alone.

Standing there now wearing an uncomfortably crisp, starched, white short sleeve button down collared shirt and thin, black tie, matched with a basic black cotton pleated pant and black belt, David felt like a flashback straight from American Graffiti and the sixties movie scene.

David finished off what he thought was the geeky look with those cheap black and white sneakers. He couldn't believe Jimmy had picked out the right sizes for everything, including his shoes. He must do this a lot, he decided as he shook his head in disgust again. He felt incredibly out of place, his neck itched under his collar, and the only thing he had on him that was his signature mark was his disheveled black hair and matching nails. *They can scrub til the rain comes but they won't get that color off.* He smiled and looked down at his hands. After checking out the rest of the courtyard, David realized that at least everyone else looked just as geeky, if not more so.

"This is your class, come on, I see your folks," Jimmy touched David's upper arm in an attempt to bring him along, which only made David violently jerk and pull away.

"Quit reaching out to me like you're some healer - I don't like touchy people!" He hissed at Jimmy's back, while the boy walked forward gracefully as if on his toes, happy as a lark, waving at some of the boys and getting hellos from everyone he passed, pointing at them as he walked along.

David stood there for a second and saw Jimmy's popularity for the first time. The kid actually lit up when he was around people, the more the brighter, and he became more and more animated, smacking hands in multiple high fives, like the geek president of a fraternity house. "What the hell?" David said quietly as he continued to stand there.

Just then, Jimmy turned around gracefully, spinning on one leg and called to him. "Come on David! Everybody's looking forward to meeting you! Come on over!"

He walked towards Jimmy with a pained look on his face. *I hate my fucking life, I hate my fucking life, I hate your fucking life...* repeated in his head.

As he walked across the courtyard, with Jimmy stopping every two feet to introduce him to whomever was sitting in their way, or near them within a ten foot radius, guys who weren't in their radius migrated over, so that before they could reach his parents, David had the ultimate displeasure of meeting every junior, minus one or two in the bathroom, that lunch period.

“Quit introducing me you prepubescent freak of nature! I’m not interested in any of your little disciple converters,” David hissed again into Jimmy’s ear, making him pull up on his shoulder in fake shyness.

Jimmy quickly smiled and winked. “Nonsense, David. You need to feel *welcome*, and remember it’s my job,” more winking and Jimmy was suddenly standing in front of the adults, all of them beaming up at him.

Bastard, David thought. *He’s fucking enjoying this...damn, think I underestimated him.*

“Why, hello Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” Jimmy beamed down at them. David began to panic as he noticed his mother was much more at ease. She smiled up at Jimmy. *That can’t be a good thing.*

“I’m so glad David has a friend in you Jimmy, someone he can trust and confide in while he’s here. Honestly, I can’t remember the last time David had a friend, can you, dear?” She glanced at Father then smiled at the other men sitting there too, until she finally looked up at her son, who was giving her the ‘give me a break’ look as expected. Father shook his head and spoke in an audible whisper, “He’s never had friends, Mother—“

“Well, boys, it looks like the Smiths are going to head out when lunch is done, so David, you sit here and talk with your parents, and we’ll leave you all alone.” Smiling again way too much, Pastor Sampson got up and gave his seat to David, then he and Professor Jenkins started to walk towards the group of boys gathering around them watching from a distance. “Come on now, boys. Give them their privacy. You’ll all get to meet the young man later on today during worship, so let’s go.” The pastor ushered the group back, but Jimmy, after standing there watching his father control the crowd, turned around and slid into the seat next to David, across from both his parents, who were both shifting their attention to him with interest.

David, however, was giving him a look of disgust and revulsion. “Uh, yeah, this is what we call ‘family time’ Jimmy, so why don’t you go finish playing ‘meet the president’ over there with your groupies, okay?”

Ignoring him, Jimmy looking at Mrs. Smith, and said in a voice slightly above a whisper, “Ma’am, I assure you this young man sitting here with me will get the best spiritual care and support possible, because here at The Disciples, we specialize in helping the troubled youth find and embrace God in a safe and accepting environment.”

Both of them leaned forward slightly to hear him better, Mrs. Smith, smiling and dabbing

a tear from her eye with a Kleenex, looking at her husband in agreement, while David pseudo coughed, his hand in a fist to his mouth as a muffled ‘bullshit’ almost registered clearly in the air.

“Jimmy, give them some time alone!” Laughing again, Pastor Sampson walked over and ushered his son away from the table.

“But Dad! They need to know who David will be hanging with and I need to know more about where he comes from – it’s psychology remember? He’s sure not going to tell me,” and then he whispered and mouthed something Mr. and Mrs. Smith couldn’t understand while David didn’t care or bother looking over. Exasperated, Jimmy followed the hand motions of his father and went reluctantly with him to continue his speech as loud as possible, as if David was an actual experimental rat instead of a person.

David chose not to watch him make a scene and focused instead on his parents, who were unfortunately still watching Jimmy. “Please, please, please don’t leave me here! I promise I’ll attend church every Sunday, volunteer my time painfully at the homeless shelter and read the Bible aloud on any street corner whenever you want me to - and stay out of trouble at school too...I’ll even do missionary work! And as far as the nails are concerned, it’s not nail polish, I promise! They just turned black one day and I can’t get it off! I think it’s some sort of blood disorder or something...” They both looked back at him in silence. “Believe me I’ve tried, but it’s like my body just decided my nail beds needed to be black!” He felt his hold not registering and he began to plead and grovel. “Maybe I should see a doctor? Maybe I-I’m just sick?” pausing again, his hands up and looking at his nails, he then gave his parents a look of desperation as he held them gingerly in prayer. It felt insanely awkward and his stomach surged upward in protest.

“We’re both sorry it had to come to this, but this school is the best place for you to be right now,” spoken sternly and without hesitation, Father had long ago already made up his mind, and probably, David was sure, had already practiced his ‘fair thee well’ speech.

“Mother?” He turned his attention to her and waited.

“David honey,” looking at her husband’s face for agreement while finding none, she continued. “It won’t be for very long.” David slumped over defeated as soon as she started talking, his head in his hands again. “Your father and I have already agreed that if you show good behavior and follow the rules here, you could be home before Thanksgiving...and that’s only fifty days away! You can do that...right?”

She genuinely wanted to believe what she said, David could tell, but he knew it wouldn't happen. He knew he couldn't follow along with anything he didn't agree with. He'd come home for other reasons, he decided, however, his parents weren't going to make it easy.

“Well, I guess since today is Wednesday, October 6th, you've already done the math, Mother.” Spoken with a muffled voice and his head in his hands, he was stunned and not quite sure why his world was suddenly turned upside down.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith left quickly like they were instructed to do, carrying the clothes he wore there and his boots home with them. That was probably the hardest part of the day, seeing his personal clothes and boots leave without him either wearing or carrying them himself. He'd lost all control in his short life and he burned and stewed in his anger as he watched them leave from the lunch table. *I paid for those clothes and they're mine!*

Instead, David walked to class in his cheap, squeaky tennis shoes, followed closely by Jimmy of course. The rest of the day slowly trickled along as if God intended it to be painfully long. David was made to stand up in class and get introduced by Professor Jenkins, as well as endure all the stares and whispers given him that day and probably several days afterward, he predicted. Several boys attempted to talk to him, but he answered no one, except Jimmy of course. He chose to hiss almost formed curses at the disciple whenever he would try to engage him. It became quite challenging to come up with quips to throw back at Jimmy without using curse words. It was like a game really and Jimmy was the perfect opponent because he was relentless and seemed determined to get through so that he could make a connection with him.

“Connect this,” David would reply, whenever Jimmy would begin talking about the Divine.

As the school day ended and spiritual reflection began, the boys had afternoon worship in the main chapel located in the administration building. All the grades met there to end the school day with an hour of service, followed by one hour of down time before they all met for dinner at the mess hall located at the back of the complex.

From eight to nine o'clock every night, the boys showered, finished homework, and got ready for bed, with all lights out at 9:30pm. It was a busy schedule, which left very little time for messing around or getting into trouble. Every day was scheduled, even the weekends, with bells sounding every hour to change the activity of the day over to the next activity, as if unscheduled time equated to sinful contemplation. Watching it all on his first day gave David the distinct

impression that the students of The Disciples were being shuffled around like cattle.

The main chapel was referred to most at The Disciples as ‘The House,’ and the little chapel, located in the senior building, was known as ‘Reflection’ - or Confession as some of the residents termed it. There were indeed confessionals in there with several on site staff rotating through, serving as counselors, they’d sit behind a screen to protect privacy and encourage repentance. It was common to see all three confessionals filled at any given time over the weekend, for although all the residents were told they were private confessions, most were under the mistaken belief by confessing frequently and listening to advice, they would somehow be released sooner rather than later, back into the world. He smiled as he sat there and listened to Jimmy tell him about Reflections, thinking to himself how dastardly his thoughts would sound spoken aloud. He’d always spared Dillon his darkest secrets and demented dreams, however these poor saps were the perfect collective sounding board! It would make his day for sure, but would it bring him home sooner? He could make up astounding stories of confessions and dramas to stun his listeners then pretend repentance to gain favor.

“They know it when the fakers go in there and lie about what they’ve done and how sorry they are, so don’t think for a *second*, you’d gain credibility as a serious student of the Gospel simply because you go into Reflections and *pretend* to reflect.” Jimmy pushed his annoying glasses back up the bridge of his nose as if to give a nonverbal, unwritten exclamation point to his last few words. David had to look away at this point in the day. He had to fight the urge to calmly remove those damn glasses, drop them on the ground near his feet, and stomp on them with his equally tacky, squeaky tennis shoes. *Just look away...*

The House, or main chapel, could easily sit four hundred people, with a large wooden cross eight feet tall hanging from the backside of the center stage. There were two podiums, one on each side, and a piano off stage left. David noticed the larger than life cross because of the metallic man hanging and nailed to it. His form, although beautifully crafted to show details one could easily pick out from across a monumental room such as this one, also depicted what David could feel upon entering such a place. He felt the pain and the suffering. It was suffrage well performed and executed, he could tell, but for reasons he couldn’t explain right then, he chose not to continue to stare at Him; it was too much to take in visually and he certainly didn’t have the option to leave.

‘The House’ was elegant on a grand scale, with red tapestries hanging from the walls, and

stain glass windows way up high along the full length of both halls. The pews were dark cherry wood, each running the full width of the church.

David couldn't even begin to imagine the cost involved in sending one messed up boy to this school. How long do these kids stay? Some of the boys looked like they were at home, only a few looked hardened with tattoos and pierced holes - without the hardware of course - and a few with cool looking battle scars.

As he walked into the chapel, filing in like all the other sheep, David took the opportunity to dash in front of Jimmy, who was right behind him at his heels. Darting in front of three upper classmen not moving forward, David shot over and moved into a pew off to his left. He recognized two of the boys sitting next to the isle from his class, both of them memorable for their tattoos and body piercings; one of them had blue hair with two inch blonde roots poking through. They both looked up at him to say "Hey" at the same time. He sat down next to the second boy in, the one with the funky blue and blond striped hair.

The pew packed quickly after David chose it, with five boys rapidly following him, sitting next to him on his left side, and more coming in from the other side of the pew as if they were all in a race to sit near the new kid. Jimmy finally crammed his way over to stand at the isle.

"David!" he whispered harshly, "You're not supposed to sit here! We need to sit up front, first row, for introductions and to hear the sermon!"

By now, everyone was filling The House quickly - all grades present and accounted for, including staff members. Pastor Sampson and another gentleman David hadn't met before were each standing at the podiums, both wearing white gowns with red ribbon down their fronts, like oversized, stuffed Christmas presents. David smiled again.

"Let us get situated and come to order," Pastor Sampson spoke into the microphone, while it screamed electricity following his words as he tried to adjust it.

"You better go sit down, Jimmy Dean," the boy sitting at the end of the isle whispered as he began to giggle, pointing to the front.

"Shut up Stewart," Jimmy hissed. "David, as your advisor and mentor, I say let's go!"

But before David could answer him, the boy with the blue hair spoke up. "I think he's found his seat. Move on, sheep boy."

"I'm not talking to you *Joel*, so butt out!" Jimmy was turning red in the ears.

Some of the boys in the pew started laughing after hearing Joel's comment, and Pastor Sampson noticed as well. Clearing his throat, he spoke. "Boys?" Another harsh electric spark filled the expansive room as everyone flinched in response. "Jimmy, please find a seat? We need to start."

Jimmy went to get in the pew, but Stewart stuck his knees out, blocking the way. "Sorry, this pew's full," he whispered, followed by Joel, who didn't bother whispering, "Farm animals need to sit up front."

David, not responding to the action on either side of him, chose instead to look straight ahead, which meant he met eyes with most of the boys in the pew in front of him. It was strange being stared at by so many pairs of eyes in the course of just one half day. He was used to the staring at Vista High because it was mostly fear and intimidation and he thrived on that. The attention he was getting here was a sick mixture of admiration and curiosity with a heaping dose of dopey school boy crush placed precariously on top.

Jimmy finally stormed up front two pews, where some boys had moved over for him, and he flopped down, making quite a scene, since the entire chapel was watching them, his face by now a lovely, deep crimson red to match his hair.

"No need to thank me now - we'll talk later," Joel spoke softly, his head leaning in so that he whispered into David's neck.

David sighed in boredom and, after allowing the kid who was sitting in front of him to continue to turn around every ten seconds to casually glance at him, he finally whispered in his signature hissing tone. "Turn the fuck around, meatball," and the overly sized behemoth quickly readjusted himself in his seat and looked forward.

Joel snickered, whispering to David again. "His name is Paul Daniels, and he's the biggest queer here - takes the longest fucking showers in our ward."

David chose not to answer, his eyes now on the only woman in the room as Mrs. Sampson walked up the side hall and sat at the piano. Her voice quiet and soft amidst the low, deep whispers across the chapel drew his attention. She gently asked the congregation—

Wow, haven't heard that word in a long time. How long has it been since I've been a member of a congregation of sinners?

In a tone that invited cooperation, she asked the boys to turn to page 146 in their hymnals to sing along to "Jesus Loves Me," followed by everyone's all time favorite, "Onward Christian

Soldiers.” David closed his eyes at that moment, realizing once again why he hated being in church, and thought if he could separate and float to the ceiling, things would at least become interesting, however no such luck, then Joel nudged him again.

“Hey, I’m Joel Baskins and this here is the infamous Stewart Taylor,” nudging David a third time, who finally looked over to meet eyes. Stewart smiled a very sheepish smile. David realized at that moment as the words ‘Yes! Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so,’ filled the room in song, that these two boys would have been his roommates if Jimmy hadn’t interfered.

Once the singing got underway, Mrs. Sampson made the boys stand up to sing by flapping her arms like an ostrich to “Onward Christian Soldiers,” while staff members patrolled the isles making sure everybody was blowing musical notes. David chose not to sing, while Joel held out the hymnal between the two of them to make a good impression. Of course he sang his own version of the song, making David laugh softly a couple of times, which only fueled Joel to sing more absurd versions of the twisted ‘fight for Jesus’ song. When they were done, everyone sat down so that Pastor Sampson could squeal the sermon out to the masses gathered there.

David squirmed in his seat as he sat there reliving his father’s speeches; every last one of them flashed before him all in the course of an hour. He realized, as he sat there listening to the Gospel according to John in his head, that all those times, from the moment he could speak and comprehend the English language, he wasn’t able to tune out his father. Why was that voice like nails on a chalkboard? He began to sweat as he heard the sermons replayed one right after the other. It was absolutely agonizing and he tried not to vomit, feeling suddenly like he was somehow, possessed and the sermons were God’s way of cleansing his soul. *Make it stop!*

As his mind began to race, he closed his eyes to keep from bolting from the room. Trying not to panic, he needed to meditate, and then he saw Louis sitting there across from him at the cavern in his majestic brilliance, so David breathed out a sigh of relief. It then hit him like a ton of bricks - he had forgotten his dinner with him last night. “Holy shit,” he whispered, his hands suddenly covering his face as the pastor finished his closing sermon.

“Go and be with God in this hour of contemplation.” Pastor dismissed the church.

Joel snickered at David’s comment. “That bad of a preach session?”

As they filed out of the chapel, David couldn’t get in front of Stewart and Joel, so when they hit the outside, both of them turned around. Joel spoke first. “Hey, let’s chill in our room. Come on, you’re cordially invited to join our select *inner circle*.” He made a triangle with his

hands.

David didn't want to talk or get to know anyone, and the thought of him not able to meet up with Louis in his dreams last night, to explain why he couldn't find the energy to walk to the closet, made his heart pound and his stomach ache. Looking at the boys in front of him, he was forced to address the issue at hand. *I better say something. They're both looking at me waiting for their own gospel sermon.* "I appreciate the offer, but actually I'd rather be a loner, since meeting new friends will only make it harder when I leave here next week."

Stewart couldn't believe what he was hearing and looking at Joel, he laughed obnoxiously, slapping his hand on Joel's shoulder. Joel, however, wasn't amused. Stewart continued. "Fine, see ya around, 'loner,' however, I hate to be the one to pop your elusive bubble, but I'm predicting we'll be seeing you around here for a long, long time," and he snickered, then pulled on Joel's uniform shirt to drag him away.

David stood there looking at Joel, thinking maybe he'd made a mistake.

Joel had a look that screamed he wanted to say something, but he instead just shrugged his shoulders and backed away silently.

He watched them leave, standing in the courtyard feeling sorry for himself. *Why can't I have a normal life, with cool friends and nothing to worry about?* He turned to leave and there was Jimmy, standing next to him smiling, pushing his glasses back up his fucking nose again.

"Nice move - saw it from the chapel door. Trust me," and he put his arm around David, who quickly side stepped away, "you don't want to hang with those two."

David couldn't believe what he was hearing. He sighed reluctantly in acceptance over the fact that Jimmy was an inevitable side effect of being in prison. Jimmy of course followed him anyway, trying to continue to invade David's personal space with talk, but all David could hear was noise, and he knew what to do when that happened.

Walking up to the third floor of the three story junior compound, David went to his room off the stairs. The door was closed and he walked in without knocking. Two boys were in there, one at the desk and the other on the lower bunk, across from what would be David's bunk, which was located under Jimmy's. Both boys turned to him, the one at the desk who had his feet perched on the desk corner, turned around in his seat and glared. "You know new-be, around these parts, people knock before they enter, on account of they lose front teeth if they don't." He rose and stood up, his chest sticking out and his posture tall and threatening, while David closed

the door and leaned on it briefly, a grin forming on his face.

Lance was tall, at least two inches taller than David, with broader shoulders and a large Adam's apple protruding from his massive neck. It caught David's attention as he watched it move up and down as the mystery hulk spoke. He felt suddenly amused.

“Is he deaf, or what? DID-YOU-HEAR-ME-NEW-BE—“

“Sit down, or you'll lose yours.” David had to pull away from Lance's funny protrusion to return to his true form. Quickly thinking of the ‘losing teeth’ remark to invoke just a hint of anger to get his blood pumping, he felt he needed to add a smile. He also needed some kind of distraction right now to get this Joel character out of his head. He walked closer to the boy to get confrontational.

The kid watching on the bunk with the horrified look on his face shot up and put his arms between the two boys. “Okay, okay, let's just meet now and, and be...okay. Okay?” Jose pleaded and tried to force a smile up to his roommates.

“You got a lot of nerve, coming in here and throwing your things in your box like they're trash, when that's school issued stuff!” As Lance pointed to the disheveled cubby, David continued to look at him, not glancing over at his pile of crappy clothes, not bothering to inform them both he was cleaner than probably anyone there, and feeling disbelief in hearing harsh words being said about of all things, his disregard for housekeeping duties.

Jose spoke up again, this time quickly and with a heavy Spanish accent. “Lance, this is David, David this is Lance, and I'm Jose...so let's just try to meet and get along...please?”

But David just couldn't resist the challenge. “Well, by all means, you have my permission to tidy up my cubby, bitch.”

Lance went to swing, but David was several seconds too fast, and smacked him in the throat with his opened hand, dropping him while he was in mid swing.

Lance fell to his knees, his hands holding his throat as he tried to suck in air. David walked over and jumped on his bed, putting his hands behind his head and looking up at the underside of Jimmy's bunk. Jose was leaning down, yelling at Lance to breathe in Spanish. The scene was somewhat comical and he began to laugh softly as he listened to the hulk gasp and the Hispanic kid scream, who, by the way, he thought, sounded a little too hysterical.

Lance fell forward, his hands shooting out to brace his fall, and in that pose, on hands and knees, he coughed and gasped while Jose patted his upper back gingerly and with a limp hand as

if afraid to touch him. David started laughing louder, but no one could hear him through the heavy breathing. He couldn't believe his luck – what a joy after having to endure a sermon on peace and love. After feeling the weakness from the sermon, David now felt renewed.

Jimmy knocked, then walked in and ran over to help. “Get Professor Jenkins, David hit him in the neck,” Jose ordered Jimmy as he began to cry, hand to mouth in what appeared to be fake horror.

That kid's hysterical, David thought. “No, I hit him in the *throat*, not the *neck* and I'm not quite sure why he's on all fours – I didn't even close my hand.” He began reading the little ‘help me’ notes scratched on the wood frame above him while all three boys looked on in disbelief.

It took a long minute, along with a nudge and push from Jose before Jimmy, with a look of trepidation on his face, to walk over to the bed. He cleared his throat then spoke with a nervous waver. “David, what were you thinking? I can't—“

“Save it for later, Jimmy. You heard Jose, now go get the Christian Enforcer so that I can collect my dues.”

Jimmy stormed out of the room and called to another kid in the hall to get the professor because there was a fight, then walked back into their room, quickly followed by several other boys all interested in seeing the fight, pushing past him and filing in. As he turned to close his door, he jumped back shocked again.

David shook his head and frowned. *He's such an idiot...*

“What's this about a fight?” Followed by several hushed whispered and gasps as several boys walked in to see Lance staggering up on his knees again, his breath returning, but still heaving for air, tears streaming down his face as he tried to look the victor. They looked from him to David then back again.

Lance was sent to the infirmary to be observed for the next few hours, on supplemental oxygen and mild narcotics, for the pain was excruciating. David spent time in Professor Jenkins office, trying not to engage in, or listen to for that matter, the lecture handed down to him. Pastor Sampson then had his turn with interrogating the three of them, Jimmy, Jose and David, in his office, off the main chapel.

As Jose and Jimmy told the story, Pastor Sampson turned to David and asked him to give his side. He answered in a monotone voice. “Yes, everything they have said is true. I struck him

in his throat and dropped him for making fun of my housekeeping skills. It was my fault, so I guess you'll just have to call my parents to come get me now." He slumped back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

"Uh, no, that's not how we do things here," and turning to Jimmy, the pastor asked, "Jimmy, you did explain the rules to him right?"

Jimmy stammered, unable to tell a lie or even hint he was avoiding one, "Y-yeah, sort of, I mean, we talked about not cursing and I guess when it came to fighting, I just assumed he already knew *that*," and he paused, glaring at David then back at his father. David smiled as he heard Jimmy's voice start to shake and waver again now that he was being questioned by his mentor, probably for the first time ever. *How does it feel to do something bad, Jimmy?*

As he sat there smiling and listening to Jimmy lose the argument with his all knowing father, David suddenly found interest in the conversation. *I can't believe it...I might even get off without anything more than a warning. I should have done more damage when I had the chance...*

"Okay, well, let's take the opportunity right now for the remainder of the hour before dinner and discuss the rules. David, you will need to apologize to Lance for the assault, and we can swing by there on our way to the mess hall." The pastor leaned forward in his chair and began the thirty minute dissertation on rules and consequences. David chose to meditate again as he focused on the pastor's teeth.

For the rest of the night, minus the short, mumbled "Sorry," given to Lance, David didn't speak another word to anyone. He chose to lie in his bunk and look at the wood frame above his cage after dinner. Turning on his side to face the wall, while Jimmy sat on the edge of his bed and talked for a good hour, David tried to disconnect. What he really wanted to do was say something similar to "Get your white pasty ass off my bed," but he didn't have the energy or the desire to vocalize any words. Instead, he mentally separated, lying there still in bed, focusing on each particle of white paint on the wall in front of him, and avoiding the two suspicious looking green specks nearby.

His world had completely changed in the course of less than half a day. He was convinced about one thing for sure though, never will he ever yell at Dillon for wanting to be close to him, because he realized today that Dillon was the only one in the world who cared enough to be *that* close to him; the only one who truly saw him as he was, yet accepted him

unconditionally, embracing him for all his strengths and weaknesses. Acceptance was what made Dillon so pure, David decided, and so trustworthy, and now that they were apart, the balance that kept them both in check had vanished. Without him around, David began to feel himself slip away, to continue to spiral down into the darkness that had always called to him. His personality was changing and he knew it, felt it, and somehow couldn't do anything about it.

With his mind traveling all over, he jumped around from Dillon to Louis to his own turmoil. Louis was upset with his absence last night. He knew this as he lay there staring at the wall. He could feel the rage and the frustration even as he sat in the chapel. It felt like the chandelier of lights above were going to fall and crush him, and he remembered looking up and watching the one above him swing back and forth, while the other three were still.

He closed his eyes and didn't want to think anymore...*could Louis be the Devil? Was there such a thing as 'the Devil?'* Did he believe in it or was it just Christian sensationalism? Maybe, he thought. *Maybe Louis was just a man who carried himself well? He sure as hell didn't look like the devil...stop thinking Dave...*

But he couldn't stop and his thoughts continued to remain on Louis, although he fought it, feeling incredibly uncomfortable thinking about his absence. *Could he be that mad at me... no, not if he knew the truth, and he must know. Could Louis have been the one who visited me last night at my front door?*

Blinking his eyes several times then closing them, he forced himself to stop thinking about it. He thought again about that conversation he'd had with Dillon at school. After hearing about Dillon's supposed dream of Louis floating above his bed and watching him, which implied that Louis could travel to this world just as David could travel down to His world, and that revelation made him queasy. If Louis could come through to this world, somehow he thought Dillon wouldn't be safe. Maybe it was the purity of his soul that made him vulnerable, but David couldn't figure out why Louis would be interested in his brother to begin with, given his soul's character. *He said he was drawn to me, to my dark spirit, so his involvement with Dillon is simply secondary to my knowing him and opening up my closet to him...that's all -right?*

He laid there and made up his mind. He wasn't going anywhere anytime soon and now he knew for sure he needed to ensure his brother was protected and secure - that was certain. He'd visit until the moment presented itself and he knew it was time. He wanted to return there, just so that he could find out more about where he was traveling to; for the first time, David

needed to pay attention to that all important detail. *Was it Hell? If so, it really wasn't that bad a place actually, and to think everyone here holds to the belief it's all fire and brimstone and demons eating your entrails and a red dopey looking devil with a pitchfork and a fat ass. When the fact was this: it was just another world more vulnerable than here, with an amazingly beautiful dark angel named Louis overlooking it all.* He sighed, finding himself longing to see the mysterious man again, only to cringe when he found himself fantasizing about Louis in a sexual manner.

Satan, I need a cigarette...

The lights flickered off and on at that moment, and Jimmy and Jose both got into their bunks and turned out their light. They prayed out loud together for Lance's quick recovery and return here, and for a good day tomorrow, and for David's arrival and adjustment to their room.

Amused David listened, then secretly prayed for a cigarette and a match...and enough gasoline to torch the school beyond recognition, and smiling he ended his silent prayer with a barely audible whisper. "And let all who dwell within these walls burn to the ground...A-fucking-men."

Chapter Ten

Mourning

He dreamt all night long, dreams of fire and burning – the picture of Hell as he thought it would be - and he swore he was actually in that Biblical place. Dillon was there too, surrounded by fire. David was forced to watch as the flames consume his little brother while he stood there without so much as a blister.

The fire in his dream was his personal space – this he quickly surmised in his dream state. It fueled and burned the air as his own oxygen source and although the ground was far from stable, he felt at home there. Eighth Plane in all its blackness was soft under his bare feet as he glanced down and watched the orange lava flow up between his toes. It warmed him as Dillon's screams woke him. He shot up in a cold sweat, breathing heavy and panicking, looking at his arms and inspecting his hands for flames that still ticked his skin. The six o'clock a.m. bell sounded in the corridor and everyone began to stir as the beginning of prison life, day two was suddenly in full effect at The Disciples.

6:32 a.m.

Dillon woke up and shut off the alarm. It was Thursday, and he hadn't slept at all. He had cried so much yesterday after school, his eyes were still sore and puffy. Besides waking up several times last night and having to get up to close the closet, every time waking to the cold draft that seemed to creep across the floor from the crack under the door. The frigid, invisible presence would linger over his bed like a cloud.

When he did fall asleep, he dreamt of David and their dual life. Awake now, lying in bed, he recalled several Christmas' together, with David always sitting back and watching detached as he always was, smiling at all the appropriate times. Now here it was the middle of October and the holidays were just around the corner – his favorite time of year – and what if David isn't around then? *He'll be around because he has to be. He's my right side. He keeps the world from spinning. Drifting back to Christmas...He never did like all that commotion at Christmas, but he never complained. He never really said anything about it.* Dillon paused and let a tear run down his cheek. *He never complained about it because of me. It's always been about me...*

He couldn't believe it. He had never realized just how much David tolerated the family, from the countless hours of religious study he was never interested in, Father's harsh words and stern looks day in, day out, Daniel's constant bullying, and Mother's distance. He and David

were all the two of them had. They spent most of their free time together both at home and at school. Lying there now, he realized that by being awake without David here, was like dreaming a living nightmare. He didn't want to dream anymore.

He rolled back over in bed and closed his sore eyes. They were an amazing shade of Caribbean blue - a calm, healing aquamarine blue. He didn't feel the calmness though, even with his Bible nearby. Although it was behind him, Dillon could sense the influence. It was calling to him, laying on the end table untouched since David left yesterday, its pages well worn and used by his hands. He turned to view it only to glance away from it again as the hopelessness crept back in bed with him.

Trying to relax, Dillon was frozen there, unable to perform mind over body meditation. He taught David to meditate too, especially when he would get angry. He closed his eyes and smiled. That was his proudest accomplishment to date.

Mother got up early after a restless night of sleep. She walked into her bathroom and turned on the light. Shouldn't have done that, she thought, and she quickly turned it off, but not before seeing her dark circles. She looked too old for her age. David had aged her ten years yesterday. She felt it in her joints and especially in her teeth.

Standing there with him at the car, she felt him hug the life out of her; her vitality draining into the ground as he clung to her. Back to what feels already like years ago, she thought of that maternal-child moment and how wonderful it felt and now she had only guilt.

I can't believe he's not here right now. This is his home, isn't it?

She would never have admitted it to anyone, especially her husband, but David scared her. He invoked fear; her personal safety and the safety of her family was in jeopardy with him present and she knew it, was ashamed to think it because she had no proof, just irrational fear and the shame attached to it only a mother could feel. She not only believed he was not right with God, but she felt his rage was beyond God's control. When he would look at someone and she could see him, she saw his rage transform him into something supernatural; darkness was there, his eyes couldn't hide it. She remembered seeing him that way as a baby when he would crawl around, not yet able to walk. He would fall down and glare up at her, his rage evident then, his cry demanding and accusing. He was not a happy child, always a scowl where a grin should be. Christmas, birthdays, and family fun times were painful for him, unless it was about Dillon. Dillon made him smile when nothing else would. And last night, watching her youngest

pull away from her for the first time ever, she shuttered at the thought that came to her at that moment. If Dillon was happiness to David, then with David gone, will happiness leave Dillon? She couldn't bear to think of her youngest turning into his brother; taking him away to save the family, especially Dillon, would be the exact thing that could damage him enough to ruin him. She couldn't live with that.

Walking upstairs and into his room, she stood over him and watched him sleep. She turned off the clock radio and walked out, noticing the closet door left opened. She looked into it without thinking, then closed it and walked out the room, quietly shutting the door and telling the others to leave him alone. He would sleep today and she would watch him just to keep him close.

Dillon woke up, shot out of bed, grabbed his clock and looked at the time – nine o'clock! He grabbed his sweat shirt and pulled it over his head, then ran downstairs to see his mother sitting on the couch sewing, looking up at him smiling. “W-w-why d-d-d-didn't you get m-me?” He asked, wearing only his blue sweatshirt and grey boxers.

Seeing her youngest half dressed and confused made her pause. “Uh...honey, I thought you needed some sleep, so I kept you home today. Don't worry, I called the school. I have your breakfast wrapped in tin foil on the table, so go sit down and eat.” She smiled again, a calm forceful expression on her face.

Dillon was still spinning, not having missed a day of school yet this year. He had perfect attendance for a reason and now it was gone. He slowly walked into the kitchen defeated and grabbed a glass off of the shelf, then walked over to the faucet to start running the water. He looked out the kitchen window and saw it again. The crow was balanced on their back fence this time, and it ruffled its wings then flew towards the window, landing on the red brick barbeque about five feet away and turned its neck to peer in at the boy.

Dillon dropped his glass in the sink, shattering it into little pieces, and making his mother bolt off the couch and scream.

“Honey?! Is everything alright?! What happened?!” She was soon standing next to him, following his unchanged gaze out the window, making eye contact with the crow sitting there, and four more who had joined him on the barbeque. “Oh, those crows love that barbeque. Father used it the other day remember?” She played with his hair while he continued to stare at

the main crow, who as he saw it, was somehow commanding the others to do what he wanted. He acted the leader, and they were summoned here to see him and maybe even the family. Could he hear them talking to each other? He breathed in slowly with emotion as he watched each of the four crows take flight towards different sections of the house while the leader sat there and watched him. *They're looking in the windows!*

“You won’t find him here anymore,” Dillon whispered, making his mother look down at him with fretful worry.

“Come on honey, let’s go sit down and get you some food...you didn’t eat at all yesterday, not lunch or dinner and it’s worrying me.” She pulled on his sweat shirt sleeve and he reluctantly left the window.

Sitting down at the table to stare at his scrambled eggs and bacon, Dillon couldn’t help but feel sick to his stomach. The food looked foreign, and he had absolutely no appetite. Mother sat down next to him to watch, but quickly noticed his face. “What’s the matter?” She asked.

“I don’t feel well, Mother. May I be excused to go lie down?” He looked at her, his eyes the palest blue and tired. They looked sunken in.

She reached out and touched the side of his temple with her hand. “He’ll be home soon honey. Your father and I told him that with good behavior, he could be home before Thanksgiving...and he agreed with that...and he has already made a friend – his roommate Jimmy Sampson – the pastor’s own son.” She smiled trying to look convincing, but she should have known better.

The pastor’s son? Doubt that. “David chooses not to have friends, Mother, so that’s not true, and he doesn’t easily agree with anything, you should know that – he’s stubborn that way.” He rose from the table silently and left the room.

Up in his room again, Dillon walked over and crawled into David’s pre-made bed. Suddenly he heard a creak and a groaning popping sound of wood giving way and splintering, as the door slowly opened, its hinges noisy. He propped himself up on his elbows and stared straight at the closet door. It was indeed opening, albeit slowly, only to stop a third of the way. A breeze came in and hit him lightly in the face, moving his hair back as it circled the room. He sat there listening to the blinds on the window rattle slightly on the adjoining wall.

Suddenly the door swung all the way open only to slam shut again with force. He jumped backward in bed, head hitting the headboard, and breathed out hard, darting his eyes

around the room, but nothing else was moving. In fact, everything was perfectly still. He sat there for about ten minutes, just staring at the closet door, not knowing what to think and expecting it to reopen. He was sleep-deprived, this he knew, and with his missing David like he was, he also could believe he was vulnerable to seeing things as more than they were. Making inaccurate conclusions based on emotion and irrational fear rather than scientific fact was not Dillon's way of thinking; it wasn't how his mind worked. He wasn't quite convinced though.

He lay back down on his side again, watching the clock radio slowly move time digitally in neon red. He had thought about the closet last night when he had gone to bed. He knew, after hearing David talk about his dreams, he had entered through the closet door to get to the dream world. It had all seemed so far-fetched to him, listening to his brother animate a story with the same characters over and over and over again. Now, lying there crippled in fear, he found it frightening that his closet door had opened; even scarier to think that an actual breeze could come out of it and circle his room. He fell asleep after awhile and dreamt of that door opening and closing repeatedly, and he swore to himself that he could look in there for miles; the distant lights flickering there in the background, or was that fire?

Dillon woke up sweaty and chilled again. Jumping up in bed and looking around, he saw the closet door ajar, but this time only half-opened, gently rocking back and forth an inch or two. The sun was setting and his clock registered six thirty two p.m. He had managed to sleep all day, which was strange and unusual in itself, but the closet door being opened once again disturbed him greatly. There was nothing rational and scientific to defend any theories he could muster up, and he was definitely not sleep deprived now.

He got out of bed and walked over and looked in, unable to fight the urge not to, although his mind screamed at him to just close the door and leave the room. The back wall of the closet was white with stains from shoes tossed violently off feet, launching and bouncing off it at various speeds. He smiled slightly as he glanced down at his shoes mixed with David's, scattered on the floor. There was a lingering smell however, and he picked up on it right then standing in front of the open closet, holding the door with one hand and resting his forehead on the door frame. The smell was jasmine and quite strong, for when he closed the door and stepped back, he could smell it follow along with him.

He stopped and turned back to the door, making sure to firmly and securely close it. He even jiggled the knob to make sure it stayed closed. It did, although he took a step back and

waited, staring and thinking it would open for him if he waited long enough. After a few minutes of standing there, he felt stupid, sighed and blew his bangs out of his face.

Dillon then walked over to view the sunset. Looking out the window, he watched the rest of the sun leave this side of the Earth, going down over the ocean, the sky a brilliant purple and pink. He leaned his forehead on the window pane and cried a single tear, its form tracing the full length of his cheek only to steady itself on the bottom of his chin.

I hate my life, I hate my life, I really, really, really hate my life. Why am I even here?

He looked down the window while still leaning on it and tried to see the grass below, but the angle wasn't quite right. The thought of opening the window and diving through it entered his mind and lingered there. He had the feeling if he indeed jumped out the window, the grass would swallow him up, and he would be sent down into Hell's fire, shunned and not forgiven by God for the taking of his own life. An overwhelming sadness crept into his heart and he contemplated his life, how useless it was without his brother, along with what his afterlife's sentence would be.

Why do I think he won't come back? Why do I feel so hopeless?

He pushed himself off the window and walked purposefully backward three steps to stand there. He had to make himself leave the window, for the draw to it was magnetic. He needed the space for his own safety. *What would David say if he saw me like this?* He thought about this for a second, visualizing David standing there smiling and shaking his head – everything always a sinister joke with him – and he'd say something like, "Dil, if you were to jump out that window, with your luck, you'd break your upper back and not your neck and I'd be forced to help Father install ramps all over this cheesy house so that you could manipulate your God damn motorized wheelchair with your chin all over the place—"

He began to cry as he stood there listening to the imaginary lecture from his brother. *David was always right, always painfully realistic and cynical, but usually right on the money, and I would make a horrible quadriplegic. Realistically, I don't want to hurt myself at all. I guess I just want to feel sorry for myself because it feels comfortably safe...*

Dillon turned to leave the room and his legs immediately buckled as he staggered backward. The closet door had swiveled open again and was floating over the hard wood floor, inviting, but this time it moved without hinges squeaking. He held his breath and blinked several times as fear crept up his spine. For the first time today, he had the distinct impression he wasn't

alone.

The lamp on his bedside table to his left flickered on and off several times. Each time it turned off, the room seemed to get darker, then it would turn on for a second and he'd let his eyes dart around the room, trying to adjust to the brightness. Finally, after several cycles of light display, he looked over at it and yelled, "Stay on!" And it did, this time brighter than ever before, blinding white as he stared at it. Anyone else would have shielded their eyes by the blaze of explosive light, but Dillon didn't even blink; then the lamp did what one would expect it to do - it exploded and an electric popping noise and a spark shot up to the ceiling.

Darkness filled the room again as if in a confident wave, and he could barely see the closet door knob reflecting the last of the outside light over his shoulder. He breathed out and saw the air crystallize before his eyes. The cold had crept over him like ice water, pooling around his ankles first, then his legs and up his waist. He gasped in pain as it tried to penetrate his skin, seeping in through his clothes as if he was submerging himself. It seemed so real that he actually looked down to see if it was pooling around him.

By the time the invisible water hit his chest, Dillon found it difficult to breathe and remain standing, but he knew he couldn't fall down to his knees – that would theoretically place him completely under water. Standing on his tip toes, he raised himself up as the water touched his ears, struggling to stand there yet feeling as though his feet were losing contact with the floor. Dillon realized he had to move towards the source. So he forced himself to stagger to the closet door, however he couldn't see anything around him and he staggered and briefly felt water on his face, coating the inside of his mouth in a thin film of ice.

Shooting back up on tip-toe, he found his footing as well as his orientation in the room. It was as if the window illuminating where the door would be had been blocked from the outside in, keeping all light hidden. Trying to walk over to where he thought the closet was, he actually felt like he was moving through water, and his legs felt so heavy, so weighted down. It was getting more and more difficult to keep his feet on the ground and the closet, as well as the bedroom door, seemed to be miles away.

Glancing over to where David's bed would be if he could see it, Dillon thought the room seemed darker over there, as if that could be possible. Another frozen bolt of fear traveled down his spine and he shivered. *No one knows I'm afraid of the dark, not even David - but I am. I am so afraid of the darkness...and it's taking over my room.*

Still struggling to keep his head above invisible water, he whispered a barely audible sentence with a last forceful breath of cold air, "I need light." He concentrated his gaze to his left and in an instant, the same lamp on the bed table lit up, first dimly, then as it caught Dillon's eye, it shown brighter and brighter, until it was bright enough to light up every corner of the room, and he stood there staring at it in awe, feet now touching the ground firmly. As if someone had unplugged a bathtub to let the water out, Dillon felt it drain around his body. Able to move his arms and legs now after regaining his balance, he breathed out in relief as he surveyed the room again. He suddenly felt something or someone else there too, and he couldn't help but think of his brother.

"David - is that you? Are you here? Please help me...please help me...please..."

By now the light source had turned the room white. He watched in awe as the darkness from his brother's corner of the room quickly retreated back into the closet. He followed it as it shot across the room like thin wisps of black ink set against the whiteness of a wall tapestry.

The door slammed itself shut, but there was no noise. It was as if Dillon were watching it on screen with the volume turned all the way off. Standing there trembling as he concentrated on the door knob, fearful it would twist itself and reopen for round two, he slowly walked over and stared at it in disbelief. After collecting himself for a few minutes and regaining control of his breathing, he felt lightheaded as he staggered over to the door. He couldn't believe it at first, but his feet felt the cold draft sucking into the closet from the floor behind him like a silent vacuum.

With the rest of his body still cold, but his breath no longer fogging up before him, he went over to David's bed and climbed back in, shivering as he lay there exhausted. He could swear he was soaking wet, but every time he'd reach down to touch his clothes, they were dry. His mind was playing with him he thought and he had an instant appreciation for all those people in the world locked up in mental health facilities due to auditory or visual hallucinations. He felt like he was insane and he couldn't deny what he'd seen anymore, not after this morning's events. He was no longer safe in his rational mind. He'd crossed over. He began to shiver more violently; afraid his shaking would vibrate the room and bring back whatever was there.

Turning on his side to face his lamp so that he could view it from the safety of David's bed, he noticed its light bulb broken and in pieces lying around the base, yet it was still producing light, just not as white as before. His eyes then focused on what was remaining in the lamp – almost nothing - trying to register exactly where the light source was coming from, since

the wiring was toast. He couldn't get any closer without moving up in bed and he didn't want nor did he dare move out from under David's covers. So he spoke out loud, like he always did to no one in particular. "You can stop now...turn off...lights out," and it grew dim, then completely out in a blink of his eye.

Dillon laid there in bed barely breathing again, beads of cold sweat now forming on his forehead as more irrational thoughts entered his brain. He prayed silently for several minutes until he drifted off into a deep sleep, so deep in fact, it was the next day before he would rise again.

Chapter Eleven

Crow Speak

Walking along the main corridor to his palace, staff in his left hand, and taking the black cloak off his head, the Dark Lord was met by Sandor. The devoted servant was waiting at the end of the hall, holding a silver tray with a half-filled glass of yellow liquid next to a dark green bottle. His head bowed as the Dark Lord approached, he waited for instructions. "I need to speak to Esmeralda - NOW. Find her and bring her to me. I will be waiting in the meeting hall. In the meantime, have Théoden summon the crows again for I need to verify what I am sure I already know," and he brushed past the young human without bothering to take his drink.

Sandor called out to him as he watched him walk away. "But my Lord, she has gone to feed up above, and she said as she was leaving that she would return shortly but she has not...yet returned." He bowed his head to wait as the Dark Lord stopped walking and stood still.

Pausing for a second, turning his head to the side to speak, he answered. "You are to wait for her after you contact Théoden. Bring her straight to me," and he strolled out of the room, long black and red lined cloak bellowing out behind him, graceful and strong. His walk was mesmerizing, and amazing feat of natural beauty mixed with powerful poise, and Sandor was always lost in admiration as he continued to stare at the empty hallway long after his master was gone.

The meeting hall was dark, but upon his entering, all the torches along the walls lit up one right after the other. There was a circular black granite slab table cut down the center and split into two half circles, with a smaller circle of open space and a walking area to both sides of the table in between. The meeting table could sit twelve; it was commonly used for the Council meetings that took place regularly, at the Dark Lord's discretion. He held more meetings than previous rulers, at the disapproval of his colleagues and fellow Council Members, but he had his reasons for doing so, mainly so that he could look upon each of them, being able to find out most of what he needed to know by simply being in their combined presence. If he sensed one building power and popularity too quickly, he would use his charm and influence to plot against, persuading other Council Members looking for recognition to attack. He was instrumental in starting up feuds and enlisting the help of others in the circle who may have also risen to power too quickly and were too overly confident and unprepared to recover from such retaliation. Surely someone would lose in the process, and so far, he was able to stay diplomatically immune

and mostly neutral.

If one member of the Council wanted to challenge another, the challenger would need to get Azmodeus' permission. So far, he had never turned down a duel amongst his Council unless it did not meet some need of his; mostly, he embraced the fighting, enjoying the chaos as it tore them apart. Of course, if and when a seat did open up on the Council, which happened frequently, Azmodeus was the only one to choose the replacement. In many ways, the Council of Twelve was merely a collection of powerful leaders coming together to pay homage to one ruler. The Council was not a democracy as it appeared, but a dictatorship meant to be recognized, where the ruler invited participation while he watched and summed up his competition. Those powerful enough to sit at Council were in fact present, accounted for and *watched* under his eye. The only stable members of the Twelve were the Arch Devils and Azmodeus, his rule and stronghold over the Nine Planes kept tightly controlled.

Théoden stood at the open doorway, trying to decide whether he should knock lightly on the stone wall or speak up, for his Lord had his back to him and was standing in the middle of the opened council table, hands behind his back holding his staff, and head bowed in silence.

“Come in, Théoden, and don't look surprised. Have you Lascivious and his crows with you? For I feel an update is in order.”

Théoden quickly walked into the room and stopped, head bowed. The Dark Lord turned to look at him. Théoden was new, summoned here at the request of Esmeralda, who had expressed an interest in an assistant, namely a male since another female in the palace would eventually only elicit jealousy and hatred.

Théoden was a warlock from Madera, an older man with long grey hair pulled back in a braid that touched the bottom of his spine. Always dressed simply in black draping robes along with several pieces of jewelry, necklace charms and amulets of various types to reflect his mood as well as the day of the week, he was average height and petite.

The Dark Lord was very particular about whom he allowed at court. He had remembered hearing about the sorcerer. Théoden, however, as his newest addition to Nine, was slowly given work to do, as he deemed fit to give.

“They have arrived, my Lord and are coming to you, however, I was only able to summon three. The others aren't accounted for yet, but they may still be looking for the human David.”

Turning away from him again, the Dark Lord spoke, “Very well, but you will locate them this night or else, for if I have to do my own work, then I have no use for you.” He raised his left hand to dismiss the warlock, then paused and spoke again as Théoden was turning to leave.

“I have another issue to discuss with you concerning Esmeralda,” and he turned and walked over to Théoden, making him draw in his breath as the Dark Lord approached to within four feet, the closest he had ever been to the warlock.

His presence was breathtaking for sure, and Théoden had to keep his mind clear in order to impress. Azmodeus raised his hand and let it hover in front of Théoden to allow adoration, watching in secret loathing the visible worship mixed with fear he could smell in the air this miserable little witch was breathing. “I want you to watch Esmeralda closely for me, for I have concerns regarding where she is choosing to feed when she visits the,” and he threw his other hand out to emphasize the geography of the statement, “*Entire Living World*, and as you know, I have vulnerable souls that I have yet to obtain.” After pausing he continued, looking at Théoden’s necklaces as he spoke, giving the warlock a strong thrill as he watched the inspection.

He let his eyes settle on the black onyx medallion hanging at the warlock’s heart, probably meant to protect it. He smiled and spoke with an ease that taunted the now visibly humbled and amorous Théoden. “Your newest assignment, besides watching those idiot crows, will be to watch and track her adventures above, for as I’m sure you know females, they just can’t seem to stay away from that age old forbidden fruit. So,” and he leaned in to emphasize the last sentence sternly, “Find out for me how I can protect the souls of the two Smith brothers from her bite.”

At that point Théoden opened his eyes widely and began to speak, “But my Lord, she wouldn’t dare attempt to feed on your—“

“You have your new assignments Théoden.” With his hand pointing to the warlock’s chest he said firmly, “Choose to serve me well, and your presence here will become more than the mere shadow it is now.”

“Yes, my Lord, thank you for the privilege.” Théoden bowed, then turned to leave the room briefly to summon in the crows, hoping the Dark Lord wouldn’t change his mind in the time he was gone from the room.

Lascivious hopped into the room first, followed by two others with Théoden in the doorway behind them, arms across his chest with a new look of importance on his face. The

Dark Lord once again in the middle of the half circles, his back to the crows as he spoke, “Speak all you know and do not pause unless advised to do so.”

“Yes, my Lord, good evening.” Lascivious bowed. This time he had gotten the bow down and didn’t stagger, while his two buddies behind him looked at each other in amazement. “We have been watching the house and there has been activity there to suggest the older brother has been moved. Our friend Lourdes took flight and followed the car with the older one and his parents yesterday, and I can report that only the parents returned.”

He paused quickly, then continued on cue when the Dark Lord remained silent, back still turned to the crow. “I have been watching the younger, Dillon, and I can tell you he is in turmoil. I have witnessed a fight he was in yesterday with another boy at the academy whom I have already mentioned to you, Daryl is his name, and the rest of yesterday he spent at home crying and sleeping in his room; his grieving evident and very intense. He did not sleep last night, but paced his room, and I observed him twice in the dark, opening and closing his closet, then sitting on his brother’s bed. Today, the boy did not attend academic training. He slept most of the day in his brother’s bed, and came down to the kitchen to drink one time, whereby he spotted me, dropped his glass, and whispered to me that his brother was no longer there. It was as if he recognized me, my Lord.” His head bowed, he waited for acknowledgement. When there was none, Lascivious ended his report with, “I observed his meeting with you in his room, and his commanding the lights on and off was...impressive,” his two buddies both ruffled their feathers. Lascivious then turned to his accomplices and spoke to them. “Do you have anything to add, you two?”

The one to the right stepped up and spoke with his old English accent shining through, “My name is Lord Devin and I can report that with my keen eyes and sense of geography, the older one is somewhere in the desert of California, for I followed his car from whence it left his dwelling most of the way, however, I was chased away by a very vulgar red hawk who refused to listen to what I tried to say,” and he ruffled his feathers as if he had been humiliated.

Lascivious looked at him, his neck bent to the side, with an ‘I can’t believe you’re even here’ look on his face, turned back to the Dark Lord to speak. “My Lord, Lourdes will return soon I’m sure, however, we can fly out to this desert with Devin here to guide us.”

“It’s Lord Devin to you, if you please,” the crow corrected the leader quietly from his back in a whisper.

A short pause followed, then the Dark Lord finally spoke, turning around to face them this time, his hand pointing out to them to give credence to his words. "I want David, the older one, located tonight, and report given to me as soon as he is found. Dillon is to be assigned one of you to watch him. If there is any suspicious or emotional activity with the younger, you are to immediately report to me, do-not-waste-time in doing so, for his weakness shall be my gain, understood?" He stopped for a second to notice all three crows looking up at him with their necks bent or cocked to the side, they all glanced at each other. Sighing loudly he continued with more details, speaking slowly and emphasizing each word, "If Dillon is sorrowful and he appears to you as if he would inflict self-harm, or if he is in jeopardy at school with this other boy you spoke of, I am to know immediately."

The crows all suddenly nodded in agreement and understanding as they looked at each other and then up to the Dark Lord.

"Time wasted in this matter will directly affect your time as dark, little, feathered creatures. Do you understand my instructions?"

The crows all bowed and answered simultaneously, "Yes, my Lord," then turned to leave.

Lascivious was asked to remain briefly, and as he stood there looking up at the Dark Lord, he listened to instructions to watch out for Esmeralda in the Living World, her activity there only a threat after nightfall, and he was to make sure that if she entered the Smith's dwelling, the Dark Lord was to be notified immediately. He placed Lascivious on Dillon and Esmeralda watch, which, after he explained the importance of the other crows finding David, he also made sure Lascivious was aware that he would not only be given his body back in prime form were he to be successful, but he could come across a nice reward for any extra work he provided. "For you are my eyes when I cannot see the living, the pure of heart, and with this little soul you are protecting, you will need to be keen in your watch."

Lascivious bowed and trembled in ecstasy at the thought that he could suddenly become important, "As you wish my Lord."

Alone again in the meeting hall, sitting at his seat in the middle of one of the half tables, Azmodeus contemplated what he had witnessed earlier that night. The smell of Jasmine was undeniably evident in the boy's room, and he was impressed by his stroke of good luck in finding this younger soul suddenly not so pure, contemplating the taking of his own life, right there in the room. Oh, the agony of being innocent and pure, then losing it so suddenly. He was

impressed by the boy's spirit and especially his heart; he sensed it was injured, probably or hopefully beyond repair. *The way he was able to command light, very, very impressive; a living soul commanding a supernatural light source strong enough to send me back to the safety of the closet, at least for now anyway, is unheard of. I am more than entertained by these two humans, surprised even. And to think, I am so very rarely impressed...*

He also felt something else too, which gave him much pleasure. He felt this soul's lack of confidence, such a powerful soul in a young body without the strength to furnish it with any sense of authority. *He cowers down at just the littlest of fear.*

His thoughts drifted to David again. *Once I establish where the little animal is located, I can both pay him a visit and convince him to follow me.* Smiling, he sat back and tried to remember David's face. *He is forced to serve time up above, when he could be here, serving time for the simple pleasure of being my shadow...where could he be?*

Realizing that at least David's no show two nights ago was probably the work of the younger brother and not his resistance or changed mind at least made him feel better about himself. It secretly disturbed the Dark Lord to think at the time, he could feel such rejection from a simple human. He frowned now at the thought. He surely did not like the way the evening had transpired.

Esmeralda entered the room gracefully as she always does with her lips a very dark red and her cheeks a nice pink hue. She looked refreshed and renewed after feeding above in the human playground as she stood there before him, posed in her long green evening gown. It was his personal favorite because it clung to every curve and the bodice line came up to her neck, however the back of the gown plummeted down her backside, exposing her flesh down to just below the base of her spine.

She knew Azmodeus enjoyed the human back; it was his favorite body feature, besides the face and eyes of course. She was working her best features to finish off this evening, for she also knew he had been forlorn these last two nights, and after having a nice dinner with him last night under candlelight with nothing to disturb them, she made sure to give him her shoulder to lean on. Although he hadn't used her services yet, she was sure tonight he'd break down under the weight of her beauty. He had almost given in and she could feel him weakening under her gaze last night, but he was a strong deity for a reason and she had had all the time in the Underworld to seduce him until now.

As his personal witch, Esmeralda was finally in a position to do what she had secretly signed up to do by becoming his witch in the first place. The witchcraft only served to keep her in his service, but she knew it was just her way to get inside Nine and closer to him. Her dream of being the most clever, skilled witch in Madera, to outshine the others, was never her goal. Now, so close to his bedroom after ages of planning, she had to deal with two stupid humans instead. These brothers were no match for her, but their interference only made her expedite her plans, which also frustrated her greatly. The art of seduction should be carefully planned and plotted – a slow simmering poison – and yet Esmeralda was forced to speed up her devilish love potion.

As she approached the table, she lightly bowed her head and then smiled at him. He looked amazing as usual, in his black and red cloak he chose to wear over his black suit, his hair neatly pulled back, not a single strand out of place. He hardly ever settled down when he was in his home, always dressed like he could leave at any moment, and tonight, he still wore his evening coat, its extra material spilling over his chair, covering and shrouding him in blood red velvet. She absolutely loved that color. She smiled sheepishly. “My Lord, you sent for me. I apologize for my lateness, for tonight I felt I needed to have more than usual...the stress I’ve been under has weakened my vampire blood.” She smiled again and wiped the extra blood left over off her lower lip. He was sitting there, his left arm perched on the arm chair holding his staff as it glowed a dim white light. His fingers grazed and stroked the top of it, making a wonderful prism light display on the ceiling above him, while he stared at her.

Watching Azmodeus’ fingers glide along the crystal ball made Esmeralda shift her feet and stance. It was erotic. *How did he know I am into hands?* The witch blushed. “May I sit my Lord, for I am tired from the trip?” She brushed off the imaginary lint from her bodice then half-turned to check out the back of her dress for lint as well, allowing him to get a better look at her assets. It worked.

“That’s fine my dear, please sit yourself in any of these oversized seats, but be careful, for someone of your size and frame would likely fall in completely,” and he smiled slightly, still admiring her lower back.

She quickly turned around, smiling and thrilled to see him smile, even if it was quick, but to have him show that kind of amusement made her heart skip a beat. She walked over to the seat closest to him, and he pulled it out for her with a careless wave of his hand. She indeed slid

into it like a tiny doll. “What is it you desire from me tonight my great Lord?”

Azmodeus looked at her with newfound interest. It had been quite a long time since he felt desire, and he wasn't sure if now was the time to act on it, but his instinct forced him to. “I desire your company tonight my dear, for earlier this evening as the sun set, I visited the younger brother in his room and upon entering there to inspect him, and all I could think about was you... and your sweet scent.” He gently touched her temple, brushing a single ringlet of dark brown hair off her face, then he let his hand slide down to her chin, so that he could lightly rest his index finger and thumb there for a second or two while she held her breath.

Esmeralda blushed even more, making her already pink cheeks even pinker, and she felt her face heat up under his scrutiny. “My Lord,” she gushed, “I am flattered at your thinking of me in the Living world, but honestly, I wasn't in this young soul's room. I...” She found herself staring shamelessly at his mouth, his lips looked so strong. “I-I,” she began, feeling herself lose control under his direct gaze, his eyes magnetic and invading, she felt so warm and protected under his control.

“Yes, go on my dear, speak to me. Where were you tonight?” Softly spoken, he let his hand travel down to her right arm as it rested on the table. His fingers caressed her forearm, his thumb lightly stroking her skin. She shivered in unbelievable ecstasy as the intense cold shot up her body, escaping through her mouth. Ice began to form bright red where the remainder of blood traced her lower lip. She crossed her legs and brushed more invisible lint off her bodice with her free hand without thinking.

“I visited the younger one earlier at dusk, but I hadn't come to see him my Lord, honestly! My visit was for the older one, for I didn't know if he was gone for good...or just for the day,” and she paused and blinked twice, noticing him pull away from her so quickly. He leaned back in his chair, the same hand he had used to lightly stroke her arm now pulled away and drumming on the table with his fingers.

Esmeralda quickly regained composure and sat herself forward in the chair, so as to appear alluring, her chin resting on her right hand while her head spun. “My Lord, you had wanted information on,” she paused, as if saying the name David was too much for her to do at that moment, “Uh...his whereabouts, and since I needed to feed in a desperate way, I felt it was quicker to come through the portal and...check on him at the same time.” She smiled, realizing she had probably said way too much.

He sat there silent for five minutes while she dared not say another word or move, for it was his turn. Finally he spoke, casually but slightly irritated, choosing not to directly look at her. “I would think that as a vampire, you are not allowed to step foot in a house, or a bedroom no less, unless you have permission. *Do you have permission? And if so, I don’t think I need to make myself clearer than I’ve already been? This younger one is intuitive and sensitive. If he senses you as a dark spirit in his room, he is bound to pull away and retreat into his religion,*” turning to her to look at her bright green eyes, he smiled and finished with “and if he did that my sweet, my chances of getting to him would be slim...and that would make me very, very *angry.*” He smiled until he spoke the last few words, then his smile disappeared and his eyes turned a sharp yellow, flickering for a second or two, then back to a paler version of the same. “So, my dear, beautiful vampire witch, as hungry as you can be when you visit the world of the living humans, do not interfere with my plans unless I command you to, for there would be too much at stake for you to lose should you tamper with what I’ve been working for.” *Only I can scare him to me...not ever will that be you and when he does come to me, jaded and cast down from his God for sins he will eventually commit as he copes without his brother’s presence and protection, I will be the one there to save him. Both he and his brother will belong to me. I alone will be their god.*

“Yes, my Lord, that makes perfect sense. You are brilliant,” and she breathed out the last word with her hand over her chest again.

They walked into the dining room and ate dinner together that night, not because he wanted to, for his desire for her had quickly dissipated, but because he wanted to watch her closely, to scrutinize her words, her face, her reactions, and to possibly relieve her mind of any worry that he would choose a mere human over her iridescent female beauty. It was so easy to seduce and convince the weaker sex that they matter most, he thought as he sipped his wine, while watching her drink hers way too fast, smiling at him as she swayed in her seat.

I need a challenge, Azmodeus thought as he longingly glanced up to the ceiling of his dining hall while she talked endlessly about nothing in particular.

Chapter Twelve

School Boy Crushes

David woke up in a cold sweat, having just recovered from his dream of hell fire and his brother's fiery demise. It was the official start of his tour of duty at The Disciples and he couldn't help but want to die right then and there. The other two roommates were already out of bed and getting dressed. David rolled back over towards the wall and sulked. His prayer didn't come true last night. He had hoped for one of two things to happen: he'd get swallowed up in flame after lighting a cigarette and torching the hellhole he was now in and everyone with him, or he'd get to escape in a dream state. He didn't dream travel at all - two nights in a row now with nothing going on anywhere else in the other world, made him a little nervous. *Just a fucking nightmare...that's all I get for being here. No dream travel, no third class ticket outta town for the night...just a crappy bunk bed and three stupid roommates—*

“Come on David, rise and shine,” Jose spoke as he walked over, his heavy Spanish accent sounding funny and different this time of day. David decided to play along and get up, for if it had been Jimmy talking, he would have told him to jump out the window and then rolled back over.

He slowly, purposefully got dressed, wearing the same pants but a new shirt, the same style and color – white. He yawned as he thought of his wardrobe and started to put on his shoes, sitting on his bed. Jimmy and Jose stood at the door and talked, apparently waiting for him. He looked up mid-shoe tying, his facial expression matching his voice - annoyed. “Umm, yeah, you can go...I'll find my way to the cafeteria just fine, I promise.” He faked a quick smile and finished his first shoe slowly.

“No way, Jose! We'll wait for you.” Jose answered him, then laughed at his little joke while his hands rested on his hips in model pose. David couldn't help but notice Jose had a very fragile, feminine way about himself; the way he used his hands when he talked, the way he stood there, hands on his thrown out hip like he was posing on a runway, and especially, the way he always seemed to lick his lips whenever he spoke to anyone he really wanted to speak to, like the new roommate. David couldn't help but fall instantly amused at this activity and reveled in the potential entertainment in store with Jose as a roommate. Yep, funny guy, he decided, as he looked up at Jose's determined face, his hip swung way out to the side. “Sure thing, chief, you got it, but I need to stop at the little boy's room first to go wee-wee.” He winked at Jose which

stirred up visible emotion and finished getting ready.

The bathroom was busy, with four boys in line waiting to use the occupied urinals. David walked up and stood there to wait. Jose showed up and stood next to him smiling and saying good morning to the others. He's so animated, David thought. *I think I might like this little she-boy. He can be my shadow for awhile, or for an hour; whichever comes first.*

After a few minutes of small talk with Jose, while keeping a straight face, David got in and walked over to a urinal. He looked back to make sure Jose hadn't followed him, not that he would have been surprised if the he-princess was right there at his shoulder, peering down and watching his stream.

Luckily for Jose, he stood at the door and continued to talk to David about what they served for breakfast and what he would get to eat if he was a new student. His rambling on gave away his nervousness immediately, but David didn't identify or make it easier on him. He wanted to enjoy the awkwardness in heavy Spanish accent for as long as he could. It was better than radio.

"Don't worry, I'll show you what's good. The pancakes are way too fattening, but the waffles are low-fat...go figure, you know?" Jose continued the chatter at a fast clip while David drained himself, sighing loudly a couple of times and then surprising himself by letting a little chuckle escape after hearing Jose discuss with another queenie friend of his who'd just showed up why using too much hair gel was "Not good for anybody – why? Because you need to let them run their fingers through your hairs and not get them stuck like that...geez, Louise."

They walked to the cafeteria with Jimmy and several of his groupies. They all introduced themselves to David again, but he didn't care, nor could he recall names of any of the other kids at his school, minus his roommates and Joel and Stewart, both he had not seen since chapel yesterday. *They must be on the second floor dorm. That sucks, but oh well, didn't want to know anyone here but Jose my fashion advisor-slash-gay roommate anyway.*

The cafeteria was fairly busy, with all the grades present and accounted for, everybody either laughing, or sulking and new to the school, David however, was simple existing, giving everyone except Jose the silent, but deadly 'don't talk to me' look. The combination seemed to work for the time being. Lance walked into the expansive cafeteria as they all sat down, and Jose noticed immediately, jumping up on his bench and waving his arms like a screaming queen. "Lance! Lance! Here! Over here!"

David went to grab his tray to move, but Jimmy stood up. “No way, David, you need to eat with us and talk to Lance. That was the deal. The two of you need to make up.” Jimmy sat on David’s right side, while Jose sat on his left. *No way*, David thought, and he rose.

“David? Where are you *going*?” Jose looked up with a very sad, almost Dillon-like stare, forcing him to stop and pause for a second.

“I don’t want to eat with that insane housekeeper. Besides, I need to branch out and meet new converters - I mean Disciples of God - right Jimmy?” He turned and returned the glare from Jimmy, who was once again painfully pushing his glasses back up his nose while trying to think of a quip worthy of God’s defense.

“Please don’t? Sit...please, you sit down...right here....” Jose’s maternal side kicked into full overdrive to the point of comedy. “Lance will sit on my left side - it’s not my nicest side - but that don’t matter right now, so sit please,” and he patted the wooden bench where David’s bum was seconds ago, and said sweetly while he rubbed in a slightly disturbing way, “Come on, please sit, come, sit...please, come on...sit.” It was too funny to pass up, so David decided to sit. The kid was after all, walking entertainment.

Lance came over and grimaced when he saw David sit back down, while Jose suddenly beamed with joy, as he patted the other side of the bench to tell Lance repeatedly to come sit down. Lance sat down and suddenly the table was silent, as well as all the surrounding tables. David looked around perplexed. *Do these idiots have nothing else going on?*

All eyes on David, then Lance then David again. It was a tennis match of eye playing. Pastor Sampson walked in and everybody stood up except David, who was nudged several times by Jimmy so that when he finally stood up slowly he was the only one standing while everybody else in the room was sitting back down. He quickly sat and chose to ignore Jimmy’s glare, so he turned his head and looked at Jose and winked. Jose beamed in response and sat up very straight, giving David the impression he was trying to stick out his imaginary breasts front and center.

Lance leaned over and met David’s eyes, shooting him his own version of a silent look to kill. David mouthed a silent ‘How’s your throat?’ and rubbed his own. Jose began to rub each of their shoulders lightly as he smiled nervously between his two roommates. Once again, David thought, more comedy.

Pastor Sampson signaled the morning meal prayer and everyone bowed their heads, while

David took a bite of his bacon.

When they finished their prayer, he was licking his fingers, smiling at the boys sitting across from him at the table. They didn't seem very happy at all, which made him smile even more.

"You do that again, David, and I will call you out in front of everyone here while my dad is reciting the prayer - got that?" Jimmy whispered harshly at David's shoulder, while he looked on, taking another strip of bacon to eat.

"Promise?" David answered hopefully, glancing over at him briefly, then taking another bite of his bacon. "Mmm, Mmm, this bacon tastes so good! I just love pig." Then turning to his nemesis, he whispered, "Did Jesus love bacon too? Did he sacrifice pigs to God back in the day only to cook 'em all for breakfast afterward? Good Ol' Testament bacon..."

Jimmy turned beat red and fumed, for once again he was unable to respond fast enough.

After finishing breakfast, David rose first in the group and walked his untouched carton of milk over and placed it next to Lance, then leaned in and said, "I hear you girls need your extra calcium during this time of month, so here you go," and even after Lance quipped back with, "I'll show your mouth who the girl is tonight," David continued to walk out of the hall, not looking back. He could hear Jose yelling, "David! Don't be mad! Lance is just joking - right? You're joking right?" Jose pulled on Lance's shirt, trying to get him to break his angry stare off David's back as he watched him leave, while David scratched the back of his head with his right hand, so that his middle finger was sticking straight up.

Walking outside to get away from the crowd of noise and useless breakfast chatter, David looked up at the rising sun and the sky, a beautiful crisp bluish-purple with not a cloud visible. Funny, he thought, but he'd never really paid much attention to the morning sun. It always hurt his eyes and brought his mood down to a deeper boil whenever Dillon or anyone else for that matter, tried to admire the weather during the daylight hours. It was a horrible way to start a cheesy conversation.

Being out here in the middle of forgotten land, he couldn't help but notice the beauty of what was above him as much as it pained him to do so. He hated to be wrong, but there truly was nothing more brilliant than an early morning desert landscape. He sighed and turned away from it all to look at the sun baked ground, not wanting to think about what or why he had chosen to live so guardedly and cynically. It just didn't seem to matter anymore, he thought. He

couldn't live near his brother right now, and he certainly couldn't live without him where he wanted to go. *So what the hell am I supposed to do? Just admire the sky and the rising sun, you idiot.*

Looking around the horizon from the middle of the complex, David suddenly saw two crows circling way above his head, one chasing the other. They look like they're playing, he thought. It was nice to see something he was familiar with, something to remind him of his previous existence. "Are you keeping an eye on my brother too?" he whispered to the sky. Just then, he went to walk forward and smacked right into Joel, who was waiting for him there and watching him talk to the crows.

"Hey, watch out there 'he who talks with birds! That would be your Indian name if we were Indian, you know."

David felt his ears turn red, it was a good thing his hair covered them. "Uh, yeah didn't realize I had a stalker already." He recovered from his own harsh comment with a wicked smile.

Joel nodded back confidently and said, "Yeah, well, someone's gotta do it, so I signed up. It's not bad though, the hours are tough, but the pay's real good." He started walking away as he said the last few words over his shoulder, which made David laugh, so he stopped and turned around, deciding he had permission to continue. "You didn't see me toast to you with my milk carton during Morning Prayer, did you?" He waited, smiling, but no response. "I thought that was so fuckin' bold of you, so I had to silently join in, and I got shit for it too, but who cares? I love that you don't fuckin' care."

David half-listened, trying not to give this blue-haired freak the time of day, but something drew him in as he fought it with all his antisocial might. So he closed his eyes and opened them, concentrating hard on the stranger standing before him, talking and throwing his arms up but not making a sound David could register. Joel's body faded briefly, a shadow of a shimmer appeared, then faded. He then leaned in, saying quietly as he interrupted Joel mid-rant, "Remember what I said yesterday about not caring to know anyone? Well...I changed my mind. I'll consider you important enough to know, so don't disappoint." He lightly pushed Joel's shoulder back, making him smile shyly.

Joel, with his obnoxious blue hair spiked to one point on his head, didn't even notice the insult he was so giddy. They walked across the courtyard, heading for class, with Stewart calling after them to wait.

The morning was painful, with three subjects crammed into one period - English, History and Math. Joel had to immediately go to the bathroom upon first entering the multidisciplinary room, to wet and calm down his spiked hair. Professor Jenkins, although cooler than any of the other professors, had to draw the line somewhere. Joel got up and silently complied, giving David the impression he had to do that frequently.

At the end of the morning period, David got up to go outside quickly, but not before he was met by a group of five boys standing in the aisle, blocking his way. Two of the five there were the ones sitting across from him at breakfast this morning. He walked right up to the one he thought was the leader and spoke harshly. "Move."

The oversized oaf standing directly in front of him didn't move, and stood a full head taller, and about seventy five pounds heavier, with plenty of body hair popping out from under his stained white shirt and collar. As a matter of fact, David noticed this kid was barely tucked into his uniform at all. He looked like a giant in baby clothing.

The strange beastly teen smiled wickedly, his hairy arms across his chest, and leaned in to speak. His voice was almost comical in its high pitched tone, which made David grin immediately. "We're gonna make you pay for disrespecting the pastor this morning. Jimmy hasn't done a good job teaching you manners, new boy. I will though. You'll get to know me better, later," and he winked and moved backward a step, smirking. David silently watched him go, as the others all followed their leader. The anger he suddenly felt darkened the room and he grabbed the nearest chair to steady himself.

"What the hell was that all about?" He could hear Joel's voice in the distant background once again, just like this morning, and this time he turned to acknowledge him standing there nearby.

"Do my eyes look different?" David breathed out, serious for the first time in a long time and actually interested in something worth knowing.

"Hell no - why - do mine?" Joel pulled his lower eye lids down to show him his blood shot eyeballs and lids. David couldn't help but smile at the 'in your face' comedy this new guy gave him consistently. Did he actually like him? He turned to walk as Joel nudged him forward with a quick, "Come on, we need to get out of this cage for at least a few minutes, I'm dying of boredom, if that's even possible."

They walked outside and sat on the lawn. The sun was shining down and it was already

hot. David wanted Southern California autumn weather again, for he loved to wear his coat.

“So, where are you from and what do you like to do, besides piss people off for the most part?” Joel started, but before David could answer, he asked another question, “What got you here - let me guess - did you burn a Bible?” He sat there waiting for the new guy’s story, as he played with a blade of grass like it was a cigarette, twirling it between his lips as he stared. He had spent half the night thinking about what made this one tick, so much so, he couldn’t wait to see him again today. He couldn’t remember the last time he cared to see another person this much, his giddiness almost uncontrolled as he studied every inch of this newcomer’s face. He also knew down to his core, that he would follow this guy to the ends of the Earth, and he didn’t even know his last name.

David leaned back, his weight supported by his elbows and smiled, not wanting to talk, but realizing at the same time, he had opened himself up for these two to come in close. And he couldn’t help but notice how Joel was looking at him – no, David thought, admiring him was more like it. He took a deep breath in and blew out slowly, trying not to notice how his body was responding right now against his wishes to Joel’s lustful inspection.

Letting him into my world is going to be a mistake, David thought quickly but what bothered him more was his inability to look Joel directly in the eye. He had a sinking suspicion Joel would know his secrets if he did. Instead he looked away as he spoke. “Well, gee...guys, my life reads like a sci-fi novel, and to sum it up in a short fifteen minute break would just leave you two hanging, so let’s just keep that mystery alive for later, okay? However, I will tell you I am from Oceanside, California, and I hate people in general...the end. Oh, and p.s., I’d never burn a Bible to spite God - for that, I burn hymnals. I see it as a subtle clue to ban church singing. Do you think He’ll get the hint?”

Stewart laughed. “I’ll agree with that last comment!”

Giving Stewart a glance of frustration, Joel turned to David and replied quickly with confidence. *What is it with confident people? First Julie, now this Joel character here...damn it his stare is strong, I can feel his eyes pierce my brain...*

“Well, I need to know who I’m hanging with, so don’t keep me in the dark for too long. I won’t take rejection twice, and after seeing how well you’ve managed to make friends here,” he looked over at the gang of Neanderthals from earlier with a smirk on his face, “I think you might want to invest in some allies.”

David shrugged his shoulders and looked down, turning on his side to face the two boys, who were both now waiting on his every word. “I can take care of myself, so don’t think I need you for protection, however, I can also tell you that I like the way you handle yourselves, and I don’t mind being around you. So...let’s just leave it at that.”

And they both did, first looking at each other and then nodding in silent agreement.

Better they don’t know. David laid there and listened to Joel and Stewart take turns discussing themselves, having given them just enough room to sit and invite themselves into his world. He sat there and pretended to listen all the while he couldn’t get his mind off Dillon. The dream he had was disturbing, gnawing at him from just below the surface. This sudden all-knowing fear that once again found its way into his chest last night before he went to bed, had awakened him several times, and he found it more than odd that every time he did wake up, he had to fight the urge to get up and walk over to the cubbies on the opposing wall.

He also had a sinking suspicion the fear was coming from his little brother, and he felt all morning long an urgency to see him, just to make sure he was okay. No such luck being stuck in this hell on earth, he thought, as he resolved to rip up some more grass.

Stewart started laughing. “David! Save some grass for lunchtime! That shit’s valuable out here!” Right then a hand grabbed at Stewart’s collar and yanked him up to a standing position, like a dog misbehaving. He gasped as he reached up for his throat, his face suddenly red. The other two jumped back, both startled.

“Come with me son! You know the rules!” The guard escorted Stewart to the front administration building, his feet barely touching the ground as he tried not to fall down, while all the kids silently watched.

Suddenly Carl, the hairy armed, high pitched bully from earlier, yelled out at Stewart in his high pitched cartoon voice. “Naughty, naughty potty mouth! You shouldn’t say bad words!” He turned to David to meet eyes and smiled wickedly again, sticking out his tongue like a heavy metal rocker.

Joel looked tentatively over at Carl, then back at David as he slowly shook his head. “Dude, he really digs you...and it’s kinda freaking me out.” he started laughing softly, then finished with, “My advice to you would be to *never* shower *a-lone* while you serve your time here. Find a shower buddy – I’m available, by the way - and you might also want to invest in some soap on a rope...I have some you could borrow...”

David ignored the comment and the invitation, much to Joel's disappointment and instead asked, "So, they were just waiting there in the background for one of us to curse, so that they could just grab and go? Is that right?" He couldn't believe how perfectly timed the staff intervention was and he took a few seconds to scope the area around them, making eye contact with most of the guards there as he did so.

Joel took the moment to lighten the mood again and it worked. "Yeah, they sorta crack down on the cursing around here...go figure right? I mean it's not like it's a religious school or something?" They both smiled at the sarcasm and David couldn't help but make eye contact now as he watched Joel sun bathe, sprawled out on the grass, his homosexual shower joke having lightened the mood earlier and now here he was, cracking more jokes. Sighing, David felt resigned to let his guard down, ignoring for the first time, that loud voice in his head screaming at him not to.

"So, what'll happen to poor Stewart?" The air around them suddenly more interesting to David, thanks to Stewart's departure and their sudden intimacy. He found himself lying down next to Joel to listen to his explanation.

"Oh, he'll get to spend the rest of the morning discussing his personal relationship with the Lord and how it's in jeopardy with Pastor Sampson – who inadvertently believes he's the Lord - then he'll have mess hall duty at lunch time...poor, stupid...little soul."

Jimmy walked over. "Well David, did you see that? That's what happens when you talk that way...so I suggest you watch out because you could be next." He stood there looking down at the boys, his hands on his waist trying to act tall.

Jose stood behind him partly hidden, and waved a pageant-like wave at David, appearing flustered to see them lying together on the lawn without him. "Hi David, how are you?" He whispered Marilyn Monroe style, hand half covering his mouth.

David sat up quickly and looked up at Jose amused, smiling briefly. Joel answered him, speaking for both of them. "Just shut your Christian pie hole Jimmy Dean. We aren't interested in listening to one of your 'We need a lobotomy speeches' k?"

"You'd better watch out Joel, or you'll be next." Jimmy turned to leave, ignoring Joel's portrayal of being scared, pretending to bite his fingertips and saying quietly, "I'm soooo scared."

Jose whispered, "Bye Dave, see you later," with his hand blocking his mouth so that

Jimmy couldn't see, then he ran after him, his hands out at his sides. They both watched him run.

"Don't ask," David said quietly and Joel laughed sweetly, then rolled over on his back to sun bathe again.

Lunch came and went quickly enough and David had a rather good time watching and listening to Joel give him the scoop on several of the other students at prison school. He was great at summarizing people quickly, in less than a handful of words - raw and witty that was Joel.

He also enjoyed listening to Joel's voice. It reminded him of how Dillon would sound if he had any evidence of confidence in his spoken words. He thought about how that one particular personality trait - probably the one human characteristic he despised the most in other people - happened to be a large part of what made up his younger brother. If he and Dillon were indeed connected on some spiritual level, like he now believed they were, then that lack of quality was somehow a reflection on him as well.

No, can't be, he thought. Dillon and I, although connected, are completely opposite, so it actually makes sense that he is the way he is, passive and insecure, and I'm a giant, self-confident asshole. Sighing quietly, he thought he wouldn't change Dillon anyway, insecurities and lack of everything else confident, although it sure bugged the hell out of him.

He thought all this as he sat on the lawn and listened to Joel send everyone who would wander over to their section of the grass away with harsh, almost cursing words dipped in sarcasm. He makes a great gatekeeper, David thought, while playing and chewing on a blade of grass, smiling up at the poor boys that were sent away, some individually, others in groups. Finally, a short, stocky boy with an extreme military style haircut, pale features and chubby red cheeks walked over and smiled at Joel. He appeared to be suffering from the desert heat in autumn. "Hey Joel, what's up? Who's your new friend?"

Joel smirked and answered him, "Hey Sam, haven't seen you in a while, heard you were locked up...true?"

At the almost invitation, Sam came over and sat down on the grass across from Joel and David, both watching him. "Uh, yeah, for a couple of days...I lost track...I'm Sam, who are you?" He was slow to talk and rubbed the top of his head a lot, which distracted David, making him itch just watching the kid go at it.

He chose not to answer, but glanced at Joel instead, who took the opportunity to introduce him. “Yeah, Sam, this is David, uh...he’s new,” and without seeming all that interested, Joel motioned his hand from David to Sam, then back again.

“Hey,” Sam muttered, quickly looking down at the grass, then up to the sky to watch two crows fly in a circle.

David just continued to stare obnoxiously, thinking to himself that words weren’t necessary, not here at The Disciples, where excessive talking and purposeful listening only guaranteed an even speedier transformation down the road to group-imposed righteousness. Although he didn’t look the part, for all David knew Sam could be a spy. *I’m so bored! I’m actually making up drama to entertain myself. Isn’t there a mental health term for that sort of imagination?*

After lunch, they had independent study, and Joel and David both got permission to go to the library to check out books to read, since the two of them already finished their assigned work before anyone else, with David’s generous help of course.

When they got to the little library, it was empty, not even a librarian there to staff it, but considering where they were situated, David noticed a lot of the staff members were volunteers from the local church his parents had passed by as they drove to the school. He had remembered traveling by a very large church about ten miles back on the main road.

Cheap Labor...

Walking into the classroom converted into the library, basically with a half dozen small tables and miss-matched chairs situated around the room and shelves built and placed alongside all the walls, lined with books, the boys sauntered in, Joel already bored, and David appearing slightly amused. He walked over to the shelf labeled music and art, and rummaged through the books, taking out two for show, while Joel walked over to the magazine rack and picked through it, not finding anything of interest and sighing multiple times, for he hated to read and glancing over at his new friend, only wanted to talk and even more so, he wished he could just listen.

Joel finally settled on an Egyptian kings and queens history book with plenty of pictures that had been misfiled nearby. They both walked over to the table nearest them and sat down facing each other.

“So, how much time do we have here in ‘God’s Library of Appropriate Books’ before we have to go back?” David asked, lowering his book so that only his pretty blue eyes were visible

to Joel from across the table.

Smiling at the comment and the lovely image of him acting coy, Joel answered. “Yeah about an hour, but that was fifteen minutes ago, so...not long.”

“Great.”

Just then, the door opened and five boys walked in single file, with Carl in front. David, sitting with his back to the boys, didn't notice, but Joel looked up as they walked over and groaned, “Oh great! Here come the clowns.”

David glanced over his shoulder to watch them approach, then quickly looked back to his opened book, holding it out in front of him with both hands. *How'd they know I was craving violence?*

Carl spoke first, his high pitched squeal made both David and Joel chuckle simultaneously. “So, here you are! We've been looking for you for fifteen minutes.” As he said these words, he clasped his hands together, one a fist, the other opened handed, suddenly pissed over the boys' laughter and apparent lack of fear. “Thought I'd show you two girls those manners we discussed this morning.”

David still didn't look up at him, so Carl reached out and knocked the book he was reading out of his hands and across the table onto the floor.

Joel jumped out of his chair and starting yelling. “Leave us the fuck alone, you hairy ape and take your stinky ass tribe of monkeys with you!”

Before he could finish his assault of words, two of the boys standing beside Carl charged him, knocking him backward, so that all three of them toppled over his chair and fell over. Joel hit his head on the laminate flooring, while the other two landed on top of him, arms throwing punches left and right.

David sat there for a millisecond to watch the scene unfold. He felt as he watched the three boys fall, that they were moving in slow motion, their reactions delayed greatly, so that in the next second, he saw out of the far corner of his eye, Carl's arm come across in a fist at the side of his face. He instantly caught it with his left hand, twisting it easily at the wrist until he heard a pop, then slammed it on the table, pulling the boy's upper body down with it while Carl slowly screamed in pain. David then released his hold by smacking Carl in the nose with the back of his hand. He followed that with his right arm, hand in a fist hitting one of the boys coming up behind him square in the nose, knocking him backward over a nearby table.

During this brief episodic fight, David's movements were orchestrated with lightning speed, faster than the eye could register. He shot up and kicked Carl square in the gut, then in almost simultaneous motion, jumped up on one leg and kicked one of the books laying on the table's edge directly at the other kid who was still standing there behind Carl - the only one who wasn't fighting - as he was bending down to help Carl up. The book hit the smaller boy right in the nose. Blood shot everywhere.

In the next few orchestrated moves David was the only one to truly act and then react again to his own moves. The other boys were just not moving fast enough. He threw a round house kick at the boy he had hit earlier across the table, smacking him across the face, dodging a wild punch thrown by Carl with his strong right hand, while holding his injured left arm against his abdomen. Of course Carl's moves were too slow, and David quickly ducked, performing an impressively fast back flip over a chair, landing only to kick it shooting into Carl as he ran forward, hitting him in the knees and making him come crashing down. As he watched the big guy fall forward in slow motion like a tree, he took aim and kicked the chair that was sliding out and towards him right back into the boy's lunging body; the top of the wooden chair hit him square in the lower jaw as he landed on it, smacking his teeth together loudly and snapping his head back.

As Carl fell to the ground like a large sack of bricks, David ran over to help Joel, while the two boys who were with Carl both ran out of the room, one of them holding his nose, the other one slamming into another table, then tripping and falling over a chair.

One of the two boys was on Joel, punching him in the face as he held his arms up; the other one was getting up after being hit in the gut. He went to rise and head over when David quickly and without thinking, jumped up on the table in one leap, using it as a spring board, shooting off and kicking him in the face with the side of his shoe to send him spiraling into the bookcases near them. The boy slammed into the wall of books with such force, the five foot tall piece of furniture fell down on top of him as he hit the ground, his arms out just in time to save his face.

David turned and took two quick steps and he was pulling the kid off Joel by the back of his shirt without any effort, turning and throwing the larger boy like a rag doll into the bookcase right next to the one that had fallen. The boy slammed into it hard enough to break one of the wooden shelves with the impact from his body, and as he bounced off, before he could hit the

ground, David delivered a side kick to his right jaw like his head was a soccer ball and the bookcase was the goal. There was enough force behind the strong kick, it sent the boy's body back up into the bookcase, only to slide down it to the floor, falling forward to the ground to collapse there.

Running to Joel, who was trying to get up, without success, spitting up blood, his left eye turning color, and a cut across his eyebrow, he fell back down with David leaning over him. "Joel, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry." Stunned, David looked around the room at the mess he'd created, trying to remember what he had just done, for the moves were so foreign and everything so fast. "This is so...I feel like I'm dreaming."

"Owww, my head hurts..." Joel whispered, bringing his hands up to his face as if he were embarrassed to be seen like this. "Do I look like Frankenstein now or what?" His voice muffled as his lower lip became more pronounced. "Well, looks like you did alright," and raising his head up to see David, his swollen eye rapidly turning purple, the other eye squinting and concentrating on David's face. He continued. "Glad I could protect you...keep you safe." He laughed softly then grimaced in pain.

David looked down at him and felt badly. People started coming into the room and the noise level rose, but he sat there leaning over Joel, his eyes on him, not leaving. He could hear faint moaning from the others in the background, rolling around the floor near him. "I think you look just fine," David whispered softly, before he was yanked up by two guards and pulled away.

The Meeting

He sat in an empty classroom with one of the guards and waited. He was still in shock after witnessing how he handled the fight. *Where did I learn those moves? How did I know what to do? I've never fought like that before, but maybe I should fight more often?*

David's eyes began to twinkle and his face tried to form a wicked smile as he thought about the pain he had caused the others, but then he thought of Joel, his face a mess, and he shook his head no to answer himself. Joel was attractive, even with his blue hair, and his eyes, light brown, were always so mischievous looking; they made him not only interesting, but incredibly funny as well. David liked those qualities, and he wondered when he would see him again, for he realized at that moment, he already missed him. The sudden revelation made him squirm in his seat, his stomach suddenly in knots. *The fight was nothing, but missing Joel and realizing I have that emotion - that scares the shit out of me...*

He could hear commotion in the halls and he was sure after sitting there thinking about what had just happened, he'd be blamed for it all. *That's always been my luck.*

Professor Jenkins walked into the room and over to David's desk, sitting down at the one next to him. David glanced up at him as he approached, then quickly averted his eyes to look straight ahead.

"I heard that was some fight you performed, David. Have you any martial arts background your parents failed to inform us of?"

"No, none at all, have you?"

Professor Jenkins laughed lightly and glanced at the guard, who was shaking his head and smiling. "Uh, no, I do believe it isn't a prerequisite to teaching here, but after today," he paused then smiled at the guard again. David continued to sit there looking straight ahead, beginning to fume at the thought that the guard and his teacher were having way too much fun at his expense.

"So, care to explain to an unbiased ear what went down in the library today?"

"There's no such thing as 'an unbiased ear' Professor. You of all people should know that ___"

"Just tell me what happened today, David."

"They attacked me so I fought back. I was just defending myself as quickly as I could, so that I could help Joel, who had two guys on him, pounding his face in." He remained staring straight ahead at the empty chalkboard, trying not to let the anger swell up in him as he suddenly realized as if for the first time, what had just happened minutes before. "And by the way, it wasn't martial arts, I just moved faster than big Carl, that's all. My mother could kick his, uh... butt."

"Well, that's not the story I received from the other students," Professor Jenkins started, but was quickly interrupted a second time.

"Well doesn't surprise me, since there were five of them and only two of us, with my friend on the ground getting beat up, so I guess that breaks it down even more to just three against one." He spoke quickly, trying to conceal his frustration, while doing his usual, defending himself yet again for a fight he didn't start.

"You know what, David? I find it interesting to note that you are the only one - the-only-one - out of seven kids who were all fighting, to appear not hurt. Did you receive any injuries at all?" He leaned forward to better hear the response.

“No.”

Laughing in mock shock, he continued. “Well, that’s going to be pretty hard to convince a jury of your peers that you were the innocent one, especially here at this school. We preach non violence, like Jesus did so long ago. And,” he saw David turn his way to argue, so he put his hand out to hush him. “Even if you aren’t of the Christian faith, there are several other prominent and well-known world leaders who preached the same. Take Gandhi for instance. He preached that violence never solved anything, teaching instead that every living creature deserved to exist in harmony with nature. He believed all forms of life were equally valuable and worthy of respect. He also preached acceptance and respect for others.” He continued his lecture, but changed the subject as David smirked.

“Jesus died on the cross and suffered tremendous violence, for the sins of others. He tolerated violence, but he never proposed it, never considered it a solution. He died for your sins and forgiveness, and furthermore, he died for you to make the mistakes you make every day, knowing that someday you will ask for forgiveness and when you do, it will already be paid for you.”

“No, thanks, I’ll stick with my own religion.” David remained looking forward.

“And what religion would that be?”

“Look, I don’t need any of this, and I didn’t ask for any of it either. Joel and I were sitting at a table reading during independent study, when Carl and his four gangsters came in, walked over, and started harassing us. He knocked my book I was reading out of my hands and Joel stood up and said something to the extent of ‘leave us alone’ and two of Carl’s buddies jumped him, and as you can see by his face, they cleaned him up. As for me, I defended myself when Carl reached out to try to touch my face with his fist, because although you may not believe it, I don’t preach violence when I am about ready to get my butt kicked, and even if I had the entire world on my shoulders waiting to receive forgiveness for my suffering, I wouldn’t allow it. And furthermore,” turning to look at the professor to stress his words. “I never asked Jesus to allow himself to get attacked, to suffer and be killed willingly on my behalf.” Sitting there, looking straight ahead again, he wanted desperately to open up, but the voice in his head screamed at him not too. And it was so loud.

“I’m sorry David. I’m sorry you have had a rough life. I’m sorry you feel as though you aren’t worthy of Jesus’ love.”

He made the mistake of glancing over and seeing eyes looking soft and understanding, something he wasn't used to seeing, so he quickly looked forward again. "I don't recall my refusing to be saved was an indication I felt too unworthy. You read too much into everything, Professor."

"I can tell you have been through some rough stuff, and naturally you have built up some fairly strong defense mechanisms...do you know what that last term means?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good, I should have known you would. I've seen your school transcripts, very impressive grades...all A's from the beginning. Most of the boys I meet are rebels who choose not to educate themselves, however you're not like most boys. Most kids your age hide behind the violence, the drugs and the crime, as a means of shielding themselves from the truth. A good Christian education can show you the truth, however once again, in your case, as well as a few others I've had the pleasure to come across and meet in this job, education has not been the issue.

Being the son of a pastor, you can probably recite scripture and its meaning better than me, but you choose to hide from it, from what you already know is true. You already know what Jesus has done for you, yet you look away. You know something? Probably the hardest part about this job is spreading the gospel to the boys who come here, because not only do they not want to listen, but they also don't know it and fear of the unknown keeps them at bay, until they finally let their guard down and begin to trust. Most of these boys have so many defense mechanisms in place - they've forgotten how to trust. So they turn to the drugs to numb themselves, and the violence becomes their weapon and their voice, they use to leech out all the anger they have brewing in them. The crime unfortunately, is mostly the result of the drugs and the violence, although it can be a drug too. But you're too smart and educated to hide behind the drugs and the crime because you know those things will hurt you in the long run. Violence on the other hand, that seems to be the card you play, and it can hurt you just as much, if not more than the other downfalls. You have all this anger in you - I sense it - and violence seems to be your release. After today, I can see you've also gotten quite good at it," and leaning over towards David, he said quietly and discreetly, "Look, I'm not a big fan of Carl's and I know as well as Pastor Sampson, that this boy has a long track record of fighting and picking fights as well."

David turned to him and ended the Professor's sentence with "Picking fights in the name

of Jesus?”

“That’s right!” The Professor smiled. “So, I’m sure your story makes sense and can hold water against him, but the other kids don’t have track records, and they were all taken separately into rooms, each confessing to the same story.”

“Really? And what story would that be?” He looked forward again.

“Well...basically that you were disrespectful at breakfast this morning during prayer by eating your food while the blessing was being performed by Pastor Sampson, and the boys all felt that they needed to come to you to talk about how much your actions upset them, since they sat across from you at your table.”

David laughed softly and answered with, “Right, okay.”

Professor Jenkins continued. “Carl and his friends, well mostly his friends since Carl’s in pretty poor shape, all said they came to the library to talk to you about it, but you wouldn’t look at them, and instead ignored them, so Carl knocked your book out of your hands to get your attention. Joel jumped up at them and said some rude comments which I won’t repeat since you were there, and they started fighting. Carl went to grab your shirt to get you to look at him, but you reached out and grabbed his arm instead, twisting it hard enough to break both bones and dislocate his elbow at the same time. He also managed to lose both his front teeth and it looks like he may have broken his lower jaw. Would you like to hear the rest of the injury report?” His voice became stern for the first time since they started talking.

“Sure, why not? I guess I should know what my charges will be.”

“Okay, sure. Danny probably has a broken jaw as well, where you had kicked him, and he has multiple rib fractures and his left hand is broken from bracing the bookcase that had fallen on him, thanks to you of course. Thomas suffered a concussion after he was slammed into the other bookcase and has a dislocated jaw, so as you can imagine, the pain he’s in couldn’t be any worse. You already know the extent of Carl’s injuries however the two boys with him also suffered. One received a broken nose, a clean break across the bridge, I believe, and the other one lost one of his front teeth and has a bruised jaw, possibly broken as well, which brings me to my next topic of discussion: Your strength. It is beyond shocking to see how someone of your average size, without lifting weights or taking martial arts could inflict so much physical damage on so many others? I don’t have an answer, but I think you do. Care to share?” And he watched David with a look of suspicion mixed with awe.

“Share? Share what? I defended myself against a gang of bullies, the leader being someone who already has a track record for this sort of behavior. You, yourself openly admitted he’s not your favorite person, and instead of getting praised for having the ability to defend myself, I get asked how I managed to defend myself *so well*? Why? You think because the odds are too many to not be in my favor, making me a monster not because I defended myself, but because I defended myself too well? Please, with no disrespect Professor, you and I both know your argument is just too ludicrous to begin to discuss, so I’ll just say, no, I don’t know how I managed to inflict so much damage. Maybe, you need to look at this particular gang of bullies and decide whether or not they just simply suck at fighting? I simply defended myself and Joel for that matter. However, back to the story as you describe it, I will say, I find it hard to believe Carl was going to grab my shirt like he told you he was, when his hand was shaped in a fist.” And ending his speech looking over at the professor, David calmly leaned back in the desk and shook his head. “What about Joel? How’s Joel doing?” He changed the subject, concern on his face for the first time ever. Marty looked taken aback.

“Joel has the beginnings of a black eye, a laceration requiring three stitches over the same eye and a swollen lower lip, although I’m sure he’ll be back to being the spiteful, sharp-tongued, goofy clown I know him to be. He’s spending the night in the school infirmary, along with Kyle, the one who suffered the broken nose. The others are at the hospital...and considering he had two boys on him taking turns using his face for target practice, he actually didn’t suffer too many injuries, at least no broken bones. I was surprised, but then again, he didn’t get hit by you.” He paused for a second, watching David look down at the desk with a sad look on his face, his mouth in a frown.

“Yeah, well, they didn’t get much time with him...I saw to that...unfortunately I still wasn’t fast enough.”

Professor Jenkins watched David in awe for a few seconds, trying desperately to figure him out, then cleared his throat and decided a change of subject might be good. “So, you mentioned earlier that you had your own religion. Would you mind talking about that? We have a few minutes before I take you over to see the pastor?” He tried not to sound like he was prying, but it instead sounded like chit-chat, and that wasn’t any better.

“Yes, I would mind talking about it, because suddenly I have the impression our conversation thus far will be repeated to ‘the big guy,’ and I think unless I speak to a lawyer real

soon, I'm already screwed...so I guess I'll have to pass on the rest of our little 'share and tell' session." He continued to look ahead, which started to frustrate Professor Jenkins.

"You don't make much eye contact do you? I mean, you barely give people the impression you're even here. You tease them by occasionally looking at them—actually you just glance at them long enough to give the impression you're even remotely interested in what they have to say, when in reality, you're always somewhere else or maybe just bored. Is that not true?" He sat at the desk sitting straight up in his chair, leaning towards David and trying hard to get his attention.

David continued looking ahead, but answered with, "Sounds like someone's feelings might be hurt. Shall we pray for your bruised ego, Professor?"

Marty laughed out loud, way too loud, and he then slowly got up, leaning his arm on the back of David's chair and bending forward, he whispered. "Nice way to switch the heat Dave. I can appreciate how smoothly you can dodge the issue. I also think you've had years of practice at it, but I'm not giving up on you, young man, now let's go see the pastor."

David didn't speak while they walked over to Pastor Sampson's office in the main building. They passed several kids walking in the hallway. With all their staring and whispering, David was used to it by now and chose not to make eye contact with anyone. When they got to Pastor Sampson's office, he was on the phone, so he motioned them both to sit down across from his desk. They did, quietly.

"Yes, yes, he's fine, I assure you, however, he is in big trouble for assaulting five other students in the library, so I will tell you now that he won't be available for a weekend visit, being already Thursday and all." Looking over at David as he was sitting down, Pastor Sampson started to turn around in his seat so that his back was to them. David jumped up and ran to the pastor's chair, swinging him around in it harshly.

"Security! I need security in here!" Pastor Sampson lurched backward, almost falling over the back of his oversized chair while Professor Jenkins yelled out the opened door as he tried to grab David.

"Mother!" David went to grab the phone, but the pastor pulled it away from him. "It wasn't my fault! I was the one attacked and I'm the one being blamed!" He went to grab the phone away from the pastor again, but a security guard grabbed at the back of his shirt and pulled him away, along with another security guard, one holding each arm. "Let go of me! I just

want to talk to her! Mother!” He yelled behind him as he was escorted out of the room.

“Take him to isolation A. I’ll be there shortly, and stay with him. Go with them Professor Jenkins,” with his hand over the receiver, Pastor Sampson waited until they all left the room before he spoke into the phone. He then sat back for a second in his brown leather swivel chair and sighed, rubbing his temples.

David went willingly, however he was still physically escorted to the basement of the administration building, a place he had not been to before. This explained his quiet cooperation in the transport, for he had no idea what was in store for him and curiosity remained.

They walked down the stairs and entered a long hallway, with what appeared to be eight rooms, four on each side, the hallway and doors all painted the same pale yellow, each door with a tiny two by one foot reinforced glass window. There appeared to be what looked like mail slots at the bottom of each door. *Air holes?* David couldn’t help but snicker.

They didn’t have to go far once in the basement, for Professor Jenkins turned and opened the first door on their left, a big letter A on the top of the door frame, with the guards bringing David in and walking him to the bed in the corner of the small eight by eight foot cell. It was simply furnished with a toilet, sink, toilet paper, and a towel. No closet, no mirror, nothing else but a single plastic cup, a toothbrush and toothpaste wrapped in clear plastic, along with a black comb.

A single bed was shoved into the corner of the dismal room, a grey blanket thrown over it and one small pillow for show. There was a small rectangular window on the only wall without a toilet, sink, or bed and the window was right off the ceiling, a good seven feet from the floor; it wouldn’t have been big enough to crawl through, since it looked to be only about six inches tall.

They left him in there alone. After the escort party walked out, the door closed and made a very loud locking sound, making David flinch. It sounded like vacuum suction.

He couldn’t believe this was happening to him. “This is definitely prison,” he whispered, and sat in bed, leaning up against the cold concrete wall.

He glanced around the room and noticed it was painted the same putrid yellow as the hallway - his least favorite color. It was the only color in the rainbow he despised. *I’d take pink any day over this crappy baby poop yellow.*

He looked around the very small square he was in, scanning the walls and the ceiling, he

noticed the tiny black camera mounted in the corner of the room above where the door was, and it fixed itself on him. He waved to it, deciding that to flip it the bird was probably already done a thousand times over, and he most definitely didn't want to be ordinary and predictable, so he smiled at it. He got up and walked around the room just to see it follow him, noises clicking as it moved along with him. After a few minutes of this sort of juvenile amusement, he also noticed an intercom with a built-in speaker system next to the door, below the camera. He frowned at the communication device, then turned and pulled on the bed tucked into the corner of the wall.

This is great! Even the bed is attached to the wall by steel nails and grommets. Holy shit! They have this place secured, don't they? I'll just feel so at home, here with my camera person.

"Hello again," David waved a second time to the camera, then panned the room, "And hello to you too, Mr. Toilet, and Mrs. Sink," he pointed to each of them and then turned to lie down in bed, his arms behind his head.

Thirty minutes later, the intercom made a static screeching sound, and Pastor Sampson, Professor Jenkins, and the two security guards stood outside the door, looking into the room through the window. David looked up and scoffed, "Geez, did you bring enough back-up outside the door?" He lay back down and looked at the ceiling.

Clearing his throat - that's never a good sign after the way this week's gone so far, David decided - Pastor Sampson spoke into the intercom. "I have listened to the testimony from the other students, including Joel, and I find it more than disturbing that you have managed to inflict so much harm, especially considering one of them wasn't even involved in the fight. The poor boy was only trying to help Carl stand after you had broken his arm," pausing to catch his breath, his voice sounding slightly shaken, he continued. "And considering your behavior in my office and your obvious lack of respect for authority, I have decided that although the other students involved will each lose privileges for participating, you will have to serve isolation for the next 48 hours, and then, if your behavior is cooperative and you have proven yourself capable of being in the general population again, AND after careful psychological evaluation, I will consider your readmission to the school."

This guy's an idiot, David thought as he listened to the last sentence...readmission? Give me a break.

Clearing his throat again and glancing at Professor Jenkins for moral support, who nodded for him to continue, the pastor spoke again. "If and when you are approved for transfer, I

assure you there will be additional lost privileges for you, as well as individual counseling sessions daily with Prof. Jenkins and supervised religious study with one of my students... possibly Jimmy, considering he's already volunteered. So with that said, I will ask you if you have any statements to make for the record or do you have any questions about what I've just said?"

The door opened electronically with a loud releasing sound, and it opened out to the hall, the four men all standing there, the two security guards in the background, behind the pastor and Marty.

David still didn't look up but finally spoke with sarcastic curiosity, breaking the silence between them. "Yeah, I have two questions. Did the kid who was trying to help Carl get in trouble? If he was innocent, like you said he was, I can't help but feel an incredible sense of injustice at his sentencing...and last but certainly most importantly, who's my camera guy? What's his name so that I can be cordial and conversational with him...or is it a she?" He didn't bother to look at the pastor, or anyone else there, just stared at the ceiling and waited, no expression on his face. A thirty second silence followed and he said quietly, "Is the camera on all the time, because I can't use the toilet with an audience watching."

"Well, looks like our conversation is over, for now at least. David, I hope you can find inner peace during your stay here, since that is the purpose of the Quiet Rooms."

"Yeah, right - recorded inner peace on camera," David mumbled.

"I leave you now with a Bible I hope you will read. It will guide you through this difficult time." The pastor placed it in the room just inside the door, then turned to leave.

The door closed with an obnoxious clanking, locking sound and the same vacuum suction. The silence crept into the cell and clung to the walls. He could hear his eyes blinking, so he closed them and prayed to whoever might have been listening, "Please get me out of here..."

The Next Meeting

He went into hibernation mode that afternoon, refusing dinner and staying on his bed, not bothering to even change his clothes or brush his teeth. Pastor Sampson came back down at eight o'clock on the nose to say an evening prayer into his intercom.

David laid there not listening to the speech as best he could, although it was blaringly obnoxiously loud and mixed with static screams and whistles every few words or so, thanks to

the speaker wiring. He covered his ears with his hands and closed his eyes shut to try to block out the forced sermon.

I swear this man must have a prayer title for every bodily function and social experience known to humankind; it all just screams insecurity...does anyone actually listen? Probably not even God Himself. He's having a nice night I bet, perusing the countryside or flying along the coastline, checking out the scenery, while I'm rotting in here being forced to listen to how my life will now be placed 'In Your Hands.' Whatever – we all know Your Hands are in Your Divine Pockets...

The lights were finally turned off and he lay there, listening to his own breathing. He fell back to sleep again.

He awoke to an electric static noise sounding through the intercom. Opening his eyes, he lay still in bed, hoping the pastor hadn't come back for more preaching. Waiting a second to hear only silence, he sighed in relief.

The room was unnaturally dark, except for a small amount of light coming in through the window hitting the wall with the door. There was also a tiny red light on the camera, directed at him as he laid there motionless in bed. He quickly drifted off to sleep again until a slow shifting noise and a shuttle across the floor woke him. Opening his eyes again but this time slowly, feeling the burning ache from the weight of his eyelids, he lay there motionless. His eyes were unable to focus on anything yet, but he could hear the undeniable sound of a slow, sliding noise move along next to his bed. *Are there mice in here?*

Suddenly the intercom by the door turned on, and an electric ticking noise was heard.

David opened his eyes widely now as he heard it, lifting his head slightly off the pillow to look in that direction. *What the hell is going on? Are they trying to scare me in here? Fuckers...*

“Okay, Mr. Camera Guy, now I'm actually scared, so congratulations. Can we all go back to sleep now?” He raised his head again and saw the red light of the camera gone. He got up in bed and put his feet on the cold cement floor then quickly raised them as if he'd just lowered them into a fire. He blew out a long breath and lowered his feet again to touch the cold, and he sat there waiting for the icy pain to eventually dissipate so that he could breathe again but it didn't.

“What in the hell is happening to me?” He whispered to the room, not noticing the cold mist escaping his mouth. Suddenly, something brushed alongside his right foot. Looking down,

seeing the outline of the Bible there, its silver letters reflecting the light from the window off to his left, David held his breath. *Strange. That was placed by the...*

He looked up to the door and waited, unaware he was holding his breath while he sat there in the darkness, every hair on his arms standing on end. He felt the Bible softly hit the side of his foot again, as if he was somehow in its way. Glancing down again as fear traveled like an ice cube down his spine, David watched the book actually move and vibrate next to him. It was trying to get away from the door, he thought. *I'm in its way...I'm in the Bible's way? What is it moving away from? And why the fuck is it moving anyway?*

“Tick-tick-tick,” from the speaker followed quickly by static loud enough, he shot his hands to his ears for a second, but as soon as he did that it was gone. He slowly got up and walked towards the door, each step shot an unbelievably cold sensation up his legs. He now saw his breath extend out before him in smoky waves. The room was a freezer, and the coldness, unnatural. His feet began to throb in pain with each step he took.

As David approached the door, he looked out the window, but saw nothing, just the other door across the way. Suddenly, a dark form floated by, and he stood there frozen, wanting to duck down, feeling his knees buckle, but he continued to stand there motionless and thinking if he was in a scary movie right now, the audience of his peers watching him on screen would be yelling obscenities at him for not doing anything smart.

His breath now chilling before his eyes, David could see the mist coming from his mouth as it began to condensate on the window before him. Forming crystals there in a pattern like a spider web, he stared transfixed almost forgetting why he was standing there in the first place.

Still barely upright, he placed his hands on either side of the window and looked out, only seeing an empty hallway to the left as well as the right. He pulled himself away from the door and looked over at the intercom off to his left. On his side of the room it was simply a speaker built into the wall with several little holes in a circular pattern. The button on the other side of the door, if held down, could activate the speaker to allow both parties to speak and listen to each other. David stood there and traced what he could barely see in the dark. He saw out of the corner of his eye, a dark form on the other side of the door window as he traced the intercom. He froze again, sweat forming on his forehead, his left hand trembling as he stood there, his fingers on the speaker.

“Tick-tick-tick,” went the speaker as David watched his breath create another interesting

pattern nearby on the glass. He quickly pulled his hand away, unable to look in the window, knowing it was still looking at him. He heard a buzz followed by a scratchy voice, one he did not recognize, partly because it was broken in millisecond intervals. However he could make out some of what was said.

“I-have...you,” the voice was crackly and static and not sounding at all like a guard or Pastor Sampson or anyone he could recognize.

He finally looked into the door window and saw nothing. Fighting the urge to run and hide, David stepped away and stood back from the door, staring at it and the window. Realizing he could talk, he said quietly, a whisper at best. “Who are you and why have you come for me?” His hands trembling, his breath chilled, he felt his lungs hurt as he stood there scared to the bone. *My bones, they actually hurt...and it's so cold in here...*

He waited for what seemed like a very long time, and finally, as he made himself turn to the bed to sit down, reaching out to grab at the only piece of furniture in the room as if he were blind, the intercom turned on again with a spark, followed by a crackling noise and a prolonged hum, shooting him forward on his bed as if he were pushed from behind.

“I-am-one-you...to me...” Static followed, making David jump as he fell backwards onto his bed. He slowly crawled until he got to the far wall, pulling his knees up to his chest; he stared at the door in utter disbelief.

“Louis? Is that...is it you?” He whispered from behind his blanket.

The intercom was silent for a few seconds, then a cryptic, fast and demanding, “Yes,” shot through the room, making David’s ears ring in a sharp sensation of pain.

This can’t be happening, he thought wildly as he continued to sit there, frozen in fear. *He wants me now?! I can’t leave now! I have to get home to Dillon...and what about Joel? I can’t leave him now...we’ve only just met...and Julie?*

David decided he needed to find out more. Whatever it was out there, even if it wasn’t Louis, it wasn’t going to hurt him, or it would have happened by now. So with that quick, reassuring thought, his rational mind returned and he found his voice. “I can’t leave without saying goodbye to my family and my friends. I-I need to get out of here...out of this school... please Louis - if that’s you - please help me get out of here and back home. I can’t stay here,” his voice pleading and charming, even in its state of fear, returned only silence.

Restless and suddenly, for the first time, not enjoying the silence, David began to get

restless. He looked up to the camera, but the light was back on, red and piercing through the air in a visible infrared line as it hit the floor in front of his bed then traveled up to land near him. The humming from the intercom had stopped earlier, and all was quiet in the room, except for his breathing, although no longer misting and fogging, was still loud and heavy as he audibly heaved out a long gasp. His heart was pounding in his chest as well.

“Louis?” He repeated the name several times in the next hour, to no answer. The tears began to stream down his face, and he felt alone and abandoned for the first time. They came slowly, then steadily, and he sobbed quietly in bed with the camera steady on him to record what looked to all there as despondent defeat. He’d never seen so many of his tears come and go as freely as they did now, trying to comfort him in the dark, each one tickling his cheeks and chin as they passed downward. David felt once again, the all too familiar emotions of emptiness and loneliness creep under his blanket and into his soul.

Chapter Thirteen

Bible Speak

Six thirty two a.m. Friday morning and Dillon reached over to turn off the alarm clock. He had slept poorly again last night, but considering he had slept all day, it didn't surprise him to be up half the night. It all made sense really, he thought as he laid there still motionless. Now that David was gone, he had very little reason to rise quickly and start the day. No need to be the perfect example of punctuality and neatness. He frowned as he thought this.

His eyes hurt as he stared up at the ceiling - from his brother's bed of course. It was warm and smelled familiar to him, comforting and secure, so he lay there not wanting to move. He had woken up at three a.m. on the hour. Turning to look at the clock, he'd remembered laying there in the dark and crying softly. The feeling of sadness and total isolation was overwhelming, as the loneliness crept back in bed with him.

Hearing footsteps coming up the stairs, Dillon began to stir. He and David were always the first alarmed by the sound of parents coming up, giving them ample time to get situated, with Dillon usually sitting on his bed reading whatever book was nearby, and David quickly putting out his cigarette in his old tennis shoe as he fanned smoke out the window. It had mysteriously lost its screen several months ago - right after David had taken up smoking. The little portable fan on the dresser David had purchased conveniently during the hot summer was also a great buy...

Mrs. Smith gently opened the door and came in. Turning to close the closet door, she stood there rattling the doorknob, pulling it after she closed it to make sure the latch was catching. Sure enough, the door stayed closed despite all her tests. She then sighed and walked over to Dillon, pausing as she did this, realizing he was in his brother's bed. "Uh, hi honey, good morning," She gingerly sat down on the edge of David's bed as if it were the first time ever, and looked over, while he pulled the covers up to his chin and turned on his side.

"Don't ask Mother, I just needed to *not* be in my bed last night." He closed his eyes tightly as if he'd see a ghost should he open them. *I must look ridiculous...*

"That's okay dear...I just wanted to make sure you were up for school. Daniel said he would take you with him when Tommy comes by...okay?" She smiled sweetly, but she couldn't cover up her concern.

Dillon half-glanced at her, then closed his eyes again. "I don't want to go to school

today, Mother. I think I'm getting sick or something. I don't feel well."

She patted his thigh with her hand and answered him in a soft voice. "Darling, you can't hide here in bed. It just won't work. Hiding from a problem never solves it—"

"Oh, but sending a problem away to boarding school is a better solution?" His quick reply stunned her silent. "Are you going to send me away if I don't comply too, Mother?" He shot up in bed and leaned against the headboard, startling her, his voice cold and sarcastic and undeniably strong for the moment, without a single stutter to kill the confidence there.

Mother didn't answer him, but her eyes showed her hurt and she began to cry silently, the tears falling down her face in streams, as if she'd been holding it in for so long.

Dillon couldn't help but look at her, she was sitting right in front of him in bed and his sliding back and leaning up against the wall didn't give him much distance. He then decided to avert his gaze down to his own lap, but his hands looked guilty. He sighed, then said a quiet barely audible, "I'm sorry Mother. I didn't mean to snap at you...please forgive me?" His voice sounded hopeless and dejected which suddenly made him remember how much David despised his quick, frequently used apologies. *He's right. I am without a doubt, an invertebrate.*

"That's okay, Sweetheart, it's just that I talked to the pastor yesterday afternoon."

Dillon shot up in bed and leaned forward to listen to her next words, making her pause as she wiped at her tears.

"Oh, honey, I didn't want to tell you this so soon, but we aren't going to be able to visit David this weekend." She braced herself for more pain only her youngest could deliver.

"What?!" Dillon began to panic.

"He got into a fight and apparently hurt five students in the library, so he's in trouble and as a result, the pastor says he's grounded for the weekend."

Dillon couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was a load of crap, he could tell. "Mother, that's not true! He couldn't have just picked a fight with what - *five* other guys? Give me a break! I know David better than anyone, and he doesn't pick fights!" His voice was getting louder as he spoke. "HE WOULDN'T PURPOSEFULLY PICK A FIGHT AND RUIN HIS CHANCES OF SEEING ME TOMORROW!" He threw the covers off and slammed his feet on the floor near his mother, then began storming around the room, pacing and fuming.

"Dillon?! It's no use getting upset! Your brother is having a tough time in his life right now, and obviously this little fight has him using poor judgment which has gotten him in a mess

of trouble! Now, after speaking with Pastor Sampson, he said maybe—“

“Mother!” Dillon whirled around to face her, startling her by the interruption. “What are you talking about? ‘A little fight’ is not him fighting *five other guys*! Why would he want to fight *five* other guys?! And did you even try to find out if he got hurt?” He paused and answered himself with an air of such assurance and confidence, his mother noticed it immediately. “No...I don’t think so, no...not at all as a matter of fact,” he suddenly was talking to himself as he stood there, while his mother continued to gawk at him in disbelief. He quickly looked over at her, and continued with “And please, please don’t call them all ‘disciples,’ Mother. No one has the authority or the privilege to use that term. Besides, I’m sure God wouldn’t select troubled teenage boys to represent Him! This particular title and those who claim it are representing the most pompous, modern day version of self-appointed pious thinking ever!”

He was rambling but she let him vent, not bothering to interrupt him or interject. It was okay for now, Mother decided. It was therapy and for once, she was the listener and not David.

“And please, don’t blindly believe everything you hear from this pastor you speak so highly of - everybody sins in the eyes of God - no one is immune and unbiased, and absolutely no one can be judge and jury!” Dillon stood there aghast, a look of shock on his face as he finished his rant

Mother looked down at her hands lying in her lap, and she started to fold her apron neatly, the tears still falling from her face as she sat there. This was the first time her baby had ever spoken to her so harshly, the first time he had ever questioned her judgment, or doubted her ability to see people for who they were. She was disappointed, but knowing how badly she was feeling with David gone, she couldn’t even imagine how her youngest was taking it.

“Well, son, I can only tell you that Pastor Sampson comes highly recommended, has a national reputation for excellence in both religious studies and education, and he specializes in helping the endangered youth of the nation find God. He is devoted to those children, and even has his family - wife and children - helping him run that school. It’s not what you think, dear, it’s a family run environment. His heart is in the right place, serving God and the community.” Smiling again, she looked up at his beautiful, scornful face as he studied hers and her words for faults.

“Great, could you tell me again why he’s there?” Not wanting to hear her response, he turned and walked over to the window, realizing the time had ticked by quickly, and he had

already missed the bus. It was driving down the street, and had just turned the corner. He stood there and watched all the kids get on board. Jessica stood there facing his house, watching for a few seconds, only to reluctantly climb on board. “Mother? I think I just missed my bus.”

Mrs. Smith jumped off the bed and stood there with her hand over her mouth, shocked like she had just found out there’d been a death in the family. “Oh my! Your father won’t be happy! He specifically told me before he left today that you were, under no circumstances, to miss school!” She walked towards him, her arms shooing him towards the dresser. “Sweetheart, come on and get dressed, please? It won’t be that bad.” She started opening his drawer and shifting through his clothes frantically.

He quickly walked over and gently grabbed her hand, pulling David’s shirt out of her grip and closing the drawer, but not before he neatly folded the shirt and placed it back where it laid seconds before, all to his mother’s surprise. “Please, Mother – let me dress myself? It’s bad enough I’m younger and socially more challenged than anyone else at school, I already feel inadequate.”

“Well, I just thought we should get going. I’m sure you’ll have a great day.”

“Do you really think I’ll have a great day, Mother?”

“Of course! Remember the power of positive thinking?”

“Mother, please listen to me? There are forces at work here trying to keep David and I apart. And they aren’t the good kind, if you follow me...?” He walked over to her and gave her a look of ‘are you following me’ on his face. “David needs me, and more importantly, I need him. We sort of balance each other out...and now I feel so scattered and weak. David was my rock.” He stood there looking up at her concerned face. She was in fact the only person he could talk to who didn’t incite a stuttering response. He sighed as he realized this again, trying not to let the self pity take hold.

“Honey, let’s just get ready for school, and I’ll drive you. I’m sure Daniel’s already gone...” she looked behind her shoulder towards the door, her voice drifting off slightly.

“Mother, can I ask you a question? Well...since we’re talking and Father isn’t here to dictate what you can and can’t say—“

“Dillon Jacob Smith!” She whirled around.

“What?” He turned into the sweet and charming son just in time to calm her down immediately. “Okay, listen, Mother, you have a voice - a strong, passionate, intelligent voice -

and Father tends to silence it frequently, which I find disturbing and bordering on dictatorship. Furthermore,” his hand held out to silence her, “I feel that if you think I am too unwell to go to school, then you should act as *the second parent* in the household and put your motherly foot down and let me stay home.” Putting his hand on her arm softly, he looked at her with visible concern. “I need more time to cope with David gone—“

“No. Be downstairs in five minutes or I’ll come back up with a wooden spoon.” She turned and left like a true authoritarian.

After standing there in defeat for a minute or two, Dillon turned and dressed himself in blue jeans, but wore one of David’s black long sleeve shirts, un-tucked, and didn’t bother to gel his hair; instead he did what his brother had always asked him to do. He glanced in the mirror and thought how different he looked. I look like someone I know, he thought, then he smiled and turned to leave, reaching into his closet to grab one of David’s black coats.

As he walked into the kitchen, there was Daniel, waiting for him, and forcing his offensive football squad - all three of them – to also wait with him in the kitchen. The four of them sitting there made the table look incredibly small, their long, muscular legs all sticking out on the sides as they slouched and leaned back in their seats. Dillon could hear the chairs moaning under the incredible weight they were supporting.

One of them however, looked pissed and was smacking the butter knife into the butter dish repeatedly. Dillon recognized him as the owner of the sparkling white Ford Bronco with its obnoxiously loud engine always coming by in the morning and afternoon, picking up and dropping off Daniel and sometimes, Rachel - everyday, rain or shine, in sickness and in health, the driver was there. His name was Tommy Reynolds, and he played wide receiver for the varsity squad and above all others, especially Daniel and Daryl, he was the most popular, sought-after football hunk. Curly, short, dark brown hair, clean cut all American boy look, with blue eyes and white, perfectly straight teeth. He stood at six feet tall and always wore argyle sweaters and Izod brand polo shirts paired with fancy, always perfectly fitted designer jeans. He sat there wearing a similar ensemble with his hair perfectly gelled to look slightly messy; a single dark brown strand of hair shaped in a ringlet on his zit-free forehead could be admired from across the room. *Oh, how David would be laughing right now if he knew this guy was in our family’s dining room.*

Tommy never once stepped foot in their house, although he was Daniel’s best friend.

Buddies for over two years, Daniel basically lived at Tommy's house. Since moving into town from Austin, Texas and befriending Daniel at football camp, Tommy was now a Vista football legend, spending time in almost everyone's home but his best friend's house for reasons no one really knew. He also realized he was staring at Tommy right as he looked up at him. He quickly looked away.

Tommy cleared his throat, smiled, and said, "Well, Mrs. Smith, looks like your boy is ready, so we should go now before we're late for school." He got up and walked around the table and over to Dillon. "Hey, looks like I'm giving you a ride, so come on...I'll show you my car."

Looking down at Dillon, who was avoiding eye contact by staring at his belt, he continued to try to get Dillon's attention, lowering his head so that the boy would look him in the eye eventually. Suddenly realizing he was staring at this guy's mid section, Dillon froze in horror.

"And since you're new to the 'Bronc,' I'll give you dibs on a seat before the other apes show up, so come on."

Dillon followed him out the kitchen doorway like a puppy, not noticing his mother calling after him to grab a blueberry muffin she'd made earlier.

As the two of them walked out the back door to the side driveway, Tommy sighed loudly and then shook his arms and upper body as if ridding himself of something horribly vile. He definitely wasn't afraid to talk a lot Dillon thought as he listened to him go on and on. It was slightly refreshing to engage another person in conversation, considering David hardly ever talked unless he was spewing obscenities or criticizing organized religion.

"I don't mean to be rude, but your house is like, way too religious for me...it kinda spooks me out a little...all those pictures and statues of Jesus and, and God." He made the sign of the cross as he walked to his car and beeped his car alarm off. He looked over at Dillon quickly, who was checking out his ride, and he smiled again. "So, you must have girlfriends calling all the time right?" He opened his car door as he asked the question.

"Uh, no, not really...actually, not at all," Dillon tried not to blush as he walked over to watch Tommy get in his seat gracefully.

The others walked out the door and started coming over. Tommy leaned to within inches of Dillon and whispered. "You better hop up front before your brother comes out, or else you'll

have to sit between those two and believe me when I say they smell like foot cheese.” He winked and smiled again, his teeth sparkling.

Dillon nodded his head in agreement, still in a state of shock at all the attention he was getting from this senior football star.

“Hey! Why’d you two leave so soon?” One of the boys called out as they both walked over, followed closely by Daniel and his mother, who was brushing off invisible lint off his sweater as she talked to him.

“Get in,” Tommy said again, this time spoken sternly and under his breath.

Dillon jumped at the order and silently walked quickly around the front of the car and to the other side, while his mother called to him to take a blueberry muffin and give her a kiss goodbye.

The two other boys filed in the back, one right after the other, while Daniel stood in front of Tommy’s rolled down window and took turns looking from Tommy over to Dillon and back again. “What in the name of football are you doing, Tommy? That’s my seat,” then leaning in closer so that he could whisper his disapproval, “I never sit in the back, and you told me just yesterday how much my little brother creeps you out, so what gives?” And leaning back he waited, while the others thanked Mrs. Smith.

“I changed my mind, now get in so we won’t be late...besides, it’s just for today, and did you see his face light up when he got in?”

Daniel shot him a mean look of suspicion.

“Get over it Danny. Let’s go.”

As he drove out of the drive way, Tommy pushed a tape into the tape player. The music of Wham’s ‘Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go,’ began playing, with George Michael’s voice booming high and slightly girlie. (Wham! “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go,” Make It Big, 1984, Epic Records.) At the sound of the song, the three guys in the back all moaned in unison.

“Please don’t play that soft, be-boppity shit again, Tommy? I swear, man, you need some *angry* music! How can you listen to that shit and play such damn good, aggressive ball?!” Junior said.

Junior was a short, stocky offensive lineman without a visible neck. He looked very intimidating, and he sat right behind Dillon, with his breath hitting the back of Dillon’s very visible neck, even when the Neanderthal wasn’t talking.

“Shut up Skippy, or you’ll be walking, sticking out that fat, nasty ass begging for another ride!”

The others started laughing, except Dillon, who just sat looking forward in his seat, his right arm holding onto the grip belt located above the window that was built for four wheel driving. Tommy looked over at him, probably the fifth time he’d looked over at him since he started the car, and spoke. “You know,” leaning toward him, “I don’t plan on going off-roadin’ so you’re safe to let go of the strap.”

Dillon let go and smiled awkwardly, trying not to look stupid, but thinking he was just that.

Turning around to yell, Tommy spat out, “Shut the hell up back there! I want to talk to my co-pilot, not you monkeys.”

Daniel kicked the back of Tommy’s seat, making him lurch forward.

Avoiding Daniel, Tommy spoke to only Dillon. “So, where do you hang out at school, Dillon? It is Dillon, right?” He looked over at him again, his eyes lingering on his incredible side profile. *Why haven’t I noticed this one before? Oh, that’s right! I’ve not noticed him because I choose to never go inside their house-church.*

“Uh, yeah, it’s D-Dillon, all d-day as a matter of fact.” *Just can’t say my d’s*, Dillon thought as he cringed. He had to force his voice over the continued cat calls in the backseat, which also didn’t help his speech impediment. He waited for Tommy to laugh at his stuttering.

Laughing softly, but non-threatening, Tommy continued. “Nice come back. I can definitely see your older brother in you...way cool. You know—“

“Ask him to prom Tommy!” A voice called out, followed by another.

“You can let him wear your football jersey tonight at the *game!*” Then they both said in unison as they looked at each other, “Ahhhh!” And they busted up laughing, lightly smacking each other like girls attempting to ‘high five’ each other.

Tommy reached back with his right arm and swung at the both of his buddies, cursing obscenities and threatening to stop the car. Their arms they held up as they laughed, trying to block his swings. They finally felt the pain and began to relinquish their twisted little game.

Dillon sat way back in his seat, hoping he could disappear as put his head in his hand and rested his elbow on the edge of the door window. His face was red and warm. He couldn’t believe this was happening, and tried without much success to hide his humiliation. He sat

quietly and if he had a tail, it would have been between his legs.

“Shut up about my little brother you twisted little shits!” Daniel hit Leroy who was sitting in the middle seat, now getting hit from the front and the side.

“Okay! Okay!” Leroy shouted, then settled down, rubbing his arm. Junior followed too, after meeting eyes with Tommy and Daniel, both looking suddenly mean and serious.

The light turned green, but Tommy was still cursing out his back seat passengers. Dillon spoke quietly, “It’s g-green.” No response from Tommy, so he grabbed his shirt and repeated his words, stuttering more. Tommy turned in his seat and saw the light, then smiled over at Dillon again.

“Thanks...and sorry about my team mates, they have absolutely no manners.” He finished with “Shut-up” as he looked in his rear view mirror at Leroy and Junior, both silent and watching him back, while he sped across the intersection. The guys didn’t reply, but he repeated it again for good measure, “Just shut the hell up.”

As they pulled up to the school parking lot, they had to wait in line behind several other cars as the first bell rang.

“Great,” Daniel seethed from the backseat as he again kicked Tommy’s back side.

Dillon looked down and felt badly. He had made them all late, but as if Tommy were reading his mind, he spoke quietly. “Don’t worry, we won’t be late. I have connections.” Dillon looked up at him as he pulled his car over to the gate and was met by the safety attendant.

“Hey Tommy! You’re a little late today - everything alright?”

He glanced over at Dillon to make sure he was paying attention, then turned back to the safety officer, rolling down his window. “Yeah, had to pick up another one for the caravan, but anyway, how about five free game passes up front tonight and a signed ball for excused late to school passes?” He waited, while the car behind him began honking her horn, her passenger screaming to get going. Junior rolled down his window and screamed back, hurting Dillon’s ears and making him lean forward more, so that he was almost sitting on the gear shift.

“Sure Tommy, but only for you, and this will stay between us right?” He slipped some passes into Tommy’s down turned hand.

“You betcha chief, just tell the football mommas tonight at the gate that you’re with my crowd and they’ll let you in.” He moved the car forward by grabbing the stick shift and saying “Excuse me,” sweetly at Dillon, a grin on his face and a look of proud accomplishment, as he put

the car in gear.

“So, you got passes Tommy boy?” Daniel spoke up as they all got out of the car, Tommy hurrying to the passenger door to wait for Dillon, ignoring Daniel’s comment.

As they walked across the school grounds, Tommy ran after Dillon, who was making a bee line for the other side of the courtyard, since Vista High had designated areas of classes and lockers for each grade, and they were in the much guarded and very privileged, senior section. “Hey! Wait up! Meet me by the statue after school for a ride, okay?”

Dillon turned around to hear him finish his sentence, then could only nod yes, feeling too overwhelmed to speak, as a group of guys and girls swarmed Tommy, all of them talking and moving him towards class. Dillon watched in a moment of awe as they pulled the football star away. What would it feel like to be so popular? He thought he’d never know and as he continued to think about it, he decided he wouldn’t want the attention anyway. He smiled as he thought about what his mentor would say time after time, “Tis better to blend and go unnoticed, than to be recognized. Why make yourself accountable to such recognition? I prefer the thrill and challenge of invisibility...” David was always full of interesting monologues.

Walking into class as the substitute teacher was taking roll call, Dillon went to the front and handed her the pass. She took it, eyeing him suspiciously, then told the class to be quiet, since a ripple of whispering had started from the moment he walked in. *So much for being invisible...*

The rest of the morning was spent walking from class to class, avoiding the stares, whispers and goofy grins from some of the girls around him as he continued to feel uneasy; going through the motions without David around. At the end of third period, Dillon received a summons to see Mrs. Sands. Sitting on the bench waiting for her, Daryl came sauntering in and walked over to him, a big wicked grin spreading across his ruggedly handsome face once he noticed Dillon. Dillon however, wanted to curl up and die right then and there.

“Hey there, Cupcake,” Daryl whispered as he sat next to him on the tiny bench, then pushed himself over so that he was pressed right up against him, his hand sliding down to Dillon’s hip. He continued the horrific display of twisted intimacy by wrapping the same hand around to Dillon’s other hip from behind and squeezing as he did so.

“Get away!” Dillon hissed back at him, looking only at the side of his neck, since the rest of Daryl towered over him, making kissing noises and smelling his hair. Daryl was quite the

physical presence, forcing himself on Dillon even more.

Leering down, Daryl taunted him. “What’s the matter b-b-baby? I thought you liked it rough and tight—“

“Boys?!” Mrs. Finch stuck her head out from behind her desk and glared at them from down the hall. From where they were, only her head and upper torso could be seen protruding from the wall, as if someone incredibly strong was holding her like a medieval ramming human tool meant to wreck havoc on the opposing wall. “There will be no monkey business over there, or I’ll have to call Mr. Seal!”

Daryl quickly pulled away, although taking the moment to relish a squeeze one more time before letting go, while Dillon tried to push his arm off him. It was infuriating to watch the incredible asshole display such a triumphant stance.

Daryl looked over at the secretary, smiled and waved at her sweetly with the hand he had just used to touch Dillon. He then leaned back on the bench as far as he could lean; his legs sprawled out in front of him in typical obnoxious guy fashion. He then glanced over at his newest victim, who hadn’t moved from where he had been smashed up against the chair rail, his face red and his breathing hard.

Daryl started laughing softly. “Get over it Cupcake...no need to thank me for the quick feel.”

“SH-SHUT UP!”

Mrs. Finch looked over at them again, and Daryl waved at her one more time, then pointed at Dillon and put his hands up in an ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with him’ pose. It worked, and she turned back to her phone, shaking her head.

Daryl put his hand to his mouth and whispered quietly, “You should be happy I squeezed your ass, you little faggot – ha! I bet you liked that didn’t you? I know I did.” He snickered as he put his left hand on the bench railing to rest it there, wanting to and almost putting his arm around Dillon.

As if reading his mind and bolting, Dillon shot off the bench and walked over to the other side of the hall, leaning against the wall with his back to the secretary’s office and his eyes away from Daryl’s hard stare.

Quickly clearing his throat, and then clearing it again loudly as he looked over at Mrs. Finch’s desk, Daryl managed to get her attention.

She looked up then got out of her seat and walked over, her heels clanking loudly. Dillon turned around to see her coming, then walked back over to sit on the bench, Daryl grinning widely as he sat down.

“Welcome back, Fruit – hi Mrs. Finch - love your shoes.” Daryl smiled as she came over in a huff.

She paused and glanced down at her dark purple high heels perfectly matching her overflowing skirt and color blending blouse, then regained her composure.

Dillon thought she looked like a giant, pissed off grape.

“Now, boys, I need you two to sit there quietly and wait for the principal. I don’t want to see either one of you walking around the hall!”

“But I wasn’t walking around, I was just *standing*.” Sarcasm in Dillon’s voice – for the second time today – and it was becoming a trend.

“Now you listen here young man! I won’t have you imitating your brother! Having to deal with his foul mouth on a daily basis bothers me greatly, but what’s worse is to see you follow in his, his, what’s his name?”

“David.” Daryl answered her calmly, ignoring the sudden glare from Dillon.

“Right! Thank you Daryl.” Mrs. Finch smiled at him.

“No problem Mrs. F. – my pleasure. Are you going to the game tonight?” Suddenly all charm and circumstance, his voice was sweet and alluring. Dillon shot him a look of disgust, then looked up at Mrs. Finch in disbelief as she swooned and smiled.

“Why yes, I always do Daryl. I sit right up front you know... anyway - what was I getting at? Oh right!” And turning to Dillon, her finger pointed at him, the other hand on her hip, she continued in her high and mighty state of existence. “David is no good! He’s trouble and I would hate to see you follow in his place—“

“You don’t know squat about my brother, can’t even remember his name for that matter, so don’t even pretend to preach what you know absolutely NOTHING about! Why you wouldn’t know trouble if he sauntered up to your cubby hole and began feeding you crappy compliments about your horrid wardrobe, so don’t start in on me! Coming from a woman who spends her entire day, *every day*, on the phone – I’m not interested in your loose interpretation of good and ‘trouble!’” As if she didn’t know the way, he boldly pointed with an outstretched hand conveniently placed in front of Daryl’s happily stunned face towards the hall.

Daryl tried to hide the smile he was forming by putting his hand to his mouth and coughing a quick “You’re screwed,” repeatedly, while Mrs. Finch silently turned on her heels and stormed down the hall to her desk, on a mission to rectify the situation as best she knew how. She picked up the phone.

Snickering and sitting there, his cocky attitude almost too much to handle, Daryl was about to say something rude when Mr. Seal walked in. He instead, sat straight up in the bench at attention, going as far as half-saluting the man as he slowly walked over.

Mr. Seal didn’t get close enough to speak to them, for Mrs. Finch intercepted his walk with yells and hysteria David would be proud of if he’d created the scene. After taking a long moment to calm her down, which both boys could tell by the look on his face Mr. Seal was not too thrilled to have to do in the first place, he finally came over to them. Daryl sat there pointing a finger in Dillon’s direction as he looked down at the floor.

“Sh-shut-up,” Dillon whispered.

Daryl shot out a quick laugh and blew an air kiss only Dillon could see.

“Well, this is surprising. Dillon, what in God’s name were you thinking?” He stood there like a giant over the boy, while Mrs. Finch made a call to Mrs. Smith to complain, getting Mr. Smith instead. Dillon cringed as he sat there, putting his head in his hands, listening to her tell his father what he had said. *Did I really say all that? No wonder I didn’t stutter...strange how I lose the speech impediment when I’m angry and yelling...a curse, it’s simply a curse. I’m in so much trouble...* “Oh...no,” he whispered into his hands.

“Oh boy, are you done,” Daryl whispered, then followed with, “Someone’s gonna git the tar whipped out of him tonight.”

“Quiet!” Mr. Seal said, now looking sternly at Daryl. Somehow he knew he was behind Dillon’s outburst earlier, but he would never be able to prove it. “Now, I’m here until the principal talks to each of you. I get to be your babysitter, and although that role doesn’t bother me when it comes to most of the troublemakers at this school, including your brother Dillon.” Dillon looked up at him, then quickly back down at his hands. “I must say it does bother me when it involves a good kid like you.” He continued to look at him, his disapproving stare burning a hole through the boy’s turned down head.

After five minutes of painful silence, Mrs. Sands walked over to the door and opened it, walking out into the hall, greeting Mr. Seal. As she started talking to him, Mrs. Finch ran over,

heels clanging loudly to interrupt Mr. Seal as he began to tell Mrs. Sands about the little altercation with the boys and the secretary.

“I see,” said Mrs. Sands as she looked down at Dillon, who was continuing to look at his hands like he’d never seen them before. Daryl still had a grin on his face as he leaned back on the bench and folded his arms to watch the show he’d created. Mrs. Finch gave her story, then Mr. Seal helped calm her down again, much to his dismay.

“So, you’ve already called Dillon’s parents?” Mrs. Sands asked, her voice sounding slightly irritated.

“Yes, I did, ma’am. You were busy and I thought I’d help you out, especially considering the boy verbally *ass-aulted* me.” Special attention was placed on the ‘ass’ comment, much to Daryl’s happiness and Dillon’s chagrin. Mrs. Finch held her hand against her chest in anguish as she stood there waiting for Mrs. Sands to sympathize with her. Daryl snickered.

“Mrs. Finch, in the future, you are to leave all disciplinary measures to me. I am responsible for assessing and determining the type and extent of the discipline at this school, not you. Now, you can go back to your desk. I can take over from here.” Her voice stern, she gave her a look of frustration.

“I’m sorry ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

“Dillon, go wait in my office for instructions on your after school detention today, since you missed yesterday’s activities. And Daryl,” turning to look at him, while he looked back at her sheepishly, “I want you to talk to your coach about your after school detention. Under no circumstances are you to work off your detention with your buddies on the football field or in the boy’s locker room. I have assigned Dillon in there, so you are to be elsewhere, and if Coach MacFearson has a problem with those arrangements, then he can come see me. Now go back to class and I advise you to stay away from Dillon or I will see to it you are suspended, even from your beloved football team.” Her eyes big and glaring, Dillon looked up at her in shock, then at Daryl, who was looking at her with all the charm he had had earlier with Mrs. Finch gone from his face. His eyes were suddenly menacing as they bore through her.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Sands, but I’m sure you’ll be hearing from my coa-CH.” As he got up slowly, he leered at her, then glanced over at Dillon, before he turned to leave, not even bothering to look at Mr. Seal. He sauntered away, making sure to say good-bye to Mrs. Finch. She called back to him sweetly as he opened the door and left the building.

“That’s one rotten kid in pretty boy clothing,” Mr. Seal said quietly, almost afraid Daryl would hear, so he spoke barely above a whisper.

Dillon got up and walked into the office, not looking at either adult standing there. He went straight over to the two chairs positioned opposite Mrs. Sands’ desk and sat down in the one to the left. He tried as best he could to block the image in his head. He could barely hear Mr. Seal and Mrs. Sands talking outside the door. He looked down at his trembling hands, unable to accept what had just happened. The thought of Daryl putting his hands on him made him want to vomit, and up until now, he had been holding back, but that was hard restraint. He lurched forward and vomited into the trash can next to Mrs. Sands’ desk; his undigested muffin staring up at him with its sad blueberry eyes as it slid down some papers and partially filled an empty Styrofoam coffee container.

Mrs. Sands came running in and stopped when she saw him sitting there still kneeling over the trash can. She felt sorry for him. It must be difficult to have his brother gone only to have to endure bullying by football players, especially Daryl. She knew from over a decade of school experience what a bad egg that boy was. He had it out for Dillon Smith. Well, she’d make sure he was safe. No kid gets picked on at my school, she decided as she came over while he stood up and grabbed a tissue off the desk. He turned to look at her and mumbled a quick “Sorry,” wiping the tears off his cheeks and his nose.

“Oh, honey, please don’t be sorry. I’ll have the janitor come and empty that. Come over here and sit down.” She turned and quickly got on the speaker phone, telling Mrs. Finch to page Mr. Adams to her office immediately. She then walked over and picked up the small trash can and carried it to the outside of her door, dusting off her hands while she walked back over to her seat. “Well, if that’s the only problem I have today, I’ll be very, very happy.” She smiled as she walked by Dillon, glancing at him as she sat down. He had regained his composure, but he still felt the sting of humiliation knowing what had happened on the bench and somehow, feeling that wouldn’t be the end of it. As if reading his mind, she spoke up. “Daryl has been warned to stay away from you. I want you to know that if he harasses you, please come and tell me? I know you boys don’t like to snitch and tattle on each other, believe me! I’ve heard all the stories as to why that is, but honestly, if this boy is bothering you there’s no reason why you should protect him and stay silent.” She smiled again, lingering on his face as he stared at her desk. “So my dear, why is he picking on you? You don’t have any classes with him do you?” She waited, a

determined look on her face that screamed she would get to the bottom of this little problem by the end of the day.

“I don’t have any classes with him and honestly, I can’t figure out why he picks on me, but he’s b-b-bigger th-th—“

He paused and felt the sting of embarrassment again, this time it was at least a familiar humiliation. His chest heaved in pain as he tried to calm his thoughts down. He felt her stare as well as her sympathy and it made him nauseated again.

“Just take a minute and collect your thoughts. It will help you with your words if you make yourself go slow. I can wait until you feel ready to continue?”

A few agonizing minutes later and Dillon felt ready to attempt what felt like the impossible. “With David here, Daryl left me alone for the most part, although I’d c-catch him staring at us when we’d walk around t-together. He’s just m-mean.” He paused again. “He figures he can have his fun mm-making my life m-miserable.” He finished finally. It was such painful torment to speak that much in one session and he breathed out long and forcefully like he’d just run a mile in record time. He could feel her stare pierce his face but he didn’t want to make eye contact with her. He was already tired, not wanting to talk anymore.

“Interesting...it seems to me from what I’ve seen of the two of you interacting, that it is you who intimidates him. When I see him look at you, he seems impressed to the point of feeling insecure by your intelligence and your, your...um...attractiveness.” She stammered somewhat at the end, then quickly changed the subject. “You know, I have another bachelor’s degree in psychology and I specialize in adolescent and child behaviors. I can usually judge a person quite accurately by studying his or her face. Your older brother David is a remarkable young man.”

Dillon looked at her for the first time since he sat down. She’d finally gotten his attention.

“He is amazing to look at, his psychological profile befuddling and challenging to say the least...I would have loved to do a personality profile on him.” She laughed softly as she sat there for a few seconds thinking of something quietly, her face lit up in a smile.

Dillon silently watched her, his mouth opened in disbelief as he realized right then and there how much she worshipped his brother. He decided at that point not to mention that he could probably read people better than she could, and not fall head over heels for them like she

seemed to do.

Mrs. Sands finally looked over at him and smiled again. “You look so much like David, it’s truly uncanny. And I’d swear I’ve seen your brother wear that jacket before...is it his?”

“Yes,” Dillon looked down, embarrassed and not able to fight the feeling of incredible awkwardness. This sudden amorous attention was unnerving to say the least. What was it with all this attention on him today? Was it really the change in hair style? He reached up and touched his hair.

“I thought so, it’s his style, for sure, however it looks smashing on you too, and I like your black shirt paired with it.” He smiled slightly, knowing the shirt wasn’t his either. *Better say something...*

“Thanks, uh...Mrs....Sands,” he almost forgot her name. He began to sweat.

“So, back to our little dilemma, since you are missing valuable class time,” and she winked at him again. He smiled painfully back, then quickly looked at his hands again. “I want you to report to the cafeteria after school for clean up duty.”

He shot her a worried look, his expression, a question mark.

“Don’t worry, I can almost guarantee Daryl will be able to squeeze out of his cafeteria assignment and be able to go back to locker duty, if not today, then tomorrow, so I will call his coach, then call Daryl back in here to tell him of the change. I will not inform him of your switch, however. So you will not have to see him after school...how does that sound?”

Dillon sighed and thought quickly how much he suddenly liked her. Mrs. Sands was a genius...finally someone besides his brother. “That sounds great. Thanks Mrs. Sands. May I be excused now? I don’t need to see the nurse. Um...my stomach feels better.” He tried to sound casual about it, but the thought of Daryl touching him made his stomach jump again as he sat there, trying to smile at her. He couldn’t help but bring his hand up to reflexively cover his mouth.

“Hmm...I have a question and I know it will sound awkward, but I need you to be honest with me. I feel that we have built up enough of a rapport to discuss this topic, so try not to get upset okay?”

“Okay.” He paused as he heard himself agree with her, not sure what he had just signed up for.

She cleared her throat, then asked, “Has Daryl ever touched you inappropriately or said

anything to suggest something of a sexual nature to you?”

She sounded professional, but it didn't help. His stomach lurched again. He panicked. Not wanting to look at her, for fear his face would give him away, and at the same time trying to keep his stomach from misbehaving, he started with, “Well...” Then he glanced past her and looked out her window at the tree.

Trees always fascinated Dillon. They calmed and settled him down, grounding him. *They were grounded, weren't they? They had no choice but to hug the ground.* He blinked what felt like a thousand times. Time stood still again for the fifth time today. He suddenly, more than ever before, needed to touch that tree; he craved the connection to nature. As he stared at it swaying gently behind her head, Dillon saw it - a crow sat there on one of the branches and watched him. He held his breath and froze, no longer blinking.

“Dillon? Is everything okay?” She looked behind herself and out the window, not even noticing the crow there. He sat in the tree very still; watching and turning his neck from Dillon to her and back again.

That's a big black bird. I don't think I've ever seen such a large crow. Is it a raven? Dillon watched the branch sway under the bird's weight as he tried not to move. He was purposefully staying as still as he could, camouflaging there like he needed to be what Dillon was craving today - invisible.

Mrs. Sands turned back around and gave Dillon a suspicious look. “Do you need to see the nurse, honey?”

“No.” Dillon met eyes with her again, determined not to let the crow hear anymore of his story. He noticed right then that the window was opened too. *Great. Why am I being followed by crows? This must be what it feels like to slowly lose one's mind—*

“Dillon?”

“Uh, no, no he hasn't done...that...that thing you said? Umm, I th-think he's just a bully and I'm his t-target.” He looked at her again very matter-of-factly. She sat back and began twirling her hair. She suddenly didn't seem all that brilliant, he thought.

“You know, if you dyed your hair black you would be your brother. Amazing resemblance...”

“Yeah...um...okay. Mrs. Sands? I need to head back to class now. Is that okay?” He stood up and broke her gaze. She got up too and smiled.

“Of course my dear, just let me know if anything comes up. I would also love it if you could give me weekly updates on your brother’s progress at that-that Christian school? Which one is it?” She followed him to the door of her office, her hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t know the name of it, mm-ma’am.” He sure wasn’t going to tell her anything.

Laughing, she reminded him not to call her ma’am. “Only bullies like Daryl need respect me that way, Dillon. Just call me Mrs. Sands. Bye now...”

He walked to the front door of the administrative building not looking at Mrs. Finch, who was giving him the mighty glare of death, and went straight to class.

As the bell rang for lunch, Dillon shot up and walked over to his locker, although his fingers still felt incredibly cold and painful to operate the tiny knob, he finally opened it just in time to have it slammed shut again, barely missing his thumb. A tanned, well manicured hand with a gigantic black, expensive and shiny all-sport watch adorning the wrist slammed and held his locker shut. What disturbed Dillon the most later on as he recalled the scene, was not what verbally transpired, but the fact that he could tell Daryl was standing behind him purely by his smell - a mixture of Old Spice and wet leather. Maybe that scent was popular with the girls at school, but he found the scent overwhelmingly frightening. The scary thing about it was that he could identify Daryl’s presence—

And no one except maybe the love of your life should be able to illicit your olfactory sense that quickly.

Daryl’s buddies were standing around him, one of them swung around and leaned up against the locker next to Dillon’s, on the other side of Daryl, however this guy reeked of used locker room sports equipment. “Hey there hot lips! I heard you got some sharp, sassy tongue in that mouth of yours...is that so?” This tall, lanky boy had a southern accent that reeked ignorant swamp heritage, causing Dillon’s stomach to start churning again. The other boys minus Daryl standing around him snickered over the comment and one of them said something like, “Yeah, I bet he gets practice with that mouth—“

“Shut up all of you. This is my time with Cupcake, so fuck off.” Daryl leaned in and nudged Dillon’s back with his, making him move forward a few inches. The other boys continued to snicker and leer. “You like that don’t you?” Daryl whispered close enough in Dillon’s ear as his cheek brushed his jaw and his breath went down his shirt. No one could hear his voice as he made it sound husky and lustful.

Dillon thought about what Daryl had said earlier on the bench, and he just couldn't stop himself. Turning around to face the enemy, he took a deep breath and let it out as smoothly as he could. "I already knew you liked to play rough, you've mm-mentioned that before... anything else you want ttt-to add, n-now that we have an audience?" He stood there waiting, his confidence and his voice, although faltering at times, still intact and returning quickly.

Surprisingly, Daryl maintained his composure for a few seconds as he thought of a reply, then he turned to the dozen or so kids standing around, some of them giggling at Dillon's bold comment, others too afraid to draw attention to themselves, and told them all to get the hell out of his hallway. They scattered like mice under his stare. His three buddies waited behind.

"Come on D, we've only got an hour for lunch - that aint long!"

"Yeah, man, come on and leave the pretty boy alone. He's just for show."

The guys started to walk backward and away, all three of them motioning to Daryl. He relented and followed, thinking how Dillon's comments earlier had intrigued him, and he couldn't help but feel the need to pursue this boy. He just didn't know why he felt that way. He felt an incredible surge of power whenever he was around his followers, but this one shook him, almost taking away the power he was getting from everyone else. He decided right then and there that he didn't like it.

As Dillon stood there watching Daryl walk away, grateful and relieved it was over, he turned and walked back to his locker. Right as the locker began to open, the same hand that had shut it twice before, did it again. Familiar laughter was heard behind his head, as Daryl leaned in again and whispered, "Sorry Cupcake - I just couldn't help myself." He leaned against the locker and slid in close – almost as close as the bench scene - and watched Dillon slowly breathe as he looked at his closed locker. Dillon could feel his blood pressure rise and at that moment, he actually felt like he was going to pop his top.

"You know, you're pretty when you're angry, Cupcake."

Ignoring the obnoxious laughter, Dillon opened his locker again and got his stuff. He turned and looked at Daryl, then slammed his locker shut and turned to leave without saying a word. Daryl followed him. He walked behind him for about fifteen steps before Dillon turned around and startled him, they both stood there again looking at each other. It would be another silent, painful stare off.

"Wh-what do you w-want from me? Wh-wh-why c-ca-can'ttt..." Dillon stopped,

exasperated and not able to speak. Daryl started to smile.

“Come on Cupcake – look,” and he leaned in with a much sweeter, inviting voice, “I’ll buy you lunch while you gather your voice.” He started to walk slowly away, motioning to Dillon to follow him, but he just stood there shocked. He couldn’t believe Daryl’s words.

Is he joking?! Unfortunately, Dillon knew he wasn’t. Great, violate me in the morning and buy me lunch in the afternoon. No thanks, I’m not that desperate for friends...or boyfriends. “N-n-no, thanks,” Dillon said as he began to make a bee line for the library.

Daryl turned around and glared again, the softness from his eyes gone. His look shot coldness up Dillon’s spine, his eyes sinister again as he reached out and grabbed his arm. *That was quick,* Dillon thought.

Bringing Dillon’s face close to his as he twisted his arm, “Nobody turns me down.” Daryl kept his voice stern and quiet, not wanting anyone else to hear. “Now, march that pretty ass to my table, bitch.” Letting go of Dillon only to push him in the direction of his lunch table, Daryl started snickering again, then laughing louder as he watched Dillon’s face turn red and flustered. Kids walked by and began to join in. Funny, Dillon thought, but they always look nervous around Daryl even when they’re laughing with him.

Ignoring his threat, Dillon turned and walked in the other direction. He knew Daryl was watching him leave, but he didn’t turn back. He went straight to the library, bypassing lunch altogether. Hearing Daryl yell after him, followed by crowd laughter, Dillon tried not to stop as he continued to walk away. “Ah, come back! Can’t you take a joke?! Don’t be mad! Great! Now you’re mad, then you’ll be sad, and I WON’T GET ANY!”

He continued to walk across the quad, thinking to himself how easy people were to manipulate. They follow blindly, any leader they see fit. His brother was right, people, in general, are sheep. And Daryl, the big, bad wolf, has an entire flock following him blindly around.

Dillon opened the door to the library in a rush of relief, hearing the quiet of the expansive reading room greet him in grateful silence. As he sat at a table in the back, surrounded by bookcases on three of four sides, he let out another sigh of relief. Daryl would be the death of him if David didn’t get back to school soon. He couldn’t figure out if Daryl loathed him, detested him, just simply hated him, wished bodily harm on him, or had a crush on him...or maybe a combination of all of the above.

Dillon rested his head in his hands with his elbows perched on the table. The whole ordeal a minute ago now shook him greatly. He could still hear all the laughter and teasing. Hands trembling, he clasped them together to calm the rage, but it was no use. At that moment, he hated Daryl with every ounce of his being he decided as his hands clenched in tight fists. He knew it was wrong to feel that way, to wish another person bodily harm, but he couldn't help it. *David shouldn't be at that school, I should. I'm the hypocrite. I'm the one in need of saving! I'm the one confused and alone, a true social outcast. I hate my life. I'm such a waste of God-given space...*

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the four ceiling lights above his head. They were ugly as sin; four long, prison-style hydrogen light tubes covered by cheap plastic, almost running the full length of the expansive library. Dillon stared at the one closest to his head, the last one in the group. He focused on it for five minutes, not looking away, barely blinking, although he was practicing on not blinking at all. Suddenly, it flickered. He startled himself and looked down at the table. He took out his homework and sat there staring at his history book, the words out of focus; the lighting seemed poor for a library despite the nasty looking prison light bulbs. He wanted a desk lamp or pocket light for his table. Suddenly thinking back to yesterday and the lighting incident in his room, Dillon hadn't told anyone about it, and since David was gone, why bother? *Nobody else would believe me anyway.*

"I need more light," he whispered, his eyes closed. Opening them after a few seconds, Dillon observed that nothing changed. "Huh, that's funny," he said aloud, his voice faltering as he began to doubt his ability to do anything at all. *Was yesterday just an elaborate dream? Did I do something wrong...did I not say the right words or think hard enough? Was I just sleeping through it all yesterday?*

Looking up at the light and saying it again, still in a whisper, "I need more light." He stared at the light source above his head and it began to glow, brighter and brighter, however he didn't make the subtle connection with his eyes. With the continued staring, an energy surge had begun to form. Dillon was in awe as he watched the light grow brighter, still feeling detached from the cause. He quickly glanced around to see if anybody else had noticed it. No one was looking up; everyone seemed oblivious to the bright light, as it almost made the room white in its intensity. *That's strange. Can nobody see it but me?*

Just then, he thought the light bulb would explode if he didn't calm the brightness down.

He looked up and made eye contact with it again, barely able to see its outline against the white ceiling. Trying not to squint under the haziness above him, Dillon opened his mouth to command it to diminish when it exploded, even cracking the plastic encasing. Sparks flew everywhere. Kids screamed and ducked down to the ground or under the tables, not quite sure what had just happened and expecting the worse, since gang activity and drive by gun shots were a normal part of life in the turbulent inner city of Vista.

Dillon just sat there, the only one still in his seat, amazed at what he had done, feeling the energy disconnect with the explosion, his body slamming into the back of his chair at the same time. There wasn't any doubt now and he certainly didn't need David there to believe what he'd just accomplished.

In the chaos that ensued, with the janitor, the school district electrician, and the two librarians talking and pointing to the lights, the room a buzz of activity and conversation, Dillon stared at the third light in. He wanted it to brighten to compensate for the fourth light. Kids began slowly moving back into their seats, some to grab their stuff and go, others to sit around and whisper and point to the bizarre lighting situation the school had never seen before.

Remained sitting at his table, Dillon played with each light in succession, eventually breaking them, except for the final light, for he made himself stop. Of course, as he noticed early on, everyone there was oblivious to the light intensity; they only noticed the light when it was gone, and of course, the explosion.

As each light fixture eventually shattered, the chaos in the library increased to a nice pitch, with kids coming in from the outside to check out the scene. Crowd control was not being enforced adequately. Dillon sat there dismayed and shocked to see how quickly chaos could reign in a place meant to make kids feel safe and secure – in a library, no less.

Still sitting at his table in the back corner, watching everything spiral downward, Dillon finally turned his attention to a sconce on the wall nearby and stared at it, making it brighter than it could handle, and it predictably exploded as two girls walked by, making them scream and duck down. Blinking several times as he shook his head, Dillon was stunned at how quickly he was able to create change. The sconce exploding took all of about ten seconds to react to his gaze. He couldn't believe it. Was he actually getting stronger? Was he actually perfecting his newly found talent?

The librarian started ushering kids out, as more kids darted in. Dillon felt dark eyes on

him while he was concentrating on another light source - the matching sconce - and he broke his gaze and looked over, meeting eyes with Daryl again, his group of friends wandering around and laughing at the exploded lights on the ceiling and nonchalantly pushing students down as they ran by, not paying attention to their surroundings.

Daryl now stood there motionless and looked at Dillon, suspicion on his face turning into a slow growing, mischievous smile. Something told Dillon he knew, and he quickly looked down at his table and started gathering up his homework.

Daryl began to walk towards him, when one of the librarians stepped in front of him and pointed at the door, the assistant librarian issued his friends the same signal.

Dillon gathered up his things and was ushered out, along with the rest of the kids there. Mrs. Sands was walking in as he was walking out. She smiled and said hello, he smiled in turn and put his head down, walking out the door feeling slightly guilty at what he'd done, but only after he'd seen her. As he walked across the courtyard, Daryl came up beside him and walked along with him.

“Saw what you did. I saw you break that light with your stare!” He grabbed Dillon by the arm and turned him around. “It seemed like you were playing with it like some kind of human light switch, weren't you? You're like some God damn human dimmer switch! Lights on, lights bright, lights fucking explode! Am I right?!”

Dillon looked up at him and began to stammer, trying to wiggle out of his hold and finally succeeding. He watched quietly as Daryl walked around him like a lion and waited for him to move. Dillon froze and panicked. *How could Daryl see the lights change when no one else could?*

“Now I know why you have me so confused about you. I'll admit it, I'm drawn to you, but what are you, some kind of witch or something?” Daryl was whispering, his voice urgent, making sure nobody could hear them. As he began walking around Dillon, his voice smooth and controlled, with a heaping dose of curiosity thrown in, Daryl's eyes were big and accusing, and he suddenly looked like he could be a physical threat again. Dillon wasn't in the mood for a fight, so he chose to walk backward a few paces until he was outside striking distance then continued walking to his class, for the warning bell had just rung. “Hey, come back here! Don't you walk away from me! I'm not done with you!” Daryl stood there for a second, and after realizing Dillon wasn't stopping, ran after him again.

Being the fastest runner at school, Daryl was soon in front of him, and Dillon, having his head down and not paying attention, literally ran into him. He bounced back shocked. Daryl stood there with his right hand out in front of Dillon's chest, grabbing the front of his shirt as he made a fist. "I'm right, aren't I?" His voice demanding and threatening, he watched while Dillon panicked again, not knowing how to answer him.

"I-I'm n-n—"

"Speak!" Daryl ordered, pushing him back a few feet.

Dillon cringed and blurted out, "I'M NOT A WITCH!"

Some of the kids around them stopped and began whispering. He realized he'd yelled it loudly to force himself to stop stuttering, and now people were looking at him, some looking concerned, others looking curious, and still others looking more than afraid. He felt sick to his stomach again. Daryl just looked at him and smiled. Dillon's face gave it away.

"Thanks Cupcake. That's all I needed to know...I'll be seeing you around, rest assured," and he winked, turned and walked towards his class.

Dillon felt defeated and tired. Not wanting to finish the day, realizing he only had two more hours to go, then remembering again that he had after school detention. "Will this day ever end?" he stood there and looked up to the sky as he spoke. Pausing for a second, as if waiting for God to answer him, Dillon heard several deep, authoritative calls of "No!" and "No, my son," from some of the kids walking by. His face turned red and he sighed. David was right, he thought. *I am a freak when I talk out loud to the sky.*

School ended without another incident. Dillon walked over to the statue to wait for Tommy, but he didn't have to stand there for more than a few minutes.

"Hey, didn't see you today. I looked at lunch for a few minutes, but we had to make a run for the border if you know what I mean," smiling, Tommy continued. "Maybe next week you can come along, you know, if you aren't doing anything at lunchtime?" He was so nice when he spoke to him, absolutely no sarcasm in his voice and no rude homosexual references. It was very refreshing.

"Uh, yeah, I don't ever have anything going on," Dillon gushed, then realized how incredibly desperate that sounded, but it was too late. He looked down for a second, then realized what he needed to tell Tommy.

"Good, we'll plan for Monday." Tommy's smile showed so much whiteness, it was

blinding. “Oh, and I got you six tickets to tonight’s game, up front in the reserved section, next to my family. I’ll be able to spot you that way when I’m on the field, you know?” seeing Dillon’s shocked, slightly confused reaction, Tommy tried to sound casual. “There’re six of you in your family right now...right? I know your brother could probably get you tickets too, but I’ve had these reserved tickets for awhile, so...I thought you could use a night out, you know, with your brother’s situation and all - and I’m sorry about that. Danny talks like it’s the best thing ever, but that’s bull...and I liked David, he seemed cool and aloof, but that’s what separates the cool from the boring, right?” He was rambling, but Dillon smiled and nodded his head in agreement.

“Thanks. That was nice of you. I miss him...” his voice drifted off as he looked away. An awkward moment passed by, then Tommy spoke up.

“So, you’re coming tonight right?” He waited for an answer as he stepped down off the statue and looked up at Dillon. The scene looked like something out of Romeo and Juliet, and Dillon cringed, darting his eyes around to make sure no one was watching and laughing at him. The laughter today made him flinch at the thought of more of the same. He began hearing it in his mind. Maybe he was laughing at himself?

He wanted desperately to go with Tommy and leave the prison he was locked in, but no dice. And he absolutely did NOT want to come to the game tonight, especially with Daryl there. He was never into football anyway. David always made him go so that they could hang out behind the bleachers and make fun of the people walking around totally unaware while David smoked his cigarettes, flicking his ashes down on passersby. It was as Dillon figured it to be, the darker version of high school most kids didn’t get to see because they didn’t have David giving them the education for free.

“Come on, let’s go. I’ll take you home and don’t worry, those monkeys aren’t coming along...I took care of them already.” His white-toothed smile shone again, beaming up at Dillon, with just a hint of deviousness.

“Uh, I can’t go Tommy - I’m sorry, but thanks anyway, maybe next week?” Dillon looked very disappointed.

“What? Why can’t you come?! Your brother is the quarterback! Come on! Where’s your school spirit?” And he stepped back up on the statue towards Dillon, already invading his personal space. Dillon took a step back.

“No, I m-m-mean, I can’t g-go home. I have after school detention and I had forgotten about it.” Dillon paused, hoping Tommy wouldn’t ask him about tonight.

“Oh,” Tommy looked relieved. “Well, then I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yeah, I g-guess...” Dillon tried to smile weakly.

“If you need a ride tonight, have Danny boy call me! See you there!” Tommy turned and flew down the steps quickly, while Dillon watched him leave, only to watch him stop, pause, then turn around and run back, pulling out tickets from his wallet and handing them over to Dillon sheepishly. “You probably need these. See you later.” Another boyish grin and he left.

Dillon looked down at the tickets, large white and red pieces of paper with a black panther face on the front and VHS in large letters across the one side; the words ‘Reserved Seats’ surrounded by stars on the other side. He smiled. Maybe it won’t be that bad tonight, he hoped. He walked towards the cafeteria.

Chapter Fourteen

A Distraction

He couldn't believe it. Turning around as he paced back and forth in front of Esmeralda, who had just gotten back from the Living World herself after a nightly feast and was feeling quite exceptional, Azmodeus glanced at her leaning against his dining room table looking as gorgeous as ever, and yelled at her as if she were arguing with him. "It is an honor to be taken! Why?! Why didn't he leave?! I cannot imagine what could have possibly kept him there in that vile dungeon?! Why does this human continue to shun me?!" She didn't flinch, which calmed him down slightly.

Esmeralda tried to look shocked and shrugged her shoulders in bewilderment, shaking her head in silent agreement. Azmodeus turned away from her and began pacing again.

"He has been given the opportunity to join me and yet he resists. I should just let him rot in that idiot school, in that small cage he was put in. I tell you now as I stand here, he will have to pay for his hesitation. He will learn soon enough NOT to disappoint me." He didn't pause as he paced back and forth from one end of the long, rectangular room to the other.

"Well, my Lord, if I may be so bold to comment, at least the little human has finally found some of his talent," she quickly paused to reconsider her words as he turned to glare at her, making her heart stop as she began to stammer, "and...and the gifts you've bestowed on him of course. He appears to be using those skills, and from what the crows have said, he's using them well. You were right about him, he is different - a diamond in the rough if you will." She stood there all in black velvet, her dress plunging down her front to her navel, her lips dark red, and her pose, confident and alluring. "My Lord, you might consider finding a way to deliver this, this human—"

"He has a *name*, my dear, the ever so clever biblical name of David." He smiled slightly as he thought of the irony in names. "His name is David."

"Right, of course my Lord," she smiled sweetly as he paused and gave her a suspicious side glance. "This David might need to be returned to his family, for I feel as though his attachment to his younger brother is strengthened, not weakened, by his departure. We might want to consider the possibility that he will not leave from above without first knowing his brother's safety is not in jeopardy. That would be my humble opinion, however, I know you have your vision and it is far clearer than mine." She paused again, then smiled as he stood still

for a second to contemplate her words, only to start pacing again. He is so thorough, she thought. *His mind must never stop itself.*

“Did I offend, my Lord? For I only give thoughts for you to consider, not decisions. You know this, I’m sure.” She leaned back against the table to show her curves, the dress clingy and almost falling off her in places. Esmeralda knew this, and selected it for that very reason. It continued to bother her greatly to think he was the only male she could not yet win over with her sexual appeal and her body. She needed to say something to pull him back to her...anything. “My Lord, I hope I did not overextend my views on this affair? I know how much it has affected you - I’ve *seen* the way it has affected you,” her voice pleading with painful empathic understanding, for she genuinely thought she felt his pain.

He didn’t answer her, didn’t want to think of David right now, for he could feel his frustration mounting, so he continued to pace, pausing a few times to glance over at her unbelievable appeal. Shaking his head at one point, he stopped and walked over to the fireplace, his hands behind his back. She could keep him from his thoughts for a while, a side step from his current situation. His brain could use such a frivolous vacation. He could release some of his anger on her body, purge himself of this particular human’s hold on him, but he knew she wouldn’t enjoy his rage. Azmodeus smiled at the thought of ripping her body apart. A moment later and his mind was back on the one he left above. Seething in anger at the thought of coming to David so openly, speaking to him and reaching out, yet coming away empty-handed, was unheard of. *I didn’t even try to scare the little human, yet he backed away.*

Disappointed at the hesitation and the fear, knowing this one was different, Azmodeus wasn’t completely surprised by David’s actions. Most souls weaker than this one would have cracked and gone along with; anything to change their circumstance – an easy way out of trouble - but he should have known better, for this soul continued to amaze him, even with the ordinary fear and trepidation, he was still unlike all the others. *A diamond in the rough, my witch said?* No, he thought, more like a diamond precariously placed among a sea of useless rocks; a gem meant to stand out and be noticed...or was it a trap?

Almost too easily have I noticed him. Was this all somehow a divine test? Could God with his sick, twisted sense of humor place such a lovely carrot before him simply to watch him bumble along trying to reach for it time after time to be left with nothing?

Or could it be a gift?

A reconciliation prize for his being shunned and sent skyrocketing down to his own cage of sorts; meant to rot in this Underworld Hell he had spent centuries improving? He frowned at the thought. *God wouldn't create such a human to tease me, to appease me, and to keep me satisfied in my place here. He's not that insightful and besides, I still have my grudges...*

He sighed and glanced upward. *Oh, don't even try to figure out why this has happened. You want to possess him and you know it. You'll act the fool just to reach him because you want to stare at him, to adorn Nine with him, and although you'd never admit it to anyone, to secretly admire one of a species you despise from the God who shunned you. He has, in all his spare time, so cleverly created this prize for you...a lovely human capable of entertaining you...and why? Because God wants to control you with distraction—*

Esmeralda's voice grabbed him away from his never ending thoughts. "My Lord? Is there something I can do for you this night? Would you like a drink? I can pour you one since we sent that poor little one-eyed human away earlier, you know?"

Looking over at the fireplace, ignoring her comment, he frowned as he watched so many human souls falling through the blue flames. He could see them descend into his Hell that way, through any fire he could count the fallen, damned souls as they came down like fireflies; some sent from purgatory just because that wretched Arch Angel Gabriel wanted to lighten his pen. Still others, the ones he saw burning most clearly, were the suicide victims. What a dastardly devious way to smite the Creator? It was brilliant, this new age version of self-destruction.

He would select the few shiny, pretty ones - doll them up and covered their self inflicted wounds with care - so that he could play with them like toy puppets whenever he chose to visit First Plane, or The Entrance. He reveled in the thought of traveling above to whisper in all those human ears to end their lives; to fill their stupid hearts with hopelessness and despair. He made it his most practiced profession during this particular century, and because of his efforts, along with the help of his witches in Madera, he had single handedly increased the suicide rate to a most noticeable level, almost unheard of in previous centuries.

Azmodeus was bored though - maybe another plague? No, he thought as he shook his head slightly, still watching the fallen through his flames. Both the stone gargoyles perched on either side of the expansive fire place smiled as he stood there before them. They came to life with his energy – his magic changed anything in Nine if Azmodeus stayed still long enough. Sensing this and not wanting the gargoyles to run around at the moment, he took a few steps

back, still transfixed by the fire and the fireflies shooting down.

...A plague for the human world? That would bring too many of those stupid little creations down here to weed their way into my kingdom. And I already know of the HIV virus God had recently named. Feeling the jealousy rise up at the thought it wasn't his creative abomination, Azmodeus yelled out, "Is He that bored?!"

"What my Lord? I honestly do not think this David character chose not to come with you because he's bored, I cannot believe he'd be that stupid."

Rolling his eyes after hearing her misguided comment, he chose not to correct her. Slightly shaking his head over the revelation of this newest HIV pandemic instead, he knew he'd have to eventually clean up that viral mess as it trickled – no, he corrected himself – more like poured down to his Entrance in a God-damned human flood.

David's suicide eluded him now, and he found himself judged harshly for it by his worst critic, himself. *I should have known better than to expect him to kill himself. Too easy for that one above to end it all and why would he do it now anyway? I gave him gifts to entertain himself and now he's distracted, getting into irresistible trouble and now, now I'll have to acquire him another way. Suicide would be too ordinary for this soul to accept and I should have foreseen it. This human is having way too much wicked fun thanks to Yours Truly...*

He finally chose to speak, knowing she was still waiting breathlessly, for he hadn't heard her let out her last one. "His brother anchors him down. I need a third party to intervene. Have you been working on the other human tool - this simpleton named Daryl?" Turning to meet Esmeralda's gaze, "And David mentioned another distraction tonight, a certain someone who obviously lives at that school as well. The crows mentioned their friendship this morning. They saw the two of them standing on the grass looking up at them. I believe this mystery friend also fought along with David today, however something tells me he didn't fair so well." He smiled then looked over at her again. "So, Daryl's intentions and whereabouts have been checked and followed...Esmeralda?!"

"My apologies my Lord! I-I was just thinking—"

"You should be listening, *not thinking*, you fool." He growled at her.

"Of course, my Lord, I have checked on Daryl, but I-I didn't have to do much. The idiot boy is already charmed and drawn to the younger Dillon. He is weak minded though, easily manipulated, and has a strong preference for fire starting."

Azmodeus laughed softly as he remembered Daryl's life profile, and Esmeralda in turn breathed out a sigh of relief as she composed herself again, adjusting her top and repositioning herself for better viewing.

"Yes, I already knew that about him." He turned completely around to look at her again, his voice sounding like he was recalling a favorite childhood memory. "I have been watching him for quite some time now, and I already have plans for his future. However, I am puzzled over his draw to Dillon, for he is so dark, his soul almost black for a body so young, to be drawn to one so pure." Pausing again to reconsider his conversation with himself minutes before, he ended in a barely audible whisper, "It absolutely screams of Divine foul play."

"Yes, my Lord, but Daryl is drawn to beautiful things and in his greed to conquer, he sees Dillon as merely a trophy. I do not think he has the capability to look into the boy's soul, or anyone else's for that matter. I believe he is nothing more than a foolish brute with an ego malfunction – an overly stimulated one at that." She smiled, laughing softly. "Please consider allowing me to feast on him tomorrow night? I would love to show him the fear he brings out in others?"

A quick, "No," reply and her excitement quelled itself as she stood there still leaning on the table, pouting. He glanced at her again, only to quickly look away. She was beautiful tonight, and he was in need of company – a distraction, more or less. It would be an enormous mistake and he knew it, but the draw to her was almost overwhelming. She sensed his hesitation and like a veteran vampire, pounced on the opportunity to invite him in.

"My Lord, would you like to accompany me to the bathing room? We can continue our conversation along the way, and if you were so inclined, you could stay and keep my company as your entertainment." She knew it was beyond bold to give out an open invitation to her employer, considering how much tonight could change their working relationship, but Esmeralda never did anything safe.

Azmodeus laughed softly. He wasn't in the mood for her female spirit, her sexual desires and needs, her body, or her emotions and in turn, he wasn't in the mood to have his ego stroked, and he knew, with all her beauty and sexual appeal, she wouldn't be able to handle his mood tonight or his appetite for that matter. "I will accompany you to the bath house, however, I must warn you, I am not good company tonight, and my mood will reflect that." He walked over and stood there, his close presence made her knees weak. She reached for the table with her hands.

“Of course, my Lord...I wouldn't dare assume you would be any different than yourself. And I have no qualms with that,” she smiled and took his outward arm gesture with much strained excitement, and slid her arm around his. The coldness quickly shot through her system in ecstasy. Esmeralda floated along beside him, already breathless with anticipation as he escorted her out of the dining room while his two black granite gargoyles turned their heads to watch them leave.

Chapter Fifteen

His Mistake

A breakfast tray lay on the floor by the door, having replaced the dinner tray from last night. David hadn't even heard the door open earlier that morning. Once again he had another active night of sleep with vivid dreams of visiting Louis and staying with him at his home, away from this hell he had allowed himself to fall into.

His tears last night were uncontrollable. He was shocked this morning thinking about how much emotion he had spilling out of him last night. "It was a fucking river," he whispered, his face growing redder by the second. He was at least relieved Louis wasn't still there to witness him in all his weakness as he lay there crying like a girl. It felt as if his soul was bleeding out all his vulnerability to pool around him now.

He felt horrible this morning, a splitting headache, sore eyes, and his chest hurt. "I can't believe I pulled a Dillon last night and cried like a baby. Why didn't I go last night when he came for me? I am, without a doubt, the biggest loser on the planet. I deserve to rot in here. Damn my living existence."

Walking over to observe the breakfast tray, hoping and half-expecting a glazed old fashioned donut to miraculously appear before him, he frowned instead. He walked back over to where the Bible had strangely, without assistance, ended up pressed against the wall next to his bed, its spine perched in the air. He picked it up and looked at it in his hands. It felt heavy, weighted down, and totally foreign to him, yet he knew every page and could recite most of Psalms with very little prompting. All those years of being force fed the Good Book had made him completely puzzled by it. He knew it was the Word of God, but why? Why would God inspire men to create a book of parables? *A book of prehistoric stories to live your life by, a historic moral compass...the annoying buzz of a camera nearby watching me stare at my supposed salvation.* David knew he was more than familiar with the Bible though, and without thinking, flipped through its pages for the next several minutes as the camera recorded him. He reacquainted himself with the familiar stories, looking from cover to cover only to place it down on the foot of his bed so that it almost bounced up at him like it had springs for legs.

He walked over and urinated in the toilet, waving with one hand while he held himself with the other at the camera as he did so. When he was done with that he brushed his teeth, splashed some water on his face, and then walked back over to his flimsy thin mattress with its

itchy blanket and cheap sheet liner smelling of sour milk. He sat on it and slid to the corner with his knees pulled up to his chest again and waited. *Well, this could be the highlight of my day. I should have gotten the shit kicked out of me yesterday. If that had happened, I'd be in the infirmary right now, getting my morphine through an intravenous line while I lay in bed drinking my breakfast through a straw and talking with Joel. Damn it! What the hell was I thinking yesterday? Nobody likes Superman!*

He thought for a second and then came to the conclusion that he didn't *think* at all yesterday. That was the problem. The fight was natural and his actions smooth and instinctive. He couldn't have resisted his natural ability to fight and fight well and he knew that, but he couldn't help but feel *too good* for his own good. "Well, at least I know what I'm good at," he whispered.

Thirty minutes went by slowly. David's thoughts jumped all over the place, from Louis, to Dillon, to Julie, quickly back to Dillon, Louis again, and finally, resting on Joel. His thoughts were finally interrupted by the electric click and suctioning sound of the door as it opened out from his room. There stood Pastor Sampson and Professor Jenkins, both smiling. Great, David thought. *Here come my interrogators - bring it on.*

"Good morning David," Pastor Sampson called out as he hesitated, looking down at the untouched breakfast tray then stepping over it as he entered the room. "I can see breakfast didn't appeal to you this morning?" Not waiting for a response and not getting one, he continued. "I am sorry I couldn't come earlier, there was another altercation in the mess hall, and my attention was shifted there." They both walked in and stood next to David's bed.

David couldn't help but think that they both looked less scared today than they had yesterday. He smirked, answering in a monotone voice, "That's quite alright." The fake, apologetic tone of the pastor's voice made him want to vomit. Luckily, he had a strong stomach.

"Good morning David." Professor Jenkins watched him with his usual look of interest.

"Yep, it's morning," David looked at him quickly then looked down at his knees.

"So, I have a few minutes to discuss with you how the rest of the day will transpire. I contacted a close friend of mine who is an expert in the field of teen violence, and he has agreed out of the kindness of his heart, to come here on short notice today, to visit you and make his assessment."

Goodie! Another professional. David tried to hide his smile as he continued to look

safely down.

“He will probably be arriving shortly, and I will send him here to speak with you. Your cooperation will determine the extent of your stay in here. In the meantime, I suggest you eat your breakfast, for I don’t believe in wasting food, and I was already informed of your refusal to touch your dinner tray last night. Refusing to eat will not benefit you at all. I have ways to force nutrition into you, so please do not make me have to consider those options?” His smile condescending as he stood there, his hands in his pockets, his balding head with his graying red hair flipped from one side of his ear to the other, made David want to vomit for a second time. *Such a good thing I didn’t eat this morning...*

“Yes, sir, I understand. I’ve been worried about Joel and the others,” David’s voice steady although the last two words spoken made him feel a seething revulsion, “And I am willing to cooperate in order to continue my schooling here, well, not here, out there, with the others.” He continued looking at the pastor, who had softened as he listened to and watched him talk. David avoided eye contact with the Professor, for obvious reasons. He had developed quite a skill in maintaining eye contact through the spoken lie and it served him well. He could train his body into believing his untruths; it was a skill Dillon felt and spoke of as ‘not a good thing’ for anybody to practice perfecting. *Too bad I’m not Dillon.*

As if reading his mind, the Professor turned to the pastor to speak. “I’d like to talk with David now, briefly, if you don’t mind sir, before my classes get too far behind?”

The pastor agreed, but first said a morning prayer, their heads bowed in silence. David counted backward from one hundred in his head, silently distracted long enough for the prayer to end.

“Well, David, I will see you later. I hope you are taking advantage of the quiet room, as I already think you are.” Pastor Sampson turned to leave, but not before David could ask a question as he walked towards the door.

“Could you please tell me if there are any other students down here, in the other rooms, the uh, quiet rooms?”

The pastor smiled and quickly responded as he turned to leave, “No, the kids learn quickly around here how to behave. See you later,” and he walked out the door.

David watched him leave with a strong feeling of loathing for the short man. Pastor Sampson’s walk wreaked a smug, judgmental religious right, the likes of which David detested

the most in this world. *He's the reason I don't go to church.* He thought this as he watched the pastor exit the room, trying to concentrate with all his might on making the door crush him on the way out. No such luck. David clenched his fist and felt his head begin to throb.

“Well, it sounds like a certain someone has had a change of behavior? However, to go as far as to say you’ve had a change of heart would be a little farfetched for even the naïve in my profession to believe - am I right?” Professor Jenkins stood there next to the bed and waited a few seconds while David thought of an appropriate answer, then asked if he could sit down on the edge.

“Sure, you might as well, the furniture for this room is on back order, so until it arrives there’s a shortage of seats.” He smiled as the professor sat down, who returned the smile, while David remained leaning up against the wall in the corner, wringing out his now cramping hands.

“You always seem to have a sense of humor, Dave. A sharp wit about you at all times. I sense it’s helped you out of difficult, probably painful, situations both at home and at school—“

“My name is David - not Dave - and yeah, I like to poke fun at things I have no control over. As far as opening up and changing my behavior, as you put it a few minutes ago, I think you and I both know why I’m doing that and whether or not it’s genuine. I will conform to a point, but you can’t make me do what I am not willing to do on my own. Besides, I have my motives and my reasons for still being around, and none of them have anything to do with this school or what it preaches. I place no value in God or salvation - I don’t want any of it.”

Pausing for a minute to allow Marty to digest the last comment, since he could feel it hit the man in the chest, he continued, reluctant but willing to confess what he knew he needed to say to get out of this cage. “I will promise you, however, that I will behave during the rest of my stay at this school. I have come to grips with keeping my anger in check. You don’t have anything to worry about, Professor.” David stretched out his right leg on the bed, while keeping his left leg pulled up at the knee. He sighed as he leaned his head back against the wall, bored already and they hadn’t even moved on from breakfast. It was going to be a long, painful day of appeasement.

Professor Jenkins listened intently, and then thought for a few minutes. “I know why you’re cooperating. I can see you do not want to be in here anymore. Everyone put in the same situation would respond the same way David, but what disturbs me is your mistrust in anyone who is not your younger brother. You are placing your reason for being on one person, aren’t

you?”

Damn, David thought, as he absorbed the question by breathing it in. *This guy actually listens and takes mental notes.* He had a quick reply though. He always had them and he knew immediately what the man was getting at. “I am not planning on killing myself, Professor, nor have I ever felt that way before. I like myself way too much to want to end my life. I’m very much *in love* with myself actually. I do enjoy making my younger brother happy, and I live to protect his best interests. He is a motivator for me, that’s all. I have other motivators as well you know, however I don’t want to talk about them right now.”

“Dillon must be very special, and I think he’s lucky to have an older brother looking out for him, but this isn’t about Dillon. You’re being here at this school is about *you*, and why your parents brought you here. You feel like your goal in life is to protect and be there for Dillon, however, your parents seem to think your influence on him is not protective and nurturing, but rather distractive and limiting. Do you understand what I’m saying here? Because I spoke with both your parents for quite some time when they dropped you off on Wednesday, and they are very concerned for your spiritual well-being. Considering what you’ve just told me regarding your not placing value in God or salvation, I can see where they might be coming from.” Marty studied David’s face for clues or emotion of any kind, but couldn’t see any.

David stared straight ahead, his eyes piercing the wall in front of him. Occasionally he’d glance over at the Professor, and when he did, Marty felt slightly uneasy, for although he genuinely liked David and even cared about his welfare, he also felt an emotion he didn’t like to admit to when he dealt with the students at this school. David scared him, just enough to make him nervous and hesitant to get too close, although he wanted to badly, and that in turn, scared him even more.

David finally spoke, this time with a hint of emotion, frustration or despair, take your pick, he thought as he glanced over and saw Marty almost falling apart at not getting any emotion from him so far. He sighed. “Look, I cannot believe in something just to fit in, and religious faith is not something you can fake. My parents have always known that and have, well, up until recently anyway, been willing to allow me my space and my religiously free life. I just don’t know why they have suddenly changed their minds. And just for the record, I am a good influence on Dillon, and he’s an even better influence on me. I just don’t want to be force fed religion.”

“We aren’t trying to force feed anything here,” watching David roll his eyes, Marty spoke with more urgency. “Listen to me David? We are only trying to teach tolerance here and acceptance, non violence, and solution building, therefore, if you don’t believe in Christianity as your salvation, well then how about learning to accept and respect another perspective at least? Think about it! You’re way too smart to get yourself in a situation such as this one. You shouldn’t be in this room. You choose your path; nobody can force you down it. I’ll see you at lunch, I’ll spend it with you, if you’d like, and I even promise to not preach during the hour I’m with you - deal?”

David didn’t have to think hard on that one. “Yeah, sure, and I’ll think about what you said. I’m not stupid. I know my options are limited.” And there was the look again, and those eyes.

The Professor held his breath and felt the fear begin to creep in. He found his voice after a few awkward seconds. “Of course you’re not stupid, that’s one thing you and I don’t have to worry about.” He patted David’s knee with a weak hand and got up, motioning to the camera to open the door. He walked out with an air of sadness around him.

David immediately recognized the posture, thinking of Dillon. He couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt not with what he had said about God and salvation, but how his words would have killed his little brother if he were listening. He just couldn’t help tearing the system down anyway, mostly because Dillon wasn’t there to stop him, and he knew it would be a hit below Marty’s belt. He knew the Professor was a religious man, and to say you didn’t believe in hope for yourself or anyone else was definitely not going to win you friends when they believe in what you’re ripping apart.

“Well, at least I get to catch up on my sleep,” and waving to the camera, David walked over to the food tray and picked it up, showing it to the camera and pointing out everything wrong about the food selected on the tray and then discussing what he’d like for lunch today, hoping they were all taking notes up there.

An hour went by. David did the following in order: ate breakfast, slept for thirty minutes, recited Shakespeare’s “To Be or Not To Be” verbatim to the camera while he paced the room, then finished by standing on his head in perfect form leaning up against the wall opposite the door, so that when the buzzer rang out and the door opened, he was still upside down, eyes closed and meditating. He had taken his shoes off first and rolled his pants up to his knees. He

had wanted to get in touch with his martial arts side.

Pastor Sampson and a gentleman dressed to the nines in a black suit and tie, aged probably in his thirties, walked in and stopped at the foot of the bed. Clearing his throat, the pastor spoke. “Hello there, David. This is Dr. Dan Towers. He is the one I spoke to you about earlier this morning...could you please stop doing that now?” He turned and smiled at Dr. Towers, who was looking at the back of David’s head with interest.

“Sorry. Right,” David flipped backward off the wall effortlessly, landing lightly and gracefully on his feet to face them, while the two men both took steps back and watched him. Dr. Towers tried not to show how impressed he was, but his mouth remained opened. Pastor Sampson reacted the usual way – his face turned red and he became aghast with shock.

David half-bowed and smiled at the guest, gestured a quick “howdy,” to the pastor and walked over to his bed and sat down, pushing himself to his usual place in the corner. He was prepared now for the oncoming inspection, analysis, interrogation, and solution that this doctor would give him.

By the end of the two hour drill session, David truly felt like an amoeba on a glass plate sitting under a microscope. He didn’t really care though. Everything out of his mouth was untruths, spun into little webs he had created with ease. And as he spun his silk, Dr. Towers went along like clockwork, spilling forth the predictable banter of psychological babble, for which David played into, giving him symptoms after he’d mentioned them, showing quiet distance at first, then anger appropriately expressed, followed by fear and uncertainty in his future there at the school. And lastly, requesting a chance to try again to succeed.

Dr. Towers stood up from the chair Pastor Sampson had brought for him, and looked at David for the first time since he’d started writing on his yellow notepad. He shut off his little recorder he had buried in his front pocket and went to speak, then paused instead for a few seconds, as if questioning himself as to what he was about to say, all of this occurring while looking down at his shoes.

That moment in therapy always gave David a thrill. He didn’t smile though, just looked down at his knees with a sullen, ‘I’m sorry for my transgressions’ look on his face.

“I enjoyed our little talk today, David. You are an incredibly insightful, intelligent and self-aware young man. I feel you have great forethought and know basic right from wrong and after yesterday’s situation, I feel that you have an even bigger grasp of consequences for your

actions. It seems almost predictable to fight at least once when placed in a new environment far from home and frankly, I'm a little surprised Pastor Sampson didn't take that into account. However, I will plan on coming to see you again next week sometime, maybe Tuesday or Wednesday, if the pastor agrees to that, and I hope you are able to conduct yourself appropriately until then now that you've had some time to adjust to your new environment. Do we have a deal?" He looked over at David and smiled slightly.

"Okay, deal. I don't want to be here anymore and yes, I have realized quite a few things since being in this room." He met eyes with Dr. Towers then decided to put the icing on the cake and he sprang up off the bed, startling the doctor. "I'll walk you to the door."

Dr. Towers appeared to be taken off guard by the polite gesture as well - not something he was used to seeing in his selected specialty - but smiled and walked to the door with David. Two security guards waited outside, opening the door for him.

"Goodbye David," Dr. Towers turned and left.

"Bye," David answered quietly, almost sweetly, then turned and walked to the bed, winking nonchalantly at the camera as he went by.

Chapter Sixteen

Friday Nights Are For Football

Dillon fulfilled his after school detention, not having to see Daryl at all, as he cleaned all the tables in the cafeteria and stacked lunch trays. After this morning's events, he now had eyes in the back of his head, and he felt his safety was in jeopardy without David there. There were forces at work too. He could feel them gather energy everywhere he went. An invisible camera seemed to follow him around, watching his every move and analyzing his words and his actions - or was that just the crows? He didn't know for sure, but it unnerved him. More importantly, Dillon had refused to ponder the idea that he was possibly a witch.

Walking to the corner of the school now, he saw his family van approaching. He ran over and looked up to see his mother's caring, 'always happy to see you' face and instead saw his father's frustration, causing him to stop in his tracks as he rolled down the window.

"Get in," and he rolled the window back up, looking straight ahead.

Oh shoot! I'm in trouble. As if remembering a nightmare, Dillon thought of the incident this morning with Mrs. Finch. He'd forgotten that little melt down, but apparently his father had not. "Yes, sir," he mumbled as he walked around and got in the back of the van, pulling the side door open and placing his backpack in first.

His father looked back at him annoyed. "No, you get up here mister, I have some *words* to say and you have a lot of explaining to do, and I want you-right-here," he pointed to the front seat, his right hand stiff and threatening a slap.

Oh gosh, I'm in soooo much trouble. Dillon shut the sliding door and got into the front seat timidly, not looking over at his father, who was glaring at the side of his face so hard, he felt his skin melt away and his skull start to sizzle. He gulped. His father scared him whenever he got angry. Mr. Smith was heavy with his hand and his 'spare the rod, spoil the child' philosophy supported his punishing methods. To everyone in the family, Father was far from lenient when it came to corporal punishment, but David fared worse than anyone else, received the most in terms of beatings, while Dillon, in comparison to all the kids, received the least. Even compared with his two sisters and all their years growing up, Dillon was hardly ever at the mercy of his father's rage. But not today, today he was at the mercy of the man in charge, and Father wasn't in a good mood with David's recent exploits.

By the time they got home, his ears were ringing from the yelling his father had heaped

on him in the car. He barely let Dillon get two words in before he'd jump into something else. He just sunk into his seat and looked straight ahead, which also upset his father, and more yelling ensued about how David did that and how disrespectful it was not to make eye contact with your elders, and how he was turning into his brother, and so on, and so on, until they pulled up the driveway and the car thankfully stopped. "Now get out and go to your room and wait for me." He froze in the seat for a few seconds until it was safe to exit, while his father walked around the van and went inside, his face steaming mad.

When he walked in the house, Dillon went straight upstairs, meeting Daniel at the top, leaning up against the railing and the wall as he watched his little brother climb up the stairs slowly, feeling like it was the gallows and not the top of the stairway. "Hey there, toilet mouth, heard what you said to Mrs. Finch." Daniel watched him walk by and into his bedroom, not looking at him or saying a word. As Dillon went to shut his door, Daniel pushed it open and walked into the room, not willing to accept the fact that he was being ignored. Dillon turned and went to David's bed to lie down.

"That's not your bed, Dil. Get up and move."

"No!" The yell startled Daniel, who took a step back. "Just l-leave me alone, D-Daniel!" The stutter gave him away again, all his insecurities spilled out before him. Looking up at the ceiling trying not to cry, Dillon knew it was useless. Now that he was home lying on his brother's bed and smelling his comforting bedroom, the tears were naturally comforting and he desperately needed comfort.

"Why are you crying?! It's so weak! You cry at the littlest of things! What has gotten into you Dil? Tell me, because I'm really worried about you, and so is everybody else here – and at school." Daniel hesitated, as if he'd contract a germ, deciding against his better judgment that it was okay to sit on the edge of David's bed with him not around. Dillon glanced over and thought Daniel genuinely looked concerned, but he also knew that deep down it was mixed with another emotion, probably jealousy.

"I-I d-don't w-w-want..." Dillon shook his head silently from side to side, frustrated he couldn't talk clearly and feeling overwhelmed with grief at the events of the day, and most importantly, David's absence. He saw no end in sight, and his voice kept losing itself. He stopped talking and turned away from Daniel to lie on his side, grabbing David's pillow and crying into it softly.

Daniel was stunned, watching his brother's emotion. He knew his younger brothers were close, and he knew neither of them had friends at school, just each other, but this display of sappy emotion he couldn't fathom. He wasn't capable of understanding what it felt like to be the outcast, to have the spotlight on you for reasons not at all positive because Daniel had never experienced anything remotely negative. Even his teeth shined white, and his face, not one blemish. He had perfect hair and girls throwing themselves at him everywhere he went. He was an outstanding citizen, a pillar of strength and morality among the youth as he recalled the Outstanding Honor Athlete Award he received from Ronald Reagan himself last year and would receive again this year. Now here he was, bothered that deep down he knew that his younger brothers – both of them – were beneath him. He sat there silent and watched Dillon's side profile sobbing into Creepy's pillow. He detested David, that was no big surprise and for obvious reasons too, but what ate at him more was the loyalty and unshaken bond between the family's mutant Antichrist and the little sunshine baby they all doted on.

What is the draw?! They have absolutely nothing in common! And now with the virus gone and out of the picture, it's up to me to bring Dillon up to speed with the social structure that is its own living breathing city – VHS. He's so small though...so fragile looking, I could lift him over my head and snap him in too. Look at that boney spine! And those spaghetti arms...he has no backside, he's skinny and pale, like a little girl in boy jeans.

Daniel sighed and shook his head. Dillon took it personally when he didn't have friends over on his birthdays, and at school, he always looked so sad if he was alone and David was not available, usually in trouble, Daniel thought as he studied Dillon's back, realizing it was David's jacket he was wearing - should have known, he thought, it's hanging on the poor boy.

“Okay, look, it's going to be no surprise when Father finally calms down enough and comes up here what he'll do to you. We both know he's going to whip you for your incident today, but when that's done,” he cleared his throat, trying not to think about Dillon getting a beating. He couldn't even remember when that had happened last, “I'll ask him if you can come with me to the game - you know, get there early and hang out with the team on the sidelines...” Pausing, as if half-expecting Dillon to jump up for joy, he ended with, “And Tommy will be there, and he really thinks you're pretty cool, for a sophomore that is.” He waited a minute or so for Dillon to respond, and when he didn't, he got up and concluded with, “I'll make sure Father lets you go with me...you need it.”

“N-no, n-n-no thanks, I d-don’t want t-to.” Dillon didn’t turn around; his voice was loud enough, with just a hint of pleading. Daniel stopped on his way out the door for a second to listen to it, determined to take Dillon with him. It didn’t really matter what Dillon wanted he decided as he walked out the bedroom door.

A few minutes later, Dillon heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. He closed his eyes and thought of a place he’d like to be and he made himself go there in his mind as his father walked into the room carrying his black leather belt, folded in half, lightly tapping it on his thigh as he walked.

“Well, you and I both know what needs to happen right now, young man. I do not enjoy doing this and frankly, this hurts me more than it does any of you, but today, today I need to show you the error of your ways. You need to respect your elders at home and at school, boy, so get on your knees and lean forward on your - GET OFF YOUR BROTHER’S BED! YOU DON’T BELONG ON HIS BED! THAT’S NOT NATURAL!” He turned and stormed out of the room and called downstairs. “Mother?! Did you know this boy is sleeping in his brother’s bed?! WHAT IS GOING ON IN THIS HOUSE?!”

Dillon could hear his mother call out from below in a calm, slightly disturbing voice. “Yes, I knew that honey, but he’s been through so much, I just thought it would go away on its own...why?”

“It’s not NATURAL Mother! I won’t have that going on here! From now on, the boy sleeps in his own bed!” He turned and made eye contact with Daniel, who was standing at the door-way to his bedroom wearing his football jersey and under armor, then turned and walked back into Dillon’s room, slamming the door behind him.

In the next two minutes or so, ten loud thunderous smacks rang out from the closed bedroom as Dillon’s muffled cries followed each noise. When Father finished, he left the room without pausing, going down stairs with Daniel following him.

“Not now, Daniel, get ready for the game, boy...no, he’s not going with you...we’re all going to the game together.”

Daniel went back upstairs to check on Dillon, half-relieved he didn’t have to carry him around tonight like a new puppy, then feeling guilty for feeling that way. This time, he actually knocked on the door, waited a few seconds, then entered when there wasn’t an answer. Dillon was lying on David’s bed again, his back to the rest of the room as he writhed in pain silently.

“Hey there Dil, um, you shouldn’t be on David’s bed, come on, get up.” He paused standing there at the foot of the bed, then walked over and grabbed Dillon’s arm when he chose to not move. “Come on Dil! Look you might not care, although you should, but I won’t be able to handle having to listen to Father whipping you again and if he comes up here and sees this – he will.” He whispered the last part of the sentence, glancing at the opened door, then continued. “I asked him if you could go with me and he said “no,” that you were all going to go later on, so I guess I better get going...get off the bed Dil – NOW.” His voice stern, but quiet as he watched Dillon pause for a second, then sighed and rolled over, sitting on the edge of the bed and wincing at the pain to his backside, making him immediately stand, wobbly on his feet. “Great, now go wash off your face and freshen up—“

“I just want to lie down,” Dillon mumbled in a barely audible whisper as he wobbled past his brother and crawled painfully into his own bed to lay there on his stomach.

Alongside his bed on the wall was a bookshelf with a black and white picture of Dillon and David sitting on the grass in their yard. The frame itself was old fashioned looking, silver plated, with intertwined streams of silver wrapped around its edges in an ornamental, frilly design. It stood up on two tiny, pedestal claw feet. His parents gave it to him last year for Christmas, his mother having grown tired of seeing the picture lying on his bed after being perched on the shelf without a frame to hold it. The brothers were seven and nine when the picture was taken, with Dillon missing teeth and looking goofy. It was his favorite photo because of the look captured on David’s face. He could see David’s happiness in that picture, could measure it there, knowing it existed. It was proof David was capable of experiencing such emotion and it made him feel a surge of importance knowing he was the reason.

The picture sat on the shelf nearest his head, and he laid there staring at it for a few seconds, intent on absorbing its mass, its entire frame suspended in his gaze. He did not blink once in the few minutes he laid there staring over at that picture. He was practicing on not blinking when he chose to focus and concentrate on things, and he was getting better, he could tell.

Suddenly, the frame moved its left foot forward an inch, quickly too, so that Dillon blinked when he didn’t want to and fell back on his pillow, his breathing quick and heavy while his mind tried to reassure him he really didn’t see anything move. He got up slowly and painfully, propping his upper body on his elbow, and looked at it up close, since at that distance it

was eye level. He inspected it and was within inches of the frame when he saw a small dust-free line where the foot had moved forward, and breathed out heavily, for he had been holding his breath while he had looked. Dust flew up and got in his nose. He started to sneeze, falling back on his bed and repeating the sneezing episode four more times. When his nose had finally settled down, he let go of it and opened his eyes, looking over at the picture. He stared at it, not blinking, and dared it to move in his mind. Move forward and fall to me, he thought as he watched it.

A long minute went by slowly. Dillon held his breath and watched it intently, with everything he had in him, and it moved. Slowly at first, as if learning to walk, it shot its right foot forward to line up with the left. Mother walked in the room suddenly without knocking and he jumped off the bed, landing on the floor in his shock. He shot up and screamed out in pain. Standing there, breathing heavily, hands on his knees, he looked up at her startled, overly concerned face. She looked absolutely horrified.

“What’s the matter?! Why-what were you doing? Were you staring at that picture?”

He flinched and felt a sharp sting of pain as he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “I was just laying there and you s-scared me, so I-I jumped.” He looked up at her and tried to smile, but the sadness he felt earlier was creeping back in and he dreaded the thought of going to the game tonight so he switched gears quickly. “Can I just stay home tonight, M-Mother? I d-don’t really f-feel...” He paused for a few seconds, refusing to let his stutter push him over the edge. He certainly felt like he was teetering anyway. A breeze could probably knock him over at this point.

“What is it honey? It’s fine, just breathe.” She watched him intently, her hands on his face then she did what she usually did when it came to his speech impediment. She finished his sentences before he could collect himself. “So you don’t want to go to the game? And you don’t feel well? Honey, I’ll talk to Father—“

“I-I don’t think I can s-sit down, Mother.” He whispered as he choked back tears.

She looked shocked, not expecting him to interrupt her and not anticipating his reason. “Did he whip you too harshly? I thought it sounded awfully loud...I suppose you wouldn’t want to show me...” Her voice drifted off as she played with his hair.

He pondered the thought for a few seconds, deciding if it looked as bad as it felt, he could win instant sympathy and possibly be able to stay at home, so he turned away from her and undid

his pants silently, dropping them to the ground and then pulling his boxers down, exposing his back side. She gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. She couldn't believe what she saw. The welts were large and looked like red, two inch wide bands across his buttocks, bleeding in a few areas where the skin had come off and blistered.

"I'll stay home with you tonight honey, don't worry. I'm going to have a talk with your father right now." She spoke with the intent to let her voice be heard.

"I have tickets f-from T-Tommy...in my pocket...here." He pulled his pants back up carefully, flinching as he did so, then dug in his front pocket and pulled out the tickets. She kissed him on the cheek, took the tickets and turned, walking out the door with a sense of urgency to her step.

He watched her leave, wondering for a quick minute if he'd done the right thing in showing her, if his reasons were justified, or just meant to start trouble. He felt guilty, thinking maybe he had done something he shouldn't have done, sitting down on his bed to ponder it more, only to shoot up again screaming out in pain and accidentally biting his tongue in the process. He turned around quickly and kicked his bed frame, clenching his fists in pain and holding them to his temples as he breathed in the discomfort from behind him.

In the next few minutes chaos reigned downstairs as Dillon heard his parents going back and forth, his father yelling first, trying to defend his actions, and then his mother, her voice louder and more convincing, as she lashed back at him. She didn't stop at Dillon either, she went on and on about David, their failures as Christian parents to guide him properly, allowing him free reign and too much space for so long. They had given themselves permission to lose track of him, letting him slip through their fingers. She accused Father of seeing the greater congregation as savable, including his family, but his second son as not. She said his indifference towards David's lack of faith and desire to hear and learn the gospel kept him from reaching out to the boy, not just in God's Love, but in a father's love. "You cannot pick and choose who you want to love in this house!" She screamed, crying and sobbing as she ran to their bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Dillon heard the front door open and close and the family car start. He knew his father probably went to the game however his leaving the scene of an argument was uncharacteristic. He normally stayed until his views were embraced and shared by everyone involved. Today, however, Mother didn't sound like she was in the mood to share.

“Father knows he lost,” he said quietly out the window as he watched the blue van head down the street. For the first time since he could remember, Mother actually stood up for what she believed in – and won. Familiar guilt seeped in through the window and dug into his chest. He felt badly right now, felt awful knowing Mother was downstairs crying into her pillow, blaming herself for his injuries and David’s placement at that school. God, I miss him, he thought, as he watched the sun slowly leave his side of the world, its purples and pinks painted across the sky in a romantic gesture for someone else to admire.

Chapter Seventeen

A Vampire Scorned

She flew through the night sky in a flash of emerald green and black, her hair cascading down her back in a brilliant dark brown hue. She was tired and hungry, and wanted to prey upon several tonight, just to make up for last night's episode with him. She let her mind wander there again - probably the tenth time today she allowed it to go there - for the images imprinted on her brain were powerful and the emotion, raw and unrelenting.

As the scene appeared before her eyes, playing like a movie reel in color, Esmeralda cringed as she watched the images unfold the way she'd remembered them. Recalling the Dark Lord accompanying her to the bath house sitting on a lounge chair while she gracefully, seductively, let her dress fall from her shoulders to gather around her ankles, Esmeralda shuddered in embarrassment. Her body was bare, bronze and glowing after feeding hours before, so she seductively stepped forward and to the side of him, standing there for a minute to gather up her hair and pin it behind her head, all the while giving him a perfect silhouette. She knew she looked amazing and she smiled in anticipation for the night's end, since her bathing always signaled the end of a long night of feeding and dangerous rendezvous, but nothing could prepare her for that next moment. She knew it would be beyond anything she could even remotely predict. He was, after all, Azmodeus, Ruler of the Underworld.

He sat there quietly, his legs crossed and his arms spread out on the lounge chair, leaning back to enjoy her beauty, for he had never seen her completely naked before. It was never something he needed to see, for his imagination more than filled in where her limited clothing covered.

Esmeralda remembered spanning the rectangular room made entirely of marble stone, colored in light taupe, silver and gold, with soft, dim lighting along the walls, and only one entrance, located at the far end of the bath; at the other end, was a smaller sunken bath heated with coals, providing a more intimate setting. She had asked to visit his private bath house, but he'd refused, escorting her here instead. Thinking about it now angered her greatly for she should've known then that he was purposely keeping her at arm's length.

The main bath was a sunken rectangular pool, not too large, measuring fifty feet long by twenty feet wide. There were steps at both sides, and several lounge chairs positioned around the pool for additional bathing spectators. It was created to look like a Roman bath house; the Dark

Lord wanting a replica from the time in human history he most enjoyed before Christ entered the picture. To Azmodeus however, the Romans were impressive, all their gods and goddesses, very unique and imaginative. Their monstrous games involving lions and Christians always gave him a thrill. He mostly enjoyed filtering through the walls into the rooms where the prisoners were caged – usually right next to the lions so that their scents could be available – so that he could watch them cower and whimper.

Yes, according to the Dark Lord, the Romans had taken life by the horns and defied God, making a mockery of His creation. Luckily for them, it took God centuries to pay them any attention and then it was all over, just as quickly as it had begun, probably with God wiping the slate clean. It just wasn't fair to see such a good thing like precisely calculated world domination and misuse of power come to an abrupt, tragic end simply by dealing a hand of cards, he thought. *God works in mysterious ways – well, more like God likes to play mysterious games such as chess, cards and Russian roulette – and the mystery was simply which game He wanted to play.*

Esmeralda watched as the Dark Lord shook his head while he sat there on that lounge chair, deep in thought. Was he thinking of her? She began to second guess herself.

She remembered not wanting to let him touch her until after she could bathe, for she could smell the two men on her neck and chest from when she had fed above earlier. She usually allowed her prey the privilege of touching her while she picked her moment to feed, catching them off guard and relishing their seductive defeat, for by the time they would realize her bite was upon them, having already started to feast, she would have them at her feet, numb and cold from her sting in a matter of maybe a minute or two, at the most. Tonight she'd felt suddenly dirty as he stared at her, and she urgently wanted the water to submerge in. Cologne and human saliva lingered there, dried on her neck and chest, creating an overwhelming urge to scratch the stench off with her long, sharp nails. Craving desperately for Azmodeus' smell to linger upon her shoulders, his lips to brush against her skin, she wanted him to thrill her tonight. Esmeralda had more than an appetite for food - she had much, much more she craved. He was to be her final conquest.

She remembered asking him to join her, his pause and castaway stare having stung her deeply, bruising her ego and making her hold her arms up to her chest to cover herself as she stood in the pool waist high in water, waiting for him. He had said earlier that he would not join her, but she was confident her presence would sway him and he would be drawn to her like a

magnet to metal.

Finally looking over at her, the Dark Lord suddenly excused himself, telling her he had to leave, that by staying, he would jeopardize their relationship, and he wasn't in the mood for warmth and passion. He was in the mood for destruction and annihilation. She would be too easy to break in two, he'd said so casually. Did he not think her tough enough? Was she a living doll to merely look at occasionally? It was a horrific nightmare and she fumed.

Reminiscing and spewing obscenities into the night sky, she could barely contain her rage. Remembering that painful moment of her standing there in the water, arms still across her chest, only to watch him get up, turn and leave without so much as a glance made her feel horribly rejected and shunned. It was almost too unbearable for her to handle, so she quickly bathed and got out of the pool. She sat on the same lounge chair he had been on minutes earlier, naked and vulnerable, still feeling his coldness lingering in the fabric, waiting for his possible return. Finally, donning a robe left there for her, she left the room to go to her bedroom chamber to remain alone until she could rise again.

So here it was the following night, she in all her defiant brilliance, making a splash once again into the world of the living; her playground of humans to feed upon made available for her viewing pleasure.

As she landed in the shadows of a quiet, upper class neighborhood on the exclusive hills of Del Mar, thirty minutes south of the Smith residence, she tried to brush off the thoughts from last night as she lightly smoothed over the wrinkles on the lapel of her full length evening coat. Wanting to feed excessively, Esmeralda was resigned that tonight her vengeance would include more than her usual male selection. The vampire wanted more than the stronger, bloodier sex, for her appetite had to quell the shame and rejection she was still feeling. Oh, how she wanted to pay the Smiths a visit.

Instead, Esmeralda walked up to the first house she saw, a beautiful Spanish style ranch home overlooking the Pacific Ocean, with large bay windows and perfectly landscaped yard. She noticed immediately the small tricycle on the front porch. Yes, she thought, this house will do. *This house will do nicely.*

She strolled up to the front door, wearing a dark green evening gown and black bejeweled coat. She transformed her boots into high heeled, diamond studded shoes, walking along the perfectly manicured pathway like the lady she wasn't. She looked like one though and that was

all that mattered to her. Appearances mattered to Esmeralda. *If one can't show it off then why own it?*

Pulling up her hair into a glamorous 'do as she gracefully glided along, she knocked on the door with authority, trying not to sway to the soothing calls of the ocean off in the close distance, the tide and pull of the full moon calling to her longingly.

A businessman in his early forties answered the door, smiling immediately when he saw her. "Hello, may I help you?" He gushed, his eyes and his smile giving him away instantly.

Esmeralda smiled back, trying to appear slightly anxious and weak as a young woman in distress and in need of a man's assistance. She hoped her acting skills would hold up despite her emotions.

"Good evening sir. I am late to a party and my car broke down. I don't know what's wrong with it, but I need to call a towing truck...and a cab," she put her hands to her temples and crinkled up her cute little nose, her lips ruby red and pouting. "I hate it when this happens." She turned away from him and breathed in, making sure her chest moved outward as much as possible.

"Please, please come in out of the cold and use my phone," he stepped aside and motioned for her to enter, staggering like a drunk as he gazed at her profile. She smiled at his foolish invitation and whispered a very glamorous "thank you" Marilyn Monroe style and walked in, holding her hand out so that he could grab it to guide her, although there weren't any steps up or down for her to take. She smiled like a smooth criminal as he walked her into his large living room, holding her dainty hand dressed in jewels and red painted fingertips. It was a spider-fly moment for the history books as far as Esmeralda was concerned.

"Are you alone Miss? Would you like to sit down?" His look concerned, however being a man, he couldn't help but peruse her physique as she gently let go of his hand and surveyed the living room. Her movements graceful and eloquent, she continued to mesmerize him as she almost floated over to the shiny, black grand piano. He liked listening to piano too, she remembered. *He likes music and song and lovely faces to adorn his courtroom but the bathhouse? No fucking way...*

She quickly complimented the owner on its beauty and still couldn't help herself as he stammered on about where he'd bought it, like it mattered to her.

The Dark Lord liked to hear piano, amongst other musical instruments, as a preferred

form of self-seduction—

The vampire grimaced in pain as she relinquished the thought that she couldn't play for him, couldn't seduce him. Esmeralda had no musical ability at all. She was just a pretty worker. She glided her hand along the edge of the piano and dug her fingernails an inch into the wood like it was clay, quietly sinking them in, then pulling them out quickly as he walked over to hand her his phone. She grabbed a family portrait sitting there and held it in her hand.

"Is this your family Sir?" Esmeralda hypnotized him with her green eyes as they locked on his, making his knees weak.

"Y-Yes, yes Miss. That is uh..."

"Your children?"

"Yes! My three children, Marcus, Samuel, and little Lucinda," he paused for a second and finished with, "And that is their mother." He didn't take his eyes off the sexy stranger as he pointed out his family.

"And their ages? Are they all here? For the house is so quiet..."

"Yes, they are here. My uh...their mother is in the bedroom, ill with the flu. My two sons are probably playing video games in their activity room. They are fifteen and ten. And my little girl is asleep...she's four." He hesitated, wondering why she seemed so interested, but the thought quickly left his brain as soon as he blinked and took in her beauty again.

"That's nice. Offer me a drink," her voice suddenly demanding.

"Would you like something to drink?" He smiled again, his eyes suddenly glassy and slightly dazed.

She laughed softly at his simple stupidity. "Of course, I thought you'd never ask – Scotch, straight up." She watched as he walked backward to the liquor cabinet, stumbling around the coffee table as he went, not taking his eyes off her; he couldn't if he tried. He grabbed the bottle of Scotch and a glass and came quickly back over like a loyal puppy. She watched his physique as he stood there before her again. It was nice, and he looked attractive enough. Typical Californian businessman look: perfect, dark brown hair neatly combed and gelled, white perfectly straight teeth, tanned skin, well-dressed business suit and nicely manicured hands implying he didn't do any manual labor. He now handed her the glass after pouring her alcohol like a pro. She smirked at the gesture. "I don't drink alcohol. The glass is for you. I figured you to be a Scotch, no rocks, kind of guy, and judging by the almost empty

bottle in your other hand, I think I'm right," her voice with just a hint of biting sarcasm as she leaned in and smiled sweetly, only to suddenly change her tone. "Drink, you need one." She watched him pause still holding the drink out in his hand as she stared at him intently, then reassured him. "Don't keep me waiting..." She laughed softly again, her personality flipping back and forth, tilting her head up, her mouth smiling in a glamorous cover girl grin, her hand brushing her neck lightly as if she were posing for the camera. Femme fatale she thought. Oh, how she loved the power as she breathed in his helplessness.

He was convinced he should take the drink to steady his nerves, so he did, finishing it in one shot. He could feel her energy, and he wanted her more than anything else in the world. Never before had he wanted another woman like this one, never before was he so driven to have someone under his body.

She kept her smile, although it was killing her face, and reached out to take the phone from his hand. She then deliberately walked by him and continued slowly over to the black leather sofa and sat down, her dress and form-fitting black coat draping and surrounding her, but exposing her magnificent bronze legs as she crossed them, her black and diamond studded high heel shoes glittering in wealthy sophistication. She looked the part of a woman who did not need men to get where she was and it more than showed. He was intrigued. She checked out the phone, looking down at it, then up at him coyly, smiling as she met his gaze and pulled him back in again, just when he was beginning to wonder why such a beautiful woman not escorted was in his living room.

Suddenly sensing her invitation to get close, Mr. Torres quietly walked over and sat next to her gingerly, as if afraid she'd disappear and he'd awaken from the incredibly amazing dream he was having. He gingerly placed his hand on her knee, squeezing it gently. His hand was warm, his radial pulse palpable on her knee and her thirst was becoming unbearable, but she held it back.

"How do you use it? These new cordless phones are so complicated." She batted her eyes over at him, so he sat very close to her, his upper body and his gaze looking down on her, watching her chest rise and fall. Her green bodice was a corset, showing her cleavage, while a heart shaped diamond necklace plunged down and rested there, accentuating and supported by her flesh. Mr. Torres was helplessly drawn and suspended there in her chest. Esmeralda reached her arm up to the back of his head and silently pushed him to her breasts, for she didn't care to

speak anymore, and she knew what he wanted. Humans were so useless and predictable and this one was no exception. He bored her immensely. He was too stupid to even tell her his name. Most male humans stumble first by saying their names up front, as if she should care to know personal information. She smirked at the thought, not sure whether or not to snap his neck right then and there for putting his hand on her knee without the invite, or to sit back and count to ten like she mostly did at times like these when dinner was cooking but not quite ready.

As he kissed the base of her neck, then drifted down to her upper chest, Esmeralda became impatient. With her left hand on the back of his neck, she placed the phone on the glass end table. Her incisors elongated as she did this, protruding down both sides of her chin. She then slowly brought her free hand over to the top of his head and pulled him up to her, for she wasn't in the mood to bend and possibly kink her neck.

Normally, she'd worry about her dress, for the thought of spilling human blood on it and ruining it, especially if it was a gown he had given to her, would have upset her greatly, but not tonight. She pulled the human up and kissed him without passion. As soon as he shoved his tongue in her mouth she took it – all of it. She sunk her teeth in and swallowed in one gulp, throwing her head back like it was a fish she was catching with her mouth, then she shoved her hand on his chin, closed his mouth shut and placed him with great strength and restraint, down across her lap onto the arm rest of the couch, and bit his neck, drinking him while he tried uselessly to struggle.

The vampire's moves were lightning fast, all of them performed before he could spill a drop of blood from his gaping mouth. He was no match for her strength and her anger and in seconds she had him almost drained, then she let go and pushed him off her and onto the floor, a look of disgust on her face as she did so. "Get off me, trash," she hissed in a wicked whisper, then stood up and straightened out her gown and bodice, one of her breasts having been exposed in the seduction. She smirked again, this time because of the alcohol-tainted blood hitting her system, coursing through her veins and warming her even more so. The vampire stood there and cracked her neck back into place, relishing her new blood supply.

He lay there looking up at her, the last puddle of draining blood trailing out his mouth as he tried to scream, only sputtering blood and saliva instead. Inside his mouth Esmeralda could see a dark red cavity and what was left of his tongue sitting there, trying to wiggle. He was too weak to move, so when she walked over and picked him up by the back of his shirt collar with

one hand and placed him back on the sofa like a human sized pillow, he couldn't fight her. He sat there limp, air leaving his mouth in a wheeze as he gasped for his voice, his eyes petrified with fear as he looked up at her pleading, but his legs were dead weight and his arms too weak to support himself. All he could do was stare at her now, standing over him like an Amazon. Why didn't he see her strength before? His tears began to flow from shock, not sure what he was experiencing. *A vampire? And my blood? Is it all gone? But they don't exist!*

Esmeralda wiped her mouth with her hand, licking it clean in a second, and then retouched her hair like she was in a powder room looking at an invisible mirror. She was perfectly repositioned, immaculate, not a trace of blood or fight on her. She smiled down at him in mild amusement. "Wait here, for the fun and the entertainment is just beginning - you were the opening act." Her fangs made her voice seethe with evil intent and she pointed a long, white elegant finger up to her even redder lips as if to suggest he had a choice as to whether or not to wait there quietly, or yell for his life and leave. She then took off in a flash, her movement too fast for the human eye to register. Mr. Torres reflexively blinked and flinched when she moved, then she disappeared. He gasped for air again as he stared around the now empty room. Maybe it was a dream, he thought, and maybe she had gone down the hall to gather up his family?

Suddenly a crushing pain hit his heart, distracting him from his mouth, so he weakly threw his hand up to his chest to try to stop the muscle from dying. *But it's just a dream...*

Esmeralda glided down the long hallway, her form fragmented, and her speed too fast for Earthly time to accelerate. She tried to slow her moves down by lightly running her hand along the wall, her fingers dancing, lightly tapping its surface as she went. To touch material things kept her in the present place and time. It was so hard as a vampire to stay connected to physical space. Esmeralda had an even harder experience with it since she only came up to feed, and languished at the thought that she *had to feed* on living humans in order to survive. It was a curse and she despised herself for it and unlike the other four vampires in existence, Esmeralda was known to only feed in the Living World; she was the only vampire who lived as an Underworld resident exclusively.

She opened the door to the master bedroom and waltzed in, having taken only one step into the room, yet arriving ten feet forward to the side of the large king bed. She looked down on the woman as she slept on her side, her back to Esmeralda, snoring loudly, with multiple used tissues scattered across the top of the bed by her pillow. She looked dead already, Esmeralda

thought, as she noticed the woman's pale, pasty skin, and the dried snot on and under her nose. The vampire suddenly lost her appetite. She stood there debating whether the mother would suite her needs, for it was males she detested at the moment. She turned and walked out of the room, closing the door as she did so forcibly, so that the door frame cracked and bent, locking the door in a permanently closed position.

She strolled into a closed room without even bothering to open the door and walked across to the two brothers sitting on the floor next to each other playing a video game on the television. The older one looked up as she appeared before them and said a quick, but startled "Hey," as he dropped his video game controller, stunned by her dark beauty. The younger one was still glued to the television screen. She smiled silently and in an instant, she had them both by the backs of their necks in her hands. She effortlessly slammed their heads together, catching them as the blow knocked them out, limp in her arms like laundry. She gathered them and strolled out of the room, one in each arm.

George Torres sat there limp and almost lifeless. Tears continued to run down his face as he thought of his children, not even thinking of his wife, and he prayed silently to God to protect and spare them. As he did this, the phone began to ring on the table next to him. He had forgotten it was there and he reached out to grab it, accidentally knocking it off the table onto the floor at his feet. He couldn't bend down to get it, the movement too much for his dying body, so he slid himself off the sofa and laid there in a crumpled up heap. He made himself fall over onto his side, so that he could stare at the phone laying inches from his face. He grabbed at it with his hand and struggled to bring it to his ear. He could hear several hellos, and he knew it was his assistant. He had been having an affair with her for the past six months.

"George?" Her voice repeated his name as he tried to gasp his words into the receiver, until finally she started screaming into the phone at him. "Are you okay?! George?! Answer me!"

Tears pooled along the bridge of his nose as he listened to her frantic words while lying on his side, partially propped up by the sofa. Suddenly, the body of his youngest boy fell down in front of him, the boy's face rolling over so that it lay right next to his face. He gasped, and the phone slid down his face and neck, resting on the ground, blood dripping down its receiver.

Esmeralda picked it up, licked its front, and folded it in her hand, her fingers snapping it into several tiny pieces while the frame bent and molded to her palm. She dropped the older boy

with her other arm, tossing him next to his younger brother on the floor, their dad looking on horrified. Throwing the phone off to her side and realizing she had probably only a few minutes before police would most likely show up, ruining her human dinner party, she grabbed the older boy by his hair and bit into his neck ravenously, all the while staring at the father, who's mouth remained permanently opened, his face pale and his breathing shallow. She drank the boy completely, ripping out most of the fleshy part of his throat in the process, then tossed him aside casually like dirty laundry.

The boy flew across the room and hit the side of the piano, landing in a heap, dead on impact, his neck snapped in two. Now frustrated and furious as she stood there realizing Mr. Torres was dying and wouldn't be around to see it all unfold her way, the vampire wanted to scream but before she could let out a sound, she watched Mr. Torres breath in his last gasp.

"Asshole can't even give me the time of day," she growled, not referring to the human on the ground below her but pissed at the world anyway, the vampire reached down and ripped his lower jaw off his face, crumbling his teeth in her fingers like they were made from clay.

Now enraged by his departure and not feeling better with his mandible in her hand, the vampire went to grab the younger boy, who was still unconscious on the ground, and reached for his arm, bringing his hand to her mouth to bite when out of the corner of her eye, she saw a tiny figure standing in the hallway. Esmeralda looked over her shoulder and smiled wickedly at the little girl several feet away across the room; the couch hiding her daddy as he lay there, only his one arm lying in view.

Little Lucinda stood there, her long curly black hair in tiny ringlets, framing her face. She was dressed in a pink nightgown with matching fuzzy sleepers. She held an oversized brown teddy bear in one hand by its arm, the rest of it lying behind her on the ground.

"Hi." The little girl said softly, smiling shyly, rubbing the hair out of her eyes with her free hand.

Esmeralda walked over as slowly as she could, casually kicking Mr. Torres' hand behind view and knelt down in front of the girl. She couldn't have been more than three feet tall, weighing maybe thirty pounds. She was a mere morsel, nothing more, but she had something in common with the vampire witch. She had strikingly brilliant green eyes and her dark hair fell half way down her little back, framing her body as she posed with confidence. Esmeralda hesitated, smiling again as she spoke. "Go back to bed little one, for I have no use for someone

so small,” her voice soothing and sweet, her teeth having retreated into her mouth, she kept her anger in check.

“Were you going to bite my brother?” Lucinda asked, her voice calm and very matter of fact. She stood there bringing her bear to her chest and hugging it, her large green eyes beautiful and bold.

Esmeralda’s eyes danced with Lucinda’s. “No, child, I’ve had enough tonight. He will awaken soon. I will put him in his bed, only if you get into yours. Now, is that a deal?”

Lucinda nodded her head yes, her curls bouncing as she did so. She turned and slowly walked back to her room, turning around every few feet to watch Esmeralda kneeling there looking back at her, intently watching her leave.

As soon as she walked into her room and shut her door, the vampire quickly shot over to the boy, drained him of his precious supply without any hesitation, ripping off his hand after sucking his wrist then scooped him up and returned him to his room. She then stood in the hallway holding both doorknobs to each child’s room, the doors facing each other, and closed them with so much force, the frames bent and twisted under her strength.

The blood was coursing through her now, but she didn’t feel as she thought she would. There was no remorse – there never was with Esmeralda – but there was also no triumph, no revenge, no feeling of fullness or satiety. She felt powerful and energetic again thanks to her feeding, but it didn’t fill the hole in her dark heart. A woman scorned was Esmeralda.

She waltzed out the front door, not looking back, ripping it off its hinges and carrying it with her until she got down the driveway to pitch it into the street. Holding her arms out she floated upward, spinning around and around in the air, watching as she ascended upward, the familiar red and blue flashing lights coming up the street in her direction. They were always too late to do their human counterparts any good she thought as she levitated in the air above the house. *If only those idiots would look up to the sky, they’d get an eye full.* The wind suddenly took her airy body beyond the house and towards the ocean, the breeze shooting her out to the horizon.

Once she gained height, Esmeralda turned and flew towards land again, her direction due north. She wanted to pay someone else a visit.

The driveway seemed inviting enough from the darkness of the sky. From a straight fall, without skipping a beat, Esmeralda waltzed up the sidewalk to the much smaller, simpler, lower

middle class home; smirking at the simple landscape and cheap pottery around the doorway as she approached.

Traveling up the path to the front porch gave her just enough time to change her black, knee-high, military boots into what suited her most at the moment. Gathering up her hair and pulling it back, then straightening up her gown and coat, Esmeralda was simply glowing with the borrowed blood. She rang the doorbell and waited breathlessly.

Chapter Eighteen

Conformity Can Pay Off

He ate lunch with Professor Jenkins, or Marty as he was told to call the professor when they weren't in class. It annoyed David greatly to think that once again, here was another old person trying too hard to establish first name relationships when it didn't ever matter to him anyway. His frustration quickly lightened up as he watched Marty come into the room carrying gifts smuggled into prison – a small bag of chips, two sodas, and a candy bar.

As the hour lunch came to an end and he filled himself with junk food, David was ready for a nap, but no such luck, for as he walked Marty to the door, Pastor Sampson showed up in full preacher garb, Bible in hand, ready to work on his newest fallen student.

Sighing repeatedly as the two men exchanged quick pleasantries, smiling at the appropriate times as they talked about him, occasionally involving him in their discussion, David waited in painful agony. As he stood there waiting for them to finish, he turned to his bed and sat on it, preparing for another torture session of 'seek and ye shall be misled' with the overzealous Pastor Sampson.

His temples began to pound in anticipation of the brain washing. His very first day at the school was a sit down, 'get to know your Bible' visit with the Pastor himself, and David showed off his biblical knowledge effortlessly, stunning the Pastor and making him speechless as he sat there behind his smug little desk, leaning back in his chair to ponder what he could say to a student so well versed in the Bible. David smirked now, thinking how incredibly safe and boring that 'get to know' session was – *that damn Pastor couldn't say anything at all! I bet he was too worried I'd catch and call him out if he'd tried to twist and manipulate the scriptures to support his ideas as God's Word according to Pastor Sampson.* Yeah, it was a real eye opener that day, a real 'clash of the Pastor and rebellious student' moment David thought as he sat there and tried to look calm and pleasant as he fought through the massive headache now engulfing his brain like wild fire. *Please go away...please, please, please move down to my feet and give my head a break?* He silently pleaded with his skull but it was no use.

Pastor Sampson walked over, bringing his chair with him, and sat opposite David, a serious look on his face as he placed his Bible gently on his lap, resting his hands on it like it was a loaded gun. David tried not to look at it, but it silently screamed its presence, as all weapons do. "Good afternoon, Dave."

Great, here we go. David quickly flinched at the overused nickname and the sound of the man's pompous voice.

"I thought we'd have some time to get to know one another in The Word, while quietly hiding away in here uninterrupted from the hustle and bustle of the school scene. What do you say?"

Do I have a fucking choice? David forced another smile – *This moment right here is proof God fucking hates me.* His headache like a siren in his cranium, he responded with forced restraint. "Yes, sir, I guess that...would be...fine." He tried not to sound like he was choking out the words he'd just spoken, but his throat hurt to speak so unnaturally. "It's just that I have a headache," he quickly added, just in case the pastor caught on to his hesitation. He was right.

"Well, yes, I wondered why you looked like you were in pain there for a second or two. Shall we postpone until later, perhaps, or maybe...say...tomorrow?" David watched him begin to thump the bottom of the Good Book with the palms of his hand, enjoying the power he was wielding.

Son of a bitch! "No, no, no. I'm fine, really. It's been a long day of talking and frankly, I'm not used to all this attention. I would like you to stay, since you went through the trouble to come down here to see me." He chose not to smile, for that would look too cheesy and forced, so he lowered his head and pulled his left knee up to his chin, and sat there, rocking back and forth gently.

"Well, I do appreciate you're thinking of my schedule, Dave."

Another flinch and David continued to rock back and forth.

"I am very busy, but I also wanted to come down here and see you again, especially since I had to leave so quickly this morning. I can tell you, however, that I am looking forward to our visit, after hearing good things from Professor Jenkins and Dr. Towers, both seem to like your company. I find it impressive and slightly puzzling that a student so young can captivate people he just barely meets – don't you agree?" His voice was curious, yet it had an overwhelming air of suspicion.

Okay, inject something cliché and slightly stupid, but disarming. "Uh...well, considering I'm the one you're referring to, I guess I wouldn't really know whether or not I captivate people so quickly - as you say. I just try to be myself, that's all. I don't really know how to be anyone else – I mean - why would anyone want to act like anyone else?" *Yes! I nailed it with that load*

of crap, neatly packaging all that youthful stupidity with a big, red bow. He looked at the pastor, his eyes matter of fact. Although David was laughing inside over his words spoken, deep down he knew his rambling was not all untrue. It bothered him on a mostly subconscious level when he'd realize the control he had over others. Somewhere in David's soul, he just wanted to be normal.

The pastor smiled, appearing more disarmed, or so David hoped, and suggested he reach over to retrieve his Bible still perched at the foot of his bed, so that they could begin their journey together.

Two hours later, his headache throbbing with enough force to explode, his teeth hurting from the tension that was spreading down to his upper and lower jaw, David closed his eyes and gratefully bowed his head for the first time while Pastor Sampson said a final prayer for the end of their meeting - or something along those lines – he wasn't paying much attention.

He didn't have to walk him to the door. He sat back and watched Pastor Sampson excuse himself and offer to find the door without help. As soon as he was alone, David fell to his side like a sack of potatoes. He crawled to the head of the bed and closed his eyes, pulling the blanket over his head to disappear from the camera buzz nearby.

Waking three hours later, more tired than ever before, with an intense ache along his backside, David slowly rose, feeling first behind him for what felt like nails sticking out of his bed but finding nothing. He then rolled over and pulled his pants down slightly to see the side of his ass, since he had no mirror, but still saw nothing besides his own white skin. The sting, however, was incredibly intense, worsening with each movement taken, so he lay back down and thought about what it could mean. It didn't take more than a few seconds to register what it was, because he'd felt that sting before numerous times. Bolting out of bed, David stood there in shock, wondering what Dillon had done to deserve such a beating, for by judging the way he felt at that moment, he couldn't imagine his brother experiencing even half of it.

Dillon didn't do well with pain stimulus. He'd cry when he would get splinters from the tree in their front yard; pain made him whimper way too easily. "What did you do, Dil?" He whispered to the room as he began pacing, pulling at his hair in madness at not being near his little brother, let alone knowing the cause so that he could at least revel in Dillon's disobedience. *What did he do?! What could he have done to deserve a lashing such as this?!* "I can't even remember the last time he was whipped." He looked up at the camera and quickly ran his fingers

through his hair again, trying not to panic but feeling a rush of sadistic joy. He walked over to the sink to rinse the shock off his face and collect himself, remembering again that he was being recorded.

He thought how strange it was not to have a mirror above the sink as he splashed cold water. He finished and looked up to the wall, where a mirror should be, and stared. Although he was never really cognizant of any mirrors at home, didn't spend too much time looking into any of them, he wanted one now. He wanted to see himself, to identify who he was again, for it seemed as if this school was already trying to change him. "Is this hell?" He whispered, silently answering himself, only to walk backward to the edge of his bed.

Within a few minutes, the door to the room opened and Professor Jenkins walked in, not carrying a dinner tray, but smiling as if he had a secret to tell.

"Hello David. I have great news. Pastor Sampson has agreed to your early release from isolation tonight before dinner instead of tomorrow morning!" He stood there beaming, as if David was being honored with an invitation to join the President of the United States for dinner.

David looked up and had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something nasty and rude, and instead painfully half-smiled and slowly got up, his backside still stinging. He grimaced as he did so.

"Is everything alright? Did you hurt yourself in here?" Marty looked worried.

"No, no, of course not, I just feel sore, you know, achy muscles from the fighting I guess. Just give me a minute to pack my things before I leave my room." He stretched quickly, looked around, then walked over to the toilet and flushed it. He turned to the professor and smiled. "Okay, I think I've got everything."

"You're very funny, David. I must say, I don't think I've met anyone as interesting and as entertaining as you. Let's get out of here before the big man changes his mind - shall we?" He motioned his arm to the door and started walking. David followed silently behind him.

As they walked across the grounds of the school, David's mind began to wander again. *What the hell did Dillon do to get a meeting with The Belt? Why does he do this shit when I'm not around, when I've only been begging him to do anything remotely bad since birth? And why the early release from prison? What did it do for me? Was it the excessive brown nosing, because I honestly didn't think I burrowed in deep enough...*

"Marty, why did I get out early? Did Pastor Sampson tell you?" He asked as they

walked towards the mess hall.

Clearing his throat, the professor said, "I know for a fact that your mother called to check on you, and according to the pastor, she sounded fairly emotional. He reassured her that you were doing much better and we were looking out for you, but she was not very satisfied." He then added, "And this conversation stays between us, understood?" He stopped walking and turned to David. "So please David, a word of advice? Keep your nose clean and stay out of trouble?" Marty turned back into the professor as he opened the double doors to the very noisy mess hall, and held them open for David to enter.

"Yeah, I get it." David said quietly, resolution in his voice as he entered the hall with as much confidence and attitude as ever before.

The hall became a hush of silence. He was sure the rumor mill had been in full swing since his departure, and during his absence he thought he was either made a hero and the greatest warrior of all time, or he was the devil in a school uniform. Neither description suited him.

As he walked by the aisles of tables, each row shuffled over to allow him to sit, however he ignored the silent offers and walked to the last table and stopped to look over. "I guess I'll sit here," he whispered, then placed his dinner tray down right as he heard his name being called in a distinct, heavy, feminine Spanish accent.

"David! David! Over here - come over here!" Jose stood there waving his arms like he was on a runway at the airport, flagging a plane to land. Some of the boys started laughing, and the noise level crept back up as David picked up his tray and walked over to Jose, who was beaming with pride and excitement. "Hi Jose," he said quietly, with much restraint, as he sat down with a flop.

"We've missed you so, so much David. You just don't know, really! You just don't know!" Jose had his hand out in a feminine gesture, then he grabbed David by the shoulders and hugged him, screaming like a groupie all the while. David sat there stiff, his fork in one hand, his other hand holding onto the table to keep him from pushing Jose off. That would be a mistake, he thought, just let him have his dinner celebration.

"Nice to have you back, David, however, I hope letting you out early has changed your perspective on violence and the evil it brings to those who choose to use it." Jimmy pushed his glasses back up his nose as he sat across from David, Lance sitting next to him, both watching and anticipating his reaction.

“Yeah, you know me. Change is my middle name...and there is no ‘evil’ in the word ‘change,’” David replied, as if he were reciting scripture, while opening his milk carton, then motioning it as an offering to Lance without saying a word, a non verbal reminder of their past. Lance frowned and glared back at him silently.

“That’s right, you know. Good David, good answer.” Jose said, nodding his head in agreement with himself while he drank his milk with his pinky finger sticking straight out. David chuckled, then reached out and gently folded Jose’s finger next to his other fingers on the milk carton. The giddy queen giggled, more from the touch of David’s hand on his than the gesture, and inhaled the milk he was swallowing. It shot out his nose in all his horror.

“Whoa there! Don’t blow your milk wad!” Lance yelled out.

Jose turned bright red at the comment and hid his face behind his napkin while David looked over at him with no expression on his face. He wasn’t amused by Lance joining in and he wasn’t concerned Jose was mortified.

After his brief dinner appearance, David went to his room, after excusing himself from Jose and Jimmy, both trying to keep him there. He took a much needed shower, then returned to his dorm room and changed his clothes, donning a pair of navy blue sweats and a white tee shirt. It felt good to get out of his clothes and change. He stared at the bathroom mirror for quite a while before he left for his room, enjoying a mirror like he’d been stranded on a desert island for way too long and had forgotten what he looked like. Gawking at his face, he swore he looked different, although he couldn’t make out what it was exactly. It disturbed him greatly though, and he had to make himself leave the mirror to return to his room. He fell onto his cot and immediately felt the discomfort of the springs in the mattress.

No sooner had he laid down when the knock on the door made him flinch. “Yeah?!” He yelled out, hesitation in his voice, although he remained on his bed, his backside still throbbing from earlier.

The door opened slowly and Joel stuck his head in. “Can I come in, your majesty?” He smirked and entered before David could answer. “I saw you at dinner, but I figured we’d cause too much of a stir if we sat together right after your release from prison, but I had to see you. So anyway...,” he hesitated, not sure as to whether or not to come over and hug his new friend or to remain standing and act cool and aloof so as not to blow his hero worship. He suddenly realized he was hesitating in his speech and now had David’s full attention. “Uh...you’ve become quite

the evil celebrity around here and that's not necessarily a good thing, because there are some pretty scary characters at this school. A few of them have been talking about you." He decided to come over and sit on the edge of David's bed, close enough to show concern and interest, but not overbearingly clingy and invading. He saw David inspecting his face and he froze. *I must look horrible!*

David smiled briefly as he took in all that was Joel, his only friend if one didn't count Dillon, and though his eye didn't look too bad, the purple a nice color to pair with that crazy blue head of hair, and the bruising was barely visible.

That bastard of a Pastor over exaggerated. "Really? Hmmm, didn't realize I'd turned into Satan." A short pause and then he spoke again, his words drifting off. "That's going to make things a lot more difficult for me at home..." He quickly noticed Joel on his bed and said with some annoyance in his controlled voice, "You know, I've tolerated it up until now, but people need to start staying off my bed when I'm lying in it..." He turned to look at the ceiling that was the frame of his bunk bed to keep from looking at Joel. For some reason, he just didn't want to warm up to him again; he felt he couldn't afford the casualty of losing his only voluntary friend once he was able to leave this place and once again, David thought, his mind panicking now, there was something about Joel's effect on him. It made him nervous.

"Fine! Where the fuck am I supposed to sit then?" Joel replied, sounding just as irritated, which pleasantly shocked David. He reluctantly moved to the floor to lean against the wall between the two bunk beds. "Look, if you don't want me here, I'll go." His voice suddenly hurt and dejected, reminded David of Dillon again. He sighed and looked over at Joel.

"No...you're fine. I've just had a crummy day of being force fed bullshit, that's all. And as far as people around here talking about me, that's never going to change. I'll always be talked about, even when I'm gone." A short pause, "I did a lot of thinking when I was in the pokey, and I'm a little apprehensive about getting close to anyone here, because I know I'm not staying for very long. Unfortunately, you are that particular someone and I don't mean to push you away, but I am, so it's been nice knowing you...goodbye." He looked back up at the bed frame above him, his voice showing no emotion. He was so good at it, he felt like a master emotional self-manipulator.

Joel laughed out painfully, his jaw still achy from yesterday, then pulled his knees up to his chin and sat there quietly, trying not to look too stunned or emotionally winded. The sting

from David's words hurt him more than anything else, and he wanted to leave, taking his pride and ego with him, to never talk to his friend again. He stayed though, partly because he was stunned, but mostly because he didn't really care about his pride or his ego. He could leave them both here, just to stay with him. He had thought of nothing else since the fight. He was driving himself crazy waiting for David's return, and now, he sat there not wanting to believe the words just spoken. Anger swelled up in his chest and he looked over at David finally, not wanting to give up on him.

"I'm not leaving, and it really pisses me off to hear you dismiss me like I'm yesterday's news! I don't plan on being sent away, and when you get out of here, probably by escaping, knowing you, then I guess I'll be your shadow, because I won't be able to stay here when you're gone. I have nowhere else to go...so there! Deal with that, He-who-talks-with-birds." His voice shaky, he sat there and stared at David's side profile, watching a slow smile develop across the one side of David's face he could see, warming his own heart as he watched with relief. He sighed as quietly as he could.

They stayed there in the room until the evening bell rang, neither one saying a word, in a comfortable silent cocoon together. As the other boys came in and invaded their space, Joel got up and brushed off the invisible hurt from his clothes, "See you in the morning, Dave." He didn't look back, but his voice showed determination and confidence, now that he knew David had silently relented to continue their relationship. We're a team, he thought, as he tried not to walk out of the room with a skip in his step.

David answered quietly, although loud enough for Joel to hear, "Yep, see you in the a.m. You'd better show up."

Chapter Nineteen

Tea on You

The sound of the doorbell chime echoed throughout the house like a warning. Dillon was up in his room putting away his clean, folded clothes given by his mother. The two of them chose to stay home from the game to ‘clean the house before the weekend.’ It was his mother’s excuse and it worked. Dillon didn’t mind doing house work. It kept him busy for the most part and more importantly, it gave his tired mind a mini vacation.

Dillon paused and looked over at his bedroom door. Suddenly the sound of the front door unlocking and opening echoed up the stairs. He dropped his clothes and staggered forward, holding onto the front of his dresser as he heard his mother say, “Of course my dear, please come in and get out of the cold!” He froze as he heard the clicking sound of unfamiliar high heels under him, for his room was directly above the living room. His bare feet felt icy cold on the floor. *Why is it suddenly so cold?* Dillon began to panic. *The cold seems to always bring bad things and my mother is down there...*

Mrs. Smith stood there smiling as she opened the front door. The Smiths had been getting home visits from quite a few of the high school students as well as inquiries from Mrs. Sands and a few of the faculty at Vista High since David’s absence from home. Word had spread at school of his parents’ congregation of The Grass Roots, and people were coming over to ask questions and learn more about what the Smiths were preaching. Mother smiled proudly as she walked over, thinking about how her second son’s influence at school was indirectly spreading the Word of God to those touched by him. *He is bringing people to Christ and he doesn’t even know it yet!* Suddenly, like a knee jerk reaction, all the crippling motherly guilt kicked in and deflated her spirit by the time she’d reached the door.

“Good evening, Madame. I was wondering if I could please use your phone. My car broke down near here, and this seemed like such a friendly home.”

“Of course my dear, please come in and get out of the cold!” Mrs. Smith smiled sweetly as she took Esmeralda’s outstretched hand and guided her into the living room, even though, once again, there weren’t any steps to take. “Please, have a seat near the fire! My, my, you look gorgeous in your outfit, my dear.” Pushing her slightly disheveled hair off her face and back into her bun, Mrs. Smith looked embarrassed. “I never get dressed up – too busy keeping track of this household.” She paused and the look on her face turned sad. She glanced away for a

second.

Esmeralda, having walked in a bee line over to the fireplace to look at the array of family photos perched on the mantle, turned her head away and tried not to smile, for she knew the cause of this mother's sadness. How she loved family photos! They said so much. "Your children are lovely," her voice very matter of fact, as she held up a family portrait taken last year, and eyed both David and Dillon, who were standing next to each other. They were gorgeous little human specks, she decided, but nothing special. She breathed out a sigh of relief. *There is no competition after all! He will see through their human flaws in a day, maybe two.*

"Thank you. I'm so sorry! I haven't introduced myself! My name is Sara Smith and it's a pleasure to meet you." She stuck her hand out to shake Esmeralda's, who suddenly paused at the nice gesture.

Hesitating first, and then shaking hands with Sara, she answered, "Esmeralda...Jones...a pleasure to finally meet you." She felt another presence in the house, and glanced up at the ceiling.

Sara paused at hearing the word 'finally' then brought her mind back to the issue at hand. "My dear! Your hands are ice cold! Please, sit down here on the couch, and I'll fix you a cup of tea, alright?" Sara's voice was sweet and inviting, for she had to pull her hand away as quickly as possible, since the cold was seeping up her arm and the pain, lingering in her fingers, but she didn't want to be rude to the nice young woman, and Esmeralda was in no rush to leave. She returned the smile and walked over to the couch, sitting there still holding onto the picture. Sara went to walk to the kitchen, then quickly turned back and took the picture from her guest. "I'll put this back for you."

Esmeralda watched the picture leave her and return to its place, the connection with her leaving a witch's impression. *Oh, the things a witch could do with a family picture...*

Sara quickly scuttled like a mother into the kitchen to start the tea. Esmeralda leaned back on the mediocre couch that looked used and abused, probably from five children she thought, smirking, then looked over at the stairs, waiting for him to come down. "Come out, come out wherever you are," she whispered wickedly towards the stairs. She crossed her legs and let her dress fall off to both sides, admiring her own newly pink flesh. She brushed her hand along her thigh and felt the blood gather and pool under her touch. It was an electrical charge to feel such a warm pulsation. She wished it lasted longer than a night.

It didn't take but a minute when she heard footsteps on the stairs. Dillon walked down each step with a determination to protect his mother growing rapidly. As he turned and walked into the living room, he froze again, locking his eyes on hers. He knew immediately the place where he'd seen them before.

She smiled as she looked him over, her head leaning back on her arm, perched on the side of the couch cushion as she brushed her fingers up against her mouth and chin. It was an innocent, sweet and demure appearing vampire sitting on the couch in the Smith's living room – a far cry away from the ruthless, hostile and overly vicious Esmeralda the Torres' family had to endure in their living room, but Dillon didn't know that.

He was beyond beautiful, Esmeralda knew this already, but admitting it to herself now would kill her. Taking him in completely with her sharp, discerning eyes, she summed him up in a quick second.

His human features are definitely unique, why, perfect would be the word used to describe every inch of him. Damn. That pure porcelain skin, his almost white, blond hair, and those light, almost clear blue eyes penetrate and violate mine deeply.

The vampire Esmeralda actually held her breath for a few seconds while taking in Dillon's presence, trying hard not to notice his magnificent soul glittering there before her.

If this moment was a scene in a comic book, both the hero and the villain would be without words – a realistically silent standoff, set against the middle class suburban sprawl of a boring Oceanside community.

Both sized the other up while time almost stood still. Dillon tried as best he could to keep himself from falling down under the stare of what he feared was a powerful evil entity, not knowing that his simple presence had momentarily crippled this same one he feared. Esmeralda on the other hand, was beginning to realize she might actually have some competition from the human world she so despised.

Dillon began to fret, not knowing what to do or say, while the vampire sat quietly and watched him. He could see right through her though – literally - and the suspense of already knowing the probable future given he and his mother's vulnerability was now twisting his stomach into knots. He took a few seconds to scan his memory banks about the occult and vampires. *It can't be this easy to sense one, especially when they disguise so well – wait – aren't vampires fictitious? Oh God! Pull it together Dil!*

The fear began to take over, forcing Dillon to accept the fact of the moment: he saw her transparency as a vampire out of disguise, and here she was, already invited into his home, sitting on his couch. He focused on the rate and depth of his breathing to keep the fear at bay but it was difficult to do. He needed to be sharp and hyper-alert right now, and fear had a way of crippling everyone – this much he could gather from personal experience. He blinked as he scanned her form, watching the blood swishing up and down the exposed part of her legs. *Who am I kidding? This is real, she's actually here and that's not her blood.* Knowing his family was in jeopardy, Dillon's knees gave way. Fear was once again having its way with him, immobilizing him. Not wanting to fall down right there, he quickly reached over to one of two arm chairs positioned opposite the couch, and fell into it, not taking his eyes off her transparent body, but avoiding them as best he could.

She smiled at him again, her voice suddenly returning. *He's checking out my body, the little pervert.* “Are you alright young one? Feeling a little *weak*?” Her eyes tried to meet his, but he continued to avert her gaze, feeling already like he'd lost the standoff. He turned his head and watched the fire, while keeping her in his peripheral vision.

He knows who I am - how interesting, a mortal with an advanced mind set. He is too intuitive for his own good.

“W-who sent you here and w-wh-what do you want because you're nn-not w-welcome.” His voice was too shaky so he stopped himself, only to sit on his trembling hands to keep them from her view. *Please stop the fear—*

“Now, now, let's not be rude, when I've only just met...*your mother.* Besides, you and I both know she invited me into this astounding dwelling.” Esmeralda smiled wickedly as she leaned back and rested her arms across the back of the couch like she was a furniture model on The Price Is Right. *I can feast on the mother, if this one isn't available. The Dark Lord never mentioned the rest of the family...let's see...that makes five humans ready for the taking.*

Dillon shot her a horrified glance, then looked down again as her eyes tried to dance with his. He knew about vampires, knew all about their powers, but did he ever expect to have one sitting on his couch in his living room?! He felt he could read her thoughts, could feel her sizing his entire family and right then, as if on cue his mother appeared and smiled at him while she placed a porcelain tea set and a bowl of cookies on the coffee table between them. The nausea hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Here we are! My dear, your tea, it will warm you - hello darling! Glad you came down to sit with us! Would you like some tea, Dillon?” Mrs. Smith was beaming at her youngest, not noticing his flinching at the sound of his name spoken aloud.

“No thanks, Mother,” he was whispering harshly to shoo her away but it didn’t work. She had to lean down to hear him now, which blocked his view of the vampire, so he raised his voice to repel her back to her standing position. Finally Mother stood up to give him room to breathe, but he didn’t enjoy the view again of pale legs with red streaks traveling up and down them like rain. He shuddered and tried to look away, but it was just too much to have such a dark presence so closely invasive. “I just need to sit by the fire for a minute.”

“Hmm...you look pale Sweetie - have a cookie.” Mrs. Smith handed him one of her extra large homemade oatmeal cookies – a Grandma Smith recipe and a family favorite.

Looking at her with urgency, he whispered, “I don’t need a cookie, Mother.” He shook his head, then shook it again, only to reluctantly take the cookie after observing his mother wasn’t taking it away from his face and now it was taking its turn blocking his view of the vampire sitting in waiting. He grabbed it then glanced over at Esmeralda but she was gone. He shot off the chair, almost falling over face first into the coffee table. He frantically looked around until he saw her again, avoiding his mother’s complaining as he took his foot off the smashed cookie like it was dog shit.

Esmeralda was standing behind his mother near the other side of the couch, smiling at him while holding her tea, tapping a long, red tipped finger nail against the side of the cup. *He’s just ever so amusing...*

“Dillon! Child, what is the matter with you?! And now I have another mess to clean!”

Trying to laugh it off, Mother glanced over at her guest and shook her head. Esmeralda played along and nodded her head in silent agreement, like she understood how children could make messes when she hadn’t a clue and more importantly to her, she didn’t fucking care.

Dillon tried to control his ears but they turned instantly red as he took a step backward and put his hands in his jean pockets to keep them from view. Now his thighs vibrated from the trembling contact but he kept his calm.

“I think he might need to lie down Mrs. Smith,” the vampire said with an air of sarcastic concern in her voice.

Dillon looked over at her again, concentrating on her tea cup. “I’m f-fine M-miss, or

Madame, or w-whatever you are.”

His mother gasped as she gave her son a real look of shock, her hands on her hips. Dillon averted his gaze again from the vampire and frowned, then sat down slowly, his backside still throbbing from his father’s belt earlier, his knees weak again, and his hands shaking more violently. Was he getting braver with this new confidence? He could only hope so.

“Dillon Jacob Smith! What has gotten into you?! Upstairs - NOW!”

“M-mother? Have you offered the phone – that is w-w-why you’re h-here, ma’am, isn’t it?” Dillon looked over at Esmeralda, his eyes glaring. She continued smiling, recognizing his stutter and enjoying it silently. Her smile fueled his anger and he spoke louder, this time without missing a beat. “The phone is in the kitchen, right next to the cross of Christ mounted on the wall next to it. YOU CAN’T MISS IT.” He looked back at his mother, who looked like she could cry with anguish over her son’s rudeness. *She’ll get over it...*

Mother, trying to regain her composure, after smiling over at Esmeralda, lowered her voice and gave Dillon the ‘don’t mess with me’ look. “I said go upstairs, Dillon. Now move it mister—“

“It’s quite alright Mrs. Smith. The boy is right, I do have somewhere to go to, and I do appreciate the tea.” Esmeralda smiled and walked over to the coffee table, placing her cup and saucer down while Dillon moved back in his chair to get as far away from her as he could, even though there was another empty chair between him and her. He knew it wouldn’t matter if he was on the other side of the house at this point. Once invited in, a vampire can go anywhere, through walls and floors and certainly across a room in a human heartbeat. *So what is she waiting for?*

She turned and strolled into the kitchen to span the room. Sure enough, the small and quaint wooden cross was hanging next to the phone, and she smiled sheepishly as she walked over to it, listening to the two humans talking back and forth in their hushed tones. Her hearing exceptional, Esmeralda smiled as she listened to the boy caution his mother about letting strangers into their home, encouraging her to send this woman on her way.

This Dillon child was more than she anticipated, and Esmeralda was jealous as only a witch could be. His brother would make her feel worse however, for he was her kind and she knew it to be true. This one however, was beyond the reaches and eventual confines of her underground home. He was not going to be her competition. Relieved, she picked up the phone

and spoke to no one as she seductively whispered into the receiver. “The Dark Lord will not be able to acquire this one – he’s not ours for the taking.” She hung up the phone, the dial tone still humming in her ear.

“My dear Esmeralda, you haven’t touched your tea! Please come in here and sit down ... please?” Sara smiled as her guest strolled slowly back into the room. Dillon rolled his eyes, watching his mother, ‘the Hostess with the Most-est,’ hurriedly get up to greet her guest, handing Esmeralda the cup and saucer, while he leaned forward in his chair ready to pounce if anything were to happen. Smiling as if she could tell, Esmeralda took the cup and ignored him, dismissing him like he wasn’t a threat at all.

“My son has had a rough day, my dear, however, he *will* behave himself,” Mrs. Smith shot Dillon a harsh look, then turned and sat on the couch, motioning for her guest to join her by patting on the cushion next to her. “Did you get a hold of someone, or do you need a ride? My husband will be home soon with the other kids, so he can take you where you need to go—“

“Mother!” Dillon gasped, not sure which comment disturbed him the most, the one about them being alone, or the one about her getting a ride from their family.

“Dillon, please! DO NOT interrupt!”

Esmeralda smiled at Mrs. Smith, who seemed smitten by her, Dillon could tell. *Is she hypnotizing her?* He knew he had to do something to jolt their shared connection. He shot a look at the cup of tea and thought about it exploding, then told it to explode, then pictured it exploding. He grabbed at both arm rests of his chair with his hands and squeezed them, sending his energy across the room with his stare. He screamed the words ‘come apart now!’ in his head three times right as Esmeralda was lifting the cup of tea to take a false sip. As the tea touched her lips the cup containing it exploded, sending shattered pieces of Grandma Smith’s china everywhere, ricocheting off the wall, hitting his mother in the chest and spilling scalding hot tea down the front of Esmeralda’s gown. She sat there holding the little handle between her index finger and her thumb - the only part of the cup still remaining intact – and did not flinch as the hot liquid seeped down her chest.

Holding it up to her eyes like she’d never seen it before, Esmeralda stared at the intact, tiny, white china handle for a millisecond as time slowed down to almost a standstill and marveled at how such a delicate piece could hold itself together. She placed it on the intact saucer plate she was still holding and put it on the coffee table, without a hint of surprise in her

movements; each one executed perfectly like multiple still frames seen through a camera Dillon might have been looking through. He watched her do this without blinking, realizing as she moved slowly that his mother wasn't moving at all. *Is time at a standstill and what just happened?! Why am I able to watch and not my mother?!*

As soon as the saucer touched the coffee table and Esmeralda looked up at Dillon, she winked and in a flash, was facing Mrs. Smith again, as if to place herself back in position to start the play of events. Like clockwork, he watched in horror as his mother suddenly gasped and shot up off the couch, picking up some of the pieces that had hit her and bounced off her chest like little rubber balls. China was everywhere. She didn't seem to suffer any injuries, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Esmeralda slowly rose from her seat and gave Dillon a curious look over, realizing maybe for the first time why the Dark Lord was possibly drawn to him. He had power in his eyes – she'd seen it when she laid her eyes on him the first time tonight, and now, there was an urgency in the air to do something, either act and feed her need, or leave before the Dark Lord feels her presence there, although she thought her mark had probably already been made. The pond was rippling from this newest stone tossed.

"I am terribly sorry for the tea cup – I guess I don't know my own strength," Esmeralda gushed, trying to appear slightly hurt from the hot liquid on her chest but Dillon wasn't fooled. He watched her intently, noting how each of her moves was carefully executed, as if she painfully tried not to move too fast.

Heart pounding and head spinning, Dillon took in the magnitude of the meaning behind the little explosion, all the while sitting in the chair, stunned. Mother, on the other hand, was busy frantically running around now, wiping off Esmeralda's dress and the couch like both were valuable collectibles.

"My dear! Are you burned?! Do you need cold water on your chest, or do you need to change into some dry clothes?" Mrs. Smith's concern showed all over her face and in her voice as she tried to fix the moment, making Esmeralda more annoyed as she watched the human flutter around her. Esmeralda instead straightened her dress to keep from biting the woman's head off, brushed out the tea that had pooled in her corset lace, and quickly glanced at the front door, a different look on her face Dillon hadn't seen before. "I am *fine*, Madame. I am not burned, not hurt at all as a matter of fact," glancing at Dillon as she said this, while he glared

back at her, watching her saunter over to the door, she continued, enjoying her audience of one. “I must be going for I think I may have overstayed my welcome.”

“Nonsense!” Mrs. Smith followed her to the door, a pleading look to stay on her face.

“L-let her go, Mother,” Dillon whispered, as he slowly got up to watch the vampire leave. He had a sinking suspicion he’d see her again, and right now he was more than puzzled by her quick getaway. He couldn’t possibly believe his little magic trick scared her off. Something bigger had called to her.

As if reading his mind, Esmeralda turned to face him at the door and spoke, her voice cold and chilled as it attempted to caress his face from across the room, “I did enjoy our meeting, but I have dinner waiting for me elsewhere. As a matter of fact, he should be here any minute.” Then turning to Mrs. Smith, she said, “Mrs. Smith, you are very hospitable, so...thank you for your...*kindness*.” It was killing her to speak such pleasantries but she pulled it off like a pro vampire slut.

“My pleasure, my dear! Be safe, because you never know out there, being a beautiful young woman alone at night can be risky. God bless.” Mrs. Smith smiled, while Esmeralda slightly flinched, for she wasn’t sure what upset her most, the blessing from God above or the comparison to a damsel in distress. Foolish woman, she thought. *You have no idea who you’re talking to*. She shot Mrs. Smith a quick smile of regret at not being able to rip her head off. She then turned to Dillon, “Good night Dillon. It was interesting, our time tonight. I must say I did not intend for it to end this way – and it’s been a long, terribly long time since I’ve been surprised...by anyone in this *world*.”

“Dillon?” Mrs. Smith turned and waited for a reply from her youngest.

“Uh, yeah, *bye*,” his voice cold and biting, Dillon finally returned the stare, locking eyes for a second, only to glance down, wishing he hadn’t looked at her at all. The image of her standing there behind his mother, with a wicked grin and those incredible teeth packed into that overtly sexual mouth reminded him of a cartoon character; those eyes, cold and seething with a raw emotion he couldn’t identify or relate to given his inexperienced youth. He’d seen the expression in a movie once before, that of a woman scorned. She looked desperate, but with the ability to cause much despair and damage to those near and far. She was not weak and definitely wouldn’t be taken advantage of by any bad man out there. He could bet his life on that assumption. God could only save the man who did try to help her. Dillon shuddered, trying to

shake her image out of his brain.

She smiled warmly, showing her teeth, as if in payment for the silent compliment he had given her, for she could sense what he was thinking, then said good night to Mrs. Smith, who closed the door behind her as she left.

Turning to Dillon and sighing loudly, Mother put her hands on her hips and scanned the messy room. “Well, I suppose I should just clean this up and not ask questions of you, but I can honestly say that it will only postpone what we will eventually be talking about.”

“Fine, uh, you do that...?” Dillon replied under his voice, trying not to sound to pleading as he shot over to the door and hugged it closed while he looked at her, hoping she wouldn’t venture outside. As soon as she walked away from him, he ran out the front door and looked around gingerly, making sure to check out the sky and the rooftop for her, then walked down the driveway.

Not seeing any sign of her or anyone else, but looking up and down the street cautiously anyway, Dillon tried to keep one eye on the front door. Wishing David was around to deal with the dark and to protect him, Dillon felt so out of place outside; his hands grabbing his shoulders and trembling in the night air, he felt overly exposed and ready for the slaughter but he couldn’t go back inside yet. He wouldn’t feel safe unless he was able to see her leave, but the vampire was nowhere to be found, not a trace. Feeling forced to do so but not wanting to, he threw his head back to check out the dark sky again, looking above his house. Focusing his eyes, he saw her hovering there, floating above the Eucalyptus tree like she was under water, slowly rising to the top. He blinked his eyes in disbelief and stared, his legs weak at the realization that it was indeed real; her image and her profile transparent against the backdrop of the moon’s glow. After the third blink of an eye she was gone – but was it really her? He couldn’t tell for sure, since the vision of her body line wasn’t clearly a woman’s shape—

There’s no such thing as vampires Dillon! It’s all fantasy! He staggered sideways on his feet, his hands on top of his head. *God wouldn’t allow it! He wouldn’t have created them, why would He?!*

“Dillon!” His mother’s voice pierced the night air and startled him to run up the driveway to the door, afraid the vampire would sink back to the ground to finish them both off.

He was met by her disapproving look as she handed him a broom at the doorway. Waiting for his mother to enter the house first, Dillon shut the door behind him, leaning against it

and locking the dead bolt, although he knew as he stood there trying to catch his breath, that it was useless from this moment on to lock any of their doors. From that night forward, Dillon never slept alone. He chose to sleep with Jesus under his pillow.

Chapter Twenty

A Kiss To Make The Vampire Cry

“If there is no other business to discuss, I will close this session. All in favor keep silent.” Glancing around the table, his voice sounding annoyed, Azmodeus had a look of utter frustration on his face, for the day had been spent mending and keeping old alliances. He had already formed tight holds on Dispatter and Belzebug - two Arch Devils older, wiser, and more powerful than the other members of the Council - since the beginning of his reign. They were both quite content with his self-appointed authority, and in return for their continued loyalty and support for his decisions, he granted them many favors and looked away several times when they chose to pick their own little battles with the other less fortunate members of the Council.

Everyone sat silent around the Council except for Nadeen, the only female represented among the twelve. Azmodeus rolled his eyes and looked at the ceiling while she began her dissertation on the vigilant determination by the Trolls of Lost Valley to gain access to Madera, as if now would be the absolute perfect time to push her own propaganda. He wasn't surprised to hear her rant since she was after all, the only female in the room.

As Nadeen went on and on, the Dark Lord went over the day's events in his mind. He was stressed over last night's unfortunate course of events with his vampire witch. He could tell as he hesitated on the lounge chair that it had devastated her. He watched her shrink in size as she stood there naked before him in the pool, her breasts perfectly round and supple attempting to beckon him, and as he watched and traced their outline with an extended finger, he couldn't help but feel contempt for all the men in the Living World who had fallen for those two mounds of flesh; their masculine weakness, her gain. And although he didn't share loyalties or alliances with either gender since he was originally angelic and androgynous to begin with, Azmodeus still felt such disdain for the female persuasion. He couldn't figure out the weakness human males displayed whenever a female of their species dropped garments. Personally, he wasn't interested in what her front side could offer him - now if she had exposed her vulnerable back to him while standing there in the pool, then he knew he would have been hard pressed to walk away from her invitation. Esmeralda did not play his game correctly. She should have known better...she should have known him a little. He was most definitely super-male to a fault - domination and submission of all others was the Dark Lord's name of the game.

“Now, now Nadeen, I dare say you have your own motives for exterminating the Trolls,

and they would not be for the safety of your poor, useless bitches you house in that hole you call Madera,” Drake seethed and spat his words across the circle table at the Grand Witch, who’s eyes turned red in response to the threat. The two enemies were as far apart as they could be, but it wasn’t far enough to suit either of their tastes.

“I would watch who you choose to speak for, Lord Drake. Your ties with the Trolls could be your downfall.” She glared at him, hesitating for a second as if trying to decide whether or not to continue. Being female, she finished her statement after smiling sweetly at Azmodeus, who only nodded at her to speed her along. “And for your very limited, ego fueled mind, the word ‘bitches’ would be better used to describe the Trolls choosing to hide behind and near your feet—“

“You’re the expert Bitch – I mean, Witch – so why not embrace the word? It more than suits Madera but don’t worry! I’ll come along to clean house soon enough—“

“Why is he even speaking?!” Dispatter jumped in, not being able to stand the fact that Drake – a despicable human – had stolen center stage while everyone else was snoozing. He wouldn’t sit quietly and he was sure his Lord Azmodeus wasn’t pleased also, this much he could tell. “He is a mere human given permission to accost an Arch Devil when he is far from that level of eligible distinction! He shouldn’t even be here!” Dispatter yelled his last words across the table at Drake, much to his chagrin and Nadeen’s thrill. Drake wisely chose not to answer but it just about killed his ego. His black eye was twitching with restraint while his light blue eye stared straight ahead at no one in particular.

Dispatter leaned back in his chair now that he had both the floor and Drake, silent. The only creature who could comment now and not be in the Little Arch Devil’s line of fire was his mentor and secret idol. So Azmodeus sighed and spoke up, silently thanking Dis for giving him the opportunity to step in and kill the session.

“I think I speak for the Council when I say there are other personal agendas to attend to, and speaking of *witches*,” the Dark Lord turned to Nadeen sitting near him, watching her smile at him adoringly, “I have yet to see mine this night, and it is late. Therefore you are all *dis-missed*.”

Walking down the main hall after sending the last of his Council away, the Dark Lord was exhausted and worried about all that was not going his way. His strained relationship with Esmeralda, his delayed capture of his newest human trinket, and the silly bickering amongst his

cabinet had made him weary. The uneasiness was screaming uncertainties.

I need something to go my way! I need to predict a correct outcome...

Not seeing Esmeralda since their painful departure from one another last night unnerved him greatly, not because he missed her by any stretch of the imagination, but for what he knew she was capable of – hell on earth. As the Dark Lord entered his dining room, Théoden hurried over to meet him in the hall near the entrance. “Speak.”

“My Lordship, I have been tracking Esmeralda’s whereabouts as you requested, and after seeing her leave this evening, I became concerned about her. She - she looked so devastated, and she wouldn’t discuss it with me...although I can’t say I blame her—“

“Tell me what news you have – NOW!”

“Yes, my Lord, I-I can report that after feasting on a family in the area south of the Smith residence, she decided to head north and I believe, if my divination holds truth, she is there presently - at the Smith house.” He paused and froze. The Dark Lord stood there, disbelief on his face, frowning at the witch, which made Théoden very weak in the knees. So this is what it feels like to give him bad news, Théoden thought as he stood there, trying not to lean against the nearest wall, although fearing he would fall if he didn’t.

Azmodeus took a moment to think of the Smith house, diverting his attention away from Théoden long enough to allow the servant to lean against the nearby wall. Thinking fast, he thought about ascending, deciding just as quickly against such an act, for there would be no way he could enter there and make his presence known without drawing unwanted Heavenly attention. He knew she wouldn’t dare feed on the boy, but Dillon’s family was free for the taking. He also knew his witch had quite the appetite and was cunning and charming, probably able to seduce God Himself, if she so desired it.

“Consult your dark divination now and return immediately, informing me if she is gone or still there. I will be waiting for you in this room. Do not keep me waiting long, for I may need to act on this little piece of news.”

“Yes, my Lord, I will make haste.” He turned and left quickly.

The Dark Lord sighed and closed his eyes. Her incredible jealousy would ruin his plans. He should have taken her last night but he chose to leave instead; choosing to withstand her charm and beauty for her ability to serve his courtroom. He should have known better, for she was like every other female in the living world. The Underworld was no different from any

other world and he sighed in resignation. Females, although fragile and easily breakable, have a talent for spiteful vengeance. Esmeralda was the queen of spite. He should have fucked her when he had the chance.

He paced the dining room this way, sighing frequently. This little soul harvesting adventure was keeping him from doing what he did best – predicting everyone else’s moves and staying ahead of the game. He didn’t want to think about the possible idea of having to go back to Madera to pick out yet another witch to train and housebreak. Besides, Nadeen would use that to her advantage, and possibly make him choose to war with Drake - someone he’d rather not notice at the moment, for Drake’s powers were only gaining strength slowly, but his allies remained unclear.

Another sigh. He had to act. Sandor came in carrying a silver tray, a bottle of wine, and an empty glass. He stopped as he stood in the room, head bowed, and spoke quietly. “My Lord, your nightly drink is ready. Shall I place it on the table for you?”

“Over there.” He pointed to the table casually, with his back to the young human. He stood staring into the fireplace.

“As you wish, my Lord, may I bring you anything else?” *Please let me serve you*, he thought as he poured the wine. The Dark Lord didn’t bother to turn to watch him.

“No. Leave.”

Sandor turned and left, feeling very dejected and unnoticed, shamed to realize the Dark Lord hadn’t even glanced at him.

He turned his head slightly to watch the servant walk out the door, thinking that someday he might have a purpose for the poor, useless soul but at the present, he chose not to notice him at all.

“My Lord,” Théoden walked into the dining room and stood waiting to be recognized.

“Speak.” Azmodeus chose not to look at him, for his eyes were still set on the door Sandor had exited seconds ago.

“I have consulted the bloodstones and have seen the following: Esmeralda has left the house as of just minutes ago and is on her way elsewhere to feed. Apparently, she did not feed at the house. The stones show no red hue—“

“And the crows, where are those useless creatures?! Lascivious was told specifically to watch that house!” He turned and glared again at the witch, making him nervous.

“I am not sure, my Lord—“

“You were told to watch over them as well,” he walked towards Théoden, his finger pointed at him as he spoke. “I am disappointed in your lack of duty. You were given specific instructions.” He opened his hand to choke the poor servant. Having very long and elegant, white fingers, the Dark Lord’s hands were powerful extensions of his angelic form.

Théoden stood there and threw his hands up to his throat, trying to gasp his words while grabbing at imaginary fingers in vain.

He didn’t seem concerned with Théoden’s inaudible sounds and instead, spoke out loud to himself. “I am having a rather unfortunate night, and now this.” He squeezed harder, his eyes a menacing light yellow; glowing and gaining in brightness with his anger. It took only a second to consider it before the Dark Lord acted, and then it was done.

As if sensing his decision - for they have intuitive tracking and can smell fear miles away - his three hounds stealthy and quietly entered the dining hall through the fire place and sneaked up behind the Dark Lord, ready for his toss.

Théoden attempted to speak, but the hold was too tight. His tongue began to swell, his face turned purple, and drool dripped down the side of his mouth.

A quick, careless flick of the Dark Lord’s hand and the witch met the enormous fireplace cavity. Landing in it perfectly, Théoden’s black robes ignited and his long, gray braid lit up like a wick leading to his head. Within milliseconds he was totally engulfed in fire. The hell hounds pounced on him, tearing him into three sections equally; stepping into the fire they laid down to eat, not affected by the flames. It was warmed, cooked barbequed flesh they wanted, and they smiled at each other as they chewed on their sections, lying in the flames, enjoying impromptu dinner together.

He turned away from the scene and walked over to the table, the smell of cooked flesh unnerving for him. His nourishment was souls, pure and simple. He was evolved to the highest form known in the Underworld; to feed on the most evolved creature on God’s Earth was where his appetite lay and he had quite a selection to choose from.

Sandor had already poured him his drink before he left earlier. Pausing to think about the servant’s eagerness to please, he smiled and took a drink. The doors opened and Sandor appeared again, timidly standing there looking over at the three hounds sitting in the fire, each with a body piece in its mouth. “My Lord, I-I heard a scream and thought...thought I’d check on

you...”

Laughing softly together, mocking the young man’s stupid comment, the three hounds looked over at Sandor and grinned, then returned to their dinner.

“Théoden is no longer with us, in case you were wondering. I want Lascivious and Esmeralda brought to me immediately upon their arrival. If you see any of the other crows, bring them to me as well.” He raised his glass to his eyes, then shot a look at Sandor, smiling. “You have stayed ahead of me Sandor. That action will be rewarded should it continue. Now go.” He drank his wine as he sat down at the head of the table, facing the door in preparation for his company.

Sandor beamed, although trying to cover it by looking at the floor. “Thank you My Lord. I serve you the best I can. I am eternally grateful to you for selecting me. I will wait and bring the others.” He bowed then shot a glance at the hounds, only one looked over at him. She shot him a suspicious jealous look which caused a massive jolt of fear up his spine so he quickly turned and left, trying to bring back the feeling of intense happiness to quell the hellish apprehension only Syrianna could deliver. He’d heard about her killing and eating house servants at random, like a lioness on the plains of the Serengeti and the thought caused him to trip as he walked out the dining room, stumbling into a nearby column yet able to brace himself from injury. As Sandor straightened up, he could still hear her laughing softly with Théoden’s foot still in her mouth; his bones crunching and dissolving under her bite.

Within an hour, Lascivious showed himself and was called into the Dark Lord’s presence. Sandor waited by the door, safely on the other side.

Hopping up to the Dark Lord, Lascivious bowed and spoke. “My Lord, I have several items to discuss with you, when you are ready to hear me.”

He remained sitting at the head of the table, working on his third glass of wine. “Yes, I am ready to hear all that you have to report, and I hope for your sake it is worthy news.”

The three hell hounds met the Dark Lord’s glance, and as he turned to look upon the crow, they turned to look upon him too, their white eyes glowing in the dark as they waited for dessert.

Lascivious ruffled his feathers and shook with fear as he began to report everything he saw of Dillon over the past two days; his encounter with Daryl at school, the moment he was in the principal’s office, his little episode in the library, and lastly, the extreme beating at the hands

of his father. When he was finished, he ruffled his feathers again and looked up at the Dark Lord, who was just finishing the last swig of his wine. He laid the empty glass on the table gently, admiring its crystal light reflected by the fire nearby as it danced a showy display with the large white crystal ring he wore on his left index finger. The crow was immediately and hopelessly drawn in, hypnotized by the dance of crystal on crystal as only a black bird would.

“You have not mentioned tonight. What happened with the younger boy tonight?” He remained staring at his glass as he spoke, his three hounds breathing in unison near his side, within mere feet of the crow.

“Yes, my Lord, I was saving that news until the end, for I know you would have questions. I was watching the boy from his bedroom window as he was putting his clothes away. He knew something horrible had entered his house - I swear it. I hurriedly flew down to the first floor of the house to look through my usual place in the kitchen, for you can see the kitchen, dining room, and parts of the living room from that window. Well, the mother had closed the blinds, something she never does, and I could not see! I went completely around the house, trying to look into every window, but saw nothing. At one point, I heard an explosion and a female screaming, possibly the mother. Then within a few minutes, Esmeralda walked out the front door and shot passed the tree I usually sit in. Floating up to the sky, she was! I saw her from below, for I was on the ground under the tree. I do not think she saw me though.” Lascivious hurried his speech when he glanced up to see the Dark Lord motioning him to continue with opened hand. “She was gone quickly, so I flew to the front of the house and saw the boy standing in his driveway watching her leave - such a scared little boy - and then he ran into his house and slammed the door. I immediately flew here to report to you, but I was accosted along the way by Devon, who has been watching David. He is outside to report to you as well, my Lord.” He bowed his head and waited for a reply.

He sat there and listened quietly, watching the crow speak and observing the tone in his voice for clues to its validity. He could spot a mistruth by the sound of a person’s voice. He was very good at detecting lies, and as he sat there staring at the crow, he quickly concluded there were no lies said here. “Fine, send in your counterpart, then return to stand watch over the house. Any more suspicious activity at that residence and you are to immediately come to me. I will think about granting you a portal, but at the moment, I have other business to attend to - now leave.”

“A portal? That would serve my travels well, my Lord. I could come to—“

“I said I would consider it, now go.”

“Yes, my Lord, thank you.” Lascivious hopped out the door, met by Sandor, who went to summon Devon.

As Devon hopped in, he hesitated at the doorway.

“Come in, you fool, you’re wasting my time!” The Dark Lord glared at the little crow.

“Yes, yes, of course My Lordship! I am dreadfully sorry,” glancing at the leering hounds, Lord Devon continued. “I have been following Sir David, and his whereabouts at that horrible desert confinement, and I can only report that he has been released from the dungeon earlier this evening and has returned to the dormitories. He has apparently chosen not to befriend any of the other boys, all of whom have come up to him this night to talk with him. He appears to be withdrawn. I can tell you that he has become quite the celebrity at the school. During his absence, they talked about him like he was a god! It was quite entertaining to hear the stories from the boys – I-I couldn’t help but listen in.” Devon began to fluster and Azmodeus had to close his eyes to keep from stepping on him right then and there. He raised his empty glass in frustration and Sandor came running over to fill it.

Devon didn’t catch on to the Dark Lord’s frustration and continued. “His fighting scene was fairly impressive, especially the part where he kicked the book off the table, hitting the poor chap square in the nose! I was impressed as I watched it, My Lord.” He hopped up in his imitation of the fight, making the hounds snicker as they grinned watching him.

“How many did he fight? I had heard of it, but not numbers.” He took a long swig of wine to calm his jealousy, knowing he had not see David in ages, or so it seemed.

“Oh, my Lord, he fought five, maybe six boys in the library, and they were all bigger than he - well, not really. The one who got hit in the face with the book was smaller—“

“Interesting – that will be all.” Pausing, he spoke again, to no one in particular. “How could he manage to get out of that cage they had put him in so quickly? He has charm, that one, and I can see why he has managed to get away with so much for so long. Not that it will help him here at my feet...continue your watch and if you see any visitors at that school, you will immediately, without hesitation, report to me, or suffer the consequences. Understand?”

“Of course, my Lord, as you wish.”

“Has Esmeralda appeared, Sandor?”

“No, my Lord, I have been keeping watch, and she has not yet arrived. She is never this late, I must say.”

“Why do I get the feeling she isn’t going to arrive?” He put on his cloak and grabbed his staff, departing to Madera in person to find his witch, for he knew she was already there. As a master warlock, Azmodeus knew enough of witchcraft to gather what he needed to know. He had visited Esmeralda’s study after he wrote the note, and performed his own divination spell. He saw her begging the Grand Witch for protection and housing.

He showed up at the gates of Madera just before dawn. He could have annihilated the guards there as they stopped him and inquired who he was and what he was looking for, but he didn’t wish to start a war with Nadeen. He needed her services, like most of the other Arch Devils in the Council, and he enjoyed having a weak female amongst the other male members, so he played along with the formalities of introductions and intentions. Within a minute’s time, he was allowed inside the compound, Nadeen literally running up the grand hall to greet him, a worried expression on her face. She was followed by countless other witches, both male and female, all having heard word the Dark Lord was in the building; most of them knowing he never visited unless it was to pick out a new servant, and they all wanted to be that servant.

“My Lord, Azmodeus, I am graced by your visit, and I do apologize for the wait—“

“Is she here Master Witch? For I have grown impatient waiting for my little hybrid servant to report for duty and you and I both know this is no longer her home.” He stood there and took the hood off his head, letting it fall to his shoulders, his hair down, framing his face. A few of the witches sighed in unison at his beauty. His staff held in his left hand was his weapon – his only needed weapon – and it was a powerful ally, a magical tool unlike any other. It lit up the room with an array of different colors to match his mood, responding to his wishes without a word spoken. Nadeen glanced at it nervously, then smiled up at the Dark Lord, noticing his eyes were menacing and unsure of her intentions.

She was an ugly old witch, fitting the character for a Halloween party easily with her pointed, crooked long nose, her black beady little eyes, and frizzy black and grey hair that stood out and to the back of her head, almost straight out. She bent over slightly when she walked, and she had yellow tinted skin, leathered and worn from centuries of alchemy and chemistry creations, her cauldrons always cooking up some kind of brew.

She was indeed, a brilliant witch, clever and intelligent, from the days of the Salem witch

trials. She had hidden herself until the very end, almost escaping her fate, only to be burned at the stake. This explained some of her burnt skin, mottled and waxy in places, although she did not burn completely. As the flames rushed up her body, she disappeared in a rush of chanting melodies. The witch took her body with her straight to the first gate of the Underworld. She was met there by Azmodeus himself and the witches who had been communicating with her all along.

Her descent down was easy enough, and she has been around since, one of the oldest witches to survive the Underworld. “Uh, yes, she is here, My Lord Azmodeus. I did not know she was hiding from you and I shouldn’t have allowed her asylum, but it was agreed to be for tonight only. She was adamant she would leave before dawn—“

“Then where is she?”

“She is coming out in a minute, my Lord. I had to calm her down...she was quite emotional, crying and pouring her soul out to myself and Clara here.” Clara stood off to the side of Nadeen and she smiled meekly and timidly.

“And you, Clara – pray tell? Are you a master of your craft yet?”

“Of course she is my Lord, one of my best—“

“I did not ask *you*, Nadeen. I am sure she can speak for herself.” He didn’t bother looking at Nadeen as he spoke. She didn’t deserve his glance. She knew it too, and dropped her head, a worried look on her face as she looked at some of her witches. She had jeopardized their safety because of a vampire witch’s charm. She could not turn away Esmeralda tonight, although she tried. The vampire had seduced and charmed her way in. Nadeen stood there feeling very foolish and shocked the Dark Lord had paid her such a quick visit. She was sure he would have waited at least a day, and was amazed he would even care about his witch’s whereabouts to begin with. She wasn’t the only one thinking this; several witches behind her began to spin tales of their own to explain the Dark Lord’s unannounced visit.

“Y-yes, my Lord, I have a mastery level suitable to serve someone as...as great as yourself. I would consider that an honor...my Lord.” She couldn’t look at him for more than a second or two at best, for his beauty hurt her eyes and made her stumble her words.

“Yes, well that’s great news. I may be in need of your services, however you’ll have to practice looking at the one you serve when you speak, it displays a confidence every witch should possess.”

“Y-yes, my Lord. Thank you.” Clara gushed then fell silent as some of the other witches

looked at her with incredible jealousy and spiteful disgust.

Just then Esmeralda walked into the great hall wearing the same outfit she had on earlier in the evening, her black coat she put on as she walked towards the Dark Lord; her hair cascading down her back, thick and luxurious, her black thigh high leather boots clinging to her legs as her dress parted up the middle. She walked like a run way model directly to him, leaving all who watched her move breathless over her amazing beauty. After all, she was only one of two vampire witches in existence, as well as being only one of five vampires in existence. Adrian was the second vampire witch in existence and he served Drake personally, which meant he was her enemy since she hated the two of them with a female's passion.

Everyone parted and stood off to the side while she approached him. Nadeen ran over to meet her halfway. "My dear, you have to leave! I can no longer interfere, nor will I ever interfere, with your affairs EVER again! You are no longer welcome in Madera!" Nadeen turned and ushered her witches to leave them alone, sensing the Dark Lord's demands. She was hoping by doing this, she would regain a little favor with him. "My Lord, I am truly sorry for the night's confusion. It will not happen again, I assure you. Please, please I beg for you to accept my apology?"

"Fine, Nadeen. Do not disappoint me again, for as you are well aware, I am the only one to have allowed Madera to stay untouched for so long. My ability to protect it could change at any moment. Remember that? You would be at the mercy of more than trolls should I turn my back, now leave me to my witch and after I leave here, do your guards a favor and inform them that if I should have to return, they would be wise to allow me entrance immediately. Is that clear?" He glared at her with distrust, and the silence that had occurred while he spoke was alarming to her, for there were at least one hundred witches and guards in the hall with them. They were all barely breathing.

"Yes, my Lord. I will take heed and remember your words. Everyone! Leave and return to your studies. Good day, my Lord." She bowed her head and turned, leaving quickly, telling one of her assistants as they walked out together, to send a gift to the Dark Lord, possibly an assistant to serve his personal needs...a very pretty one, if possible.

As they left, Esmeralda approached him gingerly, her head down for the first time since he had selected her to be his witch, and she waited for him to speak first.

"It's obvious you went and visited the boy against my wishes. What say you to this?" He

stood there staring at the top of her pretty head waiting to hear her words.

“Yes, my Lord. It’s true, I did pay the Smith family a visit, but I chose to first feed elsewhere, so that I could properly control myself. I-I needed to see what was there, I needed to see and...I did.” She looked up at him as she finished her sentence, her eyes pleading with his for forgiveness.

“Why? Why would you jeopardize my plans when I specifically told you and *warned* you against doing so?” He didn’t need to raise his voice as he spoke these words for his eyes did all the yelling for him.

“I-I don’t know really—“

Azmodeus smacked her face with the back of his left hand as he threw it out to the air before him. She was standing five feet away, but the hit stung her left lower jaw. She didn’t make a noise. The pain was coursing down her body, yet he was careful to control his force; he’d rip her head off if he wasn’t careful. She closed her eyes and remained standing, taking whatever heat he might give her, for she was no match for his anger.

“LIE. Try again.” He kept his voice casual as he stood there, already looking bored.

“I-I was jealous. I was angry and, and embarrassed for exposing myself to you and, and giving myself to you for the taking and YOU WALKED AWAY!” She began to gracefully sob as only a beautiful female knew how to do. She put her delicate hands to her face to cover her grief. He wasn’t impressed.

“Go on with your speech. Crying only grants you a moment,” he seethed revulsion as he spat at her. “I will give your weaker sex that much time to collect yourself, but I advise you to continue, for you have to convince me you were worth my trip here!” He started to walk around her at this point, watching her intently for clues. His hold on her was strong, he could tell as he watched her cower under his stare. He walked around her once, then paused as he stood there listening to her sob some more, not sounding at all like she was even close to finishing. He sighed, reached into the pocket of his jacket suit, and pulled out a white silk handkerchief, holding it out for her to take. The crying worked, he thought, he started to feel sorry for her.

She took the silk piece and looked at him quickly, then covered her face in it, embarrassed for him to see her. She felt ugly at that moment, her weakness and lack of confidence made her sick to her stomach. “I-if you w-want to kill me, then just do it, for I cannot bear to live with you h-hating me. I am very, very sorry.” She cried more, her hands to

her face and then she slowly slid to the ground as if an imaginary wall was suddenly placed behind her. Once her knees touched the ground, she reached out, barely able to touch his boots, and crawled over to him, embracing them with her arm. She then did something that disgusted him greatly - she kissed the top of his boot, then rested the side of her face on it; lying on her side under him, exposing herself like a submitting dog would do to its master.

“I am warning you my dear - do not cower like a wounded dog at my feet. I need you to speak! I need answers—“

“Forgive me! Please, forgive me Master! I was w-weak (sob) and I wasn’t thinking...I did not hurt either of them.” She paused, thinking of Dillon’s beautiful face, only to start sobbing again.

“What now?!” Azmodeus was beginning to lose his patience. “And for the record, I am NOT your Master,” he hissed down at her, then moved his feet away from her embrace like she was a dirty, stray dog. “No one has the *privilege* to call me Master! I alone can appoint that particular distinction and I have yet to see ANYONE capable of calling me that!”

Esmeralda leaned forward on her arms and looked up at him, her face tear streaked and her eyes swollen and pathetic looking. She did look sweet though, he thought, caught off guard by this new look, for Esmeralda normally looked too sexual and strongly confident to appear sweet. He liked the new demure face; it suited her better.

“But I want that title more than anything...” She paused in her pleading after seeing his eyes turn menacing, so she wisely stayed on the original topic. “You, you,” (sob) were right my Lord! He is...I, I can’t even begin to describe him...” she looked down and started silently crying. After another very painful minute, she continued. “He...the boy...he is beautiful and unique, amazing to look at and his soul – magnificent.” Her voice became quiet as she said, “You were right about him. I can see now why you would wish to collect a soul such as his. I am sorry I interfered. I couldn’t help it – I was too curious. I did not hurt him or his mother. He has powers, my, my Lord—“

“Yes, well, let’s discuss him later,” his voice sounded more and more annoyed as he watched her cower at his feet.

She breathed out a sigh of relief at the thought that he was willing to keep her around long enough to talk later. She wiped a tear off her cheek right as he grabbed her by the back of the hair and brutally pulled her upward. His cold touch froze her hair into what felt like straw as

he let his essence travel through her. She half-screamed at the searing pain on her scalp, instinctively grabbing her own hair with one hand, while pushing herself off the floor with the other, she helped him pull her up only to watch him grab the back of her neck while he firmly kissed her on the mouth, harshly and without passion, bruising her lips with the force of his own.

Instantly, Esmeralda's lips turned blue; her veins down her neck the same color while the Dark Lord made continued contact with her mouth. It temporarily shocked her as she went completely limp, so he caught her around her waist with the same hand he'd had on her neck, then pulled her up to him again, embracing her for a second or two, only to push her away once he noticed her standing there leaning against his chest and shivering with her eyes closed and her teeth chattering. He couldn't see it, but her mouth had been shaped in a smile for the brief few seconds she was lying there against his chest.

Suddenly shocked into steadying herself before him, Esmeralda quickly snapped out of her daze. The Dark Lord's shove was light and without any real force to it, but it still wasn't what she expected at that tender, romantic moment. Still, brushing away her curls from her frosted face, the vampire witch smiled anyway, looking at him like he was her prince. Another tear fell down her cheek, resting on the edge of her upper lip. It froze there. She breathed out ice mist and noticed her temporary transformation. Her mouth was tingling in pain, not unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. It was a kiss to make her cry, she thought as she brought her hand to her mouth, relishing the lingering sensation of his lips still touching hers. Just as she was about to say something sweet, the Dark Lord hit her again, right as she opened her mouth to speak.

This time, his back hand hit her hard enough to knock her to the ground in one quick fling of his arm, although it didn't look like he'd given it much effort. Wanting to leave a harsher sting, Azmodeus watched his witch collapse to the ground, cradling both her hands to her left jaw. It seared with a pain so intense, Esmeralda had to touch the side of her face frantically to make sure it was still there.

He wiped his mouth with the hand he chose to hit her with, looking down at her with disgust as he did so. Finger pointed at her as she curled up in the fetal position, he hissed the following words at her. "Do not disappoint me again, Esmeralda. You have used up all that was given you, so watch your step. Crying will only grant you one reprieve with me, and you've just used it. If you choose to attempt to run and hide from me again, I will not only hunt you down

myself, but when I find you, I will drag you through the Nine Planes of Hell in pieces, auctioning off each part of you to the highest bidder. So decide now to be my witch first and a lowly *vampire* second, because I cannot have one ruining the other. Do I make myself clear, witch?" His voice stern but no longer venomous, Azmodeus could see his actions and words had wounded her greatly.

He began to walk over to her when she answered a weak, "Yes, my Lord."

"Get up then and follow me whilst you still can and by the time we return to Nine, I hope for your sake you've rediscovered your voice, for I want details of this magnificence you speak of in that living soul I cannot *yet* see."

Chapter Twenty One

Sleeping With Both Eyes Opened

Leaning over the toilet upstairs and vomiting for the third time since he'd locked the front door that night, Dillon's eyes hurt from the intense pressure in his head. The fear had been overwhelming and now, it was finally releasing itself. He had always had a sensitive stomach. Mother was there too, leaning down with him, rubbing his back and trying to calm him with her words. He vomited again, this time nothing but yellow, stringy liquid came out, slowly dripping into the toilet water. He gagged as it left him.

“Oh sweetheart, you've had the worse day ever, and now this!”

“I'm fine, Mother, please, just give me a few min—“

Another gag, he reached out for some toilet paper and wipe his mouth.

She reached over for a washcloth and ran cold water on it, dabbing his neck and forehead, then as he got up, she gave it to him. He gratefully took it from her and wiped his face.

“Come on, to bed with you, little man.” She guided him into his room then walked him over to his bed. He did not complain, nor did he resist her guidance. She reached over the bed and picked up his picture, looked at it for a second, then placed it back on the shelf above the bed. He started to lie down, but she made him get back up so that she could pull the covers down first. “No, no, child! Under the covers, get under the covers - there! Now go to sleep my love. I just heard your father drive up, so I will tell him you are in bed asleep, okay?” She smiled down at him, then leaned over and kissed his forehead. He looked incredibly pale, she thought, his blue eyes standing out more than ever against his suddenly white skin. It frightened her to look at him. She quickly smiled again as she reached over to turn off his bedside lamp.

“No, please, Mother - keep the light on? I can turn it off in a minute?”

“Nonsense! Go to sleep. I'll get the light. I changed the light bulb, by the way. Do you know anything about it exploding? I was surprised to see pieces of it everywhere.” She reached over and turned it off while she stood there silent in the dark and watched his form barely visible on his bed. It seemed to her that Dillon was only slightly occupying it.

“Uh, no...it must be one of those freaky things, I guess.” Dillon mumbled under the sheets, hating himself for lying to her.

“Good night, Sweetheart,” Mother leaned down and kissed his forehead again - the only part of him exposed - and left the room.

The glow from the streetlight was coming in through the soft curtains of his window, illuminating the room just so. It was eerie, and Dillon slid as far down in the bed as he could. Mother had closed both his bedroom door and the closet door, so he looked up at it again just to make sure, then over to the window.

The wind was howling outside, October wind, he thought, and an occasional gust hit his window, making it creak and pop with strained effect. Dillon was afraid, and he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. His stomach cramped up again, but there was nothing left to expel. Dillon lay there and waited. Waited for her to come back and finish them all off, one by one. Drinking her fill, only to toss one empty body off to the side while she'd reach for the next, she'd plow right through them. Food, he gulped. They were all food for a creature not living. It didn't make sense. If all vampires were like this one tonight, he couldn't fathom their existence.

Was there really another world? If there was, why would God allow the worlds to mix? Once again, it just didn't make sense and this particular vampire seemed to be the type to toss dead people around easily. He thought all this while he laid there trying not to think about it – no use.

Just as he was beginning to spiral down into utter hopelessness, he shot a glance over to the cross hanging on the wall, wanting to distract and refocus his crippled mind. It glowed in the dark with a circle of light radiating around it on the wall. Dillon was suddenly filled with hope as he watched it. Slowly, very slowly, he built up enough bravery to attempt to leave the cover of his bed. He rose and quickly walked over to it. It was no bigger than eight inches long, the perfect size to carry in one's hand – a weapon of sorts. It could be useful. He reached up and touched it, tracing Jesus' body with his index finger. He then took it down and held it in his hand, watching it intently. He turned and walked over to his bed quickly, as if it was the only safe spot in the room, and climbed back in, pulling the covers back up and holding the cross to his chest as he lay there waiting.

A few minutes ticked by and he could hear his father talking with his mother and siblings downstairs. Father's voice was loud, but he sounded joyful as he sucked up to her, for Dillon could tell as he lay there listening to him go on and on about the game, that he was trying to achieve forgiveness again. He heard Daniel ask about him, but his mother warned him and everyone else. "You're all to leave Dillon alone tonight! He's had a rough day and he's probably already asleep, poor child."

Daniel started talking about how Tommy was looking for Dillon, wanting to give the boy the game ball after he'd gone through the trouble of making, and at times, forcing all the players to sign it. "He was so disappointed Mother, I couldn't even take the ball from him to give to Dillon. He said he wanted to give it to him himself." Daniel sounded more annoyed than impressed his best friend was looking out for his little brother.

"Well, that's very sweet of him to do that. He's always been such a nice, responsible boy, that Tommy, and he dresses so well! I just wish he'd stay for more than a quick minute. He's so jumpy when he's here! Does he drink a lot of coffee? Kids these days just drink too much coffee. It stunts their growth."

Dillon heard Rachel say faintly, "Tommy hasn't suffered the ill effects of coffee, Mother," only to hear his mother quickly hush her, going on again about how young Christian girls need to stick to their studies and Bible so that they're not paying attention to boys and their growth spurts.

Dillon smiled as he listened to them go back and forth this way, only to sigh as the conversation turned to the highlights of the game. It was another wipe out by Vista High, the team with the biggest reputation for fouls, injuries to other players, and just plain old fashioned legalized and school supported bullying - more so than any other team. They were brutal monsters with an accepted community backing of support. It was weird that this kind of behavior was blindly allowed. Even his parents were fans. David was right once again, Dillon thought as he shook his head in bed.

Lying there, Dillon's body began to relax under the weight of the cross he held onto, his mind relaxing as well. Suddenly his eyes drifted closed, then opened quickly, as if he was going to miss the next scene in a movie and he jolted himself in bed. The window creaked again, followed by the wind howling more than before, as if the noise was sounding off a warning for him to stay awake and alert. Dillon slowly lay back down, his breathing heavy, his heart pounding, and he looked up at the ceiling, watching shadows dance by from the swaying of the Eucalyptus tree in the window.

Any second now and he'd hear her. Any second now and he thought for sure he'd see her shape swaying there as well. He'd blink and she'd be there smiling down at him with all those teeth crammed into that red lined mouth. She was the girl on Duran Duran's Rio album cover. Lifting his head, Dillon could barely make out the image among the other record albums in his

brother's collection across the room. She was her alright and he gulped again, thinking it was almost euphoric to have such fear presented to you in an alluring, vampire-patented human package.

His stomach lurched upward but he swallowed hard and whispered as he lay there in the dark, "Please, Lord, please watch over me and my family this night and every night hereafter, for evil has come to visit and will come again. We need your protection and your blessing, for we are your faithful servants. I feel...a sense...a sense of...something to come, and I-I am afraid, not for m-me, but for my family. Please keep them safe, all of them. Bless this house and all who live in it...bless this house and all who live in it...bless this house and all who live in it...amen." A magical chant disguised as a prayer; the magic of three repeated in the dark, but he didn't notice it.

Chapter Twenty Two

A Weekend Apart

Dillon woke up with a splitting headache. His eyes burned from the light that was cascading in from the window, hitting the foot of his bed and shooting across the floor. He looked over at David's bed instinctively to say 'good morning,' something he did almost every day, but seeing the bed empty and made, with a few wrinkles in it where he had laid down yesterday, made his heart sink. He lay back in bed and covered his face with his hands, then turned and looked at the alarm clock with his fingers positioned on his face just so, allowing his vision to work and his age to show. 9:52 am Saturday, and a two day reprieve from school and Daryl, made him breathe out a sigh of relief at the thought of a much needed vacation.

He'd hardly slept at all last night as he remembered lying there listening to everyone chatter both downstairs, and then later on, as his brother and sisters came upstairs. At one point, Daniel had opened his bedroom door and looked in for a minute, then quietly closed it while he laid there pretending to sleep. As Dillon continued to do the same this morning, he could hear the hustle and bustle of activity downstairs as Mother was preparing their traditional Saturday meal. Breakfast on Saturday encompassed everything you could think of for a morning meal – eggs, bacon, toast, hash brown potatoes, and usually, although she alternated back and forth, depending on the season and requests of the children, either homemade waffles or French toast was served. The smell would drift upstairs and usually sound the silent alarm to eat for the boys as they laid in bed talking about the week's previous events.

David would usually try to convince Dillon to do something 'un-Christian-like,' which normally took up most of the pre-breakfast morning. He was, after all, quite dangerous, always doing things to risk life and limb for the intense thrill he'd get every time. David didn't have boundaries, and he'd tell Dillon over and over again that life was one big risk, but only to those who truly didn't value it. He would say he never did.

Dillon sighed and closed his burning eyes. Everyday David was alive was a day to celebrate as far as he was concerned. He could easily count at least a dozen lives David had already used up in his short time on Earth. *Maybe that's why he likes cats so much?* He sighed again. He felt so tired. He could fall back to sleep easily, so he drifted off, then shot up in bed as the chime of the door bell rang across the house. *Am I now programmed to stress reactions every time the door bell rings?!*

His heart began to pound and he grabbed his chest with his hand and held his breath, his eyes darting around the room. Suddenly, he heard David's familiar annoyed voice in his ear, coming from his bed, "Its daylight, Dil! Remember? Vampires fry in the sun. You're so predictable...breathe."

"Oh right! Sorry...," Dillon breathed out as he looked over at David's bed and stared at it in disbelief, blinking his eyes and opening his mouth to speak again, realizing no one was in the room. "Great," he whispered, "I'm finally losing my mind." He heard his mother's voice as she almost screamed an excited 'good morning!' at the front door.

"Uh, hello Mrs. Smith, um, I hope it's not too early, but I came over to give Dillon the game ball." Tommy's voice was heard clearly as Dillon bolted up in bed.

"Oh my dear, sweet boy! How thoughtful of you! Come in! Come in!"

"Uh...okay." Tommy hesitated as he looked around the living room, then gingerly walked in and closed the door behind him. Mrs. Smith was literally jumping up and down with glee. "Daniel?! Dillon?! Come downstairs! Tommy's here to see both of you!" She then turned to touch Tommy on the shoulder, making him jump. He was staring at the very large picture of Jesus across the room.

"Oh, sorry my dear...my you are a jumpy one, aren't you?" Mrs. Smith smiled as she looked him over from head to toe. He looked like he came from a guy's GQ fashion show. His hair was perfectly styled, his clothes matching and neat, and his skin looked flawless. Hmm, Sara thought as she met his eyes. He just seemed too perfect to be the rugged football star.

"Sorry, I guess I need to lay off the coffee," Tommy replied quickly, making her laugh knowingly. Daniel came downstairs at that moment, a surprised look on his face, for in the past two years since they'd become best friends, today would make in-house visit number two.

"Hey there Tommy, you're up early! You usually don't grace daylight 'til what, say twelve o'clock, right?" Daniel came over and lightly pushed his friend, then tried playfully to get the football from his tight grip.

"Not true Danny, so not true—"

"Okay boys! No horse playing in the house. My dear, would you like to stay for breakfast?"

"Uh, yeah, sure...um, I don't want to impose on the whole, you know, 'family time' thing?"

Daniel cut his mom off as she began to say, "Nonsense!"

"Don't worry man! We won't even have to pull up an extra chair! You can sit in David's seat, 'cuz he sure won't be here!" He smiled wickedly at Tommy, who looked immediately uncomfortable as he looked from Daniel to his mother.

Mother pushed her son off her shoulder and glared at him. "Daniel Baxter Smith! You watch your mouth mister! You are not too big to miss out on a whipping and I will NOT hesitate to whip you myself should I hear you speak one more awful word about your brother! Do I make myself *clear*?" She stood there with her hands on her hips and tapped her foot.

"What's the commotion about in there?" Father stuck his head in from the kitchen and looked at them. "Hey there, Tommy boy! Great game last night! Your last touchdown clenched the game, young man!" He pointed at him and smiled.

"Thanks, Mr. Smith." Tommy smiled as he nodded at him.

"Uh, sorry Mother," Daniel looked down at his shoes.

"Now go upstairs and drag your brother down here. Everyone else is waiting in the other room. Tommy," she touched the boy's arm and started to lead him into the kitchen, "You come with me. Have you eaten yet today?"

"No ma'am, just the coffee is all." He lied, allowing her to guide him into the kitchen and away from Jesus' stare while he continued to hold the football tight. He felt as though he was being watched by that larger than life picture and he had to keep his eyes down cast to cover the intense feeling of guilt he was beginning to experience. Rachel screamed in excitement as she saw him come in the room, and he flinched again, rolling his eyes as she hugged him like she hadn't seen him in years, audibly sniffing his cologne as she did so.

Daniel and Dillon came down together, dressed in tee shirts and blue jeans. Everyone was at the table waiting for them; Mrs. Smith and Samantha were bringing over the bowls of hot food and placing them on the table. Daniel went over to his seat at the opposite end of the table from Father, while Dillon stood there frozen, staring over at David's seat with Tommy sitting in it and trying not to think it all a cruel joke. It was immediately disturbing however, and his stomach knotted up again. They all turned to look at him, Mother sensing what he was thinking and chimed in, using her ultra syrupy thick hostess voice, "Sweet heart," she walked right to him and put her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her and away from Tommy. She then lowered her voice and whispered to him. "Tommy has come all the way over here to

give you something special, please ignore the seating arrangement and everything will be fine, okay?" She was barely audible, so that only he could hear her, while Father tried to get everybody else to hold hands and get ready for the prayer.

"Mother? We need to start please." Father spoke, then cleared his throat, annoyed his food was getting cold.

"Coming dear," and Mother walked Dillon over, almost pushing him forward until he got to his chair. Tommy looked up at him as she pulled out his chair and he slowly slid in it, not looking over at the intruder at all. "Okay, okay, I think we're ready dear." Mother ran over to her chair opposite her youngest and sat down cheerfully, smiling at him, watching his face look totally stunned and slightly sullen.

Father looked at Dillon harshly then spoke very sternly, "Boy, are you going to acknowledge our guest? Because you are being extremely rude, so I'm going to count to three."

"It's okay, Mr. Smith—"

"Hi Tommy, *thanks* for coming—"

The back hand from his father hit him on the side of his mouth lightly as he spoke, tapping it quickly, but smacking him with enough force that it made a slapping sound stopping him in mid-sentence. "I warned you to stop this rudeness! Now I have had just about enough of your impression of your brother – it's gonna stop right now, do you hear me boy?!"

"What? What's he saying?" Daniel spoke out in response, looking at his mother with a questionable expression.

"Like, he's not talking about *you*, Daniel," Rachel whispered as she rolled her eyes and smiled widely at Tommy, who looked absolutely horrified as he looked from Dillon to his father and back again.

"Uh, maybe I should go?"

"I said, do-you-understand-me?" Father was ready to hit Dillon harder, and Dillon knew after receiving that half slap, he, along with the other Smith children, never received the full extent of David's punishments at the hand of their biased father.

"Yes, sir," Dillon mumbled as he stared down at his plate hard enough it burned his eyes.

"Dear, please say Grace? Tommy, please sit down, dear? We're fine, just fine, everyone hold hands now." Mother was waving her hands around the table like a flaming queen and everyone quietly submitted and held hands.

Tommy put his hand under the table and reached over to get Dillon's. Dillon's hand fit perfectly inside his, and he gently squeezed it. Dillon gave him a side glance and attempted to pull their hands onto the table, but Tommy resisted and won. Father, on the other hand, grabbed Dillon's other hand at that moment and pulled it up on the table fiercely, as if ready to arm wrestle with him.

After the incredibly long Morning Prayer, they started to eat. Mother began complaining about the food being cold and apologizing to Tommy as she did so. Everybody started grabbing bowls and plates of food. Father had finally stopped glaring at Dillon and started eating.

Still holding Dillon's hand, Tommy began to serve himself with his other hand, putting eggs and bacon on his plate, while letting Rachel pour him some freshly squeezed orange juice. Dillon just sat there frozen, not blinking.

"I squeezed the little oranges myself Tommy! Here, try some?"

"Thanks Rachel, that's...enough..." he said quietly while she finished filling up his entire eight ounce water glass with juice while avoiding the smaller glass right next to it and leaving hardly any left for anyone else.

"Oh, that's brilliant Rach, thanks for draining the juice!" Daniel yanked the glass pitcher out of Rachel's hand and poured himself the rest, which filled a third of his water glass.

Dillon slowly tried to slide his right hand out of Tommy's. He couldn't believe they were actually holding hands under the table. It was strange, but not too horrible, however his heart wouldn't stop pounding and he was sure it was wrong - very, very wrong - and if his father looked under the table right now—

"Dillon? Dillon?!" His mother was watching him intently.

"What?! Oh, I'm s-sorry Mother, wh-what d-dddid you...?" He jumped and quickly pulled his hand away from Tommy's and brought it on the table. His face turned crimson red as everyone watched him stop himself from finishing his sentence. Tommy looked sad.

"Dillon, honey, give me your plate, you haven't started serving yourself." Mother gave Father a quick, 'please don't say anything mean' look, then reached over for Dillon's plate. She picked it up and stood over the bowls of food to serve him, when she noticed three large cracks having split the plate into sections. Just as she opened her mouth to ask Dillon why his plate was cracked, it fell apart in her hand, one piece landing in the scrambled egg bowl, one landing squarely on top of the single pile of stacked toast, and the last one landing on the table, bouncing

off the egg bowl first, then balancing on an edge of the plate. It wiggled back and forth several times before it finally stopped while they all watched silently. “Honey, what happened to your plate?” Mother looked puzzled as she held the last small piece in her hand, inspecting it like it was from outer space.

The table was motionless except for Daniel, who was laughing silently and pointing at the plate piece sitting in the scrambled eggs, while nudging Tommy with the other hand to get him to join. Tommy was stunned silent, like everyone else. Dillon stared at the piece of plate on the table as everyone started to talk again, and it broke in two under his gaze. He blinked, only to reflexively put his hands to his face, not wanting to see anything else. His father was giving him a stern, curious look, while his mother was picking up the plates and saying she couldn’t believe all the china falling apart in the house lately.

Luckily for Dillon, the plate distraction kept almost everyone at the table off him, allowing him to try to put his mind back together again. It was racing with thoughts as he tried to eat his eggs and bacon. He must have broken the plate when he stared at it earlier, while his father was reading him the riot act. It broke a second time, and I was just staring at it briefly, he thought as he tried to swallow a bite of egg, almost gagging and quickly grabbing his napkin to wipe his face while he discretely spit it in there. He could feel Tommy glancing at him while he ate. His face stayed warm. He didn’t even want to think about those feelings, didn’t want to go there right now, he told himself as he took a much needed drink of water.

Tommy and Daniel together probably refueled plates three times. The food they were consuming was phenomenal. Mother, Samantha, and especially Rachel were all beaming at the amount of food eaten, for they had all three helped make it.

“Mrs. Smith, this food is really delicious. I have never had a breakfast this good. Thank you very much.” Tommy took another swig of his orange juice, then glanced at Rachel, who was smiling at him, her chin resting and supported by her hand. She hadn’t even taken a bite of her toast, the only thing on her plate.

“Well, you are very welcome my dear!” Mrs. Smith beamed.

“I helped with the eggs – did you like them?” Rachel batted her eyes.

“Uh, yeah, they were great, and the juice is...great...too.” He felt his face get warm at the sound of his own awkward voice. He tried not to look at Daniel, but could see him giving a strange, ‘what the hell are you saying’ look at him. Rachel looked as dreamy as ever as she

continued to watch him

Dillon sat there still feeling stunned. His right hand felt detached as he tried to use it to eat. It was as if it was somehow marked and he was afraid everyone would see it. He felt an overwhelming sense of confusion; he knew he liked Tommy, but not *that way*. He didn't know how he was going to look at him again and the thought made him angry. There could have been friendship there, possibly, but now he felt horribly awkward. He tried to eat his dry toast. His stomach started knotting up again, and he panicked, looking up at his mother from across the table. "Mother, I-my s-s-stomach – m-may I be excused?"

"Of course, my dear, go upstairs and relax your stomach. Don't eat anymore."

Everybody watched him leave the table in silence. He turned to look over at Tommy, thinking he should say something. "I'll come back Tommy, I-I j-jju..." Dillon paused, not able to finish his sentence.

"I'm sorry Dil. Go lie down and Danny and I will come up to see you. I have something I brought over for you." Tommy smiled sweetly, making him want to vomit again. He nodded his head in agreement, quickly leaving to head upstairs to the bathroom.

Daniel was opening the window while Tommy was sitting on the edge of Dillon's bed, watching him sleep.

He is so beautiful. Unlike anybody I've ever seen before, and I've seen plenty of people, Tommy thought as he tried not to breathe for fear of waking the angel. He wasn't into guys, not at all as a matter of fact, but this one drew him in like a moth to the flame. He couldn't fathom being gay, it just wasn't his style, not when he had girls throwing themselves at him everywhere he went – and he genuinely liked them. He was a fucking celebrity in this town. He got laid all the time, never once doubted or questioned his sexual orientation, and more importantly, the girls never seemed to complain. So what was it about this one he couldn't forget or figure out? All he knew was how good he felt being around Dillon. It was like being in the presence of someone too good for this world. Being near Dillon was like being reborn, and the charge he emitted was overpowering.

Dillon slowly opened his eyes as he heard his brother's obnoxious voice in the background. "Dude, let's go get some warm water and stick his pretty little finger in it. I bet he whizzes!" Daniel stood there balancing the football on his finger.

“Hey there,” Tommy spoke softly as Dillon opened his eyes widely and looked up at the same guy who’d managed to make him vomit earlier. He tried not to scream out loud and gulped instead. He was living a nightmare and sleep wasn’t keeping him away long enough. He suddenly felt the need to never wake up.

“Uh, hey,” Dillon whispered, rubbing his eyes and trying not to kick Tommy off his bed. He remembered David’s pet peeve and realized now where he was coming from with that. *But I don’t try to hold his hand under our family table.*

“What are you smiling about?” Tommy asked, smiling himself. He quickly thought of how nice Dillon’s hand felt in his, giving him butterflies in his stomach at the table. I can’t believe I was so giddy, he thought, trying to remember the last time someone else had made him feel that way. He couldn’t remember anyone doing just that.

“Nothing, I was just remembering David, that’s all—“

“So, let’s give the little tyke his football and go Tom.” Daniel walked over and shoved the football into Tommy’s chest. He grabbed it and shot Daniel a mean look. “Don’t be rude Danny boy or you’ll piss me off.” Smiling again, he turned to Dillon and casually asked when his birthday was.

“Why the hell do you care?!” Daniel looked even more frustrated as he threw his hands up in the air. “He’s already got two bros! He doesn’t need another guy singing him happy birthday, now let’s go!”

Tommy continued to ignore Daniel, who was growing more frustrated by the minute, and continued to try to talk to Dillon. “Here’s the game ball, Dil. I scored three touchdowns with this bad boy and the last one saved the game. Thought since you couldn’t make it, I’d bring it to you. Hope you like it.”

Should I tell him I can’t stand football? No, I’d better be nice. Besides, you never know when you’ll need someone like Tommy at school, watching your back. Oh, geez! Don’t use that expression ever again. “Thanks. That was really nice of you. I-I’m sorry I couldn’t make it last night. I heard you stole the show.” Dillon took the ball and saw Daryl’s signature on the front side. He quickly flipped it over and away from view.

“No problem! It’s the least I can do. Hey, too bad you’re feeling sick. Maybe you could come along with us? Danny and I were going over to a ‘day after football’ party at some girl’s house – who is it again, Danny?” He looked up at Daniel, who was stunned.

“Jennifer’s house, man, it’s at Jen’s house. And it’s a *senior* party, Tommy. The boy’s barely out of middle school - come on!” Then looking at Dillon, he said, “No offense Dil. It’s just the facts, bro. Somebody’s gotta be the youngest, right? Catch ya later, little guy.” Daniel pointed to Dillon playfully then walked to the door to signal Tommy to follow him.

“Have fun,” Dillon whispered, avoiding Tommy’s stare as he laid back down in bed and put his football on his pillow next to him.

Tommy looked down at the floor, turmoil all over his face. “Yeah, sure, we always have fun, maybe next time, right?” He smiled at Dillon then got up and walked out.

As soon as Tommy closed the door behind him and the room went silent, Dillon breathed out a sigh of relief and closed his eyes again. *Today is a special day, and I am the only one to celebrate it. I am the only one to be glad for this day and I’m fine.* He felt himself drift off to sleep again. *I’m fine, I’m okay, and I miss David, that’s all, that’s all there ever will be. He’ll come back soon, and I’ll be here when he does. I’ll be...waiting...right...here...and he drifted off to sleep.*

Chapter Twenty Three

Help Me, I'm in Hell

He woke up to Jose sitting on the edge of his bed smiling down at him like a deranged guardian angel with a dopey look on his face. He had a grin to match, spreading quickly across as he watched David open his eyes.

“What the hell?” He turned on his side away from Jose, pulling the blankets over his shoulder.

“David? Come on! I know you're awake – I saw your big blue eyes POP open to look at me.” Jose held his hand to his chest and batted his eyes at the wood frame above his head.

“Let's go eat a breakfast! Come on! Come on! Please, come on?” He touched David's leg and wiggled it to get the reaction he wanted – the quick pull away to let him know David was awake. “Come on! Please, come on...come on now...?”

“Just leave him alone, Jose. Let's go eat,” Lance and Jimmy were both standing there waiting for him. Jimmy pushed his glasses back up his nose, intrigued and unsure over Jose's determination to stay with David.

“You guys go, I'll watch over him. Save us a seat okay?”

Save us a seat? Is he planning on sitting on my lap? Help me, I'm in hell...

Jose didn't look back at the guys, but he waved his hand in a delicate 'get out of here' motion, then continued to sit there waiting for David to register his presence. I'll sit here all day, he promised himself as he traced David's outline in bed with his eyes, his blankets are clinging to him just so, he thought as he tried to fight the urge to lie down next to him and snuggle. *There's nothing wrong with snuggling! It's warm and sweet and allows you to be close – but not too close. And there was plenty of room too! Damn! If I could be queen of the world, my life would be so much easier!* He continued to stare at the empty space between David and the edge of the bed. After a few minutes of agony and uncertainty mixed with excitement, Jose summoned the courage to ask. Clearing his throat, he spoke cautiously. “Dave? Could I just...you know...lay there next to you - because there's enough room right here for me and I'm small – then we could wake up together?”

“Do it and die,” David answered him casually from the pillow's edge, his voice slightly muffled. He looked as though he was trying to disappear into the stiff pillow.

“Well,” Jose paused to think about the act versus the risk then decided, “No thanks, I

don't wanna die today!" He laughed softly and smiled down at David. *He's so sweet, and so, so funny. It's refreshing to know someone in so much pain and turmoil. I could help him, if he'd only let me...*

A few more silent minutes went by and David was growing more and more frustrated, exhausted from not sleeping for several nights, all he really wanted to do on a Saturday was stare at the inside of his eyelids. This fruit isn't going to leave me alone, David moaned in his head as he tried to control his frustration with his breathing. *I need to get up because if I don't, I know I'm tired enough to fall asleep and the thought of me drifting off, only to wake up with Jose attached to my ass doesn't appeal to me right now...so I guess I get to eat breakfast with the school cheerleader.* He slowly turned back over and propped himself up on his elbows, while Jose still sat there watching him longingly, not moving an inch, not breathing either for that matter, and looking goofier than ever. David couldn't help but half smile, the scene was entertaining to say the least and he felt a strange acceptance for Jose. *He's different too so we're misfits together because I'm sure not normal. How can I be mean to a fellow freak? He's just too lively for me to shut him down. I guess I'm getting soft for Jose...didn't even see that one coming.* He glanced over at Jose again, who was still smiling larger than life.

"Okay, Martha, get off my bed so we can go eat." He spoke quietly with a resolution to give up in his voice.

"Oh, goody!" Jose clapped cheerleader style, then got up and waited for him to crawl out of bed to put his shoes on. He'd slept in his sweats last night and as he looked down at what he was wearing, David thought to himself, the outfit suited prison life just fine. He got up and walked by Jose, shaking his head and rolling his eyes and then stopped and really shook his head, violently up and down then side to side as a way to comb his hair. It worked, and when he was done, he turned and smiled at Jose, then walked out the door, looking away just in time to not see Jose put a hand to his chest in love struck awe.

Joel met them in the stairwell. Jose glared at him as if sizing up the competition, his hands on his hips. "David can't play right now - he needs nourishment." He smiled quickly at Joel to dismiss him then took David's arm to escort him away. David gently stopped him, taking his arm back slowly.

"Jose, I'm fine. Please, stop touching me. Joel, have you eaten?" He gave him a 'please help me look.' Joel smiled back.

“Uh, no as a matter of fact I have not done so. Shall I join you?”

Jose smiled at the game. “Oh Dave,” he lightly stroked David’s upper arm to his chest, letting his hand linger there. “I’m just joking. Come on you guys! Let’s go eat!” He smiled big and motioned them both to come along.

The mess hall was fairly quiet. Most of the boys had eaten and gone already, hanging out in the courtyard or in one of the activity rooms. As David walked around, he noticed there weren’t as many guards today, and the teachers were gone. He found out later from Joel that the adults that came over the weekend to ‘baby sit’ the boys were volunteers from Pastor Sampson’s church. Some of them older, some of them very young, but more importantly for David, it didn’t look too menacing to walk around the campus today, which made him consider something very, very possible. He turned to Joel when Jose was distracted. “Were you serious about coming with me?”

“What?! Are you actually serious about leaving?” Joel whispered back, a panicked look on his face.

“Uh, no I just thought I’d mention it – yeah! I’m fucking dead serious! I’ve got to get back home to finish some business—“

“But you just got out! And you’ll go back in and I’ll have to wait again! Just give the school some time - it’s not that bad you know?” He looked around nervously as he pleaded.

“Well, if you keep talking like I’m going to get caught then I probably will!” David copied Joel and looked around, feeling some of his anxiety, but it only lasted a few seconds before determination settled back in. “If I do get thrown back in the pokey, then I guess you’ll be crying in the next cell because you’ll be with me.” He poked Joel in the chest with his finger, “Except you’re forgetting one thing – I-won’t-get-caught.” He smiled and raised his eyebrows.

“How do you know for sure you won’t get caught?” Joel asked, his voice whiny and annoying, but his face was genuinely sad.

“Because I won’t, I already see myself gone.” He made himself turn away from Joel’s face. It bothered him to see so much genuine emotion in a guy he barely knew. He went and sat on the lawn, his stomach was upset again. He felt this way last night too. *Maybe I’m getting sick? Great, just what I need right now.*

“Do you see me with you, you know, already gone and out of here – do you see us out there together, because I have nowhere to go. My family won’t take me back, and I’m seventeen

with blue hair. What the hell am I supposed to do with rest of my life? I can't even get decent grades!" Joel followed and flopped down next to him, a defeated look on his face. "I probably won't even be able to escape from here correctly – fuck that up too—"

"Are you done? Because I have work to do, planning and timing when guards come and go, and when this place is least supervised, and I don't need your whine. Just shut the hell up and follow me around like the puppy you know you are, and I'll get us out of here. Geez," throwing pieces of grass over at Joel, who was sitting there looking totally dejected, head down, pouting, David just couldn't resist saying his thoughts aloud. "You know, with that mouth of yours, I could just put you on a street corner for two hours and we'll make ends meet." He laughed a good strong laugh right then, something he hadn't done in a long time, and he rolled on his side, grabbing his stomach as Joel pushed him away.

"Shut up bird talker, I could sell tickets to people on the street to come watch you talk to crows."

More laughter from David followed. "Could I be your pimp, Joelie?" He snickered as Joel hit him in the arm, connecting hard and delivering quite a sting.

"Ewww! Quit making me look like a man whore." Joel spoke quietly, looking over at Jose, who was jumping up and down like a cheerleader with a group of other she-boys.

"You know, I've always wanted to be a pimp, just couldn't fathom putting my little brother out on a street corner for rent, but you're not related, so this could actually happen—"

"Please stop? Okay, I promise no more whine. Seriously though, what the hell am I going to do out there? Nobody will want me and I'm not old enough to take care of myself yet."

"Um, I don't know. I'm just planning my escape from here. Anywhere is better than here, right? I just have to get home and see my little brother - make sure he's okay before I go." David winced with his last words spoken – he'd said too much. He hoped Joel wasn't paying attention. He should have known better.

"Why? Where are you going?"

Shit...

"I thought you said you needed to go back home – are you not going to stay there?" He sat up and looked over intently, invading David's mandatory five foot bubble by four feet.

"Uh, well...I just need to see my little brother again. I miss him, that's all, and he needs me there to watch out for him. He's - you know - fragile that way."

“Fragile? Sharing your genes? I doubt that.”

“No, really, he’s very sensitive and he...he cries a lot. He stutters when he’s nervous or afraid, so the kids at school pick on him. He doesn’t have any friends.”

“Do you?”

“No, but I don’t care. He does though, and he’s so beautiful, they treat him like some kind of freak because of it. Imagine a beautiful white swan trying to blend in with a bunch of gray geese and that’s my brother.” Joel shot him a confused look. “I know, I don’t get it either, but they’re mean to him. Sometimes it feels like I’m watching a modern day version of Jesus Christ Superstar being crucified by the masses, except they’re kids.”

Joel found himself staring at David in disbelief. “I can’t believe you don’t have friends, Dave. I mean, I picture you with groups of kids trying to get into your inner circle. You must have friends – or just maybe devote loyal followers? At least tell me you’re some mafia king at your high school, right?”

“Nope, and I don’t want any friends either - and followers? Please, no one would be able to keep up with me. People bore me, most are shallow, blank, lack substance, and they all seem to want something in the end. So basically, I can’t stand the mediocrity of the human race and the blind worship you see everywhere around you. It’s pathetic. So, no friends and sure as I’m alive, I don’t want any followers.”

“Well...then what, uh...how do you think of me?” Joel looked down at the grass, not wanting to see David as he felt him contemplate the question. The sudden silence was killing him though.

David sighed, not sure how to respond and realizing, maybe for the first time in his young life, that he might actually be wrong in his broad generalization of humankind. He quickly shrugged the little voice away, not feeling like listening to his conscience right now, especially since lately the other, much louder and more appealing voice seemed to speak over it anyway. “Nice try. Trying to get me to talk about how I see you? I’ll keep that to myself, but since we’re talking and sitting together, I’m sure you could figure it out.” Annoyed and immediately disinterested, David looked away, catching Jose doing a Madonna dance move to show a small group of girlie boys watching and trying to learn. He then noticed some hostile looking youths nearby, a few of them fake fighting with each other, only to finally rest his eyes on his own hands, opening and closing his fists and feeling powerful again.

Joel began to panic, but took the opportunity to speak up. Being quiet and passive wasn't going to get him anywhere and he so wanted to go somewhere with David.

“What’s wrong with telling me how you see me? I need to know, because if we sneak out those gates together and leave, you’ll be all I have. And by the way, just for the record, I’d follow you into Hell if you decided to go there, so I guess that says a lot about how I see you.”

David couldn't look at him, but he also couldn't stop opening up either, even though the voice in his head was screaming at him to shut up. “Look...I don't plan on being in this world for very long. My short term goal is to make sure my little brother will be okay without me. When that revelation occurs, and I'm secure with that decision, then I'm gone.”

“*Gone?*” The sound of panic again could be heard.

David paused for a few seconds, looking down at his hands trying to decide if he should open up. *Too late Dave, so you'd better finish what you've started, idiot.* He looked at Joel for a minute and studied his face. Joel was the closest friend since Dillon, the only person he actually considered to be a 'friend,' and he liked him, secretly more than he should, and that revelation was bad news. Bad news for Joel at least, because David knew he'd be selfish. He couldn't help but string him along because he actually wanted Joel there, knowing it would jeopardize his friend's safety, but he did. He wanted Joel by his side, he held his breath. *Here we go...*

“I plan on ending my life as soon as my goal is reached. I have reserved a place in the Underworld with people who know me, and I will go there after I die. It's all set up, it's what I want, and I've dreamt it for months now. It's a reality for me - it's my future reality. So...now you can see why I hesitate to get close to you, because the truth is, I won't know you for very long, Joel.” *Let's see what he does with this little piece of news...*

Joel sat there silent and stunned. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was crazy, delusional at best, but the way he watched David explain it like it was nothing special, just something he had planned to do, like taking a trip to Europe or riding the subway for the first time, made the moment extraordinary.

He sat there and watched David, a deep, ponderous look on his face, and he thought how fascinating everything David did and said was, how completely unordinary his ideas were. Even when he talked crazy, it was still so interesting. “I want to go with you to this 'Underworld' you speak about. I have nothing keeping me here.” He half-smiled at David. “I'd like to know more about this place you speak of - it sounds interesting. How do you know it's *real* though? You

did mention you visited there in your dreams, right?”

David spent the rest of the morning explaining everything to his friend, fighting and winning against the little Dillon-like voice in his head that kept screaming at him not to, to spare Joel from his damning influence. He chose not to listen however, and they talked together for hours, just the two of them, sitting in the sun with nothing else to do. Joel asked questions and David answered them, with a certainty that had Joel excited at the end of the discussion. He was now convinced this Underworld existed, and he wanted to know when they could go.

“Well, it’s not that easy. I traveled back and forth through my closet, but there aren’t any in the dorm rooms, and I don’t know if you could even go with, since nobody ever experiences the same dream together in groups. I haven’t figured out yet how we could work out the details. Plus, I’m not sure if Louis would allow you entrance. The scenery there and the people, modes of dress, all remind me of being back in time – kind of like the Middle Ages? It’s very simplistic, very survival-oriented and violent. You wouldn’t want to be alone down there - it’d be dangerous to say the very least. Your soul would be vulnerable; you’d need protection until you could gain strength and power yourself. Since I’ve been here though, nothing’s happened. Louis visited me in the isolation room the night I was there, but I wouldn’t go with him - you know, because of Dillon? So, I think I pissed him off, because I haven’t heard from him since. Does this all make sense, because you’re looking at me like I have a third eye?”

Joel sat there fascinated, taking in every word spoken. He was caught off guard by the question. “Uh, yeah, I understand it. It’s actually rather simple really. So there’s a heavenly place, where people like your little brother will go to, and there’s here, where everybody stays until they die, then there’s the Underworld, where people like you and me go? Are we bad then? Is the Underworld, Hell?”

“No, we aren’t bad, we’re just dark souls, and no, the Underworld isn’t Hell, although it could be interpreted that way, since you see some pretty wicked shit down there....” He suddenly decided on a radical whim to open up to Joel even more. He explained how he could see into people, how he could see the condition of their souls. He described his brother’s soul as being so bright, he couldn’t look at it for it hurt and temporarily blinded his eyes. He told Joel that most people, unfortunately but not surprisingly, were neutral or murky gray, like he’d explained earlier.

“So what am I?” Joel looked worried, for he didn’t want to be neutral after seeing

David's face as he discussed those souls, and hearing how he described those types of people. David paused, not sure if he even could see the state of Joel's soul and even if he could right now, he wouldn't care, so he said what he wanted and it worked, for now.

"You're dark natured, like me."

"How do you know what you are?" Joel watched David with a look of concern.

"I just do. I know I'm dark, I can feel it, especially now that I'm away from my brother. We tend to balance each other out, and without him to keep me in check, I can feel my wickedness seeping through and I can see the darkness behind my eyes. It feels like I'm wearing shades at times." He cleared his throat and looked over at Joel, who was smiling, happy he was at least something, proud to be more than ordinary.

"Okay, so I know about the types of souls, and so far you've mentioned the dark-natured, the neutral, the light-natured, and the pure of heart, but you haven't mentioned the level below dark-natured. There has to be an evil soul type right, like Omen or The Exorcist? Have you seen that type?" Joel looked anxious, he hoped David wasn't evil.

Yeah, I've seen it - once." He looked down again, frowning as he did so.

"Who?" Joel waited breathlessly.

"He's nobody you know. Let's talk about how we're going to leave this place, okay?" He looked away towards the desert landscape.

"Wait - one more question - can you see the condition of the souls in the Underworld?"

David became stunned by the question - stunned for the first time in a long time. The question actually made him struggle to think about it. He had never really tried to see the nature of the creatures in the Underworld. It had never occurred to him to check. Did they have souls in new bodies, or were they their souls in pure form without a so-called shell? He paused and debated with himself for a minute while Joel admired his side profile. "Well...no...but I just started seeing people here that way, so I don't think I had that ability when I visited the Underworld. It's relatively new for me, and it tends to not work all the time...and frankly...I really don't know if it's even true. I just feel it, can't explain it really, I just...know."

Joel thought for a few seconds then looked at David with a panicked expression on his face again. "Dave?"

"Yeah?" David sounded annoyed again, for he knew Joel wasn't going to end the discussion with another question like the stumper before and he'd start to worry about his whole

futuristic, other worldly plan. More importantly, David thought, he didn't want a dose of reality right now. He didn't need Joel to ruin his imaginative path of up and coming Underworld domination and success because then he'd have to face the fact that he was living in a fantasy world that was purely fictional.

"If you say that Dillon is the purest you've ever seen and you also say that the two of you balance each other out, then wouldn't that make you two opposites? And if you are the opposite of each other and you've just said you feel darker without Dillon with you, then..."

"*What?*" David looked over at him, his face irritated.

"Well, wouldn't that make you the opposite of pure and good? Wouldn't you be the other...*pure?*" Joel's voice drifted off.

David just sat there silent. *Damn, another stumper...leave it to the blue hair to give him that stupid looking edge when in fact, Joel's quite fucking smart.* He had to fight the urge to hit him at that moment. He hated the fact that his friend wouldn't shut up about it all. He needed to get out of there and they were wasting time. Just then, two boys walked over slowly, both of them looking at David with suspicious expressions on their faces; he was familiar with the looks, sizing him up was a look he was most familiar with as of late.

"Hey, wanna fight? I heard you were pretty good the other day, but then again, I wasn't there." The two boys standing near him looked like seniors; they were from the group David had seen earlier; the one talking was about the same height as David, but thirty pounds heavier, with multiple tattoos of crosses and swords peaking out of his shirt sleeves and neck collar. His friend was much skinnier and shorter, standing slightly behind him.

David didn't look amused or interested and chose not to acknowledge them with direct eye contact. Instead he looked at Joel who was slowly shaking his head as if already capable of reading David's mind. David winked at him in purposeful slow motion.

"I've been waiting for my turn on your ass, bitch, so get up. Follow me to the gym, and let's see what you got." His friend started to laugh safely behind his shoulder.

Joel began to whisper at David, a pleading look on his face not to start any trouble, but no use. He could tell David would never bow down or turn the other cheek. It just wasn't in his dark nature.

David could feel the anger well up in him as he put his head down, taking in the harsh words just spoken. He could feel the ache in his chest, his soul wanting out, wanting to take

over. He felt dark heat on his face, seeping out his eyes. “Yeah, sure, I’ll ‘kick’ your ass if you want me too, but why not right here? I think judging by the way you look, it won’t take me that long – but it’s just you and me, nobody else.” David shot up to his feet quickly, making everyone blink twice to register his move.

The leader stood there smiling a big cheesy grin as he took in David’s nice, model looks and like everyone else, underestimated his ruthless spirit. “Sure Sweetheart, whatever you say. Let’s go,” he held out his hands and motioned to David, while his friend stepped back to watch. Other boys came over as well, making a circle around them. Joel stepped in front of David.

“Dave, please don’t do this?! The guy is a hoodlum, not worth his blood on your knuckles! I mean, he’s got more tattoos than I have teeth, for crying out loud! Please, let’s just leave!”

“Step aside Joel, you’re wasting time. This will take a minute,” then he came close and whispered, “Trust me.” David winked nonchalantly then repositioned Joel out of the way so that he could keep walking over to the challenger, who was bouncing around the man-made rink like an amateur boxer. David stood there now, a bored look registering already on his face. “Come on and hit me here!” He yelled, pointing at his lower jaw, his voice resonating impatience.

The boy paused, smiled, then walked over and punched David. It was in such slow motion that David could see every millisecond of the boy’s facial expressions and his hand coming closer and closer to his face. It was absolutely painful to stand still long enough to allow the idiot to make contact with his face, but he did, finally. The punch was a direct hit, hard enough across David’s lower jaw that he spun around and shot to the ground, his face smashed into the grass from the force. His jaw exploded in pain, rocketing up his teeth and cheek bone and ending in a massive throbbing sensation to his right eye socket. He then immediately did what he always did at home – he blocked it out with a quick grimace and opened his eyes. His vision suddenly changed, became much sharper and darkly reflective.

As if waking up from a dead sleep, David grinned wickedly as he got up and rubbed his lower jaw, looking at his opponent, anger coursing through his veins as he watched the youth bounce around, calling him ‘bitch’ and grinning.

David felt the darkness in his eyes as he walked up to him in a fast, determined pace - not flinching, not hesitating and not moving to the side.

The boy immediately threw a punch, but it was incredibly slow again and David playfully

ducked and threw a punch of his own, an upper cut, directly to his opponent's exposed chin and jaw, knocking him up in the air a few feet and backward. Landing on his back, the force of the fall shooting the wind out of his chest like a whistle call, the boy held his chin in his hands and rolled over to his side, trying to get up and breathe in much needed air at the same time.

David stood there and waited patiently, looking at his black nails and chewing on one of his cuticles. He suddenly felt a rush of energy behind him, and he turned around, still chewing on his nail, and jumped up, throwing a round house kick and nailing the boy's buddy square in the nose, shooting him ten feet into the crowd, known as the human rink.

Watching the mystery boy's friend fly backward in slow motion, David thought how much he liked hitting noses as targets. It was fun to smack with brute force, the fragile extension of a human's face like that, breaking it off just to watch the blood flow swiftly down like a faucet turning on.

Hearing adult voices coming closer, David quickly walked over to finish the leader of the fight one more time, just for the hell of it, when he stopped short. The guys in the circle were gasping and stepping away from him as he approached, most of them turning and running away. The wounded boy tried to get to his feet as he saw David now above him, but fell back down again from the pain in his jaw; a terrified look appeared on his face as he crawled backward to get away.

Joel came running over and stepped in front of David again, this time stopping him as he stood there in his way. The act snapped David out of his trance. "Are you ok- holy shit." Joel stepped back and gawked at his friend's face.

David could still feel the darkness in his eyes. He looked back at Joel and whispered. "Are they black?" his voice sounded wicked and curiously evil.

The other guys, including the two boys David had just fought, had all hurriedly run away, so it was just the two of them. Some of the adults were grabbing and stopping students as they rushed away, asking questions, but nobody was talking.

"Uh...yeah, Dave, they're definitely...black." Joel's voice wavered as he came in close to look at them, half expecting the cause to be David's pupils dilating, but he couldn't see any delineation between pupil and iris. He stepped back to look at David from head to toe, hoping not to see any horns or forked tails. Realizing David still looked like himself, Joel put his hands on David's shoulders and tried to smile, "But at least you 'kicked his ass' with one punch right?"

Come on, let's go to the dorms quickly – it doesn't appear as though anybody's talking or pointing fingers yet." His voice sounded more worried as he slid his arm around David's shoulder to guide him along. Adding his own flare, Joel just couldn't resist throwing some comedy out there. "Come on, let's go, *Damian*," he whispered sweetly into David's ear as they walked to the dorms. "How's your jaw by the way? Sure was nice of you to let him hit you first."

"Yeah, that's me, Mr. Nice Guy. How are my eyes now?" He stopped and glanced over at Joel, his voice sounding more like himself with a hint of deranged happiness added in, much to Joel's relief.

"Whoa, they're back to normal." Joel felt a surge of happiness as he relished the moment in the company of greatness. His worship of his dark friend had just begun.

Chapter Twenty Four

An Offering

He threw his cloak on the back of a lounge chair, then walked over and lit the fire by simply walking by it. The blue flames shot up and lightened the room considerably, but there was no physical warmth with their presence. The blue flame was unique to Nine and Azmodeus.

The grand fire place was marble encased, with black onyx crystal devils crouching on either side as they supported the massive weight, serving as pillars. The intimate, smaller fireplace looked out at one of two rooms in Nine that required an invitation to enter. This particular room was Azmodeus' living room - his personal space - where he chose not to entertain guests, rarely bringing anyone here at all.

He placed his staff on the table where its holder resided while Esmeralda stood there and looked around the room curiously. It was rather small and cozy, with a large black, oversized couch located in the center of the room, facing the fire place, and two lounge chairs located on either side of the couch. There was a white fur rug on the floor in the middle of the furniture, with pillows placed around it for a more comfortable view of the scenery. Several glasses and bottles of wine were stacked on a table behind the couch, easily accessible to anyone sitting there. It was a comfy room meant for private talk and intimate moments, however, there was the business side of things, for behind the couch a few feet away stood a round table with a huge white crystal the size of a beach ball placed securely in the middle, accessible from anywhere around the table. There weren't any chairs, for it was a viewer, and the crystal served as a window. There were maps rolled up and stacked around the crystal orb, quills, ink and parchment paper scattered around as well.

Esmeralda finally summoned the courage to walk to the doorway, taking off her coat as she did so. This was her first invite and she was both exhilarated and fearful at the same time, not sure why after disappointing him so harshly this night, he would ask her into his personal living space. They had to travel across two planes and three gates to get home, and she was tired, having been up all day and now, all night. Morning was finally here and she felt sleep call to her, but she resisted it, for this was an experience she wouldn't turn away from, nor did she have the choice. She glanced up at the ceiling and admired the mural painted in brilliant red, green and yellow; a landscape of what appeared to be rolling hills and vineyards with beautiful homes in the background – a festive scene of wine making. Esmeralda smiled at the warmth of

the vision, framed in gold edging. It drew her eyes upward, and she had the sudden urge to walk over and lie on the white furry rug to gaze up at it, as if it were the ground and she was in mid air. She blushed, longing for romance again.

Azmodeus walked by her and drew her gaze as he always seemed to do. He looked as refreshed as ever, for she had heard rumors that he hardly ever slept; his soul not needing to recover, for it was far too restless to lie still for any length of time. Her heart skipped a beat just thinking about how she could probably make him tired in her own, womanly way.

He fell onto the couch gracefully and reached behind for two glasses and the closest bottle of wine, then poured the drinks. He avoided looking at her, although he knew she was watching him intently and remained near the doorway, probably for her own safety.

“It’s incredibly rude to remain at another’s door when you’ve been invited inside. I suggest you find a seat now, before your rudeness interferes with my hospitality.” He sat against the edge of the couch and placed the drinks back on the table next to him; his hair partly pulled back, however the rest of it fell around his shoulders, landing mid-way down the front of his black shirt, for he’d taken off his jacket as well, something he never did in the company of others.

Esmeralda was quick to notice his lack of layered clothing and smiled shyly, for she could actually see his body outline – sort of. As she walked in closer to the center of the quaint room, she immediately sat on the couch next to him. Although she knew he disliked her at the moment, she just couldn’t be too far away from his beautiful presence.

Azmodeus glanced at her sitting close and considered hitting her again, for he did not like her smiling at him, batting her eyes again with her legs crossed in full view. He decided to contain himself at this moment however, for he needed what she saw. He hated the fact that she could fly around the Living World unnoticed, seeing everything from the cover of night, without a care in the world and no kingdom to worry about losing whilst gone to play amongst the mortals. Dillon, he thought, she could see him and *talk to him*. The action made him grind his teeth. He seethed his words at her without actually making eye contact, “Tell me about the unfortunate visit. I want details of the house, the family, and especially the little one, for his magnificence intrigues me. The thought that you had the privilege of foreseeing his brilliance upsets me greatly my dear – so speak all you know, now that I have allowed you to keep your tongue, that is.” He set his mouth in a wicked grimace, his eyes turning yellow and black. He

looked so incredibly charming and menacing at the same time.

Esmeralda shuddered, her smile having gone, and she looked at her folded hands placed on her lap. She began to panic, realizing he hadn't yet decided he was going to keep her. This was a test. She would show herself worthy of keeping. "The house was very simple, my Lord, decorated distastefully with cheap, run-down furniture, and pictures of holiness the likes one would never want to see. The fireplace was droll with family photos. I picked up one of the portraits and looked at the two brothers standing next to each other. Their physical appearance quite similar, yet completely different from the other members of the family, and they stood out, beautiful little human toys, they were." She paused and glanced over at him; he was staring into the fire and frowning, but he remained quiet. She took the silent clue to continue. "The parents are Christians, and they have their own church. It has become quite popular in the community, especially with the new notoriety of the two youngest members of the family, especially David. They have tripled their attendance, with the father serving as the pastor and the mother, as the head of the Sunday school. There are two older sisters, and one older brother; however, the only family members there were Dillon and his mother. She is a simpleton, that woman, and was actually concerned for my welfare, being alone at night unescorted." She scoffed at the thought again, but continued. "She gave me tea and almost force fed Dillon a cookie. He was... interesting," she paused again and turned her head to lean her arm on the back of the couch, so that she could watch him as she talked.

"Go on," he whispered to the fireplace, choosing not to look at her while she told her story, for just listening to her words was painful enough.

"Well...there's his beauty, that's undeniable. He was perfectly formed really, his facial features neither masculine nor feminine. It is quite impressive for a human subject to possess such physical beauty. He looks to be approaching fifteen, if not already, for I sensed his age. He has blonde hair and crystal blue eyes. His face shows much fear. It simply gives him away. You can read his life by the emotion on his face and the way he holds his body line. He sensed I was there before he saw me. I smelled his fear while I waited for him downstairs in the living room. His scent is strong, that one, and he is so transparent—"

"Yes, pure souls tend to be transparent and angels are, for the most part, genderless. It sounds like he isn't as imperfect as I had originally thought. Although I did see his outline, so there is something about him that allows his soul even the slightest, limited viewing – maybe

simply, his brother's dark influence? It surely makes sense he'd be flawed slightly, for I can't imagine God Himself would create a perfect human being in His Image – that would be asking Him to play fair.” He spoke to no one, for he was discussing every possible angle with himself as he continued to stare into the back of the fireplace.

Esmeralda began to get annoyed as she continued to look at his side profile, waiting for his attention. It was strange not to be the center of a man's vision. It made her nervous and fretful. When it came to all men, she really didn't care, however Azmodeus wasn't a man and not at all human. No, she thought, he was an angel descended and transformed into a male god in his own right. *He used to look at me, yet now he doesn't even acknowledge my presence.* Her face began to heat up.

“Try not to display your jealousy, my dear. It doesn't become you. I will look at you when I deem it necessary to do so. You will have to wait for your privileged glance from me. Continue your story. You have more to tell.”

Esmeralda was caught off guard by the comment and quickly snapped out of her pout. It wouldn't work today anyway, and she knew it. “Yes, of course my Lord, my apologies, as I was saying, I was going to bring up the meeting I had with the boy. He came downstairs and saw right through me. I was temporarily stunned by his ability to do so, for I have never met a mortal with that capability. He saw me as a vampire immediately, and he froze there, in his beautiful fright. He asked me what I wanted and why was I there. I remember smiling at him and telling him not to be rude. He sat down, almost staggering over to the chair, for he could feel my true presence. Amazing it is for a young mortal to be so paranormally aware, but I should have known better, considering you felt his potential.”

He glanced at her quickly and then turned away, shaking his head in disbelief over her ignorance. “Do not stop until you are finished telling the story, my dear. I grow impatient with each pause, and that is a warning.” He continued to gaze at the fireplace.

“Yes, well, he was rather spiteful and rude to me, and might I add he has a slight stutter and I would gather from what the crows have reported, that is another reason why the boy is probably teased at school. He almost ordered me to go use the phone to make my call, and he was fairly quick tempered. After stepping away for a minute, I returned to the living room, where that horrid woman offered me a cup of tea and we sat down together on the couch. I never contemplated feeding the entire time I was there, for I knew my purpose was just to observe...for

you. I made up my mind to do that after I arrived of course, otherwise I wouldn't have come at all, but my, my jealousy blinded my better judgment. As I sat there with his mother, he positioned himself in the chair across from us and watched me intently. I have to tell you his eyes are amazing. I'm saving the best for last when I say this, for I sensed they had power from the first moment I saw him. He can will things to be done with them, my Lord. He has a magical presence about him too. He sat there while I brought the tea cup to my lips and it exploded – shattered into pieces while I held it! Pieces went everywhere, hitting his mother across her face and chest, but not hurting her.”

The Dark Lord turned his head in an instant and startled her with his stare of intense interest.

“Uh, yes, well as I was saying, he could control the intensity of the explosion with his eyes, my Lord!” She became animated again, as if she'd found a new dress she wanted, and she almost bounced up and down on the couch as she described this last piece of news, her heart pounding at his sudden interest in her and her words.

“And the saucer? Was there a saucer you were holding as well?” His voice seething again, but this time she didn't notice in her glee.

“Why yes! I hadn't thought of that! Yes, he didn't touch the saucer, and I placed it on the coffee table and looked at him. The only piece of the cup remaining was the little porcelain handle I was holding. He watched me with a stunned look on his face, for I don't think he has truly embraced his craft. I searched his face and found resistance, his distrust for his magic—“

“Of course he distrusts it! It is evil to the boy. All he knows - all that his parents and that Book have force fed him - have strangled his intuition and his natural talent.”

“Yes, my Lord, well, I left shortly after that incident. He watched me intently of course, all the way to the door. I became quite upset when I'd realized his powers and what I had allowed myself to do. That is why I went to Madera. I needed to seek counsel for my transgressions so that I could better learn from them. I knew I'd made a grave mistake and that I had jeopardized what you were working for, and I swear to you, my Lord, from this moment forward, I will do everything I can to bring both of them here to you. I want to bring them to you, really I do, just give me the chance to serve you again? I feel so ashamed for my weakness,” she looked down, the last few words drifting off after painfully noticing that he was still looking into the fire, having only looked at her once since she'd started talking.

A few minutes of silence went by and Esmeralda fretted. She sat silently anyway, knowing she couldn't say anything else to improve her position and she feared if she continued to talk about the incident, it would upset him more. Azmodeus finally turned in his seat, startling her and reached for his wine glass. She tried to pretend she knew he wasn't going to hit her, but it didn't work. Her fear was thick in the air and he grimaced at the pungent smell. It disgusted him greatly. He took a sip and glanced at her. Was she worth blind, vengeance – the kind one knew would eventually come full circle? Did the rage justify the reckless act? He wasn't sure.

She held her breath and waited for him to speak. *At least he's looking at me again...*

“I will pardon your intrusion my dear, but only once will I do this. If you should disobey me again, I would suggest you destroy yourself as soon as the revelation hits you, because I will surely do so. Mercy will not be shown, I'm afraid to say. And one more thing before we close our little chat – Théoden is no longer with us, I'm saddened to announce. The poor old soul met a rather unfortunate end in my fireplace. My hounds mourned his passing while you were away. Does that piece of news make you sad, my dear?” He took another sip while he looked at her over the rim of his glass; his eyes back to their normal cover of light, icy blue when he wasn't fully himself. However Azmodeus' look was curious as he watched her expression forming.

Esmeralda wanted to ask why he'd taken her assistant, but why bother? Théoden was useless to her anyway, he only cared to be around when the Dark Lord was near, proving like all the others, that he was there just for that purpose and not to help her. Théoden had proven to be a waste of space, another Dark Lord Groupie. He obviously saw this too, she thought as she smiled at him. “My Lord, your wisdom in doing what you do so well need not be questioned nor mourned by myself. I choose to follow your lead and I feel secure in all your decisions, my Lord. I serve you in that way.” She smiled.

Ruthless bitch. “Well, then let's toast his passing my dear, with some drink.” He reached over and handed her the other glass on the table behind her head. She flinched again, expecting another hit and he grinded his teeth as he tried to pretend he didn't notice it. They touched glasses and drank in silence. She was gushing like a school girl again. She couldn't resist keeping quiet about the kiss much longer. Now was the time to blurt it out in typical giddy female fashion.

“My Lord, the, um, the kiss tonight, it was - it made me breathless! I can still feel my lips tingling from the sweet pain. How did you do that? I have never been kissed like that

before.” She smiled and took another drink as she sent him a flirty side glance. She suddenly felt nervous again, like she’d said too much, or expressed herself too well.

“A kiss is just that, nothing more or less. My kissing you was simply a taste of what you could have had if you’d been patient. Now you’ll have to wait for the next opportunity to present itself for I am NOT one of your throw away male toys you enjoy playing with. I will be the one to play with you, my dear, and I am...ruthless.” He took another drink and then set it down on the table behind him.

“My Lord, I would never consider you one of my playmates. I choose to remain celibate you know, although I’m sure you have your opinions about my activities, having heard the rumors about my sexual appetite. It’s not true though! I assure you, I do not engage in, nor do I return affection to the men I hunt. I am not what others view me as...I am very selective and it has been a long time since I’d matched lips with someone and not used my teeth. I could be yours now if you wanted me though? I would give myself to you completely, and you would know by my trembling that it was something I would never do lightly?” She talked with confidence again - her sexuality had come back in these few minutes like wild fire. Esmeralda had returned in full form. Now she was handing herself over on a platter and she didn’t care if he was still angry. She wanted him to take out his anger on her body.

Azmodeus sat there and smiled at her feeble explanation and her offering. He knew he’d destroy her quickly after he’d had her. It would be the perfect ending to the night, since she had already told him all he needed to know about Dillon; a perfectly planned and executed vengefully sexual act. *She was not thinking, foolish woman, always wanting to play with ice.* “Mating with me would be far too dangerous for you right now. I’d suggest you wait until my feelings for you return. Your chance of surviving would greatly improve should that happen...so if you’ll excuse me, I need to finish my drink. I have other agendas to attend to tonight and sexual debauchery is not on the list of things to do. However, speaking of sexual debauchery,” he smiled coyly, much to Esmeralda’s chagrin as he suddenly thought of David, “you will need to meet with me later on to discuss when I can bring David here. I may need to bring him forcefully. You can leave now.”

He spoke to the fire as he said these hurtful words to her, not appearing interested even slightly in her offering herself to him. He’d made it obvious right then and there that he only wanted David on his knees before him and there was nothing the alluring vampire could do to

improve her standing at the moment. It pained her deeply to continue to sit there and watch him look away, dismissing her like he did so well, but she couldn't leave right then for her body was frozen stiff from the cold sting of rejection again.

He sensed her pain and turned to her finally. "Go and rest. You've had a long, destructive night. I will be calling you shortly to work for my interests here, and I'll need you to perform for me then. Do not disappoint - now go."

"Yes, my Lord." She didn't look at him as she turned to get off the couch. Her looking away caught him off guard, and he reached out and grabbed her chin gently in his hand, as he pulled her back to look at him. She was beginning to genuinely cry as a single tear slid down her cheek and rested itself on his thumb. He wiped it off and hesitated. That's all she needed to see. Her heart began to beat again, her cold blood flowing again and her body suddenly alive and renewed. She smiled demurely at him.

"Go now, before I change my mind," Azmodeus brushed his hand against the side of her face in a gentle motion, his touch creating a cold current across her skin. She sighed then got up on shaky legs, and half-bowed to him before turning and leaving the room, grabbing her coat and beaming at him over her shoulder as she left.

Jasmine lingered in the air around him long after Esmeralda left the room. He finished his drink as he sat there motionless for most of the night, thinking on the words of his witch's story. Finally he swung his legs onto the couch and laid there, his hand under his head as he watched the light from the fire make shadows on his ceiling.

Chapter Twenty Five

The Pokey Party

It didn't take long for them to come for him. David knew the Christian posse led by Sheriff Sampson was on its way to his room in a blaze of glory, so he waited there in his dorm surrounded by Jose, Jimmy and Joel; all three of them staring at him like he was the main attraction at the Circus for the Stars. He lay on his bed with his arms tucked behind his head and listened to Jimmy and Joel arguing back and forth. It was very entertaining - better than television.

"Look, he's fine! You can see for yourself his eyes are blue as can be, so everyone else must be smoking crack, Jimmy! You know it's absolutely ridiculous to accuse someone of changing the color of their eyes?! What? You think David just turned away from that asshole and everyone else there and popped in a couple of black contacts with nobody noticing?! Come on!" Joel threw his arms up in the air, his look one of total exasperation. David watched him and smiled. *He's a fairly good actor...another occupation for Joel to fall back on when he's not hitting the streets as my male bitch for rent.*

"I saw him, I saw those beautiful black eyes, and I cried out they were so angry and sad looking," Jose held his hand to his chest as he stood there between Joel and Jimmy, neither one of them noticing nor listening to him. David noticed though, and he tried not to chuckle over Jose's rendition of his rage but he couldn't help it.

"It doesn't matter that his eyes are blue *now*, Joel. I've heard from dozens of guys who were right there too and they all said the same thing! His eyes turned black and he looked like he was going to *kill* that boy! He's the one probably on drugs!" Jimmy pointed to David, who smiled wider at the accusation.

This is so entertaining. Honestly, I couldn't pay for this shit anywhere else! David faked a cough. "Great, I'm on drugs. Anyone got any cactus weed?" He spoke quietly to the wood frame of his bed.

Jose laughed and threw his hand out at David. "Oh, Dave, you are so, so funny! I love you and your black eyes." He smiled at David, almost blowing him a kiss as he puckered his lips together, desperately wishing he had lip gloss. Joel and Jimmy both turned to him now, as if noticing him for the first time. "What?! I jus' said he's funny...gosh, take a joke," Jose mumbled as he began to pout.

“David isn’t the one who started the fight anyway, Jimmy! Those boys asked him to fight, and then the leader threw the first punch! Anyone with eyes who was there would at least verify that, so David isn’t at fault anyway!” Joel paused, knowing now why David had asked the boy to hit him first. At the time, he thought David was nuts.

Jimmy pushed his glasses back up his nose. David watched, sure as hell the boy did that just to buy himself time to think hard on a disciple appropriate come back line that would reek pseudo-authority. “Well, they’re both in trouble for fighting – period, Joel. You know the rules as well as I do. Come on David, you know you need to go downstairs and talk to my father. He should be arriving any minute now.”

“No! David stays for he is innocent! I saw him standing there so small against that...that jerk off!” Jose stood there and stomped his foot, his hands on his hips with a comical, disgusted look on his face as he looked at Jimmy. David couldn’t have Martha sticking up for him. It just wasn’t right; somewhere out there it was way, way wrong, he decided, slowly rising off his bed to defend himself.

“Bite me Jimmy,” David replied casually, standing up to stretch out his arms as he did so, with Jose giggling at the suggestion. “I’m not leaving until they come get me. I didn’t do anything wrong. I defended myself against that knuckle dragging brut – that’s all. And this rumor about my black eyes, well, it is close to Halloween, so the boys need something to be afraid of, you know, a new scary story to tell during evening hour, right? Jose?” David winked and pointed at Jose, who blushed and laughed.

“Oh, David! What can I say? You caught me.” He blushed sweetly.

The door suddenly opened and Pastor Sampson walked in, along with two much older gentlemen, all of them wearing leisure suits from the seventies. It was like something out of an old cops and robbers’ movie – all Pastor Sampson needed was a badge and a gun. David laughed out loud unexpectedly, causing all eyes to turn to him. Joel gave him a ‘why are you trying to get in trouble’ look on his face. He then mouthed David’s name silently to protest his actions.

Forcing him to turn his gaze away from Joel by clearing his throat for the millionth time since David had to meet the guy, Pastor Sampson began his monologue. His smug throat clearing was to David, like nails on a chalkboard. “Well, Dave—“

And there’s yet ANOTHER nail on my fucking chalkboard—

“I am very sorry to hear that after less than twenty-four hours out of isolation, you go

perform yet another violent act. This time you even have the entire school involved, everybody ready to pack their bags and leave for fear of the ‘devil fighter.’ How does that make you feel, especially considering it’s your birthday, hmm?” Pastor Sampson stood there as cocky as ever. David wanted to vomit on the pastor’s buddies – they were probably the best page turners in Pastor Sampson’s congregation, he was sure of it - both of them standing there with their hands on their hips like rent-old-cops.

The boys all turned and looked over at him. It was funny how their mouths all dropped in unison. Joel looked particularly hurt, like he had been left out or something. David swung his legs around and stood up from his bed again. Jose was beaming as he came over and gave David a hug. “Happy birthday David - you are so lucky!”

“Come on, son. Let’s not make this hard,” Pastor Sampson motioned for David to come with, his arm extended towards him.

David thought about resisting him for a second, along with everyone else at the school. He knew no one there could stop him forcefully anyway. He also knew he could walk out the front door right now and hitch a ride with a stranger without much in the way of resistance. There’d probably be a lot of carnage along the way too, he hoped. He felt a surge of confidence and power, but then Dillon came to mind, and how he would never get to go home if he fucked everything up right now by playing Rambo. No, better stay in line, he thought as he sighed in self defeat. “What would we make *hard*?” He heard Jose giggle softly at the suggestion but he ignored it, although it was difficult not to snicker too. “I mean...I was defending myself against a much older boy with lots of facial hair and tattoos, who used offensive language and called me a bitch - so what’s the crime in defending against that kind of abuse?” David looked annoyed. He shot a glance at Joel, which was a mistake because he in turn, looked crushed.

Is he that upset he didn’t know it was my seventeenth birthday? Should I remind him I never wanted to be born? Should I inform him the reason people brag and celebrate their birthdays is because they are celebrating another year lived and in my case, that’s a bad thing? No, no use in doing that. Joel doesn’t need to know anything more about me...he knows too much already, thanks to my big, fucking mouth. “So, why should we make it hard for *me* when I didn’t do anything wrong? I shouldn’t have to be the one to leave!” He stood there trying as best he could to play the innocent role with Pastor Sampson. It wasn’t working, as usual.

“David, I’m going to ask you one more time? Come with us to discuss what happened

today in my office – Now.” Pastor Sampson spoke firmly for the first time, pointing his finger at David from across the room. He was intentionally keeping his distance from him, which in itself was comical, but David knew by the sound of the pastor’s voice, he also wasn’t going to back down either.

David smiled. *Scared yet?* “Fine! Why not?! I guess we can talk about it in your office. See you guys later. Bye Joel,” David walked by the boys and mouthed the word ‘sorry’ to Joel as he did so. It worked, for as he looked back at his friend, Joel was blushing and looking at the floor, smiling.

“Bye David, see you.” Jose whispered, shaking his head at the other two boys, whispering, “It’s so, so not fair. Our boy’s in trouble again.”

David walked by the pastor who took a side step away from him at the same time, then also walked by the two older bodyguards and smirked. Interesting, he thought. *Why do I feel like I’m already going to receive the blame for the very quick, boring fight?*

As they got to the courtyard and headed to the main building, the four of them were met by two more church volunteers; these two were younger, as in less than half a century in age, and David began to look cautiously around them as they walked into the building. Instead of turning to the left to walk towards the chapel and the Pastor’s office, they went to the right and down the familiar flight of stairs to the basement. David shook his head in disgust as they walked downstairs. “I thought we were going to discuss it in your office, *sir?*” He whispered to the pastor walking right behind him.

“Yes, well, I can discuss the case with you down here too - now move.” The pastor suddenly gained his authoritative voice again, now that he was surrounded by additional reinforcements.

“Well, nothing says we care about you and your side of the story like a quick trip to the isolation rooms located way down in the basement.” David chimed in loudly as he stomped down the stairs. “Yep, we care so much about you, we’re gonna lock you up before we even hear you tell us your side of the story!” His voice was dripping with sarcasm. He felt the anger well up in him like a rising thermometer. It shot up his head and focused its intensity in his eyes. He felt it leave him, burning imaginary holes in the steps below his feet as he walked down the steep steps. He had to remind himself to remain calm, so he thought of his little brother. He thought of his brother smiling at him every morning, so happy to see him, the joy radiated like heat. He

also thought of Julie in her sweater and Joel with his blue hair making fun of the other students at school and his mischievous, contagious grin. It finally worked, and he felt the hallway lighten before him.

Once in the basement, they didn't have to go far again, Isolation Room 'A' was available and immediately to their left. The group of church men stood around the door to let David pass through. He marched in like he was returning home from a long vacation. "Honey, I'm home!" Walking over to the bed, he sat down on the edge, facing the toilet. He looked up at the camera and saluted it while he waited for the pastor.

"Well, here we go again." Pastor Sampson walked in and spoke with the familiar smug sound in his voice David so detested.

"I'm innocent until proven guilty, yet I find myself placed in a cell." David chose to speak quietly, staring at the toilet while the pastor stood before him. He continued to focus his energy on keeping his anger in check although it was getting harder to do by the second.

"I have heard the story from several of the students there, eleven to be exact, and they all repeated the same. You were approached by Edward—"

"So that's his name?"

Pastor Sampson cleared his throat and David rolled his eyes, "He challenged you to a fight and you accepted, unfortunately, and asked him to hit you right there in the courtyard in front of everyone to start it—"

"He would have started it anyway because he was the one who wanted it!" David finally raised his voice in frustration, still looking at the toilet.

"Interrupting me gets you nowhere, now (throat clearing), once he hit you and knocked you down, you got up quickly and approached him, hitting him and knocking him down, then you kicked George in the nose – breaking it, I might add – and turned to walk over to continue to hurt Edward, who was still on the ground."

"I was just walking over to see if he was okay, that's all." He lied to the toilet, trying to hide his smile.

"Well, once again, according to everyone else there, apparently that wasn't your motive, because the look on your face said otherwise." He glanced over at his entourage nervously, and then looked back at David, who noticed the apprehension immediately. He thought he could smell the fear, for the air was sweaty and thick. He smirked as he glanced at the pastor, surprised

to see him actually in the cell this time. He noticed beads of sweat on the man's incredibly large forehead and receding hairline, making his long piece of marathon hair stick to it like it was pasted on by a three year old.

“Nevertheless, the general opinion from all questioned was that you became enraged and terrified everyone there. None of the adults could get anyone to talk about the fight for an hour or so, while they called me in. The fear was infectious! I mean, the boys all ran away from you - not just Edward - who by the way, now joins the other two boys who have received broken jaws by your hand. He has a fracture across his chin and his upper jaw as well,” the pastor began using his hands to attempt to explain the injury, which made him look like a horribly acted pantomime. He had David's attention though, which was a first. “And his two front teeth were jammed into the bone, so that they are shorter now, and - and it's - oh, you think that's funny do you?!” He glared down at David, who was trying not to laugh, but the pastor's voice was beginning to sound more and more ridiculous, his reenactment of the punch hilarious, and his fear was pathetic.

“Uh, no, sir, that would not be wise of me to laugh. I'm just shocked that this is now suddenly my fault, that's all.” He tried to cover up and switch topics to save himself. “I was bullied by someone I didn't know, an older student for that matter, and because he called me derogatory names and attempted to humiliate me in front of my peers, I defended myself and my honor—“

“YOU have managed to single handedly scare every student, minus maybe Jose and Joel, at this school by your actions today and your demon eyes, so now you suffer the consequences! I am awarding you forty eight hours of isolation for participating in a fight - whether or not you started it doesn't matter - this is a no fighting campus!” He turned to leave, but not before David could call out his reply, making the pastor pause at the door for a second before leaving him.

“Oh, I see! So if I'd not hit him quite so hard, maybe just bruised him a little, and then turned and smiled and waved at the crowd of boys there watching, then maybe I'd be better off?! Great, well, now I know what I need to do, suck at fighting, get my ass kicked, shake hands with everyone in the crowd and I'll get off light! Thanks, PASTOR OF GOD! Your words are pure wisdom!”

The door closed with a loud electronic clicking sound. David spat at the ground.

Chapter Twenty Six

Happy Birthday to You

The scenery was amazing, the change subtle, and Dillon enjoyed taking trips in the family station wagon. He preferred it to the van. It was cozier, and he could ride closer to the ground in the car, whereas the van was like a school bus - basically not cool.

The dryer scenery and sparse trees was eye catching. The landscape was flat and unchanging once they traveled outside the city limits. He looked over at his mother driving and smiled. He was so proud of her today. She had found her voice and had stood up to Father so well. It was eerie. She demanded to see her second son, whether or not he was in trouble for fighting. She didn't care. She needed to make sure he was okay, for Dillon had knowingly planted a small seed in her emotional brain that made her question the powers that be. She wouldn't trust someone just because they were a religious authority figure.

Dillon was right. A pastor was not necessarily higher up in God's eye than anyone else. This Pastor Sampson could be a very good con artist, and what would be wrong with a surprise visit over the weekend, not interfering with school, on a Saturday, no less? It's my son's birthday, so as far as I'm concerned, that's reason enough for a motherly visit!

As Mother drove along the two lane, much smaller scenic highway, her mind drifted from one emotional topic to the next. She hadn't forgotten David's birthday - she'd always remembered it, every year hoping he'd change his mind and want to celebrate it, but it hadn't occurred yet. Not since his eighth birthday did they even have a cake that shared his name on it. He refused to acknowledge it, focusing on his little brother instead. Somehow, he'd decided only Dillon was good enough to celebrate life.

It pained her greatly to see him push away presents over the years, or worse, give them to Dillon when they all weren't looking, for by doing that, he'd guarantee a harsh punishment from his father. He did it deliberately on the birthdays where they pushed him to change, so that he would receive harsh words and sometimes, whippings at the hand of his father, for purposefully ruining his own birthday party. She realized now as she drove along, how much they had fought David and not once did they sit him down and really spend the time to actually listen to why he would say over and over again, "I just don't want to, that's all. I hate birthdays when they are mine," or, "It's Dillon's day to be alive, not mine. It's his birthday."

Those phrases used over and over again were never really questioned, they were just

refused, answers not worthy of thought and understanding. According to Father, they were instigating and spiteful, meant to bring sadness to the family, and Mother played along, hoping her son would grow out of his anti-birthday campaign. But like everything else he spoke about, David never did change. Had they overlooked his reasons for doing what he did, year after year? Could there be personal truth in consistency at such a young age?

They pulled onto a dirt road and approached the gate. Mother spoke into the gray box vaguely, not wanting to give herself away. “I am here to see my son.”

A quick spark of electricity fired out, followed by the answer. “Ma’am, visiting hours are after lunch...you are very, very early.”

“Yes, well, that’s too bad. I demand to come see my child – NOW.”

Once the gate opened and they started to drive down the dirt road, Dillon became nervous. He looked around and started to sweat. Mother noticed this and smiled over at him. “It’s okay, Honey. You know, David did the same thing when we pulled onto this road.” She laughed softly and shook her head. “You two are too much alike - it’s like I have twins! No wonder I’m so tired all the time!” She winked at him as he glanced at her nervously.

Dillon tried to smile but he was sick to his stomach and vomiting right now might make his mother turn the car around and head home again. He had to beg her to take him, promising her he was fine and choking down two pieces of toast in front of her this morning to prove himself, which was difficult because his lower jaw was killing him. He couldn’t figure out why, but it felt like someone socked him one while he took his quick nap after breakfast. He felt certain Daniel had snuck in and punched him in the face for stealing Tommy’s attention. He rubbed it now and stretched his mouth open until he heard a cracking sound. There, he thought, that felt better.

They drove for what seemed like an incredibly long time, then finally, right as Dillon was about to complain, the school appeared in view. He got out of the car slowly, looking up at the massive gate and chain linked fence that seemed to give the school a jailhouse feel, and shuddered. So this is where one goes to become a disciple, Dillon thought, as he walked around to join his mother. He noticed how she casually walked up to the second gate and rang it. The doors opened and she strolled in, Dillon trying to keep up with her, for her six foot frame was noticeably bigger than his five foot seven height. He noticed as he walked along next to her, how intimidating she had become in her transformation. Sara Smith was no small fry, but her

demeanor was so sweet and caring. The kids in the neighborhood always referred to her as June Cleaver magnified, for she could definitely fill a man's shoes with her height, but she had a heart large enough to love everyone in need of a maternal connection. Right now however, she looked very foreboding, and Dillon saw a glimpse of David in her walk at that particular moment. He smiled at the likeness there.

Sara strolled into the administrative building, which was also the first building in the complex and walked up to the desk. There wasn't anyone there. The place looked empty, then again, she thought, it was a Saturday. There was a sign that said 'Welcome Parents' on the desk and a complete list of the students and their dorm rooms, with a map of the campus. Sara didn't need the map, she knew where her son was, and she turned to Dillon and said, "Let's go see him, darling. I know where he is." She was so poised and confident; Dillon watched her walk by him in awe, his mouth opened. "Close your mouth honey, it's not attractive." He ran after her towards the dormitories.

There were boys sitting around the grassy area between the circle of buildings, all of them wearing blue sweat suit outfits. Dillon couldn't help but stare at the conformity, it really did look like prison, and he cringed as he thought about David wearing those ugly blue coordinating sweat tops and matching pants. How awful, he thought.

The boys all stared back at him as he walked along side his mother. The stares were harsh, making high school seem not so bad, Dillon thought as he tried to block himself from view by walking along the opposite side of his mother. As they got to the second floor of David's dorm, Sara walked over to the room and knocked. Jose screamed out as he ran over to the door, opening it and yelling, "Leave us alone! He's gone—"

"Uh, hello there, young man, I am looking for my son, David Smith?" Dillon stood behind his mother as she spoke, but he poked his head out from around her back and looked at Jose.

"Oh-my-gosh! You are her? And you must be his brother! Oh, you two are so, so cute! Come in! Come in!" Jose stood there clapping and bouncing as he opened the door and stepped back into the room in cheerleader mode. Joel was lying on David's bed looking as though he was in mourning, but when they walked into the room, he stumbled out looking suddenly guilty and came over. He then quickly grabbed at Jimmy, who was trying to sneak out of the room to alert his father of the visit.

“Where do you think you’re going, Jimmy? Don’t you know it’s rude to leave when we have company?” He pushed Jimmy back into the room, then turned to stick his hand out at Mrs. Smith. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, David’s Mom. I’m Joel, his best friend, and these two boys are his roommates, Jose and Jimmy.” Joel shook Mrs. Smith’s hand then looked over at Dillon, who had walked in out of his mother’s shadow and was looking around the room.

Jimmy and Jose were standing there in front of Dillon with their mouths dropped in unison. He didn’t even notice their stares. Joel felt what David had described when he spoke of his brother; he felt the boy’s shine immediately.

“Well, nice to meet you too, Joel. Your hair, it’s...different, isn’t it?” Sara smiled sweetly at him, while watching him blush.

“Yes, ma’am, I’m growing it out though – slowly and at times, painfully. Your son makes fun of it too.”

Dillon looked over at Joel and watched him intently, still not having noticed Jimmy or Jose. Joel met eyes with him and froze. Those eyes, he thought as he tried to speak. “Uh...”

Dillon interrupted him, his stare piercing Joel’s brain. “Hello. David knows you w-well. Nice to m-mmmeet you.” He reached out his hand and shook Joel’s, sending electricity up Joel’s arm, making him gasp and force out a cough. Dillon let go of his hand first, turned from Joel and looked around the room again. “M-Mother?” He only had to look at her and she spoke, turning to Joel. “Where is the birthday boy? We’ve come to surprise him.”

Jose jumped in, still looking at Dillon as he spoke. “Um, our boy’s in trouble – but it wasn’t his fault – you look so, so much like him, um, and he’s in—“

“Hello Mrs. Smith, remember me? It’s Jimmy – my father’s Pastor Sampson? He’s probably talking with David right now. You see, he was involved in another fight this morning and—“

“Don’t you interrupt me Jimmy! I was talking and I know your rascal ways!” Jose glared at him, his eyes almost popping out of his head, while Jimmy was looking very frustrated as he turned to Jose, pushing his glasses up on his nose and began to explain, but Jose became more irate. “I am telling you to not make me lose my temper!” He pointed his finger at Jimmy, his other hand on his stuck out hip, then he dramatically turned to Mrs. Smith and Dillon with his hand out to silence Jimmy and continued. Joel coughed lightly to keep from laughing. “David got in trouble for defending himself against a mean, mean boy bully and because of his good,

strong fighting style, he got sent to the isolation rooms, not to be seen today, or tomorrow.” He threw up his hands in frustration and shook his head.

“Mrs. Smith, let me take you downstairs to my father’s office and he can take you to David—“

“I think I will be the one to take Mrs. Smith and Dillon to see David and you can stay here with Jose, right Jose?” Joel winked at Jose, giving him the ‘don’t let him leave you look.’ Jose nodded in agreement.

“I can go with them *Joel!*” Jimmy was getting red in the face as he pushed Joel’s hand off his arm.

“Oh no you don’t mister!” Jose stepped in front of Jimmy again, with finger out and pointing, waving around Jimmy’s face, making him back up, looking fearful. Dillon smiled at the scene. How entertaining this all was, he thought. *David must have enjoyed some of this drama.*

Mrs. Smith looked over at Jimmy with apprehension, then at Joel. “Sure, my dear, do you know where these isolation rooms are? It sounds awful.” She glanced back at her son with a worried look on her face, unsure whether or not he should even be there. Oh my Lord, she prayed to herself, please let David not be chained up in a basement! Her eyes began to water.

They walked out of the room and followed Joel back to the administrative building, trying not to cause a scene, but almost running to keep up with Joel’s excited pace. He knew where the isolation rooms were, for he had visited them frequently when he’d first arrived here. They walked down the stairs to the basement, only to be met by a locked door.

“Great!” Joel yelled out in frustration, smacking the door and grabbing at the handle repeatedly.

Mrs. Smith pushed the intercom button and waited. The two boys stood there listening.

“Yes?” Spoke the speaker, the voice sounding very familiar to Sara.

“Yes, my son, David Smith, is supposedly in an isolation room and I am here to check on him. I’m his mother, Sara Smith.” She spoke with confidence again, making Dillon smile up at her. Joel, however, was still transfixed on Dillon.

The sound of a clearing throat could be heard, then “Why, hello Mrs. Smith. It’s Pastor Sampson here, I will be down to see you in just a, a minute.”

“I want inside, Pastor Sampson and I’m not waiting.” Mrs. Smith looked and sounded

irritated as she stood there, her hands on her waist, tapping her foot.

Joel finally spoke up. “Um, David’s told me so much about both of you. I wish I had such a nice family.” He gushed as he spoke, although Dillon’s eyes felt like heat on his face, making him sweat profusely. *Jesus*, Joel thought, *this boy’s a chip off his older brother’s block any day of the week.*

“Well, that’s very sweet of you Joel. We’ll have to have you come stay with us when - when you get out.” Mrs. Smith’s voice sounded awkward as she spoke. She didn’t want to admit it, but at that moment, The Disciples did feel like prison.

“Well, I’m not really here because I’m a troublemaker. I’m just here because my family kinda disowned me. They can’t find my parents, and I guess my grandparents have enough money stashed away that they sent me here to “finish up my youth,” as they put it.” He laughed softly, after throwing up his hands in quotation marks, however the hurt in his comical voice came through as he shuffled his feet and tried to brush it off. The short pause was painful for all three of them, with Mrs. Smith frowning at the thought of family leaving a confused teenager at boarding school just so that he could finish his growing up there. “I just turned seventeen, so it’ll be another year, and then I’ll be done - not too long, right?”

“Uh, right, that’s right! Where do your grandparents live? And have you heard from your parents...how long has it been?” Mrs. Smith inquired like the typical nosy neighborhood pastor’s wife and mother.

“My parents have been missing for a little over a year. My grandparents sent me here two months ago, after they saw my newly dyed blue hair,” he pointed at his head, then smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “They didn’t want to raise me anyway, because it interfered with their trips all over the world. They live in New York City, by the way, but I won’t go back there when I leave here. I want to move near David. He motivates me to do better, you know? Your son is a great person, Mrs. Smith.” He smiled up at her and then glanced at Dillon. “He wouldn’t stop talking about you either, I mean, I feel like I’ve known you for years,” then pausing, relieved he’d finally found his confident voice, Joel ended with, “He really loves you, Dillon.”

Dillon smiled back, his face radiating as it warmed Joel’s skin. “Yeah, he’s always bragging about me—“

“Mrs. Smith! Nice to see you again!” Pastor Sampson was hurriedly flying down the

stairs, almost falling on top of them as they stood there waiting in the small space between the door and the stairwell. Dillon smelled fear in the air and a harsh, moral wind hit him in the face as the Pastor stood there in front of them and breathed out a quick, forceful sigh.

“Open this door, Pastor Sampson. I need to see him now.” Sara had one hand on the closed door, the other, on her hip.

“Uh, well, sure, sure. We can do that. I was hoping I could get you to come to my office, located just upstairs, so that we could talk about everything that has gone on since David came —“

“I don’t think you understood me, Pastor Sampson. I want to see my son NOW.” Sara smiled sweetly as she emphasized the last word. Dillon glared at the Pastor intently, making him glance over and smile down at him.

“Hello there, you must be the younger brother David talks nonstop about! Dillon, right?”

Dillon quickly looked away, choosing not to make eye contact with him, for he sensed something wrong in the man’s eyes, and he smelled judgment and misuse of power in the air when he spoke. It was beginning to choke him.

Pastor Sampson quickly looked over at Joel and his voice became stern, his upper lip disappearing from view. “Hi there, Joel. What brings you into this?”

“Hey there, Pastor. I was just showing Mrs. Smith around the school grounds, that’s all.” Joel smiled, thinking to himself how incredibly cool this particular moment was in school history. He and David would finally get their due time making the pastor they despised look like the monkey fool he truly was.

“Pastor? Open the door.” Dillon saw his mother begin to frown as she spoke her words. Oh Lord, he thought.

“Yes, of course, Ma’am. Please know that the isolation rooms really aren’t called that, they are called ‘quiet rooms’ – and for good reason – for the boys come here when they need time out from the disruptive behavior they’ve gotten themselves involved in. Now David got into a fight this morning and severely hurt two boys, both of them being treated right now as we speak—“

“That’s funny, Pastor Sampson, because I just saw one of the boys, George I think his name is? Yeah, I just saw him walking by us with his nose taped up before we got here. He looked just fine.” Joel smiled knowingly again. Pastor Sampson chose to ignore him.

“So, with this being a nonviolent school campus, for obvious reasons, we need to isolate the violent offenders, therefore David was placed in here an hour or so after the incident. He hasn’t been in here that long, and after he cools down and learns the error of his ways with prayer and scripture, he will be released back into the campus environment.” He was rambling, and Sara was giving him the glaring, overly suspicious and dangerous mother look. He reached by her and opened the door gingerly, having unlocked it while he was upstairs. The four of them walked in, Joel and Mrs. Smith continuing to walk down the hall looking around and in the rooms, while Dillon walked right over to Room A and looked in, watching David pace the room with a nervous look on his face.

Pastor Sampson watched Dillon intently, whispering to him. “You see him *that way*, don’t you? You’re both like twins, aren’t you?”

Dillon leaned on the glass window and breathed a circle of fog on the pane, then whispered back to the window, “I see you *that way* too, Mr. Sampson.”

“It’s Pastor Sampson, young man.”

“Is he in there?” Sara and Joel ran back over.

Pastor Sampson glared down at Dillon for another second, then when he realized the boy would probably not recognize him the way he wanted him too, and there would be nothing he could do about it, he turned to the control panel on the wall next to him and typed in his code. The door opened out and they stepped back, David looking up and met eyes with Dillon, first one in the room, and he went right to his brother, hugging him hard enough to knock him backward two steps. David smiled, looking at his mother and Joel walking in as well, his mother beginning to cry, and Joel smiling awkwardly. “Well, I guess this might just turn out to be a Happy Birthday after all,” David said aloud, then squeezing his brother tight, the two of them leaning into the center to keep from falling over; their dual energies overwhelmingly strong.

“Happy Birthday boys, Happy Birthday to you,” Mother whispered, her face beginning to smile.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Love

They gathered up David's things, Dillon stuck to his side like the side kick he was used to having around, and they headed towards the administrative building to leave. Jose and Joel followed them to the front door, Jimmy having stayed in the dorm room, stared at David in disbelief as he packed up his belongings. As they walked out of the room, David didn't look back, nor did he speak to Jimmy, and for the first time since they talked in the dorm room on his first day there, Jimmy was without words to yell out as he watched 'the one that got away' leave his world. He turned away from the door in silence and walked over to the window, shaking his head and pushing the glasses back up his nose in defeat.

As they got to the main building, David turned and said good bye to Jose first, then Joel. He felt an overwhelming sense of relief to finally leave the school, but sadness quickly descended on him as he watched these two boys stand in front of him, so different from each other, neither one standing a chance at knowing him at all if they were in the real world.

"Bye Jose," David smiled, giving Jose a thrill as he winked at him. Jose started to cry immediately, looking from David to his family, then back to David.

"Oh, no! No, no this can't be happening! You're supposed to stay and we would eventually leave together!" He leaned in and whispered to David, "We haven't even had one time alone together yet...damn it! I had plans!" He cried and stomped his foot as he spoke. Dillon smiled in the background as he watched. Now this guy was definitely gay, Dillon thought. *I have nothing to worry about.*

"It was fun, Jose, but I've known all along that I wouldn't have made a good roommate – it's just not my style. Goodbye." He then shocked his feminine roommate by leaning in and speaking in his ear, tickling the side of his neck with his breath, "See you, Martha." He quickly turned to Joel, while Jose continued to cry and smile at the same time, holding one hand to his chest and the other, over his mouth in complete happiness.

Joel was looking at the ground and trying not to cry. David stood there looking at him in silence, allowing him a moment to collect himself. How does it come so quickly, David thought as he stood there and watched his friend. *How did he do it? How did he get to know me so well, invade my thoughts and grand plans in four days' time?* It stunned him as he stood taking in Joel's presence, staring at the top of his blue head while Joel hid his overwhelming emotions. He

felt in the short time they had spent together, he'd really gotten to know Joel, he could sense his thoughts and feelings easily, and giving him a moment to breathe and accept the situation was unnatural for David, and something he wouldn't have given anybody else, except for Dillon of course.

"I won't forget you Joel, and I will see you again, under different circumstances, under a new set of rules. Look for me there, you'll find me looking for you." David leaned in and hugged Joel, who hugged him back quickly, sobbing and whispering something David couldn't quite hear, then turned and left, not looking back, with a sense of urgency in his step. David watched him nervously, not sure what had just happened. Not turning his eyes away until Joel was out of sight, he finally, slowly walked over to his mother and Dillon, passing Pastor Sampson without stopping, although he heard him say a few words about how nice it was to meet him and how he hoped he could find God out there. David didn't look at him, nor did he answer him, but he walked out the front gate with a confident step, knowing the school hadn't taken away his identity or forced his conformity.

Professor Marty met them at the gate. David felt immediately uneasy by his sudden presence, hoping to have had the opportunity to glide right on through without another meeting – no dice.

Dillon walked right up to the Professor and shook his hand, introducing himself and smiling, with Mother standing right behind him and David lingering behind.

"Well, I can see the resemblance strongly in your two sons, Mrs. Smith. You must be proud of them."

"Thank you, Professor Jenkins—"

"You can call me Marty, ma'am." He turned and shot a look over at David, but didn't make eye contact, so he cleared his throat and said his good bye to Mrs. Smith and Dillon, complimenting them both for coming to support David. "And David," Professor Jenkins walked over with his hand out to shake his, then remembering the occurrence with Pastor Sampson and Jimmy, quickly withdrew it and smiled instead, waving his hand to say good bye instead.

"It was my distinct pleasure to have had the opportunity to know you a little better David and I thank you for that. I truly hope you can walk out these gates with some understanding and tolerance for the world around you, like we discussed, and a better appreciation for your time here in this world." He watched as he noticed David squirm and look for the first time since

meeting him at the gates, uncomfortable.

David didn't answer him, didn't say a single word, much to his mother's dismay and Dillon's puzzled face, but he did something only Marty appreciated. He stuck out his left hand. Marty smiled as they finally made eye contact. He did what he knew David might enjoy and instead of traditionally shaking the young man's hand, he performed a lighthearted gesture by sliding his open hand along David's palm. They grabbed fingers and pulled away playfully, then touched closed fists. David smiled briefly at the comedy and Marty beamed. It was all they needed, a little light humor. David walked out, followed by his family.

As they were leaving the gate and pulling out onto the main highway, Joel was smashing his hand through the glass window of his dorm room, the blood seeping down the broken window pane. He grabbed a shard piece off the windowsill and cut his other wrist then staggered back and leaned against his lower bunk to admire the cross on the wall in front of him, while his sight slowly faded away.

Chapter Twenty Eight

A Quick Departure

He knew it was no use staying around. Visits on weekends were strictly for family members only, so for Joel, there would still be nobody to call on him. David leaving was a monumental surprise of the worst kind. He didn't see it coming, and Mrs. Smith had disguised it so well during his time with her. He knew he wouldn't have wanted to help her find David if he'd known of her plans to leave with him. Joel felt used and fought hard to not punch the wall as he stood there and watched David quickly pack his things in the dorm room. It was maddening, almost surreal, but he kept it together for David's sake.

As he watched David say good bye to Jose, his heart began to rip open and Joel held his breath. He felt it gush through his chest wall, soaking his shirt, so he looked down to check as he waited his turn. His mind was racing. He couldn't bear not seeing David again, and a year seemed like an eternal wait. He can't even write me, he thought as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, for letters weren't allowed unless, once again, they were from family. *My life is over now that he's going out those gates without me. I was supposed to go with, I was chosen to be by his side, and now I get to watch him leave! No, no this can't be happening. I was supposed to go with! I was planning on living my life for him! I can't do that here! I can't cope now! His spirit will haunt me here! He's in the walls, in the air, and worse, he's in my head! How can I escape that?! My heart hurts, my head aches, and the blood coursing through my veins feels like it needs to get out...I need out of here.*

David approached him while he remained looking down, the smell of his sweet breath hitting Joel's head, moving his hair and trickling down his face was almost too much for him to accept as a final moment. He needed more time! Trying not to panic, Joel focused on David's words. Like poetry to his ears, he clung to every word, like he'd done all week as he forced David to accept and embrace him. He'd never tried so hard to make someone see him like he'd made himself do with this boy. After hearing the words spoken, Joel wanted to reach up and hug him, but he froze, knowing that if he embraced David like he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to let go. A single tear fell down his face, stopping on the edge of his chin, trying to decide to jump off and hit the ground or stay collected there. David rushed his indecision and hugged him first, squeezing him quickly. Not wanting to miss out on the rapidly ending moment, Joel quickly returned the hug and whispered in David's ear, now that he was close enough to do so, and he

quietly said, "My soul wants to leave now, but I'll wait for you there." He turned and walked away with urgency in his step, driven by the ache in his chest. He could feel David's eyes on his back, begging him to turn around and see him, wave to him, and smile like everything will be okay, but he should know better than to expect his partner to fall in line with everyone else. No, Joel wouldn't perform like all the others. His difference, he swore to himself, was the reason David chose him to begin with. He couldn't blow it now by doing what everybody else would do. He would go quietly into the beyond, and he would prove to David that he could do it alone. Joel felt that he didn't need to ride on David's coat tail like they'd originally discussed. No, he'd find his own ticket, and when it was all said and done, he knew he'd see David much, much sooner by doing that than by sitting here rotting away in this school. He wanted out now.

As he strolled into his room, he closed the door quietly and scanned it. Nobody was there. He walked over and grabbed the desk chair and propped it up against the doorknob, making sure the connection was tight and secure, for there were no locks on the door and he wanted to delay anyone trying to enter. "No one will save my body when I'm gone," he said quietly as he turned from the door and walked over to the window. The action was smooth and effortless, driven by something from within. He was amazed as he watched it happen before him, his hand out and up, palm and wrist exposed, went through the glass so easily, the cut perfectly placed. He stood there and pulled his hand out, glass fracturing and falling to the floor at his feet. He could hear his pulse in his ears, the pressure he'd felt earlier in his chest beginning to soften as the weight of blood supply began to leave his wrist.

Joel reached out and grabbed a triangular piece of glass barely hanging on the window frame and tried to cut his other wrist, however the first time, he missed; the cut a mere scratch. He was having a hard time using his right hand now that it had been partially severed, and he panicked. He did it again, this time forcefully slashing his wrist using his body weight with his cutting. The pain made him scream out as he dropped the glass. An unusual sensation of warmth spread up his arms hitting his face as he staggered backward. He looked down at the expanding pool of dark blood collecting between the two bunk beds and became shocked by the sight, like he'd just walked in on all the mess.

Joel raised his hands up to his face and watched as the blood flow slowed to a trickle, both hands side by side so that his life could meet in the middle. He became lightheaded and blinked, but the room was dark, so he blinked again, however the darkness remained. He slowly

fell backward, hitting the edge and the corner of his lower bunk bed, then slid down.

In a few seconds time, the room reappeared before his eyes, yet the only thing he could focus on was the cross of Jesus, arms extended, on the wall above the window. He thought about how that painful image was a symbol for hope and everlasting love and forgiveness – the ultimate sacrifice. His hands fell down to his sides, palms up, their weight too heavy for him to keep holding, but he smiled anyway as he thought about how much he was sacrificing, and how much he was hoping for on the other side. He focused on the cross and thought of love, then floated away effortlessly.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Homeward Bound

As they drove away, David sat in the back seat and away from the spotlight, having refused to sit up front by claiming to have an upset stomach. He knew as soon as they would get home, he'd have to play the new role he'd developed during his time at prison camp, but for as long as he could relish it, he wanted his alone time in seclusion. Still, he was ready to do whatever it took to please his parental units; he felt confident he could play along and live his newly improved, more tolerant, Reformed David Smith persona. As they got into the car and he slid into the back seat, Dillon suddenly changed his mind and while smiling at his mother, quickly shot into the back seat as well, sitting next to a surprised David who was buckling his seat belt.

Sara smiled as she started the car and drove off. In the days since David had been away, she had noticed her connection with Dillon had grown dramatically. She could read his mind when he looked at her, speaking for him when she needed to without thinking. It was slightly disturbing when she thought about it, but over the past few days, it had transformed into a comfort for her - a stronger connection. She felt like she could protect him just as well as David could, and all these years she'd felt jealous over the boys' bond. Now it didn't seem to matter to her anymore, because she finally felt the connection too.

David sat there looking out the window watching the scenery reverse itself, smiling and appreciating the transformation. Dillon was sleeping, leaning on his shoulder, having fallen asleep immediately upon sitting next to him. David would have normally pushed the kid off and yelled something obnoxious at him for touching him, but not now. Things were different, and he thought as he sat there listening to Dillon breathe easily, that things would be better for both of them. He enjoyed the warmth of his brother's presence, although it didn't take long for the weight of his brother to begin pressing David into the car door. He repositioned himself slightly, bracing his shoulder against the door to help offset Dillon's presence. It worked for the most part.

As he sat there watching the scenery, his mother started talking to him about school and how he'd been missed greatly. She talked about how, just in the past few days since he'd been gone, they've had an increase in their church attendance. David rolled his eyes behind her seat. She then went on and on about how the church had become so popular with the Vista High

student body, so much so, they had to ask their good friend and fellow long time church member Tom Stanton to head the ever expanding youth group and organize it for activities and social outings. He grimaced at the thought that he'd have to not only endure church every Sunday with his family, but now he might be expected to attend these swinging Christian youth parties. I'm in hell again, he thought as he sat there listening and openly agreeing with her by throwing in the occasional "Mmm, hmmm," when it was needed. *She just keeps talking too. It was too easy to keep her going.*

Right as they hit the main highway, leaving the dirt road, David felt his chest hurt. He gasped and thought of Joel. "What's he doing?" He whispered to his mother's seat.

"What dear?" Mother looked up at the rear view mirror.

"Uh, nothing Mother. I just feel like something bad might have happened to Joel a minute ago. I'm feeling a little apprehensive at the moment, and I don't know why, except I see his face in my head, and he's fading away..." He stared out the window again at the long stretch of the two lane desert highway before him. Dillon stirred in his sleep.

"Well, yes, I can tell you I felt worried about that boy as well. He was quite charming until he found out we were leaving. He had a look in his eyes that made me think he could do something desperate. He liked you quite a bit, too much I think for the short amount of time you were there. It almost felt like idol worship if you ask me, but I'm no expert. The other one, Jose I think his name is? Well, he liked you even more, had quite the crush on you dear. Strange to see that, but I guess this world has changed quite a bit since I was a teenager." She paused for a minute while David ignored her, still looking out the window, then she continued talking again about church and school.

While looking at the desert scenery, David noticed his side profile reflected in the window, his nose, mouth and one eye visible as he sat there leaning into the glass. Suddenly, he saw Joel's face there looking back at him, his eyes sad, his face, pale white. He held his breath, staying motionless as he saw his friend's face and the scenery behind him traveling sixty miles an hour. He blinked and a flash of severed hands, cuts deep like mouths opened, smacked into the window, as if Joel was pushed into it, shaking it loudly with the impact. David pulled back in disbelief as he watched the blood splatter everywhere, then falling down the window in streams. He shot sideways across his seat by the impact of energy, falling into Dillon, who quickly woke up and yelled out, "Ouch! Dave!" Dillon watched in shock as David sprawled to the other side

of the backseat, crawling over him as he did so, his eyes wide open, his breathing heavy as he plastered himself there, shaking his head in disbelief and shock.

He could barely hear Dillon and his mother asking him questions. He couldn't help but keep his eyes glued to the window now in front of him as he lay across the back seat and rested against the other window, sweating profusely. Dillon turned to look at the window also, but saw nothing. David however, couldn't help but see the bloody hand prints remaining there, Joel's face so panicked and scared, now gone, as if he was being sucked down a drain to somewhere far away and he was resisting and trying to get to him first for one more moment. He felt his stomach lurch forward as he quickly realized Joel looked panicked, as though he wished he could change his mind and stay...and those hands were bent so unnaturally, like rubber...

Mother pulled over and stopped the car, just in time for Dillon to open the car door David was leaning against. Vomit went shooting out as David leaned there, then he got out and staggered to the other side of the door, almost falling over, holding onto the car with his hands to steady his legs as he ran around the backside of the car. He looked at the window and saw nothing. He did a quick visual check around him at the deserted highway and the barren landscape and also saw nothing but a single crow circling above him in the air. He looked at it for a second, touching the window for any sign of body heat.

Nothing - he saw and he felt nothing. He began to cry, holding onto the door. He knew it...he heard it now. He now could hear what Joel had whispered to him minutes ago. "He can't go there yet! It's not safe! He needed to wait for me - DAMN IT ALL TO HELL!" He screamed at the crow hovering above his head. It cawed back at him as if answering his request, then flew off. He watched it fly away while his mother stood there and hugged him.

"You'll see them again someday dear! I have already invited Joel over once he gets out, and maybe he could spend the summer with us? I'm sure we can work something out. I'm just happy you are finally making friends...your father and I will work out the details on getting Joel over to us, okay? Now Jose is another matter all together, so I don't think I can convince your father about him." She hugged him again as he stood there stunned, sobbing into her shoulder. He smelled so good she thought, like a grown man! She smiled as she laid her head against his and breathed him in slowly, enjoying the moment as long as she thought he'd let her. *I won't let go first...*

Dillon walked up behind her and watched his brother, recognition spreading on his face

as he shook his head in agreement. *Do you feel it?* David thought as he watched his brother while his mother hugged him. Dillon nodded yes. David watched as Dillon mouthed the words “he’s dead, isn’t he?”

The rest of the trip home was a silent one, all three of them quietly resolved not to speak. The combined mood was somber, the landscape growing greener and the cars more frequent, until finally, after merging onto highway southbound five, they found themselves bumper to bumper in mid-afternoon traffic. David sat all the way over next to the window he’d sat in before, looking out it, hoping for another gruesome trace of his only friend. Dillon sat on the other side this time, not leaning against his brother, but their fingers touched as they each threw an arm up onto the back of the seat. The energy shooting back and forth between them, each one taking turns moving his fingers around in the magnetic dance of being drawn near, then shot away.

David sat there more confused and conflicted than ever before. At that moment he wanted to be below, if nothing more than to protect Joel because once again, he didn’t truly know the state of his friend’s soul and he had looked forward to today, being with Dillon and seeing his face light up at him, but he squirmed in his seat thinking about how long he could feel satisfied with this life; how long would he take before he ventured down and stayed down? He looked over at his brother, who was looking out his own window, and he felt guilt - massive guilt. He sat there watching Dillon’s side profile for awhile and thought his brother’s eyes had a new presence. He’d noticed it when he first saw Dillon in the isolation cell. He had to close his eyes for a few seconds at first glance, for the brightness was more intense, and the energy, well that was much more noticeable as they hugged each other. The pull forward and apart at the same time tore his insides back and forth; the sense of completeness overwhelmingly strong as he held his brother, his other, more important half. Suddenly the guilt came back in a wave like motion. David suddenly closed his eyes and tried not to think about leaving. His departure would happen when he was ready. He missed Joel - knew he loved him even - but not enough to leave Dillon to chase after him. *Please stay safe, Joel. Please don’t disappear before I get to see you again, you - you son of a bitch!* His sadness turned to anger in an instant and he lightly smacked the window with his fist. I can’t wait, he thought. *I can’t wait to kick your ass when I see you, Joel.* He let his anger entertain him the rest of the way home as he thought of all the ways he’d make Joel pay for leaving him alone.

When they walked inside the house, the entire family was there, minus Father. Everyone came up and hugged David, except for Daniel, of course, who instead stood there with his hands in his jean pockets and glared back and forth from David to his mother, then back again.

David ignored him, instead letting Rachel fawn all over him, trying not to listen to her go on and on about this girl and that girl, and all her friends who've been waiting for him to invite them all to Homecoming dance. It was nauseating, especially after experiencing loss for the first time ever – real, significant loss of someone he loved – but he allowed her to continue, knowing Daniel was watching and waiting to pounce. He smiled sarcastically at Rachel while she ranted and raved his praises.

“Like, Kristin is so, so impressed with your verbal ability! She wanted so badly to tape your speech about, you know, that guy – and um, it was like way cool the way that speech of yours got around! She is so, so cute too! And she has great fashion sense. Anyway! Oh my gosh! Let's go call her right now!” She squealed, making both David and Dillon jump back, their mouths dropped in unison. Mother smiled as she watched. My, my, she thought, they do look like mirror images of each other.

“Have you spoken to Father about this, *Moth-er?*” Daniel whispered as he walked over to her, while he continued to glare at David. “He won't be happy, I can assure you.”

“Good! He shouldn't be happy, Daniel. For we have work to do – lots and lots of work to do IN THIS HOUSE, starting with YOU.” She pointed her finger at him, tapping his chest and smiling. He stood there shocked. “Now, be a sweet dear and make your mother some tea. It's been a long ride there and back and I do feel tired. Thanks Sweetie!” She pinched his cheeks and patted him on the shoulder, gently pushing him to the kitchen. He walked over slowly, looking back at her as she continued to smile at him. Tommy was sitting awkwardly on the couch and he stood up as Daniel walked by him, not saying a word.

“Tommy! You're here! Wow!” Mother paused as she watched him look upward at the Jesus portrait, then back at her. “It's great to see you've finally made yourself at home here Sweetheart! Come here and meet David, my second son.”

He walked over slowly and smiled at her. “Hi, Mrs. Smith, hey Dillon,” he glanced over at Dillon and smiled. He then made the mistake and looked at David without preparing himself first. The young man was just slightly shorter than he, with dark, almost black hair, and his beauty almost matched his younger brother's. His light blues eyes, however, as they looked

upon Tommy, weren't warm and sweet looking, instead they were cold and harsh. "Hey there, I've heard great things about you from Dillon. He's a great guy." Tommy swallowed hard then put his hands in the pockets of his jeans and began rocking on his feet, both David and Dillon stared at him intently.

"I *would* know." David said quietly with just a hint of sarcasm, looking Tommy up and down. "Nice belt buckle." He then turned and ran into Rachel, who was coming over with the phone in her hand.

"It's Kristin! Say hello Dave!" She shoved the phone in his face as he tried to step away from her, dropping it so that he had to catch it. She then turned and started talking at a phenomenally fast pace to Tommy, who looked suddenly overwhelmed as he glanced from her to Dillon.

"What?" David spoke into the phone.

"Uh, hi – hi is this David?" An intimidated girlie voice could barely be heard amongst Rachel's chatter in the background.

"Nope, wrong number." He hung up and turned to smile at Dillon, who was watching him and smiling back, shaking his head to disapprove. David twirled the phone in his hand like it was a gun, shooting it at Rachel's back as he mouthed to Dillon only while he pointed to Rachel's back. "What's her name?"

Dillon shook his head a second time, smiling more so.

David grabbed Rachel by the shoulders and turned her around to face him, pushing the phone into her chest. "Here you go - neat girl, your friend Carrie." He walked by her and went up the stairs to his room, followed closely by his side kick, as Rachel called after him.

"It's Kristin! Ask her to Homecoming on Monday!"

"Um, how are you feeling Dillon?" Tommy shot out the question as Dillon started up the stairs after David, making him pause and slowly turn to go back downstairs to speak.

"Oh, you don't have to stay here, I know you're excited about your brother being home, so, um, it's okay to go up there and see him." Tommy stood there shifting his weight from one foot to the other, with Mrs. Smith, Dillon, and Rachel all looking at him, waiting for him to say something else. Dillon decided to save him, for he liked Tommy, and he was grateful for the distraction while David was away.

"Um, no, no, it's okay. I can see David in a minute. W-what are you and Daniel doing

today? I th-thought you had a party to go to?"

Daniel walked in and handed his mother a cup of tea with a sour, defeated look on his face, his eyes down cast.

"Thank you dear, why don't you invite Tommy for dinner, since it's the boys' birthday, and Tommy is now Dillon's friend too," Mother smiled at Daniel, who suddenly had his mouth open in silent protest.

"It's your birthday?" Tommy turned to Dillon, trying not to show the excitement mixed with relief across his face.

"Uh, yeah, David and I share a birthday, but he's pretty low key about his half of the day, so word to the wise – don't remind him." Dillon was beaming at the thought that David was upstairs. His fears would be gone now and tonight, tonight he would sleep soundly.

"Gee, yeah, Tommy, how about this for a surprise? Do you want to stay for a birthday dinner?" Daniel snickered at Tommy after his mother walked into the kitchen.

Tommy looked over at Dillon and smiled. "Of course I'll stay for dinner, but this time I'll pull up another chair." He winked at Dillon and they both smiled at each other. It was odd having Dillon half way up the stairs looking down on him like a modern day Juliet. He was immediately stunned at the radiance of the face above him. He kept feeling weak; it was all he could think about today, and yesterday, and the day before yesterday...Daniel nudged him and Tommy woke up with sudden determination.

"Hey Daniel?!" Tommy yelled out a lot louder as he walked over to the kitchen. "My parents are going to be gone tonight, what do you want to do?!"

Daniel didn't answer quickly enough, he was too busy trying to figure out why Tommy was yelling at the kitchen door, but Mrs. Smith came running into the room as expected, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "What's this I hear? You're alone tonight?"

Tommy looked over at her and nodded his head silently.

"You didn't mention this before now, Tommy boy?" Daniel was giving his best friend a curious stare.

"Well, you'll just have dinner here and stay the night! Go home now and get a change of clothes. Dinner is always at six o'clock sharp here – no exceptions." She turned, her dress flying out behind her as she ran back into the kitchen on a new mission. "Rachel! Get in here and help me girl!"

Rachel rolled her eyes. “*What?! Mother!* I want to visit with David some more!” She stomped her foot and pouted so well, all three boys watched her with interest.

“Get in here now, the icing for the cake is waiting for you.”

“Fine, just let me call Kristin back and tell her Tommy is staying the night!” She giggled and ran into the kitchen to use the phone. “Can Kristin spend the night?”

Still standing half way up the stairs, Dillon smiled again at Tommy, then glanced over at Daniel who was looking up at him with a stern, ‘I don’t know what you’ve done to my friend, but I don’t like it’ look. “Yeah, I’m going up to see David now. See you guys later.” Dillon took two steps up but not before Tommy could yell out.

“Wait! What do you want for your birthday?” He walked past Daniel, almost shoving him out of the way to get a better look at Dillon.

“You don’t need to get—“

“Yeah, I do. So speak up.”

“Okay...how about free rides to school and back for the next week for both myself and David?”

“What?!” Daniel yelled out, coming over quickly.

Tommy smiled, “Sure, sounds like a plan, and I’ll buy you guys’ lunch on Monday for being a year older, how’s that sound?”

“Uh, gay, Tommy, that sounds gay actually.” Daniel nodded his head to agree with himself.

“Shut up Daniel, or you can find your own ride. I mean, it’s their birthday for Christ’s sake—“

Dillon shot him a quick look.

“I’m sorry!” Tommy cautiously looked behind him at the larger than life picture of Jesus on the wall and corrected himself. “I mean, it’s their birthday for crying out loud! I wish I had brothers and sisters. You need to be a nicer older brother.”

“Or what? You’ll take over?” Daniel laughed loudly. “Yeah, that’ll go over well with my brother, Satan, upstairs. You don’t know him very well do you?” He smiled wickedly and shook his head. “Whatever dude. And it’s your party Dillon, but Tommy, you’re in for a bumpy ride if you engage the antichrist upstairs to come along, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Tommy shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t fu-fricken care. He is just a bit of a loner -

misunderstood that's all - right Dil?" he looked up at Dillon, who suddenly cringed.

Daniel laughed again. "Tom? A word to the unwise, just don't call Dillon, 'Dil' in front of David, and don't call David, 'Dave' in front of himself – got that? Not too much to remember is it, Tommy boy? Oh, and one more thing. Just thought you'd like to know, but up until he left us to go to prison rehab, David always referred to you as 'the driver' and me as 'the date' whenever you came to get me. Does that sound like someone you wanna know better, older brother?" He smiled and patted Tommy's shoulder, while Tommy looked like he was trying not to get too upset as Dillon watched him. He covered his anger by quickly smiling up at Dillon instead.

"P-please d-don't call him that, D-Daniel." Dillon whispered, feeling nervous over his brother's accusation that David was the devil.

"Well, I don't have any holy water on me, but we can go to the nearest church and get some. Let's end the suspense and run upstairs now! Tommy, you can pin him down, while Dillon, you can sprinkle holy water on him, and I'll check his pretty little head for triple sixes, what do ya say team?" He was uglier than usual today, probably because of the obvious new addition to the household. Dillon thought for sure that Daniel had prayed for at least a year's reprieve from David - just long enough to get him through his senior year.

"Cut it out Daniel." Tommy spoke in a growl, looking suddenly pissed.

"W-why do you hate him s-s-so much," Dillon couldn't finish his sentence, so he turned and quickly shot upstairs, the pain in his eyes temporarily stunning both the older boys. They stood there silent for quite a while before Mother yelled at them to go get Tommy's things.

Dillon opened the door to his room and came in quickly, closing it as he leaned there for support. David was sitting on his own bed, leaning against the headboard, staring at the closet intently. He looked like he was meditating. Dillon walked over and closed the closet, then leaned against it, staring at David and trying to get in his line of sight, but failing to meet his eyes.

"Glad to be back?" He smiled, trying to make conversation.

"What do you think?" David spoke quietly, still not looking at him, his face sullen. He felt incredibly confused and dazed from earlier. He couldn't get Joel out of his head. It would torment him from this day forward, he knew this for sure and he hated the fact that he was allowing himself to be human in the first place.

“Um, I don’t know Dave...it hasn’t been a good reunion with uh...”

“Joel.” David didn’t break his gaze from the spot on the far off closet door he was staring at.

“I know, I know. He’s gone isn’t he? And, and you saw him while we were in the car, didn’t you?” He walked over and sat on the edge of David’s bed, realizing he wasn’t going to get anywhere fast with David if he remained at a safe distance and he needed to desperately connect with David again.

David sighed, not bothering to comment on the obvious intrusion on his bed since he was finally getting used to it. He looked at Dillon finally, his demeanor changed with just a glance at the boy’s eyes, their calm blue sea drawing him in. “Yeah, I saw him. I think I killed him, Dil – on my birthday, no less.” His voice cracked and he almost sobbed, succeeding in keeping it at bay. A short pause followed, with Dillon watching him with an angelic presence so strong, David couldn’t look at him for more than a second without wanting to repent. It felt like he was confessing his sins to an angel. “Oh, Dil! I think I pushed him to do it, and now he’s gone, and I – I,” he paused again, not knowing how to describe the strong feelings he’d developed for Joel and afraid to even try. “I-I cared about him. I let him get close to me, and now he’s gone! Damn him!” He yelled the last two sentences, but Dillon reached over and covered his mouth, a panicked look on his face.

“Please! Oh, please, Dave! Don’t say bad words like that! Please don’t think those thoughts about your friend, especially here. You didn’t make him take his life. You’re not responsible for his actions, but I could tell you loved him—“

“I didn’t say that, Dil!” David looked annoyed as he hit the back of his head into the wall he was leaning against, the sound making Dillon jump and panic again.

“Okay, okay. You cared about him, h-how’s that? And I felt it pull me away when the two of you were together. I was stunned by your combined energies, and you’ll see him again, I can feel it. He was a lost soul, Dave, but he’ll find you someday. But me, I’m still here and I-I missed you s-s-so m-m...” He couldn’t finish his sentence as the emotion took over so he fell down on his side, pulling himself up to where David was, his back lightly touching him. David sighed again, resting his hand on his brother’s shoulder. *I missed you too, Dil. If only you knew how much—*

“How much?” Dillon asked, sobbing silently.

“Uh...*what?* What’d you say?” He looked down at his brother, breathless.

“How much did you miss me?” Dillon asked, his voice sounded hurt and dejected. He chose not to turn back to see David, but he had stopped crying.

“How did you—“

“I don’t know. I saw some words run across my mind and I read them, then just answered—“

“Tell me the words, Dil.”

“Uh, well, I saw the words ‘I missed you too Dil, if only you knew how much.’” He sat up and looked at David. “I was sad for a second because you didn’t say you missed me, but I read about it instead, and I know you, Dave. I know you love me. You don’t have to say it.”

“Do you realize what you’ve just discovered? Are you not completely shocked?! Jesus, how long have I been gone?!” David’s eyes wide, his expression animated for the first time since he talked at school about the visit from the mystery man. Dillon smiled as he watched his brother’s reaction, finally feeling their connection again.

“Forgive him Lord,” he looked up at the ceiling then turned back to him. “We have a connection, Dave. I thought you understood that.” He got up and walked over to his bed, falling backward on it, hands behind his head as he allowed happiness to filter back in. He was thrilled to have his roommate back.

“Dil! We can communicate by thinking our words! Our thoughts pass to each other without talking!”

“It’s called telepathy, and yes, sounds like we have that capability. Please, don’t say anything to anyone, okay?”

“Duh! I’m not stupid! Okay, okay...I’m going to think something and you tell me what it is.” He sat up on the edge of his bed and looked at Dillon. *I hate Tommy.*

“Why?” Copying David’s posture, Dillon sat up on the edge of his bed and looked at him harshly. “He hasn’t done anything mean and he stuck up for you while you were gone!”

“What did I say?” He looked suddenly impatient and slightly annoyed.

“I hate Tommy.” Dillon whispered quietly, fearful Tommy would hear him.

“Yeah, me too,” David smiled mischievously as he sat there nodding his head in playful agreement.

“Dave! Stop kidding! I think that’s a mean thing to say, so be nice to him, okay? He’s

staying for dinner...and sleeping...here...tonight.” He coughed as he said the last word while David staring at him suspiciously.

“What the hell did you just say?”

“Please listen to me?! I have to tell you about some of the things that have gone on since you’ve left. You won’t believe some of it, I’m sure, but we need to talk, so just listen to me, okay?”

Suddenly, as if perfectly timed off stage left, Mother called them downstairs. Father was home and wanted to see them both. They froze there in unison, looking at each other from the edge of their beds.

“Oh, shit!”

“Sshh! Please behave?! Please just control your anger?”

“Fine, I’ll be-*have*.”

They slowly ventured down the stairs, Dillon first, then David, who was talking to himself the whole time. *Just control your tongue Dave. Just stay focused with your mouth shut and be res-respectful – God! I can’t even say the word in my head! So how am I to act it?! Dillon’s fuckin’ nuts if he thinks I can pull off the impossible—*

It’s not impossible and don’t think God’s name that way Dave! He quickly turned around to meet David’s eyes, his face stern.

Stay out of my head, Dil! I need to focus on being Mr. Nice Guy and I can’t do that with you screaming judgments all the time!

He nudged Dillon forward without saying a word. It was exhilarating to telepathically talk with both their parents standing right there in front of them, totally unaware. David couldn’t help but beam a smile at his mother. She smiled back at him lovingly. *Hah! She doesn’t know,* he thought. *This is fun.*

Stay focused Dave, Dillon thought, then looked up at his father with anticipation for his speech.

As they got to the bottom of the stairs, Father stood there waiting with brief case in hand, having just come home from a church meeting. His face warmed up at the sight of Dillon. “Happy birthday son, glad to see you’re feeling better.” He paused when he saw David, clearing his throat and handing Mother his things to put away. “Well, I must say I AM shocked to see you home so soon, but after receiving the upsetting phone call from Pastor Sampson, I can

understand why he wouldn't want you there anymore.”

Both Dillon and his mother shot confused looks at each other for they both remembered the pastor trying to convince Mother to keep David there another week, “Just one more week, so that we can really work with him – out of isolation of course – just one more week with some good old fashioned Christian intervention.” Mother didn't even answer him, which only frustrated him more. She signed the paperwork with both David and Dillon there and then she strolled back over to the dorms and collected his things. It was that easy.

“Dear, we can discuss the pastor's phone conversation in a minute, for I have quite a lot to add. Please, let's just enjoy a dual birthday and celebrate family life tonight? I think we all need to do that – you know, get back to basics?” She smiled at all three of them, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Well, yes, I can see not ruining the night. I'm sure David will see to that instead, won't you, boy?” He looked at him and glared, making David sigh quietly.

Here we go. My life under the microscope again - just remember why you're here Dave, he thought to himself over and over again.

“Uh, no sir, I plan on not ruining anything tonight. I am just happy to be, to be home,” he glanced at his father, then looked over at his mother, who was beaming, her eyes watering.

“Well, we'll see about that. There are changes coming down the pipeline, boy, so you had better watch your step and pay attention. I want absolutely no more fighting, no smart mouthing to anyone, no signs of disrespect AT ALL, and church attendance and involvement in Sunday School.” He continued to glare at David, his finger pointed at him through Dillon, who was standing in front, trying to silently protect his much taller brother.

“And furthermore,” Father glanced at Mother before looking back at David, “Since it's been passed on to me by Pastor Sampson about how proficient your Bible skills and knowledge are, so much so, he was quite amazed and complemented me on it. Although he also added how condescending and belittling you were to him,” his voice sounded like it was growling. “So, after apologizing to the pastor for your disrespectful ways, I have decided to utilize your hidden Christian talent and Bible knowledge and put it to good use! I will have both you and Dillon start to assist your mother and the other women in the church and help teach some of the younger children, and maybe even have you teach the high schoolers David, since I've also heard from Rachel incessantly about how well you can speak to groups.” Father smiled with sarcasm

glinting in his eyes. He stood there waiting for David to react, knowing he'd gotten him in a bind. Dillon looked behind at David nervously.

“Uh, yeah...I guess.” David spoke quietly, hesitating, then adding, “Sir,” when he realized he hadn't addressed his father respectfully. *Bastard*, he thought. *I'll teach you a thing or two about religion—*

Dave, please, I can read you like a book. Dillon sighed.

“Well, that won't be necessary, dear. Remember I told you Tom Stanton was taking on the responsibility of the newly expanded youth program?” Mother stepped in and stood in front of Father. *She's good and she's different. What did you do to Mom? I know you're reading me, so answer.*

Let's just say you owe me more than one. You can pay me later, but you can start now by not cursing at Father - I can't handle it Dave, please?

Whatever, but you know as well as I do that his plan won't work. The only thing I'd get up and teach my peers would be how to leave me the fuck alone when we're at school, that's all. Just to leave US alone - you and me against the world, Dil. How's that sound? The silent duo! Please stay focused, Dave.

“He could still use some help, and I've already discussed it with him, so it's a done deal. Besides, out of maybe thirty new kids in the program, maybe the three original youth team members are the only ones who are there NOT because of David's popularity. He's become some sort of public figure – why I have no idea.” Father shook his head in disbelief as he walked into the living room and past the boys. “Watch your step boy, just watch your step.” He mumbled as he walked into the kitchen, but not before throwing his hands up to prove his point to his wife by showing her the large group of teenagers hanging out in the living room next to the stairs, in close ear shot to all of them. “See what I mean Mother?! Unbelievable...how long has the boy been home, Mother? How long?” He walked into the kitchen, past the rest of the kids all sitting around the living room, including Tommy, and then the sea of people parted ways and she stood there smiling awkwardly. Julie looked at him and beamed, her face turning redder by the second.

“It's alright dear! Remember our discussion earlier? It's better to have young ones here in our house where they're protected and nurtured than to have them out there in the world set free to, to do whatever.” Mother almost sang out her response while a few of the teenagers

chuckled and high fived each other.

Don't say anything Dave, just don't comment on that one—

Sure thing bro, you know me. I just love to be protected and nurtured and not set free to

“Sshh!” Dillon whispered, trying not to smile as he saw his brother’s funny scowl.

Mother came over to the kids and asked them why they were gathered there. Both Daniel and Rachel were in the center of the group. There were eight kids all assembled, sitting around, some on the floor, making the room look incredibly small. The fireplace was lit and it was dusk. The room had a cozy feel, and nobody looked like they wanted to leave. David walked over to Julie and stood next to her. She went to hug him but stopped short when she realized he wasn’t going to hug her first. He smiled instead. Julie’s knees went weak.

“Mother! These are our friends from school and like they are also now new church members, as of tomorrow! Can you believe it? And like, they all showed up here for the boys’ birthday party! So wild,” Rachel looked around at the kids, some of them nodding in agreement. David had to bite his tongue not to say anything, and now, things were much harder since he had to also watch what he was thinking. He couldn’t keep his mind quiet.

“Fine, you can all stay for a few minutes, but we are having dinner at six, so—“

“So what are we having for dinner Mrs. S?” A football player David recognized as one of Daniel’s buddies spoke up, making some of the kids giggle. Angela from David’s history class, glanced over at him and smiled, then spoke out as well, knowing she had his attention. “Yeah Mrs. S., can we stay? Some of us can go get some more food, and I don’t eat much, just some salad for me.” She glanced at David again and giggled. The rest of the girls all chimed in agreement. David couldn’t stop glaring at the football player.

Please don't say anything Dave, please—

“You need to show respect, Mr. Football jock. My mother isn’t your cook and she most definitely isn’t your waitress—“

“Put a lid on it Dave! He was joking! You better watch your mouth, you just got here remember? Father! David’s mouthing off already!” Daniel went to stand up, pointing at David as he did so, but Tommy pulled him back down.

“He’s right, Daniel. Craig, you need to show respect. You weren’t invited.”

“Oh, *how touching*, sticking up for your new little bro—“

Mother spoke up. “Daniel! That’s enough!”

Dave, please don’t say anything!

“Why would I have footballers at my birthday anyway? I go to games just to watch you all get injured—“

“Dave!” Dillon turned and stood in front of him, but Julie grabbed David’s arm instead and whispered in his ear. Luckily, Daniel, Tommy, and Craig were all arguing amongst themselves, but all the girls laughed at David’s comment as they beamed at him, batting their eyes and working their attributes.

“Come outside and talk to me.” Julie whispered in his ear.

David was drawn away like a moth to the flame, leaving Dillon there, mouth opened and hurt, his hands wrapped across his chest as he watched them walk away. Mother noticed it too, but smiled instead as she watched her son engage another human being besides his younger brother.

David opened the door for her and they stepped out together, while the voice of Angela called out in the background, asking them where they were going.

They walked to the front yard and Julie sat down first. David sat next to her, beginning to play with the grass - his grass - which felt so much nicer between his fingers than the desert patch he’d torn up at prison.

“I missed you. Thought about you a lot and tried not to listen to all the rumors floating around at school about you.” Julie leaned in and rested herself on his shoulder. Sparks shot up and down his arm.

“How did you know I was back? I’ve only been back a few hours at most.” David glanced over at her, making her get back up off his shoulder to look him face to face. She panicked for a minute, thinking maybe she’d confessed too much, too soon. The sun had left and the sky was darkening, but their facial outlines were still visible.

“Did you miss me? I just told you I missed you. And I found out from Tommy. He called Angela’s house and I happened to be there visiting her. I think he really likes your brother Dillon.” Her voice lowered as she finished her sentence.

“Yeah, I get that vibe too. Strange, but not unexpected, because Dillon has an electric pull, and weaker minded people tend to either fear that and make fun of him and try to hurt him, or they go overboard and obsessively stalk him. You don’t want to know how many stalkers that

boy has had that he knows nothing about.” He laughed softly, pulling at the grass.

“What, you scare everybody away from him?” Julie smiled wide again. She was so giddy, she had to sit on her hands, for they were trembling.

“Hell, yeah, I’m his keeper, whether he knows it or not and yes, I am already aware of Tommy. I’ll deal with him later.” He threw a pinch of grass at her, making her reach out and swat it away. “You’re trembling.” He looked down at her hand resting on her knee. She quickly pulled it away and smiled again.

“You, you didn’t—“

“Answer your question? Yeah, I did.” David looked up at the first stars appearing in the sky as he spun a blade of grass between his lips.

“No, you didn’t! You’ve managed to avoid the question! And that really—“

“I said I did. Are you not listening? Is this what girls do?” He whispered as he leaned into her personal space. Julie was stunned, his breath sweet against her cheek. She could feel herself heat up, but he was avoiding her question, and she felt stupidly exposed. She got up quickly, much to his surprise, and started to walk to the driveway, then down to the sidewalk. He chewed on the piece of grass now and curiously watched her leave. *Should I follow her? Yeah, of course I should.*

He stood up and shot across the lawn and got in front of her before she could take another running step, making her stop suddenly and gasp, then whirl around and look at the distance he’d gone to catch her. “How did you—“

“I said I did – *I missed you!* Do you want me to yell it to the neighbors?!” David stood there frustrated with his hands in the air, his breathing slow, while she caught her breath.

She stammered, but he stepped in and grabbed her hands. They were trembling, so he pulled her to him and did something he’d never done before. He kissed her while she continued to stammer, making her swoon and go limp. He grabbed her around her waist, pinning her hands against the small of her back and pulled her closer. Their lips locked together perfectly and the world disintegrated away. All of David’s worries and concerns, Joel, even Dillon, disappeared briefly as he lived in the moment. They kissed for a full minute like that, with Julie not fighting his hold on her hands. She let herself go in his embrace, for he held her there suspended. As their electricity lit up the evening dark, the crowd watched them silently.

Their embrace was broken by the familiar yell out by David’s mother, calling to them to

come in from the front door. They separated quickly, staring at each other silently for a second, neither one knowing what to say. The awkwardness suddenly annoyed David because he wasn't familiar with it, and had only experienced it for the first time on the day he met her in the hall at school. Since then, he'd felt it enough to know he hated it.

"I hope I wasn't too forward by doing that," he said, looking at her outline in the dark. The street light across the road illuminated to within a few feet from where they stood, however they were still darkly lined. He could barely see her smiling there, teetering on her weak legs like she could fall over and faint at any second. He reached out his arm to steady her stance. *Where was the strong, overly confident girl I met last week?*

"N-no, no it-it was nice. I'm just so...happy to see you. You are...amazing." She gushed as she said those words; her original confidence, what drew him to her, along with her quick sharp wit and glaring, in-your-face charm, made her different from all the other goofy girls trying to get and keep his attention. Now, David felt a sense of disappointment in her behavior, looking at her standing there shy, head down, and gushing sweet words at him in a little girl's voice, almost disgusted him. *I bet she's batting her eyes too*, he thought. *Damn, I hate that.* Sighing to keep from ridiculing her, he looked down at the gutter next to his feet instead and tried to remember how she used to be.

"Ummm, did I say something wrong?" Julie continued to stand there shifting her weight and twirling her hair. "I am just shocked - it was nice, you know? I've never been kissed like that before," more gushing and maybe the hint of a girlie giggle in her voice.

David looked over at her and frowned. It was a good thing the darkness surrounded him, for his look would have crushed her. She didn't see it though, and he was relieved at that, for he still liked her. He had a weakness for her, he felt it right then, and it worried him for all the same reasons it worried him with Joel, as if he knew it would be somehow used against him eventually. *She shouldn't know me*, he thought, his mind beginning to race. *She is in danger for knowing me, because just look at what I've done to Joel.* Taking a step away from her as Joel entered his mind, David coughed harshly, his eyes beginning to tear up. He quickly averted his gaze away from her and looked up at the dark sky – a sky foreboding and ruthless.

"David? Is something wrong? Please, please say something? Whatever I did or said, I'm sorry." Her fearful voice snapped him out of his somber state, so he finally looked at her.

"No, you didn't say or do anything. I'm just glad to be home, and I guess, it's

overwhelming. I enjoyed our kiss, so let me just say that for the official record, I enjoyed it, okay? But I shouldn't have done it. I shouldn't have brought you in."

"What are you talking about? I enjoyed it too, so I'm not complaining! My God, you're grumpy!" She stood there with her hands on her hips again and shook her head, her hair flipping around behind her, catching the light in places and transforming her image.

He smiled, his arms folded across his chest in a playfully defiant stance as he stood there watching her. He could smell himself on her mouth. What a strange girl she was. He couldn't figure her out, and that still intrigued him. "You're cute when you've been kissed," he whispered to her face, while she stayed close enough to him he could easily reach out and kiss her again. He saw her melt easily with his words.

Suddenly, the sound of scrapping, scratching, followed by a flutter of wings broke their intimate moment. David turned and looked across the street, seeing nothing, then he looked down and there it was, a single crow, hopping over to within four feet, and then it stopped and looked up at him. Julie stepped behind David quickly and he immediately sensed her fear as she in turn, grabbed his shoulder from behind to lean on him.

"It's okay. It's just a crow. I've seen it before, several times I think." He glanced over at the crow again to make sure it was still there. It was and it looked slightly annoyed, which puzzled him even more.

"I-I don't like crows. They're bad luck! If you come across a crow and it stares at you, like this one is doing right now, it's a bad omen, an-an omen of something to come, or a, a warning. I need to go...David please be careful? Come on, your mother has already called us inside." She tried to grab his arm but he took a step closer to the crow causing Julie to back away from him in hurtful shock.

"You're joking right? Bad luck? No way! Crows are just birds, like any other." He knelt down to look at the crow closely. It turned its head to the side to inspect him as well. He felt inclined to speak, but stopped as he thought of Joel's teasing comments. His face turned sad again, and another sigh forced its way out his mouth. The crow startled him by cawing loudly. He looked at it again with new found interest. "What is it? Have you been following me this past week, little guy?" His voice was casual as he smiled at the crow. He then took a step past the curb and knelt down in the street to be closer to Lascivious, amazed to watch him not turn and fly away.

Lascivious answered by cawing again, this time louder and with animation. He hopped on one foot, then the other. David suddenly thought of the scene at the car today, and the crow cawing at him in the sky. He felt a chill creep up his arms.

“Do you know me?” He whispered, his voice suddenly serious.

“CAW!” Lascivious almost looked offended by the question, ruffling his feathers as he waited.

“Dave? Let’s go inside please? Can you escort me inside?” Standing there waiting, looking more frightened, Julie pleaded with him.

He quickly glanced over his shoulder at her, not wanting to take his eyes off the crow for more than a second, only to see her standing there shivering in the perfectly warm night air. Her hands were motioning him to her.

“I can’t, not yet, just give me a...” He spoke as he turned to look at the crow, falling backward. He landed on his ass in the gutter as he took in the triple threat. Now three crows stood there in triangle formation, two behind the original crow, all three staring up at him with interest.

“Holy shit,” he whispered to the crows.

“CAW!” All three of them answered him at the same time, then the leader cawed again, taking a hop forward towards him.

He was stunned. He heard Julie run up the driveway and the door opening and closing, but chose not to move or look behind him. The crows however, strained their necks and looked around him to the side to watch her, only to look back at him in unison when she was gone.

“Did I just see you do that?” he whispered incredulously again. “What do you want? Who sent you? Do you know *Him*?”

The crows just stared at him, not answering.

“What the hell am I doing?” He looked up at the sky, darting his eyes at the leader again, feeling drawn to him. “Have you seen Joel?” He whispered intently, holding his breath and hoping he might get some strange affirmation from the bird in charge. He slowly rose to his knee, within two feet of Lascivious and waited breathlessly for a response.

Lascivious looked up at David and thought of how he could make a lasting impression on the human, having remembered the Dark Lord’s comment earlier. “Go to him and make your presence known, draw him to you.” Lascivious stretched his neck up and cawed again, but not

loudly, as if to answer his question regarding Joel; his two crow followers both hoped forward to stand on either side of him, all three stretching their necks his way. The chill returned and shot through David's body as he watched them do the unthinkable and bow in unison. He stared, transfixed by the gesture. Suddenly his mother's voice shot out from behind him, yelling his name loudly and startling him backward. He landed on his ass again.

"What the *hell*!?" He hissed in the dark as he quickly shot up and wiped the back of his pants after the three crows all took flight, perching on the street lamp across the street. They peered down at him from up there as he stood looking up at them. He felt frustrated by the interruption.

"David Smith - get in this house!" Mother was walking down the driveway towards him, wiping her hands on her apron. "You must have scared Julie to bits! She's in there shaking like a sweet little flower! What did you say to her?"

"Uh, nothing Mother, I was just—"

"You were just marching in that house to go check on her, weren't you, young man?!"

"Fine...I'm coming Mother." He walked slowly up the driveway following her quick pace, turning around once to take another glance at the crows, but they were gone.

To David's continued surprise, as well as all the other Smith siblings, Mother had convinced Father to let the kids all stay for dinner. Pizza was ordered for everyone. Mother had baked a quick chocolate cake and was frosting it when David walked into the kitchen. Everybody was there talking and sitting around the much larger table with the extra two leaves placed to expand it. Father was sitting there laughing and talking with them - a huge change from his suspicious, paranoid demeanor not thirty minutes ago. He looked over his shoulder at David and half-smiled.

"So, how does it feel to turn fifteen and seventeen, you two?" Mother chimed in, making the other kids laugh. "My babies are growing up before my very eyes!"

David tried to smile but couldn't, it was just too weird to be having a fun-loving family chat about babies growing up. Dillon beamed at the thought of being grown.

"It feels like it did yesterday, and the day before, and the day before, and so on and so on," David answered his mother's question in a monotonous voice, rambling on, everybody watching, until Dillon screamed in his brain to stop it. He did, interrupting himself by adding, "Mother, it feels great, doesn't it Dil?" He turned to Dillon, irritated by his continued telepathic

intrusion. Dillon was suddenly pink in the cheeks with all the girls suddenly shooting their eyes his way. His stutter returned in full force, making David feel horrible for putting him on the spot.

“I-I f-f-feel g-g-good—“

“Yep, guess we’re adults now,” David put his arm around Dillon, drawing the attention to himself, and making the girls all giggle more and stare. Dillon breathed out a sigh of relief.

“I don’t think so young man,” Mother spoke up, shaking her head. “I think I can still whip you if I need to – both of you!” Even more giggles from the girls, while Daniel snickered, leaning back on his chair and glaring at David harshly as he plotted his revenge. Just then the doorbell rang and David shot by Dillon, yelling “I’ll get it,” as he ran out of the room, with Dillon following him.

“It’s the pizza dude!” He called out, standing at the door and grinning wickedly at the young guy standing there holding several boxes of pizza. David leaned forward and read his name tag. “Dave? Your name is *Dave*?” He asked with a look of disgust on his face.

“Uh, yeah Sport, that’s me.” Dave looked too dopey to be using David’s name, as he stood there smiling and looking past David at the group of pretty teenage girls that had just walked into the room.

“They’re not legal yet and when they are of age, they won’t ever be interested in a guy named *Dave* who delivers pizza. Ouch, that hurts doesn’t it?” He smiled as he leaned on the front door, coming closer to Dave, who took a step back, frowning and not sure what to say to the barrage of insults thrown at him so casually.

“Uh, is your mommy home?” The Pizza Dude cleared his throat and shifted his feet.

David turned and slammed the door in his face, making the girls all jump and stare at him. “What? Wrong house! The guy went to the wrong house! Apparently, our neighbors ordered pizza too – go figure.” He dramatically threw his hands up and walked back in the room, the girls all surrounding him and admiring him up close.

Dillon sighed and walked over to open the door, seeing dopey Dave stand there still holding the pizzas with a confused look on his face. He opened his mouth in awe as he looked at Dillon standing there, thinking to himself he’d just went from devil to angel in two minutes’ time. Dillon smiled at him, making him forget the girls as he went weak in the knees.

“W-wait here, M-Mother?” He turned and saw his mother coming to the door to pay as

she counted her money.

They ate pizza and everyone chatted about school, football, and who's going out with whom, and the conversation dragged. David sat back in his chair and watched Tommy stare at Dillon relentlessly, occasionally he'd catch Dillon looking at Tommy then quickly looking away as well. Strange, David thought, for it seemed Dillon was more than aware of the staring, something David had never noticed before. Dillon's apparent knowledge and welcomed acceptance of Tommy's staring disturbed David greatly as he leaned back in his seat to watch and of course, he kept getting interrupted by Rachel who kept trying to get his attention - probably because of the pressure she was getting from the girls there. He was getting frustrated trying to answer her in as few words as possible; each time, the girls would lean in to hear what he would say. What he really wanted was to rip her completely apart, and the temptation was growing stronger by the minute. Finally, as if a ton of bricks fell from the sky and landed on his head, David shot up in his seat and thought of Julie. Where the hell was she, he thought as he glanced at Dillon.

I haven't seen her, Dave. Why are you staring at Tommy so much?

Because I think he's really sexy and I love the way he gels his hair—you know why I'm staring at Tommy, Dil. Is there anything you'd like to confess to while I'm here and he's nearby, within my choking reach?

No! There's nothing to confess, Dave! Tommy and I are friends – that's all! What are you getting at?

Gee, let's think about it, shall we? Hmm, I'm going to compare the way Tommy looks at you to the way every girl minus say, Rachel and Samantha and our mother, is looking at me right now in this room. Does that clear up the confusion, Dil? Just look around you. If he continues to look at you like he's love struck—

He's not love struck! Please don't talk like that, Dave...you're scaring me and I feel awkward enough as it is with him here looking at us right now. You do realize he's looking at us as we, uh, think?

I'm just warning you, Dil. I get the impression Tommy boy would like you to sit on his lap right now—

Dillon shot up out of his chair, making all conversations stop, as everybody looked up at him, then almost simultaneously, the full water pitcher tipped itself over, water shooting across

the table, making the girls all scream and jump out of their chairs to avoid getting wet, like it was hot lava or something. David laughed obnoxiously, only to quickly look down as he felt his father's stare.

As the commotion got going, and Mother was running around the room cleaning up the mess and handing the girls towels, David snuck out of the room and went upstairs, but not before Dillon could grab his arm as he reached the stairway, turning him around.

"There's nothing w-wrong w-with Tommy and m-me." Dillon stood there, breathing hard and visibly upset, trying not to cry, and catching David off guard.

"Okay, then stop making it wrong by acting guilty, Dil. Look, it's okay to like Tommy as a friend, but I assure you, I can guarantee he likes you much more than that, and he can push himself on you if you're not careful. I worry—"

"Hey guys, everything okay? Dillon, are you alright?" Tommy was slowly approaching them, his voice cautious, not wanting to interrupt their heated whispered discussion.

David looked up at Tommy and glared. "Yeah, Tommy – we're fine, see? Nothing to save here big guy, because we're a-okay," then he looked back at Dillon and said, "Do you understand? It's not you, Dil." He glanced at Tommy again, then turned and went up the stairs, leaving Dillon there, head bowed and hands across his chest in defensive mode, looking scolded and feeling embarrassed, but not knowing why. Dillon slowly turned to Tommy and tried to smile.

"I'm okay, Tommy, I-I have t-to use..." He couldn't finish his sentence so he pointed down the hall at the bathroom, walking by him, feeling his stare on his back as he quickly got away.

David opened the door to his room and walked in, seeing Julie lying on Dillon's bed, on her side facing him. She was looking rather dejected and sad, having been waiting for him to notice she was gone and not coming to find her quick enough.

"That's Dillon's bed, by the way. Mine is that one." He pointed to his bed then stood there waiting for her to say something or move, trying not to show his displeasure at her not laying on his bed. "I don't allow guys on my bed, including Dillon, but girls are always accepted, without question." That was a lie, he thought, she was the only one allowed, but he couldn't tell her that, not yet anyway.

Julie got up quietly and walked the two steps over and climbed onto his bed, curling up in

a ball. He quickly walked over and crawled onto his bed, positioning himself next to her so that he could lie behind her and spoon. Silence followed for a few minutes. *Say something, Dave, before anyone can ruin this moment.*

“I’m sorry about the whole ordeal with the crows, and not walking you up the driveway, and taking so long to come find you, and making you change beds, and, and, what else am I sorry about?” He asked the ceiling as he laid there. He could feel her giggle, her body shaking slightly as he thought some more on what to be sorry for. He smiled down at her, as he perched himself up on his elbow, then rolled her over with his hand, so that she looked up at him. She was without words again, as she stared up at him in awe. He is so beautiful and charming, so larger than life, she thought over and over again, waiting for him to speak, for his words tantalized her. He in turn, just watched her and thought to himself how vulnerable she was, how obvious her feelings were, and how like putty he could squeeze her and manipulate her into doing whatever he wanted her to do.

The power surge shot through him at that moment and he breathed it out, breathing in instead, her memory, her spark, her wit, and her ability to make him second guess himself when he was around her. He leaned down and kissed her again, his hand on the side of her face, then sliding down to the base of her neck. As they kissed, he felt her body willingly submit under him. He slid himself between her legs, her miniskirt no longer in the way as she quickly pulled it further up her hips while she arched her back and wrapped her legs around him.

He wanted to dive into her, to accept her open invitation, but the voice in his head kept talking, distracting him. He tried hard to avoid it, to tune it out as he felt Julie’s excitement build under him, her fingers tugging then undoing his pants, but the voice wouldn’t shut up. Pausing for a second, David knew instinctively it wasn’t Dillon’s thoughts; however he also didn’t want to know the person or entity behind the voice. *She’s too close to you, David. She’ll only get hurt if you continue to invite her in. You know she has no place with you here, and she has less to no existence or place in the Underworld. If you touch her soul she will follow you down and you will watch her burn there - you know this. She’ll burn for you, and you’ll be forced to watch. No! I won’t allow that to happen! She’s a light, good natured person, meant to live a long, peaceful life. I am just enjoying her body before I go – that’s all.*

His left hand had already found its way up the front of Julie’s tight sweater right as Dillon opened the door quietly and froze, standing there watching his brother and Julie quickly move

past second base in a few second's time. Suddenly feeling his brother's eyes on his back, David stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder, making eye contact with Dillon long enough to watch him turn and walk out. "Shit!" Hopping up, startling Julie as he did so, he leaped over her to the door, buttoning up his pants as he did so. Dillon was at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at him in sudden disgust.

Don't lecture me about who I chose to be friends with, then go upstairs and openly fool around with a girl knowing your entire family is one story below you! I can't believe I listen to you and look up to you the way I do! You so easily want to blow EVERYTHING I've worked on just to get you back here—

Dillon walked away, as soon as he saw Julie walk up and stand behind David in the stairwell, rapidly trying to adjust the bra under her sweater.

Don't walk away from me Dil! I'll kick your ass right here! Damn it! David went to go downstairs, then realizing he'd left her behind, he turned and almost ran into her as she stood there watching him.

"Uh, hey there..." He couldn't help but look startled.

"What was that silent thing all about between you and your brother? It was really creepy watching the two of you stare at each other like that." Julie's voice sounded suspicious as she waited on his response.

David felt the anger and frustration building up after seeing how Dillon looked at him, not to mention the words he'd just read. He was shunned by his little brother for the first time ever and he felt sick to his stomach. *He's right too, that's what really sucks about it...*

"I need to talk to Dillon. He's clingy with me right now - it's a complicated story, and I'd rather you not get tangled up in it." He looked up at her hurt face and almost reconsidered his words. Being with Julie wouldn't be easy on him now, and he knew Dillon was right. He was not only setting a bad example for his little brother, but he was also jeopardizing everything they'd both worked at to bring him home. "I'm sorry, but this isn't going to work between us. I have to go now." He turned and walked downstairs, thinking he could hear her beginning to cry, but he didn't turn around to check. *No, better not look. She can't pull out the crying card because I can only handle that when Dillon uses it - nobody else has that power to make me feel like shit, nobody else does.*

Dillon avoided David's eyes and his thoughts for as long as he could stand it, but he

eventually fell apart and gave up. After dinner, Mother made both David and Dillon stand at the head of the table and blow out the cake together, but not before everybody belted out the happy birthday song for them.

Dillon's ignoring him was driving him crazy. He had to refrain from pinning him down and smacking him until he submitted, but he couldn't do that now, although Dillon's stubbornness was almost too much to bear.

Instead, he chose to stand there and make fun of each and every one of them in his head, knowing he was upsetting Dillon, hoping he would jump in at any moment and start arguing back. It didn't work, not until he got to Tommy.

Happy birthday to you, I hate you, you, and you...God, I hate this fucking chant! Blah, blah, blah, blah blah blah...why is Rachel so fucking annoying! Her name is Rachel, right? I keep forgetting...she's such a bottom feeder! She's a goat on the Smith farm. Have you noticed Dil, how farm animals tend to gather around, waiting for someone to lead them? I liken the Christian faith to being a herd of farm animals, everybody walking around waiting for a leader to come along and show them the way. It's so sad to be without vision, isn't it? And to have a religion without vision is even more pathetic and Father can just kiss my nonconformist ass if he thinks I'm gonna spew out Christian Bible stories about fishermen and multiplying loaves of bread to a bunch of idiot pagan high schoolers who unknowingly worship a leather football every Friday night as a reason for being! Besides, just because I know the Bible doesn't mean I live by it, nor recommend its teachings to anyone – it's called 'brain washing.' Hmm...okay... what else can we talk about? What else can I piss you off with? More Jesus talk? Hmm, oh of course – Tommy, Tommy, Tommy - what can I say about that boy? How can I describe pure lust when I see it? How can I—

Knock it off Dave! I'd hate to have to—

What?! Hurt me? You'd hate to have to hurt me?! With what? Mean thoughts?!

I didn't say that! Just leave Tommy out of it. Answer her, Dave. Mother asked you a question!

“Huh?” David looked up from the cake all lit and candles melting and looked over at Mother. “I'm sorry, uh, what was the, the question?” He shook his head like he'd been sleeping and the girls all giggled. He suddenly saw Julie walk into the room, Kleenex in hand and a sad look on her face.

“I said to please nudge your brother to make a wish and blow out the candles with you, before I have to get the fire extinguisher, *Dear.*” Mother’s voice sounded slightly sarcastic as she smiled, while the girls all giggled again. David felt heat on his face. He glanced over at Dillon, who was also red.

“Ready?” David whispered.

“Yep.”

“One, two, three—“

They both wished, knowing fully what the other had wished for, then blew out the candles together. Everyone clapped. Dillon cringed as he realized his wish was made known and now shouldn’t theoretically come true. He was superstitious that way, but only David knew that about him.

It will come true, Dil. I’m certainly not going anywhere without you with me ever again

Even in your dreams, Dave?

Yep. We’ll find a way to travel together when we sleep too. Why the hell not? We can already visit each other’s minds. It shouldn’t be that much harder to hop into each other’s dreams—

Mother kissed David on the cheek and then grabbed for Dillon. Father was beaming, watching David blow out candles was an event he’d hadn’t witnessed in years. Samantha and Rachel were both speechless, but Daniel was waiting, biding his time.

As soon as cake was done, Mother shoed everybody out the door. Parties at the Smith house were extremely rare, and it was nine o’clock, ‘late enough for parents to wonder where their children were’ according to Mother, aka, June Cleaver. All the girls were reluctant to leave, which made great entertainment for David. He sat back in the living room and watched the scene unfold. They all took turns, each girl walking up to him to say another dull birthday wish then they’d stand there for another few awkward seconds or so waiting for him to get up so that they could get their hugs, but it didn’t happen, and David was in heaven watching it occur over and over and over again. He didn’t see Julie after he blew out the candles. She must have slipped out earlier, although he knew she’d come with Susie, and here she was standing in front of him right now, doing her ‘good bye and I’ll see you around at school, oh and by the way, happy birthday’ - awkward crap. The phrase made him cringe and grind his teeth. The scene

was finally getting old.

“Yeah, um, I’ll walk you out, Susie,” David got up and walked past her. Susie followed him, smiling back at Rachel and mouthing a silent, “Oh my God!” as she took off after him. Rachel clapped and squealed as she waved good bye.

Dillon just shook his head in disgust and excused himself, much to Tommy’s disappointment, telling his mother he felt ill again and needed to go to bed. Tommy paused for a minute then followed him upstairs.

As David walked outside, the cool evening air stroked his face lightly, blowing his hair back and making him stop and breathe in. It was nice to be back outside again, looking up at the stars and not having to squint with one’s eyes to avoid the sun. As they both walked to her car, and Susie talked incessantly about her likes and dislikes, and whether or not she was interested in going to Homecoming, as if he was interviewing her or something. David walked along quietly, until he finally interrupted her with, “So where’s your car?”

“Uh, right here, here it is. Uh, you don’t drive yet, do you?”

“No, I guess I don’t.” He thought of Julie again, how he’d probably hurt her beyond repair with the comments he’d made to her earlier, but he needed to, he knew it. Now *she* was different. First girl he’d ever kissed too, and that was an activity he could do for days.

Susie laughed and pushed him backwards roughly as they walked to her car. He stopped at the push and thought about pushing her back, but didn’t – barely. “Oh, David! Rachel told me you were a kidder. I love to laugh! We should go out. I would love it, so...when?” She stood there at her door and smiled, waiting for him to answer her. The look on her face was determined, like she’d never been disappointed or turned down before. He smiled and tried not to laugh but played along for the moment.

“Right, um sure, somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, we’ll meet and ‘go out’ as you put it - and I don’t kiss ‘til I’m ready, because I’m not that kind of guy.” He went to point his finger at her, but she grabbed it and giggled, holding onto his finger like it was a gift and leaning into him, she tried to kiss him but she wasn’t tall enough to make the connection. She’s weird, he thought. *I could turn her into a woman without even trying.* He looked into her car as she hugged him and didn’t see Julie, so he lightly pushed her off like she was a dirty shirt, since he no longer needed her around. The push was strong enough to make her hit the back of her head into her closed car door.

David callously turned around and looked up and down the street, his voice changing from playful and sarcastic, to stern and uninterested. “Where’s Julie? Didn’t you drive her here?”

Susie laughed again. “You know, I have three older brothers, so I can wrestle, and I’m good too. I bet I could pin you down in two minutes flat.” She smiled at him while she rubbed the back of her head - all five feet and ninety pounds of her smiling up at him. He sighed and looked away.

“Did you give Julie a ride here?” He was becoming impatient and demanding.

“Uh, yeah, but she went home with Kristen, but I think she only offered to drive her home to pump her for information about the two of you earlier on the lawn. I don’t care though, because I don’t get into all the gossip and backstabbing that most girls you’ll meet will be into these days. It’s crazy at school to hear them all talk about you and Dillon, like the two of you are just ready to be taken. I mean, girls have been betting to see who can de-virginize either one of you first – can you believe that?”

David turned back to her at the last comment, not even hearing it, and said, “What?! Damn it!” He shook his head in disappointment at not being able to see Julie, then threw his hands up and turned to walk away.

“Did I say something? Hey wait, David! I don’t feel that way! I wouldn’t do that! Don’t leave!”

He continued to walk up the driveway and went into the house, not looking back and pissed at the world again.

Chapter Thirty

To Have For The Taking

“He’s there for you, my Lord.” Lascivious bowed and waited, while the Dark Lord paced his main hall like he always did, his staff in hand, his long black cloak dragging behind him several feet along the ground as he continued to move around, not able to stand still. It had been a long day of deliberation and turmoil. The chaos was spreading across the Planes, starting in the Sixth - the most volatile - and now tales of war, destruction, and turnovers were spreading to Fifth Plane as well. *Why is it that when I wish for peace and quiet in the land, so that I can attend to my personal affairs, it seems that half my Council must wage war?* He stopped mid-thought and glared down at Lascivious, his eyes blue, then yellow, then blue again.

“So,” he turned and paused in his pacing, “Did you do as I instructed?”

“Yes, my Lord, I approached him as soon as he ventured outside and I spoke to him, answered his questions, and bowed. He was most impressed—“

“Was he alone? What did he ask?” His multiple questions stunned the crow, who couldn’t think which one to answer first.

“My Lord, uh...uh, he was with a girl, Julie is her name, the same girl he was with at school. They kissed as I watched tonight.”

“Brilliant,” The Dark Lord hissed as he started to pace again. “Continue.”

“Uh, yes, well, he asked me why I was there and if I knew him, and if I knew you, my Lord.” Lascivious ruffled his feathers and waited, while the Dark Lord continued to pace silently. “He also asked me if I’d seen Joel.”

Azmodeus paused and stopped, head turned. “Joel?”

“Yes, my Lord, David’s friend from that school—“

“I know who he is!”

“Well, my Lord, Joel killed himself today when David left the school. I saw his body taken out of the school dormitory later this afternoon. I flew there myself after Devon informed me of David’s return.”

“He killed himself? Strange, such devotion between them - it’s a gift really, a gift for me to use.” Smiling wickedly as he stood there pausing, he turned and looked at Esmeralda. “I want this Joel, found and brought to me, or maybe I’ll find him myself. What does he look like?”

Esmeralda shrugged her shoulders. "I have not seen this human, my Lord and I've only seen silly family portraits of this David character."

"I-I don't know either my Lord! I didn't see him personally, for I watched the Smith residence. His body was covered when they disposed of it at that school, so I saw nothing." Lascivious bowed and lowered his head, for fear he'd get kicked.

"Where is Devon? Where is that idiot crow?! Has anyone else seen this Joel character?!" He turned to Esmeralda again, who only shrugged her shoulders and shook her head no again.

"So either he has beauty to buy him servitude, or he becomes another damned human victim - new meat for the taking. I don't have time to hunt down every warlord so inclined to have taken him, and it could be for not if he's already been tossed aside!" He threw up his hand, making Lascivious shrink and bow down further, still waiting for the kick to send him flying.

"My Lord, Devon did not return as expected. I have not seen him since we met with David. I will send him to you as soon as I see him."

Azmodeus continued to talk to himself, ignoring Lascivious. "There is the possibility he might still be struggling at The Entrance, if he hasn't been taken into servitude, or worse, devoured. He would be a suitable enough addition to my courtroom if his beauty proves him valuable, and a welcome for David to see, someone to dangle in front of him. I'll find him and bring him here tonight. The poor lad will be happy to see me when I drag him out of the depths of human hell by his feet, I'm sure. That is of course, if he still has his feet." He turned to look at his witch, his mind back on David again. *Now that he's home, and has just suffered personal tragedy, he'd be too weak to resist the door. Now that he has accessibility, it's only a matter of time before he opens it, unless his brother gets in the way again.*

Esmeralda leaned against one of the pillars and filed her nails, listening intently, but trying not to appear too interested, for her Master had kept close watch on her today, not letting her leave his side at all, and now she was growing restless with even more intense, nightly hunger pains. Having not eaten much last night due to her visit to the Smith house, Esmeralda felt weak; it was a visit without a meal. A complete waste of time, she thought, as she pouted and filed her claws.

Worse than hunger however, was the humiliation she had to endure at his hand, for he ignored her today, not once did he admire her presence, nor even smile her way. She'd even tried

to be extra charming as well. Oh, how she hated it when he shunned her, it was pure torture. *Maybe now that his mind is back on David, he'll see my usefulness?* She listened to the stupid little crow cater and appease the Dark Lord in an attempt to keep his company. *He is so much above you, little fool.* Smiling, Esmeralda listened to her future lover interrogate and yell at the bird. He then looked at her for the first time today and spoke. She stood at attention and held her breath.

“If I take David tonight, invite his soul here, killing him by keeping him here, what would that do again?” His mind felt scattered and he didn't feel his best. *This is not good timing to have everything come together before me and yet, I can't think clearly!*

Esmeralda sighed at the nature of the question and walked over to stand in front of him, stuffing her file down her purple bodice in her cleavage when she got close enough. “Well, my Lord, he would not be yours to keep should you do that. Only by his taking his own life will you have his soul for yours and yours only—“

“Yes, well, we both know that isn't an option anymore, so let's move along!” He was getting frustrated again.

“If he is killed above by someone else's hand, then he may be sent down, but that would depend on the state of his soul at the time. He could be taken above if he repents, My Lord, for it is common knowledge forgiveness and acceptance need only be requested by a human. Salvation is easily attainable this way,” she paused to watch him shake his head and shrug that idea away, as if the mere thought of his human given Grace and Salvation was something he couldn't fathom accepting at the moment. Esmeralda frowned but continued. “However if he is indeed sent down, he will enter the Underworld as a free agent, to wait at The Entrance for you with your mark already on him, guaranteeing no one will touch him. That is of course unless he gets destroyed in the chaos of The Entrance by those stupid zombies the gatekeepers let loose in there occasionally when it gets too full, but what is the likelihood of that happening now?” She smiled sweetly, trying to attract his attention, as she stared at his side profile. He stood there, frustrated, hands across his chest as he contemplated something dreadful.

“You'd be surprised, my dear, just how things can occur when you least expect them to, for I can assure you, I have had my moments when even the lowest forms of slime have managed to surprise me. Go on, so what if I kill him myself, bringing his body and soul straight here to Nine,” he pointed his finger down to the ground as his face lit up at the thought of the human in

his possession.

“I would think you’d have to keep him under lock and key my Lord, for he would not be yours to keep. His soul would be stronger for it, since having been killed by an Arch Devil, especially the Ruler himself, would grant him strength and power immediately upon his descent. What’s worse is he wouldn’t have any loyalty to you, and would most likely hate you for taking him from his brother so soon. My Lord, you’re also forgetting that by killing him and taking him here, you will have jeopardized your place as head of the Council, for the power needed to materialize in the Living World to take a life and bring it down, body and soul, will take so much energy. You’d be vulnerable to a takeover, or worse, you could be held responsible and he could be allowed to roam freely—“

“I would never allow that, Esmeralda!” Azmodeus yelled at her, making her flinch and step back. He turned away and started pacing again, this time with his hands behind his back. “No one in the Twelve would question my actions or even consider voting against my interests. No one would be so bold. I have made sure of that, and I have control. Taking this useless little soul and bringing him here will violate NOTHING, for I make and enforce the rules!”

Jumping at the opportunity, Esmeralda felt hopeful. “My Lord, have you considered my helping you again? I can persuade this David character to take and hand over his miserable little life? I have ways to inject subtle hopelessness and my spells can be made even stronger if I am allowed back into his house, just to collect a few things...”

Azmodeus laughed. “I’m not that desperate, my dear. I can just have him come here in his dream state - then keep him. End of story.”

“Yes, of course you can my Lord now that he’s home and has access to it, only there’s Dillon’s influence, for apparently he can cast some spells of his own, that one—“

“He will pay if he should choose to interfere again and if he did, I’d just have to make another visit above to the human hunting ground and take what’s rightfully mine and be done with it!”

“My Lord, please consider what you would be giving him should you take him yourself! He would not be worthy of such an entrance, and I fear he’d use it against you! I only say these things to remind you not to act too quickly, not to be impulsive—“

“Impulsive?! I am everything but, my dear. If we do not act and bring him here this night, then my duties will pull me away! You’ve seen it! Drake has seen to it personally to

distract me away from Madera and to keep the Council influx. If I turn my back away from his little exploits, then I'll have another growing power to bring down. And-that-takes-time, which would be unfortunate for you," he pointed his finger at her, then turned and pointed it at Lascivious, "And you." He started to walk out of the hall, yelling over his shoulder as he did so, "And anyone else I deem suitable for execution! So, my dear, sweet council of one, find a way to bring him here tonight if you wish to avoid my taking him! It might already be too late however, for I do feel the need to act impulsively so that I can appease my growing appetite for stimulating company!" The door slammed shut as he left.

Esmeralda stood there steaming mad. "I should just convert the little human waste and bring him here - a new vampire for the Master to control just as he does me!" She whirled around and stormed out of the room to her study to prepare for what she knew would kill her chances of sharing his bed for another century at least.

Lascivious just stood there, shaking his head as he watched her leave.

The Dark Lord chose not to go looking for Joel, for it wasn't worth his time and energy. He sent word by messenger to employ rangers to find and bring this friend of his future captive to him, for prizes only he could reward. It worked of course, and within hours they started arriving, each one bragging about his ability to find anyone underground, for say, the right price. After dispatching half a dozen rangers and dark elves to find and return this Joel character to him, doubling their prize money should they return him by daybreak, he was sure they'd be bringing every human soul in all the Eight Planes to his door. He gave them only his name and approximate age to go on, but he wasn't concerned. He had other more pressing issues to concern himself with.

Chapter Thirty One

A Journey Back

David kissed his mother good night for the first time since either one of them could remember when. Mother smiled and held her cheek where he'd planted one, feeling his saliva dry on her skin. Father appeared stunned at the little exchange, but chose to say nothing to spoil her happiness as he watched her walk over to the family albums to pull out his baby pictures. David went upstairs, followed closely by Rachel, who kept at him about Susie, and Kristin, and Sarah, and Jacqueline, and so on, until he finally snapped as he was brushing his teeth in their bathroom upstairs.

He spat into the sink as he glared at her through the mirror. "Look sheep girl, I don't like ANY of your farm friends, okay? None of them give me the least bit of a pulse—"

"Eww!" Rachel screamed, putting her hand to her mouth. "That's really gross Dave."

"And stop calling me Dave - its David okay?" He looked away from the mirror and stuck his tooth brush back in his mouth so that he could purposefully avoid her. He started to brush his teeth for the second time, hoping she'd get the hint. Not taking his clues to leave, Rachel continued her chat while he brushed again, avoiding his glaring eyes.

"I just got the call from Susie, and she says differently about the way you told her to take you out, and about your wrestling date coming up! You'd better watch out, because, like, she tried out for the boy's wrestling team last year and almost made it!"

David paused as he looked up at the mirror with disgust, a mouth full of toothpaste to prevent him from spewing obscenities, then bent down and spat into the sink a second time. He turned to look at her, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "I told Susie I'd meet her somewhere over the rainbow, so you can decipher for yourself when that'll be and speaking of Susie, I have to take a crap now. Are you going to continue to stare at me while I do that?"

"Double eww! No, no, go ahead and do your...thing. I'll call Susie back right now and tell her it's on for wrestling!" She squealed, making him flinch, then turned and walked out.

He closed the door with his foot and shook his head. *I take it back. She's not a bottom feeder, she's just plain stupid.*

David got undressed and stepped into the shower. The warm water felt good as it traveled down his body. He smiled thinking about how nice it was to shower in private. He let his thoughts drift back to prison and Joel, his only memory of that place he cared to think about.

It wasn't all bad there, he thought, because Joel made it worthwhile - *but would I go do it all over again knowing I'd never have met Joel if I hadn't? Yes, I'd do it all over again just to have met him.* He leaned against the shower head and thought of Joel's sad face, and those hands, almost severed, bending into the window pane unnaturally as his friend tried to see him one more time. A single tear fell down, blending with the shower water splattering on his face, as he rested his head and closed his eyes, not noticing the face staring at him.

"Hey there, *Satan*," Daniel whispered as David froze very still, opening his eyes, but not looking over. "I think you know why I'm here. I think you also know what you deserve, and I think you definitely know I'm going to give it to you."

David sighed and held his breath and his gut in as Daniel reached over and turned off the water.

"You may have fooled Mother and maybe even Father with your fake attitude, but I see right through you and you need to pay for those comments you made to me earlier, don't you?" He waited a few seconds, with David still not looking at him, then hissed, "Answer me!"

"Why don't you go make happy with Tom—"

He fell to the bottom of the tub, his abdomen on fire. Daniel had chosen to punch him while he spoke, right in the gut, dropping him down quickly. He gasped and pulled his knees up while Daniel shook his own hand out, then casually reached over and turned on the water, ice cold. "I'll get you later for that last comment, something to look forward to."

As Daniel walked out, David shot up and bit his tongue to keep from screaming as the cold water hit him right in the chest. He slipped and fell back down, catching himself on the shower curtain and causing it to come down on him, cold water still hitting him. He cursed quietly as he reached over and punched the water nozzle off. *I'll get him for that and so much more*, he thought as he stood up and replaced the shower curtain. *I hope you get a big festering zit on the tip of your nose tonight, right before you have to strut your shit at church tomorrow, you fucking hypocrite. Then I want that zit to multiply, so that by the end of the day, you'll be afraid to look in the mirror!*

David turned the water back on and warmed himself again, but this time, with one eye to the door, having left the curtain half opened. He chose not to retaliate against Daniel. He knew fighting back would not be wise so early in the game.

He changed into boxers and a tee shirt and walked into his room, but Dillon wasn't in

there. He went back out and down the little hall to the activity room where he found all four of them sitting there together, snug as bugs under a rug.

The activity room separated the three kids' bedrooms upstairs and was a frequented spot away from the constant church activity downstairs; a sanctuary for sinners not wanting to repent as David would refer to this particular room. Daniel and Rachel were sitting on the couch, and Tommy and Dillon were on the floor, side by side sharing a blanket, leaning back on pillows and watching television.

“Mother said we could watch for an hour!” Rachel screamed, making the boys all jump. Had her voice gotten that much louder and more obnoxious since he'd been gone? Was she going deaf? Did he care? No, not really.

Dillon looked over at David as he approached and smiled awkwardly. He didn't return the smile and Dillon knew why. He was probably eyeing how close Tommy was as he lay there next to his little brother.

Oh, going to notice me again, Dil?

Please don't leave, Dave! Come sit and watch, you know you want to...look, I don't want to continue our little fight, okay? Tommy is just being really nice, and see? We're just hanging out. Please don't be mad! I even forgive you for what you did with Julie okay? I'm just glad you're home...oh, did you hurt yourself in the shower?

Just leave me alone.

He silently sulked back into his room, not paying attention to Rachel calling out about having talked to Susie. He didn't hear a word she said. Closing his door to lean against it and look around his room, he sighed and felt tired – immensely tired. Such a long day today was, from the moment he'd gotten up the highlight of the day started with his talk with Joel, then to the fight and his surge of power, and then it all went downhill from there, even reuniting with Dillon didn't last long. Let's see, he thought, after the fight, there was the isolation cell, being reunited with Dillon, then switch gears to losing Joel, coming back home and the birthday fiasco, to Julie and my first kiss, and the crow incident, my fight with Dillon, the shower punch, and now this. He breathed out slowly. *Finally I can go somewhere tonight and just be myself, not have to worry about anyone but me.*

He walked over to the closet and opened it, looking in and staring at the back wall. He thought he could smell Jasmine there, and he sniffed several times wondering about the scent, a

mixture of dirt, mold, and flowers. Strange, he thought, but the smell elicited the all too familiar image of cemeteries at night – his favorite place to go if he had a car...and a license. He turned and walked over to the window and looked out. There was Jessica, at her window, in her pajamas, staring at him with what looked like binoculars in her hands. He quickly backed away from the window and walked over to his bed.

Thinking about what his mother was saying earlier about their church's popularity made David cringe. He hated the thought, hated the notion that people were coming to church just because he was the main attraction.

He lay on his bed, not wanting to get too comfortable, for he planned to exit the room quickly tonight once lights were out. He needed an escape for a little while, needed to see another place, distant and completely new. He needed to get away in his mind for just a few minutes. *Louis...I need to see him again, to explain myself and to just be in his amazing company...Dillon had better not try to stop me either.*

He began to worry, for he had just remembered that little prayer Dillon had pulled on him the night he stood up his dinner meeting with Louis. He sighed and fidgeted in bed, waiting for Dillon to come in, like he always does, to apologize and make him feel better.

He waited, and waited, and waited for what seemed like more than an hour. Television should be over by now, he thought. *Why am I so tired? My bed feels so good. I could sink in and sleep right now.*

Group laughter from the next room over made him frown as he almost drifted off to sleep. *Nothing is going the way I'd planned it today.* He sighed and turned over, biting on his thumb nail and staring at the electrical wire sticking out from the lamp's base. It looked broken, shattered even, but there was a new light bulb and it worked, for the room was lit. Strange, he thought. *Lately, everything has been a fucking surprise – totally unexpected, and now this! Dillon should have come in and checked on me, the little shit. I guess I'll just wait a bit longer. He'll show, because I sure am NOT going back out there defeated, and if I see Daniel one more time tonight, I think I could easily kill him.* He drifted off to sleep without even noticing it – in mid thought he was gone - thinking about all the ways he could kill Daniel, but only making it through the first idea when he jolted up and out the door.

He woke up on the ground, lying in his boxers and his tee shirt, feeling an overwhelming sense of fatigue set in. *Am I still sleeping?*

The air was frigidly cold, stinging his skin as his body hairs all stood out to maintain heat. At least where he lay was comfortable, he thought, as he reached for bed covers to pull over him, and grabbed a few twigs nearby instead. He shivered then shot up off the ground in a second. Looking around and recognizing the forest-like surroundings from the last time he'd ventured into the Underworld, David stood there puzzled, waiting a few minutes for Emen to show.

The scenery looked different, not quite as inviting and certainly not warm like before. David glanced down and shivered. "Holy shit! I'm still in my boxers," he whispered to the night air. He then found himself staring up at the night sky, but there was no moon, no stars in the sky, just a purplish, dark blue hue mixed with blackness on the horizon and it was spreading upward like ink in water. David could barely see anything but the surrounding trees. *What the hell am I to do*, he thought, panicking while he looked down at his lack of wardrobe. *Louis can't see me like this! I've always been dressed before!*

A rustling in the trees off to his left startled him and he shot over to a shrub nearby, holding his breath and watching, he crawled into the bush and waited. The air was so cold; he couldn't remember it being this cold last time. He could see his breath extend out two feet from his mouth with his breathing. That could be just a little noticeable, he thought as he covered his mouth.

Suddenly, Emen sprang out as if from a cannon and landed several feet from where David was hiding. He rose to a standing position gracefully and looked around cautiously, then stood there bored, waiting for something to happen. In a blink of David's eyes, three more elves joined Emen, and they all looked very impatient.

"He's not coming Emen!" One elf whispered.

"You've been back here every night waiting for the poor little human, and he hasn't shown. Maybe the Dark One took him after all? Maybe we should just let it go?" Another elf, with a female voice, spoke softly, while he stood still and scanned the surrounding forest. David stayed frozen, not knowing what to do in his boxers.

"Listen you losers, he might come, and if he does, this is where the little sapling will enter. I've seen it before, and I have a feeling it'll happen again. Now go, if you chose not to wait with me." He brushed them off by waving his arm, while he scanned, then focused his eyes in David's direction, his ears turning slightly and vibrating as he did so. Smiling wickedly, Emen

strolled over to David's shrub casually, whistling an unknown tune.

Within another blink of his eyes, Emen was there, standing, then squatting down and looking at him. The shrub separated the two of them, but not by much. The other three elves followed their leader over, all three curious as well.

"Hey there little guy, come out. It's me, Emen."

David sighed, looking down at his boxers, then spoke up. "Who you calling little?"

Emen laughed quietly and then pulled over some of the shrub, exposing David crouching down. "Yeah, that's you; I can recognize that voice anywhere. Sharp and witty for a mere human mortal, you'll go far here."

"Emen? Please be careful?"

"Quiet Leselle! I run the show, and I've been missing my little human side kick and here you are, come out," He moved back and stood up, waiting and motioning to David.

They all chuckled as they watched the human stand up slowly to walk out in the open, eyeing his lack of wardrobe and making comments to themselves about his abundance of exposed flesh. Emen's wicked smile caught David's attention however and he tuned the others out for the moment.

Not having ever noticed Emen's dark nature before, David stood there perplexed, taking in the elf's features as he slowly approached him, arms and hands out like he was the Bogey Man. It was creepy and David couldn't help but feel something ominous was beginning to encircle him.

Emen's teeth were jagged and pronounced and his eyes, dark purple as he looked David over like he was a piece of meat. David shivered from cold and the sensation he was being sized up.

"Well, I swear I haven't seen you in this kind of precarious position before, David, but you're in luck, because not only are we almost the same size, but I have an extra pair of pants and Jackel has an extra pair of Elvin boots—"

"Are you serious, Emen? Those boots are rare, not to be given to a human. Only elf kind should be so inclined to wear these!"

"I'll pay you Jackel! Give them up, and *I'll pay you*, understood?" He turned and glared at Jackel, who sighed and quickly pulled his pack down and took out a black roll of leather, bound and tied. He tossed it at David, but his movements were faster than David could register,

and it bounced off his chest as he was putting his hands up to catch it. It fell to the ground in front of him. His face turned red as the elves all started to laugh.

“Hey, Emen, you might be right for once! This one could be worth a couple of laughs just to have along.” The third elf finally spoke, and appeared to be in close company with Emen. He stepped forward to make his presence known. He was the only one with white hair, long and pulled back in a braid. He was very attractive, with light orange eyes, freckles across his cheeks and upturned nose and was slightly taller than all the others, but still shorter than David by at least three to four inches. He was covered in weapons, and wore a massive golden bow across his shoulders and back. He casually put his arm around Emen’s shoulder and smiled at David. “So, you must be something special because this master elf right here, well, he doesn’t take to strangers, especially humans, and he’s quite selective with elves for that matter.”

“Yeah, well, David and I have history, don’t we?” Emen smiled at David, his purple eyes squinting, framed by his short, black hair. He then reached in his tiny sack, the size of an apple attached to his waist and pulled out a pair of black suede-like pants, rolling them out then leaning over and giving them gently to David, as if mocking his inability to react quickly enough. The elves chuckled again. “Put it on - they’re special.”

David couldn’t believe a full sized pair of pants could fit into a sack so small. He grabbed them gingerly, for they weighed nothing, and slid them on over his boxers as the elves all stood around him. Luckily for him, his tee shirt was black. He then sat down and put the boots on. They came up to his knees. He stood up and almost bounced, he felt so light. Was he on the moon? He started walking around in a circle while the elves all nodded their heads and smiled in agreement over his quick transformation, even Leselle, and Emen stood there beaming. “How do they feel?” He leaned in, leering at every detail on David’s face as he stopped to answer.

“The pants feel warm and light as air, and the boots, it’s almost as if I’m not touching the ground.” David was shocked and it showed. He suddenly became cognizant of his naiveté and he tried to control his excitement. The elves all snickered.

“You’re not touching the ground. That’s the point, young one. Now come on, we should make haste, for this is not the safest forest. We are in Nagul territory, and they are nasty reptilian creatures. Come, you’ll be sniffed out in minutes if you don’t move. Besides, I now have access to a few doors, which means we won’t have to travel too far.” Emen grinned while the other

elves breathed out in what appeared to be relief. David remained puzzled by their words and reactions to Emen.

As he stood there thinking his next course of action, before he could even blink twice, they were fifteen feet away. He remained still, looking dumbfounded as he watched them turn around to glance back at him.

“Uh, wait. I wasn’t ready to go anywhere, and...I’ve only been to the Cavern and the-the town. I need to go back and check on my brother. I’m, I’m not ready...for this.” David walked around again, trying to scan the rapidly darkening forest, not able to identify it from his visits beforehand. It looked very different and he shuddered as he tried to adjust to the harsh landscape around him, turning in a full circle until he met eyes with the four elves again, all but Emen having worried looks on their faces. They turned to Emen and waited on his word. *They all follow him blindly*, David thought, *and I am not sure why*.

“Shouldn’t you tell him, Emen?” Leselle pleaded. “You’re way too involved, I’ve seen you like this before, but-not-this-badly,” Her voice hesitating as it drifted off while she backed away from the master elf.

Leselle was the smallest in the group and tiny. She had pretty, large brown eyes and long lashes, with dark, blood red hair down to her waist, curly and full. It seemed as though she was hiding her pointed ears as she glanced at David, then looked down, holding her hair to both sides of her face as she did so.

“Shut your mouth, Leselle, your meaningless words are *female*.” Emen spoke with venom at her, still transfixed on David.

“This is a bad idea, Emen, the human is a siren! He’s got the Dark Lord written all over him.” Jackal whispered, standing in front of Emen. Emen pushed him away.

“Yeah Em, what if he *is* looking for him?” Sarin whispered.

“He’s not! He’s looking for another - David?” Emen walked over to him, his hand up to his chin in deep thought, his fingernails long, black and curved. As he walked over, David took a step back, gawking at the dark presence of the elf, his voice sounding menacing. “I am taking a chance with you, now either you come with me willingly, or I’ll drag you, but we,” and he pointed to everyone, then at David, “we aren’t staying here. Understand? Now I am in charge of this group, and you’ve just been indoctrinated in AND you’re wearing my clothes.”

“And my boots,” Jackal chimed in.

Emen's face turned magically dark again as his eyes danced with David. His wicked smile returned as he leaned in, touching the side of David's face with his hand, admiring his beauty and facial structure while David leaned back, still in shock over Emen's changed character.

"Now move." He turned abruptly and started to walk to the others.

David followed, almost running after the quick elf, not wanting to fight with what he thought was his only friend here, but feeling heat on his face as the others stared at him. He had followed Emen before, and he didn't know where else to go, couldn't remember the way to the Cavern in this new place he was in. *But I'm not a follower...*

Leselle touched his hair curiously as he walked by, making him turn to look at her while Emen and the other male elves walked in front of them. She smiled and put a finger to her mouth, then looked over at Emen. David nodded his head in agreement.

They traveled quickly through the forest. David's newly adept movements he'd realized in the Living World helped him greatly, although he barely kept pace with the pack. Moving along for what felt like hours, he began to feel disoriented, although he quickly realized there probably wasn't a concept of time here. Glancing upward, he could at least see that there was no moon, or stars to guide them and no light to really speak of. He also noticed by being up close that the forest they traveled through wasn't green; the trees and shrubs were various shades of purple, brown, and red. The ground was hard packed dirt, rocky and sharp edged in some places, and it didn't take long for David to become instantly grateful to have the boots.

Leselle was ordered to the back of the pack, behind David, and as they traveled along at a runner's swift pace, she would occasionally cheat and hop up to lightly run and skip alongside him as he huffed and puffed along, his breathing fast and irregular. She laughed quietly as she watched him, startling him at times when she'd get too close. He struggled to breathe, while her breathing remained slow and unnoticeable. "You are keeping up remarkably well for a human! We all had our doubts, for there is an obvious reason why elves travel together exclusively." Leselle giggled as she trotted along.

Was she skipping? David was so out of breath, he couldn't answer her, but he smiled at her in an attempt, making her laugh again. "Emen was right about you. You are different. Here, you need something to give you energy, for we aren't there yet." She handed him a tiny perfectly round object the size of a gum ball, bright blue in color and hard as a rock. He reached out for it

and brought it to his face.

“Eat it - just put it in your mouth and absorb its power. You’ll feel the difference, and it will calm your breathing too. That’s it, now just absorb it and let it melt—“

“Leselle! Do we need to lighten our load?!” Emen yelled back to her as he trotted along. “Silent females only when we travel! You know the rules!” The others laughed and snickered back at her. David looked over at her sullen face as she slowly left his side, drifting back again in line.

She was right, David thought, as he felt strength in his legs while his chest pain disappeared and his breathing slowed. The gum ball tasted like dirt, gritty and slightly sour and it swished around his mouth like mud. *I could have been warned about that little fact.* He suddenly gagged and coughed. A small stream of midnight blue spit shot out his mouth. He wiped it off with the back of his hand, then stared at it while he picked up the pace, smacking into the backside of Jackal, the largest elf in the group, not in height, but in stature, causing him to lunge forward slightly. Jackal quickly corrected himself and glared back. David could tell from the beginning that he wasn’t this elf’s favorite person.

“Watch yourself - clumsy human waste,” he whispered harshly.

“Sorry, but your size blocks the way.” David hissed back, realizing he had his voice again, thanks to the energy of that nasty dirt ball he choked down earlier.

Emen laughed loudly, as he slowly stopped his running pace, making everyone gather around him, while Sarin jumped up and was gone in a flash.

“Now that’s the wit I was referring to, that’s the spark I need in my group! Welcome, wicked rudeness! Everyone, this is David.” He pointed to David then introduced them all individually. “Leselle is the chatter box I love to have along, giving my position away everywhere I go.” He placed his hands on her shoulders and smiled sarcastically, then walked over to David and came in close to whisper and block her out. “Females in general are hard to find - female elves, even harder to find, so she’s valuable in her own way.” He winked at her, making her blush and look down. He then pointed at Jackal, who was standing there, hands on his large waist and glaring up David. “This elf right here, the one you just insulted, is Jackal, one of my top rangers. He knows the land quite well, and he is so, so resourceful. He knows everyone too, so I have friends through his acquaintance. Last but certainly most important, is Sarin. He is my occasional companion, my ghost warrior and my muscle. He is scouting the

area as we speak and amazing he is, beyond description, disappears instantly when you'd least expect it. He has a reputation like no other, wanted by all but giving himself to no one - that's his motto...however, he considers me worthy - go figure, right?" He nudged David and smiled like he did at the Cavern, his purple eyes drawing him in again. "And then there's you! An amazingly dark, edgy human with the agility and speed of an elf—"

"But he's wearing Elvin boots."

"Quiet Jackal! You're just angry mad at our David for checking you - get over it." His voice, then his face, changed from sugary sweet to mean in two seconds as he flashed Jackal an opposing stare. Just then, Sarin jumped down in the middle of them, without a sound registered, startling David and making him shoot back a step for not noticing him. Jackal snickered and laughed at him. Sarin turned to Emen and spoke.

"The way is clear, I see nothing. It's as if everyone is looking for that other human you spoke of earlier." Sarin turned to David and hesitated, as if wondering whether or not to divulge more information. Emen interrupted him quickly.

"He's fine, already been captured. I feel change in the air...and excitement."

"Who's this human you speak of?" David stepped into the circle, examining Emen's face closely for clues.

"He's a poor, stupid fool wanted by someone very powerful, to serve a purpose, for everything and everyone has a purpose here," Emen leaned in and wrapped his arm around David's shoulder, tapping his finger lightly on David's chest like he was reprimanding him for a future wrongdoing. "Whether they like it or not, it's survival. And when there's a large purse involved, everyone can become your friend and your worst enemy. Now, let's go relax and visit my friends, and I'll show and tell you everything you need to know to survive here—"

"But I'm not staying right now, I'm just dreaming - I mean, visiting - I'm visiting," David laughed nervously. "I-I have another life and I'm just dreaming right now, that's all... right?" He tried to pull away from Emen's arm, to look at him for much needed confirmation, but it was getting darker and his eyes felt like they were losing their ability to see. Sarin suddenly appeared on his other side. He wrapped his arm around David as well, whispering in his ear confidently and with authority. "Of course you're not staying. You're just visiting under our welcomed hospitality, and you should consider it a privilege, for it is rarely granted to humans."

David felt the weight and pull of Sarin's presence and heard the warning to conform in

the elf's voice. He slowly relented to the taller, more charming elf, letting them both escort him down the other side of the jagged mountain road to the hidden fortress in the near distance.

Chapter Thirty Two

Wake Me Up Before I Go

They sat there watching television in the dark, all four of them, for over an hour. Tommy sat there stunned to see them all so excited to flip through the basic television channels two through twelve, since they didn't have cable, and the awe and enjoyment on their faces as they watched. He felt like he was in the middle of a scene from the television show *Little House on the Prairie*; half-expecting Mrs. Ingalls to come up with homemade biscuits and fresh cow's milk straight from the barn. Instead, he found himself leaning against the front of the couch watching Dillon in the dark, with only the light of the television hitting his face. It danced with Dillon's eyes, his nose and his beautiful mouth. After awhile, Tommy was able to touch shoulders with Dillon and that gave him such a thrill, he couldn't concentrate. Dillon remained glued to the screen completely unaware. After what seemed like another thirty minutes, Daniel stretched his legs and lightly tapped Dillon on the head with the remote controller.

"Oww!" Dillon shot up from a semi-lying position to a sitting position, startling Tommy from his continued gaze on him up close and personal.

"Get me a soda, Lil' Sport and see if Tommy wants one too," Daniel barked. Rachel had just gotten up and walked into her bedroom to answer the phone that had been ringing constantly since Mother sent the other kids home.

"I can get my own drink, Daniel."

"No, you're the guest and the youngest of the hosts can get us both drinks," Daniel's voice sounded jealous as he sat there, getting fed up with watching Tommy watch his little brother, chit-chatting all night with him, and ignoring everyone else in the room – everyone else in the room being Daniel. *Nobody ignores me except David, and that's a good thing*, he thought as he leaned back on the couch.

Dillon sighed as he rubbed the top of his head. "Can't I w-wait until the commercial?"

"Yeah, that's fine Dillon, don't worry about—"

"Uh, negatory, good buddy! A big negatoro on that one - now go." Daniel pointed to the stairs off to the side of their open room.

Dillon frowned at his demanding brother and got up to walk over to his bedroom, wearing his usual white tee shirt and pajama bottoms, to check on David. He chose this time to ignore Daniel's yells.

“That’s not the kitchen! You’re way off base, Pocahontas!”

“Shut up Danny! You are such an ass!” Tommy got up quickly, adjusting his pajama pants as he followed Dillon into his room and closed the door.

Tommy stood there at the foot of David’s bed and saw David lying there, his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Dillon was sitting next to him, leaning down and looking at him frantically, shaking him lightly. “Dave? David? Are you sleeping? Wake up now...”

Tommy walked over and stood right behind Dillon, leaning over his shoulder to make sure David was breathing, relieved to see his chest rise slowly and rhythmically. “Uh, he’s sleeping Dil, just let him sleep.” He gently grabbed Dillon’s arm and pulled him away from David, helping him stand up so that he could stand right behind him. He then leaned down and whispered in Dillon’s ear. “Some of the girls I know from school sleep with their eyes opened - it’s slightly creepy, but it’s still okay—“

“But he doesn’t do that...” Dillon turned around to finish his sentence then stopped short of Tommy’s face, realizing how close they suddenly were in the short amount of time they had been in the room together. Tommy had one of Dillon’s hands and he reached over for the other, then he pulled Dillon close; their mouths even closer still. Dillon tried to squirm away as he watched Tommy’s eyes focus on his mouth. Then Tommy brought his head down even closer. It happened so fast, Dillon couldn’t speak; his words a mass of stuttering as he tried to turn his head to one side then the other, but Tommy was much stronger, and he grabbed and held him securely.

Within seconds, both of them became a tangle of feet, falling on Dillon’s bed, Tommy’s much larger weight holding him down as he pinned himself on Dillon’s much smaller frame.

Without thinking, Tommy shoved his mouth on Dillon’s and forcibly kissed him, all the while Dillon’s hands remained pinned behind the small of his back, the combined weight sealing them there. He tried to buck and kick Tommy off him, but his legs were useless against a much stronger boy. Releasing the kiss, Tommy pulled one hand out and shoved it down on Dillon’s mouth to keep him from screaming so that he could calm him down, but his words failed miserably to soothe.

“Shhh! It’s okay...just lay still. I’m, I’m not going to hurt you, Dil. I love you - that’s all. I just want to be with you...close to you. I’d protect you too, from everyone. I can’t believe I’m saying this but, I love you, really, really love you.” He spoke way too fast, his words

gushing out of him in excitement. He looked down at Dillon's pleading, panicked eyes and tried to smile reassuringly down at him. "Now I'm going to take my hand off of your mouth, but you have to not scream, okay? We can just lay here close like this and talk, alright? Just talk, okay?"

Dillon was frozen in fear as he watched Tommy look down at him, studying every inch of his face with such a lost infatuation, a devotion so deeply disturbing, Dillon felt his stomach contents bubble as he thought of the vomit spewing out at any minute, hitting Tommy in the face and creating enough of a scene, everyone in his family would come in and see them there; his disgrace and humiliation of being under a boy on his bed would be the end of his Father's sanity. *No, no, no - this can't be happening!* He screamed in his head as Tommy let go of his hand, a smile spreading across his face now that he was able to see Dillon's mouth again.

"There, that wasn't so bad, right?"

"P-p-please l-l-llet m-m-m—"

"Shhhh...it's okay, just relax angel." Tommy continued to speak softly, brushing Dillon's hair off his face with his free hand while Dillon continued to try without success to wiggle free. "You are so, so pretty! I can't believe I'm saying this, but you are simply breathtaking. And I'm not gay - never been into guys - but I have not once felt so drawn to anyone before like I am to you." He shook his head in disbelief and laughed softly, still running his hand through Dillon's hair, then tracking it down to his mouth, tracing its outline with his thumb.

Feeling Tommy's arousal pressing into his own groin strongly now, Dillon was beyond stunned, physically pinned down and unable to speak clearly, all he could do was plead with his eyes while Tommy continued to lay on top of him, playing with his hair as he appeared to Dillon to be trying to gather up enough courage to kiss him again. Suddenly, after taking a slow breath in, Dillon was able to understand what was happening. He saw in Tommy's hypnotized face, his state of irrational thought. *He doesn't want to hurt me, I see that now, but I can tell he's gone. He's lost in me and he's not thinking about himself, or me, or his reputation. His entire life and mine for that matter, could fall apart at any second if anybody comes through my unlocked door. David! Please wake up David, please wake up and take care of this! I don't know what to do! Please help me! Wake up!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

The sound of a gasp and a cough shot Tommy off Dillon's bed so fast that he knocked the lamp over onto the floor. Dillon quickly kicked himself up in bed and crawled back into the corner of the wall, breathing hard, trying to catch his breath after holding it in for so long. He

made himself not scream as he held his hand over his mouth and clasped it there. He looked over at David, along with Tommy, then they looked at each other.

Tommy walked over and looked down at David curiously, noticing that his eyes weren't the same as they were before, instead, they appeared glassy and strange. He looked down and noticed something else too. David was barely breathing. Tommy shook him lightly, then lifted him slightly off the bed by the shoulders and spoke his name loudly, but David didn't blink or show any sign of recognition at even being touched. Dillon shot over and pushed Tommy out of the way so that he could take over. The act dropped David back onto the bed unnaturally limp, his head bent slightly backward and his eyes staring at the headboard. It was as if someone had replaced his neck with a Slinky toy. Dillon gasped at the sight and screamed, "David! Wake up! Dave!!!!!!!"

Daniel came in as Dillon went running out, screaming down the stairs and crying out, "M-Mother!!!!!!!"

Chapter Thirty Three

Life's Dream

The fortress of Ulleren jettied out from the side of a rocky, dangerously high mountain terrain. It blended in with the mountainside easily, barely registered by the eye if one wasn't aware it was there. David looked around for minutes as they walked up before he noticed it, stopping for a minute to look up at its massive walls in disbelief. His mouth remained fixed open and his knees became suddenly weak at the grand scale of the gates. Leselle bumped into him while he stood there gawking, so she gently moved him along.

The elves had absolutely no difficulties traversing the landscape, and although he had a rough start, David caught on by watching their movements, transforming into an elf, minus the ears, in the short time he was with them. His reactions, his movements and his balance improved so much so, he was soon near the front of the pack instead of trailing the rear, being laughed at by Leselle.

Once they got to the gates and Emen spoke with the guards, they were allowed inside. It was a quick check over before they were allowed to proceed. Once inside, David quickly realized it was not just a castle or fortress, but a small city, almost exclusively Elvin, with a few humans here and there, walking around and mixing in with the much shorter elves. There was a bustle of activity and trading, with an open market feel. He looked around as soon as they were inside and noticed Sarin was gone. Damn, he's quick, he thought as he scanned the area, making a full circle, not able to see a trace of the ghost elf. *I think I'm beginning to see why Emen refers to him as his 'ghost warrior.'* Not wanting to be alone, David ran after Emen, walking behind him and looking around like a first time tourist in a foreign country.

They walked along quickly, for Emen had a reason for being there, and it wasn't for a purchase or trade, however he stopped at a stand and looked at a black and purple long sleeved tunic, with matching leather arm pads and wrist straps. He turned to ask the dealer how much in Elvin, surprising David as he stood there and watched them converse in a language never heard before and so incredibly fast, he could barely hear the syllables. Emen reached in to his pack and pulled out a small bag. He tossed it on the counter to the dealer. A quick nod by the dealer and he reached over and grabbed the tunic and arm protectors, while the dealer counted the eight gold coins. He turned to David.

"Here, wear this, I feel purple suits you and it matches my eyes." He laughed at himself

softly. “And these black leather straps and protectors are nice to have when scouting.” He pushed them into David’s chest roughly, then smiled and leaned in, looking up at David’s shocked, but grateful, down turned face and whispered longingly, “We will discuss payment later, for gold is valuable, and I don’t give to the poor and downtrodden.” He pulled away and studied David again for a second, his eyes squinting and inspecting.

David felt like he was being sized up again, however he was quickly getting used to the inspection, so he just stood there and waited for Emen to finish giving him the obnoxious look over he’d often give girls at school, suddenly feeling like an asshole for ever doing that in the first place. *Note to self, do NOT look a girl up and down while she stands there watching EVER again.*

“You did well on the journey here, amazingly fast and agile you have become in such a short time. I’m beginning to think you were *made to be here.*” He pointed to the ground and smiled wickedly again.

David regarded him suspiciously for a few seconds, and then answered, whispering, “I am made to be anywhere I want to be, Emen. I guess I’m just full of surprises everywhere I go,” his last sentence slightly annoyed as he turned and slipped on the tunic. It had a material inside that appeared to be like fleece, only it was so light, he barely knew it was there. The warmth it created was more than sufficient, and he smiled at the feeling of it touching his arms, allowing the fabric to lighten his mood.

Emen just stood there and watched him silently, not bothering to respond to his comments, but smiling anyway, knowing he’d have him eventually on his knees. Forcing himself to back off for the time being, Emen took a step back and waited. Within minutes, he became surrounded as word spread of his arrival. Elves were talking to him and showing him things as David turned around to watch. Emen looked like an Underworld celebrity. David noticed the way the elves gathered around him, some looking at him with awe and wonder. It was pure worship, he thought. Emen continued to smile knowingly at David, while surrounded by the others, his eyes not shifting or wavering. He didn’t seem to notice or care about his popularity as he stared at his property. Those eyes shot goose bumps down David’s newly warmed arms, and he paused as he held the arm guards to his chest. He’d never been stared at like this before and he was unsure how to respond to such a visual invasion.

With that last thought, David didn’t take his eyes off the dark elf, not even to inspect his

new gifts, although he felt pink in the ears at the thought of not knowing how to put on his strange attire. As if reading his mind, Leselle came over with two other female elves she was apparently friends with and touched him lightly on the shoulder, breaking his staring game with Emen.

“Yeah? What?” Startled and not yet comfortable with creatures from the Underworld surprising him by silently approaching, David was trying to adjust to his surroundings.

Leselle smiled, while her two friends giggled. “I thought you might need some help with those arm guards, David.” She held out her arm to him; hers were covered in similar material, although well worn. She took his guards from his hold against his chest. One of her friends whispered to her in Elvin tongue as she stared at David and they all laughed. David’s face turned red again.

“What did she say, Leselle?” He asked her quietly but with a demanding tone, not looking at her friends. Leselle stammered, not knowing how to say what had been said, but Sarin walked by at that moment and said aloud as he continued on, “You are attractive, for a human. She said you are attractive for a human and something else I’d rather not say aloud!” He yelled it out, not looking back or stopping as he did so. David stared at his back for a few seconds, trying to figure out what was drawing him to the mysterious elf, for he knew he was already there.

“David?” Leselle called to him, making him break his gaze with Sarin’s back as he turned to her.

“Give me your arms and I’ll suit you up.” The same elf that had whispered to Leselle earlier said something else, but this time Leselle answered her quickly and harshly, making the pretty elf shrink back and look down. David watched, but decided not to ask, he could tell it was probably something along the lines of ‘shut the hell up.’

As she finished putting his guards on and wrapping them in an interesting pattern, David watched in awe at the intricate detail. She started talking to him quietly, while wrapping his hands and fingers, almost whispering to him, not wanting anyone else to hear. Pausing as she checked out his black fingernails, she looked up at him with a frightened look of acknowledgement, then quickly continued her wrapping. David looked puzzled as he watched her stammer. He wondered why his nails startled her.

“These guards are nice, David, worthy enough to wear by any strong warrior and your

tunic is magic-lined for warmth. It's-it's very pretty." She gushed as she glanced up at him, his newly acquired wardrobe having turned him instantly into quite a sight. She leaned in to whisper, "Emen has spent quite a lot of money on this set up...and on you. I'm sure you don't realize this yet, but those pants he gave you, they are light as air - a rare find; the boots, expensive as well, almost impossible to find. In fact, everything you are wearing minus your undergarments," she blushed again, "Are meant to provide warmth, for it gets cold here, painfully cold, and the need for fire and heat are hardly ever allowed out in the open land. One must rely on one's clothes to provide heat, and if one doesn't have that, one can always rely on the natural heat of another—"

"Leselle! Are you finished catering to the human? We have been summoned by Emen. Let's go! Aww, look! He's all pretty now, isn't he?" Jackal's loud, commanding voice made Leselle jump, startling her. He in turn stood there, his face disgusted, as he spat on the ground in front of and off to the side of David.

"Fine, Jackal, you don't have to be rude." Leselle's face was still pink with the words just spoken to David, and the surprise of someone else near enough to hear her was difficult for her to digest.

"Shut your mouth Leselle. Now let's go, and bring your playmate with you."

David went to yell something obnoxious back at Jackal, but Leselle threw one hand up to his mouth and the other hand to his chest to keep him quiet and not moving. He slowly but gently removed her hand from his mouth. She blushed.

"That one has issues."

"I know he isn't the nicest or the most cordial, but he more than pulls his weight in our group." Leselle tried to sound convincing but David didn't buy it and he frowned at her encouraging smile. They both turned and watched Jackal walk away, his large backside bumbling along; his clothes tight and painful as they stretched around his large body.

Leselle laughed as she looked up at David, who was a full eighteen inches taller than her, and smiled up at him. "I'm glad you're here David. I am very glad to have you. Come on, let's go." She reached behind her and quickly grabbed his sleeve, pulling him forward with her playfully as she walked. Then she casually spoke over her shoulder at him while she went along, "Emen didn't mention this earlier during our introduction, probably because he only likes to emphasize my weaknesses, but I am fluent in almost all of the hundred or so different languages

here, and I graciously translate for him everywhere we go. That's the real reason why he has me with him." David looked down at her while they walked, his mouth opened in awe once again as he thought of her intelligence at that moment. She laughed as if reading his mind. "I'll start by teaching you Elvin, especially since you've already been solicited." She laughed again playfully as she hooked her arm in his and allowed him to walk her. He smiled and shook his head. *I guess I'm not in Kansas anymore.*

David escorted Leselle down a long hallway. Luckily she knew where they needed to go. Right as they were turning the corner he heard it - the faint barely audible sound of his name and to wake up. He stopped and stood still, the two of them alone in the expansive hallway with its massive archways and pillars.

"What's wrong, David? You look stunned." Leselle stood there in front of him, staring up at his face as he froze there.

"I-I need to go home, Leselle. My brother is calling for me, and he sounds like he needs help." He paused and looked up and down the hallway, not knowing where to go or what to do. "How do I get back?" He grabbed her by the shoulders and whispered down at her frantically.

"What do you mean? I live here, David. I don't know how you go between worlds like you do. I figured you knew how?" She tried to smile to get him to smile as well, but it didn't work this time. She nudged him gently. "Come on, Emen will get angry if we don't hurry. You haven't seen him angry yet and I wouldn't advise it happening anytime soon." She pulled on his sleeve again, but he wouldn't move - he couldn't move.

"Don't you understand?!" He whispered at her harshly. "I need to get home. I shouldn't have come all this way!"

"Well, what, or I should say, how did you get back before?" She looked up at him, scrutinizing his face for answers. She felt compelled to help him. She liked him too much to watch him get upset.

"I-I just would get tired and as soon as that happened the closet - I mean - the door would present itself and I'd walk through it. But, but it always happened at Fifth's Cavern - well, twice now it happened in the forest, you know, the forest where I met you? I guess I just assumed I'd eventually get tired and the door would open, but it's not - and I'm NOT tired! Wait, what did you give me back there on the road?" Leselle took a step back and shook her head, not sure what to say. She glanced behind her timidly.

“I think you should lower your voice Master David—“

“That dirt ball gave me too much energy! How long will it last Leselle?!” He brought his hands up to his head in disbelief, pulling at his hair. “Holy shit, I can’t believe this is happening! I have to go home! I’m going back Leselle! Tell the others I went back, okay?” He turned to leave and started to run down the hall when the quick little elf shot up in front of him again, causing him to slam into her. “I’m sorry!” He grabbed her to balance and keep her from falling, then he frowned at her. “You need to STOP doing that!” He yelled out in frustration, making her shoot her hands up to her long, pointed ears and cower down slightly.

“You can’t leave Master David! He will not allow it! Please, let’s just go inside and talk to him. He can give you a better idea on how to get back home, okay?” She was pleading with him, for she knew it was dangerous for him to venture out alone, and probably more dangerous for him to leave Emen.

“Who says I can’t? I am not *obliged* to Emen, Leselle. He doesn’t *own* me!” He walked by her again, but she reached out and grabbed his arm.

“Okay! Okay! So he doesn’t own you! Do you remember the way?” She stopped and watched him walk a few feet then stop. He stood there, head down, his hands on his waist, and thought quietly. She ran back over to him and stood in front again, trying to appeal to his rational thought. “You cannot go out there alone, a young, inexperienced human out in the dead of night! It is no longer evening, Master David! There will be more activity out there, please be sure!” She then turned behind her, as if sensing what would be occurring in minutes, turning back to him and looking up with pleading eyes. “They will be closing the gates and reinforcing the doors in a few minutes!”

David snapped out of his train of thought and looked down at her again in disbelief. “What?! Are you telling me we might be holed up in here?!” He stepped back from her and looked around, his eyes frantic and panicking. “What the hell is going on?!”

“There’s a reason why they reinforce the doors, Master David. You do not want to be on the other side of those doors after the sky turns black! Why do you think we made such great haste to get here?” She tried to smile up at him as she gently held onto his arms, but his face was noticeably upset and his eyes were elsewhere. She held her breath as she watched him look like he was experiencing pain. It was already killing her to watch him hurt.

“Leselle? Are you two coming in, for your rudeness disturbs me,” Emen’s voice could be

heard behind David as he stood there leaning against the doorway they'd almost entered earlier.

Both Leselle and David made eye contact, her eyes nervous and worried and his eyes, panicking and fretful. She took the initiative and grabbed David's arm, linking it in hers again, and brought him reluctantly over to Emen as he dragged his feet. She forced a smile as she approached the dark elf.

"I am sorry, my Lord, but David and I were just talking about how and when he should return to his world, and I guess we lost track of the time." She laughed nervously, then smiled up at David, avoiding eye contact with Emen's piercing purple stare.

"I need to get back, Emen. I need to go home now, for I heard my brother calling me just minutes ago. I think I need to go back to the forest where I met you all, and wait for the door to present...itself..." David's voice trailed off as he watched Emen's wicked grin spread across his face. The dark elf's eyes began dancing at the thought he knew something David wasn't privy to yet and now he could finally reveal his evil secret. David felt the need to vomit as he watched Emen's face light up, so he took a step back in response, almost losing his footing. Leselle held him up.

"Well, well, well," Emen shook his head and pretended to be sad. "I hate to be the one to bring about such horrible news, but you aren't going back." He said it so casually, his eyes down cast as he tried to look the part of the messenger.

"What are you saying Emen?" David whispered, trying to keep from vomiting again as he held onto his stomach with one hand.

"The door as you call it is actually a portal, and like all portals, it is magically controlled by the person who created it. Do you even know who created your 'door' as you put it?" Emen leaned against the wall again and picked at his nails, appearing suddenly bored and uninterested.

David couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "I-I don't know, who – what are you talking about? Someone created my door? But it's just a closet, it's my closet..." He put his hands to his head again, feeling the throb of fear coursing through his veins. He felt his pulse pound along his temple. *I'm alive at least. At least I'm alive...*

"Think, my boy, think about who you've met here—"

"Emen! Just tell him what you know! This is not fair! He has another life you are messing with!" Leselle couldn't stand quiet any longer, and her voice, although pleading with the dark elf, was as demanding as a female elf could be. She knew she was in jeopardy by

speaking up but all she could see right now was David and he was quite a presence.

“What is she talking about?” David looked from Leselle to Emen, then back again.

“Leselle, I am going to say this once, for if it occurs again, I’ll have to take your tongue, and we both know how horribly out of place you’d be without it.” Emen casually spoke, then growled the rest of his words as he pushed himself off the wall and pointed a finger in her direction. “I will have your tongue in my pocket, my dear, if you audibly register one more word this night, understood?”

Leselle nodded her head, for fear her answering would guarantee the taking of her tongue. She bowed her head in silence.

“Now go inside with the others, for I have words to discuss with your new friend here.” he moved to the side to allow her exit, as she hesitated, glancing over at David, her eyes expressing a sorrow apology while she walked by Emen. He shoved her along, then turned to meet David’s eyes again. *Such a pretty blue, such brilliance in a pair of human eyes, he is like a treasure, a shiny diamond on a ring, placed delicately...on my finger.*

“What are you saying Emen? You’re the only one I know here, really know that is.” David felt weak in the knees again, and tried as best he could to remain standing as he waited for the dark elf to speak. *And there was also Louis...*

Emen laughed and shook his head at the human’s apparent ignorance and blindsided view of the world he was now stuck in. “Oh, David, what can I say? Do you honestly not know of anyone else powerful enough to cast a portal trap on you? Hmmm?” He leaned in until he was close enough to feel David’s breath on his face, his evil smile and the slight nodding of his head made David realize something sinister.

David gasped and Emen laughed harder, his voice echoing back and forth across the hall. He was really enjoying himself and it showed. “How unfortunate David! How very unfortunate for you! He has brought you here so many times and you’ve not once questioned why you were here? Or why you were *allowed* to visit? What, did you think he’d let you come and go as you *pleased*? Do you think yourself more than worthy of such a dual life? Interrupting our world when you felt the need?! My dear, everything and everyone has a purpose and a place here... yours is for service. You are his for the taking! Your place is now *here* and your purpose is to avoid *his capture*.” He spoke condescendingly, forcing a fake sigh.

David staggered and leaned against the nearest wall, feeling his legs finally give way. He

watched as his body slowly slid down the cold cement while he stared off without blinking. He could barely breathe. His world, the past month, everything that had happened to him, was flashing before his eyes like a movie on a screen across a medieval hall.

Chapter Thirty Four

Close the Door

*The dust settles at the place I fall,
While door slowly closes
And the World will mourn my passing.
But for you, I'll come again,
Knocking loudly at your door*

It was still early in the night, but the Dark Lord was distracted, thinking about his personal affairs while he listened to Drake rant, scream and lament about why his place in the Council was so far down the line. At the heart of his tirade, Drake wanted most importantly to know why he wasn't yet considered and addressed as an Arch Devil like the others. He wanted the recognition he deserved and he threatened to get it any way he could.

Azmodeus sat in his Council chair and drummed his fingers on the edge of the table, restless and watching Drake pace back and forth in front of him, not bothering to sit and converse like civilized devils should. Azmodeus considered his cabinet as above all the other slime in the Underworld and there was a way to act for those chosen. Since Drake wasn't chosen yet as an elite member, he tolerated the little tantrum with very little interest.

"Sit down Drake. Your pacing is disturbing my eyes. I am done chasing you around the room." He shot out a chair across from his at the table with a wave of his hand and waited, ushering a servant over to pour another glass of wine in the meantime.

"I have acquired more than any other warlord in the Council these past few weeks - my notoriety and reputation built in half that time! I am feared by most, if not all the inhabitants in Fifth and Sixth Planes, yet I'm eighth in placement on this Council! I'm not an Arch Devil and I deserve to be, for I can challenge at least three of my fellow higher ranked Council members easily!" His voice exasperated, Drake leaned forward, bracing himself against the back of his chair and glared at Azmodeus, who casually took a sip of wine then paused, glass held in mid air as he tested the sweetness of the wine. Nodding his head yes to show himself he approved, he placed the glass on the table and wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

Realizing he wasn't going to get anywhere with his yelling, Drake sighed and walked around the Council chair, flopping himself down in it like an obstinate child, only to adjust

himself like a hooligan shortly afterward. He was attractive enough, with long, straggly shoulder length dark hair, piercing eyes - one black and the other, light blue. Most of the time he seemed to sport a five o'clock shadow of a beard he was also always rubbing and was usually found scratching himself in various places with some form of sharp weaponry. He had one shiny silver upper front tooth and a large, vertical scar down his right cheek, giving him a pirate appearance. However his description, Drake had a rough-edged charm and raw, almost attractive presence, but only if he took the time to make himself presentable, which rarely occurred. Part ladies' man, part nomadic warrior, Drake's rise to fame was legendary to the humans of the Underworld; brute force combined with an adept mastery of most forms of weaponry had in a short period of time, catapulted him to evil stardom.

Since noticing him in the Living World decades past in a human's lifetime, Azmodeus admired him for his rise to power back then, and more recently, even tried unsuccessfully to hire him to lead his own personal army as a front man, but Drake had much higher ambitions. He had a strong following of his own, a seemingly identical male witch who also just so happened to be a vampire, and he enjoyed acquiring pretty things.

The similarities between them were difficult for Azmodeus to accept. He most definitely did not want a twin on the Council. Although he had little respect for Drake as a peer, he was reluctantly impressed by the ranger's ability to rise quickly in rank. He also knew about Drake's threats to other less powerful, but more stable members of his carefully picked Council of Twelve. He was sure the volatile humanoid would upset the balance for sure unless he was quietly subdued—

Unfortunately, he's also quite popular and an uprising is not something I want right now given my current acquisition and latest muse. Azmodeus sighed and took another drink while Drake sat there, having fallen into the chair across from him, one leg lying on top of the chair arm, his body almost sideways in the chair. "Drake, your rise in power has undoubtedly caught my attention, along with most of the other members of the Council, however you forget there are only six Council Members, myself included, who are Arch Devils. It is a title reserved for those who have risen above and *stayed* above all others. Although your quick rise to fame and fortune is impressive and noteworthy, you have only been a member of the Twelve for less than one lunar cycle. I have members who have been waiting double that time for recognition. And might I add, only I can decide who is appointed the title of Arch Devil? It is not a majority vote,

but a singular act and I have yet to see your permanence here worthy of my time and energy to appoint such a title to you. I will, in the meantime, suggest if you expect to receive my recognition, consider cleaning up your act? And while you're attempting that tall request, also try to present yourself dignified and worthy of a title that would place you in the same general vicinity as myself?" His voice was surprisingly calm but stern, and he most wanted Drake to know he did not consider him worthy of personal recognition, at least not as a peer.

The words slammed into Drake harshly as he sat there silent for a few painful minutes, his twisted, transforming eyes trying their best to register a look of compliance. He wanted that fucking title - he more than earned it - and now, after all the shit, piss and sweat he created and waded through to get to this point, his commander in chief and leader of the Twelve, could merely suggest he bathe? He smirked but nodded his head in silent agreement as he watched Azmodeus take another drink. *That's right, go ahead and drink. I'll be waiting...*

Just then Esmeralda came in, followed by an exasperated Sandor. "My Lord, she was told to wait! I told her specifically to wait outside..." Fearful, Sandor paused as he saw the Dark Lord raise his hand to silence him. He laid his empty wine glass down on the table and shot his witch a curious look. Drake looked over at the two intruders as well with much interest, his hand rubbing his shaggy goatee.

Esmeralda was breathless as she stood there beaming at her king. "My Lord, my apologies for the interruption, but I have very important news. He's here. David is—"

"That will be discussed shortly, my dear for I am conducting other business." The Dark Lord's eyes turned a dangerous bright yellow as he attempted to brush off her news as unimportant, however he couldn't hide his eyes. Esmeralda glanced over at Drake, noticing his presence for the first time. He had been leaning back in his chair almost hidden, smiling at her and waving now. He liked her, lusted after her even, and made crude remarks towards her from the moment he was allowed entrance into Nine as a Council Member.

Esmeralda hesitated and looked down at her now trembling hands. Azmodeus stood up and leaned his hands on the table. "Our time here is done, Lord Drake. I will escort you out personally."

Drake shot up in his chair, his face twisted in instant rage. "I have not yet fully voiced my concerns as I wait to get your approval for a takeover—"

"Fine! Speak! Who is the unfortunate Council Member you'd like to waste into oblivion

in the near future?! If it is the Grand Witch, I will not allow it, so be careful who you choose to clash with!” He drummed his fingers on the table, their color changing with each touchdown. Drake darted his eyes down then hesitated, deciding to lower his voice to almost a whisper, for he needed to get his point across with confidence and without causing his already fragile relationship with Azmodeus to threaten and suddenly end his rise to power.

“No, not that bitch I loathe, a more suitable target - for now that is. Monstrous, I wish to battle with Monstrous.” Drake stood up and leaned on the table directly across from his leader, both of them staring at each other in their own silent duel.

Azmodeus smirked, shaking his head in disbelief as he played along with his frustrated opponent. “Battling Monstrous will not win you his title—“

“But he is an Arch Devil! I should take his place, for then the title would become rightfully mine!” He slammed his fist on the table and stood back, his mismatched eyes glowing and enraged. He was having trouble keeping himself contained as the chaotic fire creature he was, “I may not be the perfect picture of what you would see as an Arch Devil, but I have a dark soul worthy of recognition and I will have what is owed to me! I will have it one way or another!” He pushed his chair out of the way and took a step backward, in effect stepping down and away from his table mate. Azmodeus glanced over at Esmeralda’s nervously excited face and relented. He wanted her news more than he wanted Drake squashed and booted to the curb.

“Fine, you have my *permission*, but not tonight – NOT THIS NIGHT. I will allow it tomorrow – ANYTIME TOMORROW. The victor will return here after that day for recognition. I will inform Monstrous of your surprised request for annihilation. Now I have personal business to attend to.” His voice was sarcastic as he glared over at Drake, who was overwhelmingly confident he’d already won the battle with Monstrous now that it was granted and was probably planning his Arch Devil status as they spoke. His visible thoughts frustrated the Dark Lord immensely.

“Of course, my Lord, as you see fit,” Drake half bowed, his eyes glinting in excitement at the futuristic duel and the winnings he would soon have; his cockiness showing on his face. He tilted his head and after glancing again at Esmeralda and smiling, looking her over, he turned and spoke. “I can escort myself out, for my witch is waiting for me at the gates. As you were, however,” he turned and started walking out the door, speaking over his shoulder in a cocky way only Drake could pull off. “I would remind you my Lord, playing favorites is so, so not fair,” his

voice suddenly subdued and playful as he strolled out.

As soon as Drake left the room, Azmodeus beckoned with his hand to the ceiling, and a dark shadowy figure flew down and hovered above the table, her long, dark hair floating behind her as if she were submerged in water. A pillar of swirling air served as her legs; she was an upper body and torso only, with beautiful eyes sparkling from the reflection of the fire, smiling down as she watched him intently, then nodding her head following his words.

“Follow him.” Azmodeus signaled her to go and pointed in the direction of the door and in an instant, the shadow was gone. He turned to Esmeralda and sighed, trying to fight the urge to hit her before she could give him her news.

“May I?” She asked, taking a step backward as the Dark Lord approached her.

“Now would be the perfect time to open your mouth with news.” He casually walked over to her, his hands behind his back as if he were hiding something he wanted to give to her.

Esmeralda hesitated as she watched him and then continued, regaining some of her excitement, and relieved she wouldn't have to do more work on the subject matter. “I must tell you, my Lord, I went to check on our portal and opened it early, hopeful David would be tired and nap and it worked! The one you seek is here—“

The slap hit her unexpectedly and she fell to the ground, her lower jaw throbbing. She quickly staggered back up, holding her hand to the side of her face as she stared at him shocked and without words. Sandor stood back by the door and smiled at the scene. Oh, how he enjoyed watching her lose ground with his Dark Lord.

Azmodeus walked over to her, making her again retreat a few steps so as not to be in hitting range, although realizing quickly that it really didn't matter how close or far away she was from the Dark Lord; his reach could still get her. She finally stopped and stood still as he raised his hand and pointed to her as he spoke, clenching it in a fist as he attempted to control his anger without inflicting more violence.

“Now that phrase you just spoke, ‘the one you seek is here,’ THAT would have been the appropriate phrase to say, my dear, whilst I had company. Need I remind you that names GIVE-PEOPLE-AWAY?! Now his name is out there, handed on a golden platter to my worst nemesis - someone only hoping for some sort of leverage to use against me - and no, your work is not done! There will now be additional work to be done, my Sweet, for we have invited yet another player into my personal affairs!” He threw his hand up in frustration, making her flinch as she

closed her eyes and bowed her head.

He paused for a few seconds to allow his rage to boil down and simmer, while his mind returned. “He’s here? It’s too early in the evening for him...is it not early evening above in that droll world?” He turned and looked over at Sandor, who as if on key, stepped forward and spoke quietly.

“It’s actually further along in the night, my Lord. Your visit with Drake was...um—“

“Yes, I know! Time consuming - it was a complete consumption of my time! So...the portal was opened and now he is here...” He turned away from his two servants and smiled, staring at the floor. “He is marked, correct?”

“Yes, yes my Lord, he has your markings on him, strongly I’m sure. He has visited here enough that you have noticeably enhanced your presence on his soul.” Esmeralda stood tall once more; still rubbing her jaw, for it stung her greatly. She looked like a beautiful boxer standing there, knowing how to take a punch like a man.

“Fine, then he should be at the Cavern having a drink and enjoying the company of those there, or at least they will be enjoying him at a distance, I’m sure. My only concern is I have not placed the appropriate people there. Find Emen and send him immediately to intercept the human.”

“My Lord, you know as well as I that the Elvin Fortress is probably being reinforced and closed as we speak. Emen is most likely there and thus untouchable until morning.”

“Fine, I will go to the Cavern myself, and yes, you may accompany me, however,” he turned and looked at her while she lit up with excitement at the thought of being with him in public. She could almost envision herself on his arm as an ornament to be admired. *Oh, I need to freshen up!*

“Esmeralda? Are you listening?! Quit playing with your hair!”

She snapped out of her dazed state and blushed. “My apologies my Lord, yes, I am listening—“

“Close the portal. Close it and lock it NOW.”

“But, my Lord, do you not feel the human will succumb to his own death in the Living World? Might we be acting too quickly, for I know I can work on his misery up there? I can make him think there is nothing left to live for, if given the chance, especially now with this Joel character dead and gone?”

“No, I do not have time to wait. According to the crows, he has changed his perspective on life, has a new girlfriend, a new and improved relationship with his brother and his mother. No - now is the time to act, while he’s here unexpectedly. He has not realized what he has walked into, giving us the upper hand. He will be easier to take and enslave now, than to wait for what would inevitably be the same outcome.”

He turned and quickly walked over to his cloak and staff, a wicked smile on his face. *Well, if I can't absorb his soul for my own, I can at least beat him down and keep him under my thumb. The little human should be easy to control for, say, at least a century or two at my feet...*

He paced the main hall, wearing his black cloak, its dark velvet purple inner lining brilliantly contrasting with his light hair. He held his staff in both hands placed behind his back as he went back and forth, the bright light of the crystal lighting the walls mimicking his excitement to depart and collect his living gem.

“Is she coming or not?” Azmodeus looked over at Sandor with a frustrated glance.

“She is uh...getting ready, my Lord. I specifically heard her use those words in a sentence.” Sandor smiled weakly and then looked down at his feet again. The Dark Lord sighed and continued pacing.

“Women! Why can’t they be satisfied in their skin? Her foolish ways make her appear so...so frivolous!”

Sandor shot him a quick puzzled expression, and then looked down again, listening to every word breathlessly.

“Why can’t she just be my witch and leave it at that?” He spoke to the ceiling, making eye contact with one of his Shadows. She blew him a kiss in the dark air with her long fingers and shook her head and her long, flowing black hair in agreement with his statement. She didn’t much care for Esmeralda.

He started pacing again, his cloak flowing behind him as he walked and his hair, he let fall down around him loosely, making him feel like it was indeed a special night and a long awaited engagement. The time had come to test the soul he had placed so much stock in. David was now invited to stay in the Dark Lord’s realm to see if he could swim.

Finally Esmeralda strolled in, throwing her coat over her head and letting it slide onto on her extended arms. She had transformed herself into a female even more breathtaking; dressed

in blood red satin, matching corset, long flowing skirt and boots. She pulled up her hair and wore her diamonds on her neck, ears, and wrists.

The Dark Lord sighed as she approached him. Realizing how complicated the female mind could be, he looked down at her smiling, glowing face.

“Can we *go*?” He asked sarcastically while she reached out and gestured for his arm.

“Yes, my Lord. I’m ready for you. Can we?” She held her arm out for him hoping he’d take it and lead her away.

“Did you close it?”

“Of course, my Lord, it is done, never to be used again. David is stuck here, as you wished—“

“So then his body is dead to the World of the Living and he is now, his soul?” He turned to meet her gaze, for she was temporarily stunned as she watched his face up close, having been kept at several paces since her last fall from his grace.

“Uh, yes, yes, my Lord. David is now in our world.”

“Will he feel the change?” Azmodeus leaned in more so and waited, hoping to hear the words describing how his prize would remain unaware until he could reach him.

Esmeralda hesitated, wondering quickly what the Dark Lord was suggesting by the odd question. *Why would he care if this human knew that he was dead, or whether he could feel his death?* “My Lord, this little human you seek is but a mere human, not capable of feeling his separation, therefore he will not know of his permanence here. I honestly doubt his connection with his younger brother continues while he’s here anyway, separated and residing in another world. He shouldn’t be cognizant of his split from Dillon, but I now see your concern. Also, there will be no outwardly change in his appearance, except the gifts you bestowed on him will come out freely now, and his natural abilities, if he has any,” her voice sounding slightly sarcastic, “Those supposed abilities will strengthen and his character will adapt to the change, making him possibly, if he is actually as you say he is, stronger.” She casually spoke of David as if he were already a disappointment. Azmodeus smiled as he watched her play with him.

“Good, then he will be easy to manipulate with false promises of a safe journey home after our visit. Then I’ll lure him here to Nine and be done with it all. Brilliant.” Sighing in relief, he looked down and noticed she put out her arm again. He thought to walk away, making her follow him dutifully as she should. Azmodeus resented her stupidity after watching her slip

up with Drake, hoping that in the future nothing would come from her loose mouth unless invited.

After a short pause, he accepted her offer and took her hand, leading her out quickly, all the while thinking to himself she will probably not last the week, but he would use her for as long as he deemed necessary anyway. It was problematic and superstitious to destroy a collectible just to make room for another and bad luck was something The Collector never invited into his world of Nine.

Strolling through the gates with Esmeralda floating along next to him, Azmodeus hoped this newest human jewel he was going to collect will outshine his witch and everyone else he deemed valuable, so that maybe the impossible might actually happen—

I will spite God and all those angels who doubted my ability to appreciate the human species by taking and cleaving to one so beautiful as this one I seek...and for the other brother, a brutal Biblical sacrifice made in the very same name of love. Embracing human beauty whilst destroying human beauty – this should give me prophetic justice, along with an eternity of retribution. Oh, how I love to love viciously—

Performing the unthinkable given his sudden unnatural state of mind, Azmodeus swung Esmeralda around, slamming her into his chest so that he could relish the moment. He kissed her harshly and aggressively there at the Gates of Nine; fire swirling in the background like a Van Gogh painting, lighting up the skies of Eighth Plane with the passionate electricity of a Dark Angel's embrace.

The scene behind the Vampire and the Devil was the perfect backdrop - a most envied ending to all of the many romantic movies Esmeralda enjoyed watching when she ventured above to mingle with the humans. Here she was, standing center stage getting swept off her feet to live a rare moment of romance in the Underworld. The only notable offering humans as a species had perfected as far as she was concerned was the notion of romance. In the Living World, love, marriage, family, and the idea of happy endings was idealized and worshiped on movie screens since the birth of cinema. However at this time, in this moment, Esmeralda didn't even notice her own theatrical surroundings. As far as she cared to tell, she was Scarlet and Rhett Butler tasted absolutely divine.