

The Acolyte

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To my wife. For everything.

Chapter 1

I'm somewhere outside of Albuquerque before I feel the first real pangs of fear for my parents. They have been missing for three days, but for some reason it never even crossed my mind that they might be in actual danger until I was well on my way to Los Angeles. For most of the ride an old man who smelled like he was already dead occupied the seat beside me. Thankfully, he had gotten off the Greyhound at the previous stop, which freed me to put my feet up on the seat and try to catch a nap.

The constant rocking of the bus prevents any real sleep, so I just close my eyes and rest the back of my head on the window. I try to imagine myself riding a different bus, my school bus. I get lost in the thought, and soon I am no longer headed to L.A. to stay with an uncle I've never met, but I'm on my way home and I am anxious to get there. The new Galaxy Wars 3 game is finally out and I pre-ordered it months ago. It should be waiting for me in the mailbox when I get there, unless Mom has already gotten it and thrown it on my bed. To make things even better, Mom promised to pick up the special edition controller when she went shopping today. I can't wait to log on and kick some alien ass.

But that was Friday, and a child's cry from across the aisle reminds me which bus I'm on. I close my eyes tighter and try to bring the memory back, try to feel it. I remember the smell of chimneys in the air as I step off the bus and wave goodbye to my friends. If you could call them friends. I never had many of those, really. It's not as easy for a guy like me to make real friends at school. I am the same age as everyone else in my class, but I look like I'm in middle school. I can be pretty popular at school sometimes, but not in a good way.

The kids on the bus and at school are just people I talk to during the day. Some of them are actually pretty cool to me, unless I happen to be the target of the day, in which case I can only count on them to follow the crowd. My real friends, though, the ones that really matter, are online. They are others like me, scattered around the world, who prefer our electronic lives over those we actually live. They don't care what I look like, how tall I am, or what my grades are.

But, I'm drifting.

I try to bring the feeling back again. In my mind I run down the street, fallen leaves crunching beneath my feet, as soon as the bus pulls away. I cut through the neighbor's lawn even though I'll get yelled at about it later. I try to see the old lady that lives there in my mind, standing in the kitchen window, as I run down the back of her house.

I make it home, and after checking the mailbox, I burst through the front door and yell for my mother.

"Mom?"

"I'm in the kitchen."

I drop my book bag on the couch, another thing that I will get yelled at for. "Did my game come?"

"Yes," she says. "It's over there on the counter." She points across the kitchen to a pile of mail sitting next to the sink. I can't believe it.

"Geez, Mom. What if it would have fell in the sink?"

"It wasn't going to--"

"Mom," I say, "Look at me." She half-heartedly glances over her shoulder in my direction. "Do you know how many months I've been waiting to play this game?" Clearly she has no idea. I thought that she would know me a little bit better by now.

"No," she says, "but I know how much your father and I paid for it."

Ugh. She always had to bring up that part of it. "Fine. Where's the controller?"

She does turn around to look at me then. "Ohhh...I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Jesus Christ, Mom."

"Jesus Christ, Brian. I said I was sorry."

I open my eyes.

The little girl across the aisle begins to cry. Nadine, her mother called her. She can't be more than four or five. Her mother tries unsuccessfully to prevent an outburst, but the child is adamant about whatever it was that she wants. Probably food, if I had to guess.

Nadine and her mother are filthy and their clothes are worn and tattered. The garbage smell that now fills the air is more tolerable than the decaying old man smell, but it is still enough to make me pull my shirt up over my nose and silently curse my Uncle Dylan.

I don't know much about him, but I know that he is successful doing something. From what I heard Mom telling Aunt Linda, I am pretty sure that he could've sprung for a plane ticket without hurting his pocketbook too much. Besides that, my father has money as well. I understand that he's not here to get it from the bank, but surely there was some kind of system in place for just this kind of emergency.

His agent, Walter, could have even loaned it to me. My father has written several successful fiction novels, vampire and monster stuff. And he is constantly in his office writing, so I'm sure that another one is on the way. Which means Walter would have another paycheck on the way. I wouldn't need much, a couple hundred to last me until my parents came back. Was that too much to ask after all the money he and my father have made together?

Nadine's cries lower to a soft whimper and she curls up in her seat. She rests her head in her mother's lap and stares at the seat in front of her, thumb firmly in mouth. Watching her mother stroke her hair makes me a little envious. That's when the first wave of despair falls over me and I shamefully remember how the rest of Friday went.

I had not been quick to forgive that day. Mom and I stood in the kitchen and screamed at each other for another ten minutes about that damned controller. After that I went to my room and played for hours. Mom came up at some point to tell me that dinner was ready, but I refused.

"I'm not hungry," I said.

"But your father is here and waiting for you."

"What do you mean my father's here?" I demanded. "He's been here all day and hasn't wanted to see me."

Mom's shoulders slumped and she let out a long sigh. "You know he has to work. If he had any other job, he would be gone all day."

"He might as well be."

"Please, come down for dinner," she said.

But I never went. By the time I got hungry enough to pause the game and venture into the kitchen, my parents were already in bed. I ate a leftover meatloaf sandwich and went back up to my room. I played Galaxy Wars until I passed out with the controller still in my hand. The next morning there was a note on the refrigerator from Mom telling me that she and Dad had gone shopping for the day. That was nothing unusual. They often used their Saturdays to "window shop" as my Mom called it. Basically walk around the mall and look at things that they wanted, and could afford to get, but couldn't stand to pay the asking price for. Most Saturdays they were back by early afternoon and Dad would be back in his office, not to be seen until dinner. Once or twice they stayed out into the evening, but Mom had always called if they wouldn't be home until after dark.

I suppose a better son might have been concerned to come out of his room to find a dark and empty house. Dinner hadn't been cooked, but there were still leftovers in the fridge, so I grabbed up an armful of plastic containers and soda cans and went back up to my room. I didn't even look outside to see if their car was back in the driveway.

Nadine begins to snivel again and she turns her head to look up at her mother. "Mommy." Her voice is a high pitched quiver. "I'm really hungry."

Her mother leans her head down close and whispers. "I know, baby. We'll try to find something at the next stop."

I am pretty sure that by that she meant that the two of them would get off the bus, search for the nearest restaurant, and take a walk out back. Nadine's mother would probably hop into the dumpster and search for anything that was salvageable enough to make her daughter's hunger go away. I wish I could say that my first thought is selfless and noble, but it isn't. My first thought is that they would get back on the bus and smell worse than they do now. My second thought is of my uncle. Maybe he was too cheap to give to someone in need, to make their life a little easier, but I'm not. I ate before I got on the bus, and was wise enough to pack a "survival kit." Granted, the bulk of it consists of my laptop, my hand-held game system, a few extra games, and a tangle of power cords, but there are also two candy bars in there. I reach under the seat, take them from my book bag and lean over the aisle toward Nadine.

"Hey," I whisper and tap her on the leg.

She turns to look at me. Her cheeks are pink and clean where she has used her shirt sleeve and tears to scrub the grime away. The rest of her face is just as filthy as the rest of her, though. I hold the candy bars out to her. She smiles, but then stops to look up at her mother for permission to take them. Her mother nods and Nadine grabs the candy from my hand. She rips the wrapper from one with her teeth almost immediately.

"Thank you," her mother says.

"Yeah, Thanks," Nadine says with her mouth full of chocolate. A half of a slimy peanut rolls out of her mouth as she says it.

"You're welcome."

I lean back and check my cell phone. For now, I have enough service to play some multi-player games, but that might not last. I still have several hours of bus ride ahead of me, so I plug in my ear buds and load up the zombie-shooter that I downloaded the last time I had service. Hopefully I can waste the rest of the ride killing the undead, assuming I continue having service or the battery doesn't run out.

Chapter 2

It turns out that I have plenty of battery to last the rest of the trip, but I beat the game way before we pull into the station in L.A. I wait for everyone else to get off before I walk down the aisle to the door. It takes a while for the older people to shuffle off the bus, but I am in no hurry. I have no idea where I will be going from here. The “briefing” I was given over the phone hadn't gone any further than getting on the bus to L.A. I am pretty sure that my uncle will be here to meet me, but I have no idea what he even looks like.

I grab my other bag from the compartment underneath the bus, and walk into the station. I have no problems finding my ride. I would have noticed the man waiting for me even if he hadn't been holding a sign with “B. Prescott” written on it. Everyone in the station looked at the huge man standing in the middle of the lobby. He is, by far, the largest human being I have ever seen. Freakishly large, with proportions that would only look rational on a comic book hero and a square face to match. I hesitantly walk up to him.

"Uncle Dylan?"

"Nyet. I am Gregory," he says with a heavy accent. I assume it's Russian, but I'm not entirely sure. "You have all of your things?"

"Yes."

Without saying another word he turns and walks away. It takes me a moment to decide whether I want to follow him or not, and by the time I do I have to run through the crowd to catch up with him. He doesn't seem overly concerned whether I do or not. He never looks back even when we reach the black BMW that is parked right at the curb. He walks around the front of the car and gets in. Again, I hesitate.

Gregory rolls the passenger window down, and leans over to look at me. "You need the trunk?"

"Nah, I'll just throw it in the back seat." I open the back door and throw my duffel bag and backpack on the floor board.

"You sit back there, too," he says.

"Okay, sure."

Not that I really want to sit in the front with the Hulk, as a matter of fact I would prefer not to, but maybe because he made it so clear that I am not welcome up there, I kind of get offended. I get in the back with my luggage and close the door just as Gregory starts to pull away from the curb. We ride in silence until the landscape outside begins to change and the number of buildings begins to be fewer and they are spreading farther apart.

"Where are we going?" I ask him.

"To Uncle's"

"He doesn't live in L.A.?"

"Nyet. One hour."

"He lives an hour away?"

"Da."

Gregory reaches forward and turns on the radio, obviously not wanting to talk to me at all. Some political talk show, it sounds like, but I don't feel like listening for long enough to try to decipher what they are talking about. So I once again pull out my phone. The last game I had downloaded had been a waste of \$3, but at least it had passed the time. I am just about to press the download button a new one when the two old guys Gregory is listening to are interrupted by the news.

I'm not usually one to care much about the news, but since my parents have gone missing I try to listen when I hear it, hoping that I will hear a report that they have been found so I can go home. I got half of what I hoped for.

...The search ends for novelist John Prescott. Prescott and his wife were reported missing three days ago by Prescott's agent, Walter Knox. Authorities now say that the false report was due to a communication error between Knox and Prescott's personal assistant. Sources close to the

author confirm that John and Gina Prescott are out of the country, but they are safe and wish to thank everyone for their concern. In other news...

To say that I am thrilled is a definite understatement. "Well, it was nice to meet you Gregory." I reach over the seat and pat his shoulder. "It looks like you'll be taking me to the airport soon." Surely, my father would never make me ride the bus back to Florida.

"Don't be so sure."

I am about to ask him what he means by that when he takes a hard right turn that sends me flying toward the opposite door. When I finally pull myself off of the floorboard, Gregory is pressing the button on a speaker box outside his window. The large iron gate that is now in front of us rolls to the side and Gregory drives through.

Past the gate, the driveway curves up to one of the largest houses I have ever seen. It is a post-modern and angular two story that seems to be partially built right into the rock behind it. There is a covered breezeway with large windows connecting the house to a massive garage. The entire front of the house is basically one large window, which makes me think of a guinea pig cage.

Gregory parks the car right in front of the large double doors and gets out. He doesn't offer to help me with my bags or even wait for me at the door. I wrestle my bags off of the floorboard and run up the steps. I use the big metal ring to knock and watch through the glass as Gregory comes back to open the door. He steps aside to allow me through, and I see him roll his eyes as I go by him and into the house. I am glad that my parents are okay so that I won't have to spend too much time around this guy. If I am lucky, I'll be on a plane tonight, tomorrow at the latest.

The inside of Uncle Dylan's home is as minimal as the outside. Most of the furnishings are metal and glass, although I suppose that it is more likely some type of plastic, but everything is clear in any case. Gregory closes the door and walks past me to a hallway entrance. He gives me a large, but obviously fake, smile and motions down the hallway.

"Follow me, please." he says.

I give him back a larger and equally fake smile. "Yes. Thank you." I make a slight bow and gesture forward. "After you."

He makes a deep grunting sound that is either in disgust or humor, I can't tell. I hope it is the latter. Being the smallest kid in school has taught me the value of being able to make the big guys laugh. I follow him down the hallway until we reach an open door on the left. He turns around, takes my bags and lays them on the floor just inside the doorway.

"You sleep there," he says. "Come."

We continue down to the end of the hall where we turn to enter a large room filled with bookshelves. There is a large wooden desk in the center of the room, and two small tables on either side of the room. Sitting at the desk is a small man that has to be Uncle Dylan. He looks like my dad. Short, thin and bookish, and his hair is long and drawn back in a pony-tail. Dad would never stand for his to be that long, but other than that they could be twins instead of being three years apart.

I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting. Not a warm family reunion, for sure, but at least some faked niceties. That is far from what I receive. Uncle Dylan looks up from whatever he was writing and stares at me. He holds his eyes on me just past the point of being uncomfortable before he finally speaks.

"I am Dylan Prescott," he says. "While you are here you will go to school and come back, stay out of trouble and out of my way. You have free roam of the house with the exception of this room, which you will not enter unless invited to do so."

"Um. Hold on." Did he say something about going to school? "I guess you haven't heard the news," I say. "My parents are fine, so I won't inconvenience you any further. Now, if you could just have good 'ole Gregory here give me a ride to the airport, I'm sure that I'll be able to get in touch with them and find my own way home."

He smiles and stands up from his chair. "I like your mettle," he says. The smile suddenly drops from his thin face and he walks around the desk and towards me. "Make no mistake. You're parents are not fine, but the danger they are in the police and media cannot help with." He is close

enough for me to feel his breath on my face and even though he is a small man, I am feeling very intimidated. His voice lowers to almost a whisper. "I arranged for the police to call off the search for your parents."

My heart jumps into my throat and I can feel my face and ears grow hot. What kind of game is this? I am usually not a violent person, for obvious reasons, but Uncle Dylan is starting to piss me off. I can see now why Mom and Dad never brought me to visit. I try to shove him back as hard as I can. My hands land on either side of his chest, but when I push his body seems to disappear beneath my hands leaving him standing in the same spot. Me, with my arms outstretched on either side of him. I stand there staring at him, frozen with the fear of his inevitable counterattack, but it doesn't come. Instead, he turns around and walks back to his desk.

"Why would you do that?" I ask.

"Why do you care?"

"What?"

He sits back down and folds his hands in front of him. "I said why do you care?"

"Look, I don't know where you learned to comfort grieving people, but--"

He jumps up from his chair and slams his hand on the desk hard enough to make me flinch. "Grieving?" he says. He starts to come around the desk again and I prepare myself to run but he stops, closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Tell me, what have you done to help find your parents?" I am not sure how to respond, but he keeps talking, obviously not expecting me to. "Your dad's agent reported them missing. You didn't even care that they didn't come home. The detective told me that the first 48 hours are crucial in a missing persons case and most of that went by with no one even knowing they were gone."

He's right, of course, but I will never admit it. Not to him. I have nothing to say. No way to defend myself. I stare at him and refuse to look away even as tears begin to blur my vision.

"If you care so much more, then why did you call off the search?"

"The police cannot help them. Only we can." He glances over at Gregory, and then back to me. "Assuming, that is, that you can stop being a selfish brat for long enough to help the people who love you the most."

"I--"

He holds up his hand to silence me. "Save it. We will talk more tomorrow. Gregory will drive you to the school in the morning. Go to the principal's office. He will be expecting you."

"I don't see why I have to--"

"I know you don't, but you are not in charge. I am." He sits back down and returns his attention to his papers. "Gregory, get him something to eat if he's hungry."

"Da." Gregory puts his hand on my shoulder and guides me toward the door. "Come."

When we're out of the study Gregory asks me if I am hungry. No, I'm not. This has to be a dream. Whatever it was that I had imagined I would find when I got off that stinky Greyhound, I would never have guessed that this is what I would walk into. Gregory stops at the doorway to the room my luggage is in.

"I will return in the morning," he says. He turns and continues down the hallway and then stops. "You will understand. Dylan is a good man. He loves your father. Owes your father his life."

I am somehow not shocked at this revelation. I have never envisioned Dad as the type of person that would ever be credited with saving someone's life, but at this point I'm not entirely sure that any of this is actually happening. Surely, I am still on the bus, and will wake up to meet the real Uncle Dylan. Yes, this has to be just a bad dream. I am under quite a bit of stress, after all.

"What happened?" I ask.

"You will ask Dylan if you want to know." He studies me for a moment and then nods his head slightly. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I say and go into the room and close the door.

It is a small room. Nothing but a bed, a bookshelf, and a desk with a chair in the corner. I sit down on the bed and pull out my cell phone. I try to call my parents, but for the hundredth time I get only voice mail for both of their cell phones. Just to be sure, I call the house number, but with

the same result.

I sit on the edge of the bed thinking about what I should do. Should I try to run away and make it back home? Uncle Dylan is obviously a little unstable. Maybe Mom's sister, Aunt Linda, would let me stay with her. I don't really like staying at Aunt Linda's, everything is pink and she treats me like a baby, but anything would be better than here.

I notice a book on the bookshelf and walk over to pull it out. It's Dad's first book, *The Priesthood Chronicles*. I have never actually read one of my dad's books. Vampires and monsters really aren't my thing, unless they're in a video game and I can shoot at them or blow them up. I put it back on the shelf and lay down on the bed. I will try to call Aunt Linda tomorrow. Nothing to do now but wait. I start to download a new game on my cell to pass the night. After all, it's still pretty early, but I doubt I will be leaving this room until morning. I must have been more tired than I thought, though because I fell asleep before it could finish downloading.

Chapter 3

I wake up to Gregory's ham-like fists pounding on the door. He yells at me to wake up. I grab my cell phone to see what time it is, and my heart sinks as I realize that the battery is dead. I should have plugged it in. Gregory continues to yell and beat on the door, and for a second I think it might break at the hinges.

"I'm up, I'm up," I yell back.

"Good. Breakfast is ready."

I'm really not hungry, but I do need a shower. I walk down the hallway and into the kitchen. Gregory has placed a stack of pancakes on the bar. When I smell them I realize how hungry I am and forget the shower entirely. When I finish the whole stack, Gregory offers me more for the road.

"No, thank you," I say, "I need to get in the shower."

"No time. We leave now."

"What? No, I need a shower first." I wasn't planning on going to the school last night, but now I think that it might be easier to get in touch with my parents if I were away from this house. But there is no way that I am going without a shower and in wrinkled clothes. Gregory would just have to wait.

He doesn't wait. I probably could have ran and grabbed my cell phone if I would have just calmly left. Instead, I stand my ground and refuse to move if he doesn't allow me to shower. Gregory has no problem with moving me. As a matter of fact, I think he kind of enjoys it. I will have a much harder time trying to get in touch with my parents without my phone. I have all of the numbers to Dad's agent, publicist and more family members that I never talk to, but I have none of them memorized. I don't even know the house number by heart.

We pull up to the school and I am even more disheartened to see that all of the other students are wearing uniforms. Could it get any worse? I reluctantly open the back door and step out. I am already starting to catch the attention of some of the students.

"I will be here after. Da?"

"Yeah, whatever."

Gregory pulls away and I am left standing there alone. Everyone is staring at me now, many beginning to whisper. I try to cheer myself up by telling myself that it doesn't matter. I'll be out of here by tonight, and none of these kids will ever see this wrinkled, dirty freak again. I stand as straight as I can and walk up the steps to the front door. The other kids, in a sea of black and red, part to allow me through. Like I'm royalty or a leper. I could guess which one they were thinking.

The stares and whispers continue inside, the quiet laughter comes next. Luckily, I find the office before someone decides to throw something at me. I've been in this situation before, and I know well what awaits me in the day ahead. If it had been a regular school, I would have had a

better chance to blend in. It might have been several days before this began, but with everyone else wearing a uniform, I stick out like a fur coat at a PETA rally. The sooner I can get out of here, the better.

"Gonna be a long day for you." The lady behind the desk says.

"Don't I know it."

"You must be Brian Prescott."

"Yes." I wonder if I should bother to tell her that I won't be here long. She seems nice enough, and I don't see the need in doing a bunch of paperwork for just one day.

"I'm Ms. Jackson." She pulls a pencil out of the back of her hair and taps it on the small clipboard in front of her. "Come sign in."

I walk over to the desk and sign my name on the top line of the paper. From the drawer in front of her she takes a manilla envelope and places it on the counter. My name is written on the front in large black letters. She opens it and removes a green sheet of paper, and then places the paper on top of the envelope. She slides them both across the counter to me. "I need the green filled out now, the rest you can bring back tomorrow."

"Okay, but I doubt I'll be here tomorrow."

"That's right," she says with a smile. "I heard on the news this morning about your parents. I bet you're happy."

"Well, I will be as soon as I get back home."

"I imagine so, but in the meantime sit over there and fill out that paper. Mr. Whippley will see you in just a few minutes." She sits back down behind the counter and begins typing on her computer. "And while you're doing that, I'll get your schedule ready."

"Okay." *It's your time you're wasting.*

I sit on the small wooden bench. The form is easy enough, and it's a good thing. If Ms. Jackson wants to do a whole lot of unnecessary work that is fine, but I really don't feel like giving myself carpal tunnel on a bunch of useless paperwork that they won't even need tomorrow. I fill it all in, though: name, social, and emergency contacts, which I have no choice but to make up. I doubt she will call them to verify. I am just finishing my signature on the back when another student walks through the office door.

She is wearing a uniform, too. Sort of. I can tell by Ms. Jackson's face that she does not approve. I approve, though. Even though she has a tattoo of a small tribal dragon on her neck, something I usually wouldn't find attractive, her hair is my favorite shade of purple and she is h-o-t. I try to keep my eyes on the green form in my lap and pretend that I'm still writing. Ms. Jackson is so offended by the girl that she comes around from behind the counter.

"Young lady," she says. "That attire is completely inappropriate for this school." She walks over to the girl and tugs loose the large knot at the front of the girl's white button up shirt. "Bare midriffs are not tolerated here." She begins to circle the girl like a drill sergeant inspecting an unusually pathetic recruit. "This skirt is entirely too short. Any skirt must end no higher than the top of the knees. The uniform color is red and black, not yellow and black."

The girl mockingly snaps to attention and raises her right hand in salute. "Yes, Ma'am." She looks over at me and winks. I quickly look back down at the form, and I can feel my cheeks turning red.

"And combat boots are never permitted," Ms. Jackson continues.

She walks back around the counter and sits down. From the desk drawer comes another manilla envelope, identical to mine except for the name. Tori Spencer. "I'm Ms. Jackson. I have a feeling we will be seeing a lot of each other, Miss Spencer."

"Not if I don't get caught doing anything wrong." Tori looks over and catches me staring again. Thankfully, I am saved any further awkwardness when a large round face appears in the door behind me.

"Mr. Prescott?" the man asks.

"Yes."

"Come in." The face disappears back into the office and I stand up to follow him. I go in and

turn around to close the door behind me. I risk one last look out into the office at Tori. She is sitting now, in a chair on the other side of the office. Too bad I'm not sticking around. I would've liked to see more of her. From afar, of course. Girls don't actually talk to guys like me. I've come to terms with that. I close the door and take the seat on the other side of the desk from the overweight and balding principal.

"Let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Okay," I say.

"I am Mr. Whippley," he says. "I hope that this is the last time you are in my office. I run a tight ship here. I'm fair, but I'm strict."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem."

"Oh, no?" Mr. Whippley leans back in his chair and props his feet up on the desk. His legs seem surprisingly thin considering the plumpness of the rest of his body.

"No," I say. "As soon as I can call my parents, I'll be going back to Florida."

"Yes, well, that is not the information that I have."

"Well, sir, the situation with my parents has changed."

"Yes, I know. I got a fax from your father this morning." He takes his feet off of the desk and leans forward to get a piece of paper. "Dear Mr. Whippley," he reads. "As you have no doubt heard, my wife and I are safely in Costa Rica. We have decided, though, to stay for longer than originally anticipated."

"Wait--"

"Please continue with Brian's enrollment at your school."

I am literally in shock. My brain is frozen.

"Contact Brian's uncle, Dylan Prescott, if there is any additional information you need. Sincerely, John Prescott."

"There must be some mistake," I say. What in the hell is going on here? My parents had never mentioned any trip. I was willing to overlook it before, but this is getting ridiculous.

"Afraid not."

"Listen, if I could just use your phone--"

"No, Mr. Prescott, you may not," he said. "What you can do is see Ms. Jackson for your schedule. I expect you to come back tomorrow looking a little more proper. I understand you do not own a uniform, but personal hygiene is important in all aspects of your life."

Is everyone in on my crazy uncle's sick joke? I am really beginning to get tired of it. More than tired, quite pissed off to be truthful.

"I will see Ms. Jackson, but I will not return tomorrow. Clean or otherwise."

Mr. Whippley's face turns red and he slams his hand on the desk. That is the second grown man in California that I have made to strike a defenceless piece of furniture in anger. I'm really on a roll. But, if they would just give me half a chance, I would be on my way, never to anger them again.

"Now you listen close, Mr. Prescott," he says. "You may have been hot shit in whatever podunk Florida school you came from, but no one here cares if you're John Prescott's son. Everyone here has parents who are somebody." He stands up and leans over his desk. "You're just another spoiled brat that I have to babysit."

Mr. Whippley clearly has some anger issues and pent up frustration with his life, but he couldn't be further from the truth. I was well known in my own school, but not because I was John Prescott's son. Boy, would that have been nice. At least back home the school office was a safe haven, which didn't look to be the case here. I need to get back to Florida and fast, but I clearly wasn't accomplishing anything here.

"Yes, sir," I say and stand up to leave.

"Good," he says. "Ms. Jackson will assign you a locker."

I open the door and quickly look around for Tori. I hope that she hasn't heard Mr. Whippley yelling at me. How embarrassing. On the other hand, she seemed like she was the type of girl who would be into the bad boy thing. It doesn't matter, though. Ms. Jackson has already sent her on her

way. She hands me my schedule and gives me a small photocopied drawing of the school's layout. She points out on the crude map where each of my classes are and where my locker is. She writes my locker combination on the back of the map and advises me not to lose it, but if I do I can always come back and get it from her.

I leave the office and head for the locker. I don't have anything to put in there, other than Ms. Jackson's manilla envelope, but I don't want to have to walk into a new class already in progress. Better to wait for the next class and slip in with everyone else. Try to, anyway. I just need to survive until I can get to a phone. Or, better yet, a computer. Surely the school has a computer lab somewhere. Then I can look up Walter's number at the agency. He could get in touch with my parents for me.

Chapter 4

The first half of the day goes pretty much as I expect it to. In spite of my attempt to stay next to my locker, I was still caught by a teacher and escorted to my first class. After the initial embarrassment of standing in front of the class while the teacher introduced me, I settle into one of the back desks and try to ignore the whispers and glances from the others. The next class is only slightly better. By third period, though, word has pretty well gotten around about the new students, and I begin to hear whispers of Tori's name in between my own.

When the lunch bell rings, I am hesitantly optimistic. If I'm lucky I can get through the lunch line with no incidents. Even though I ate such a big breakfast, I'm starving. I find the lunchroom with ease by following the flow of the crowd, and once inside I file quickly into line and only get knocked into the wall twice. Pretty decent for the first day, actually.

The large lunchroom is mostly empty, with the exception of small groups of band geeks and A/V nerds, same as back home. Even though the clothes are exactly the same, I can still easily see the social classes and these are safe people. Through the windows on the other side, I can see that most of the kids were eating lunch in a small outdoor courtyard. In every school the cool kids have their "space" and that seemed to be it. That area would, obviously, be off limits to me.

I chose a table that isn't too far away from the windows and try to eat my burrito as fast as I can. I scan the walls of the lunchroom and out the window in the courtyard. No phones. I do catch a glimpse of Tori sitting on the back of a bench in the middle of the courtyard. She is alone, and the other students are giving her plenty of space. There is something about her that intrigues me and if she were enrolled at school back home, I just might get up the courage to talk to her. Well, I would send her an email, anyway. Maybe. My thoughts are interrupted when I hear a voice from behind me.

"Is it okay if I sit here?" I look up to see a tall, muscular guy with short blonde hair. He's wearing a letterman jacket, so he's a jock of some kind although I can't tell at the moment which breed. And at the moment it doesn't matter. *Shit, here we go.* I nod my head and he comes around the table and sits in front of me.

"Hi." He reaches out his hand. "I'm Sam Lincoln."

I take his hand, expecting a hard and painful "man" handshake, but it was a gentleman's handshake instead. Firm and solid, but not painful. My defences drop slightly, but I am still on high alert. Unless this is some sort of student council errand to welcome new students, I can't see any scenario in which this could turn out pleasant for me.

"Brian--"

"Prescott," he finished. "Yes, I know who you are."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm like your dad's biggest fan."

I study his face for any sign that this is some kind of set-up. This is definitely uncharted

waters for me. Back home, most of the kids had at least heard of my dad's books, but few would admit that they had read them. Although they were written for kids my age, Dad's books were quite often viewed as "for kids" by most of my peers. The few kids in my school that did read, much preferred "adult" fiction. Curiously, most of the adults in the school had read and enjoyed them.

"Great, then you've probably heard the news. I won't be staying long."

"Really?" He leans forward giving me his full attention. "You've talked to your parents?"

"Well, no, but--"

"Hmm...So they're hiding it from you too."

I am genuinely confused. This guy is starting to sound like he was in league with my uncle. The games and jokes about my parents are starting to get old quickly. Was this some sort of elaborate hoax? But, why? Then it hits me. I've been kidnapped. My uncle must be at the heart of it. But if I were being held for ransom or something, why were my parents the ones who went missing?

"I don't understand," I say.

Sam looks around and leans in closer. "Well, my first clue was when they said that your parents were on vacation." He looks at me knowingly, but I am not understanding.

"And..."

He lets out a sigh and shakes his head in disappointment. "Dude, *End of Conspiracy* releases today."

"What's that?"

"Wow." Sam's eyes open wide. He pushes away from the table, and for a moment I think he is going to leave. "You don't know about your own father's book? Man, that's crazy. It's the new book in the Priesthood series."

I had never until that moment been ashamed of not reading Dad's books. Even though he began his writing career by writing stories for me, I had grown out of them quickly. Right about the time he bought me my first computer. I try to change the subject.

"Okay, so what does that mean?"

"Well," he raises his eyebrow, "as I'm sure you know, your dad flies to Colorado every time one of his books is released."

That I do know. When Dad's first novel had become a bestseller, he and Mom had flown to Colorado to visit my grandfather's grave. It had been the first time since the funeral that he had gone, but he went from then on every time the publisher released a new one. Sam must have seen the look of realization cross my face.

"Can't be in Costa Rica and Colorado at the same time, can they?" He smiled triumphantly. "After all these years I can't see him just going to Costa Rica instead, and even if they did, why wouldn't they take you?" He takes a bite of his burrito. "I knew your uncle lived around here somewhere, so when I heard Ms. Jackson tell Whippley we were getting new students, I got curious. And here you are."

He does have a point, but how did he know all that? "How do you know that?"

He smiles. "I told you. I'm his biggest fan. I've done my research."

"Or you're stalking."

Sam leans back and laughs until he has tears in his eyes. I find myself smiling as well. The bell rings and he picks up his tray. "Well, I guess I'll see you later. If you're still here."

"Let's hope not."

He stops and looks thoughtful for a moment. "You know what? For their sake, I hope you're right."

He starts to walk away and I call after him. "Hey, are there any payphones here?"

"Nope. Sorry."

When he is gone I take another look out the window. The bench that Tori had previously occupied is empty. I pick up my tray and throw it through the window to the kitchen. Things are definitely not adding up, and at this point I can't trust anyone until I talk to my parents and find out what is really going on.

I spend the rest of the school day dodging jocks and searching for a computer. Just because my meeting with Sam had not ended poorly didn't mean that other encounters would end the same. I desperately want to be back at my old school. I had already gone through this there, and I was fairly safe most of the time, but here I am fresh meat.

I make it to the final bell without any major incidents, though. I never found a computer, which I thought was weird. This was a private school, after all. With all of tuition they probably got and they didn't have a computer room? Maybe they didn't need it. Everyone around me had internet access on their phones and tablets, but I didn't dare try to ask to borrow one. I will just have to wait until I get back to Uncle Dylan's and use my own cell.

I can't remember ever going this long without my cell phone, and I miss it. Several times throughout the day I had reached into my pocket to get it out and was saddened to find that it wasn't there. I vow to keep it with me from now on no matter what. At least if I had it I could have passed the day playing games. When the last bell finally rings, Gregory is right where he said he would be, and I am surprised to realize that I am glad to see him.

Chapter 5

We ride in silence all the way back to the house until we drive through the gate and Gregory finally tells me that Uncle Dylan will not be home until later.

"Please follow the rules."

He parks the car in the garage this time. We get out and Gregory walks over to a side door and presses a button on the wall. The sound of the motor pushing the large metal door back down echoes loudly in the mostly empty garage. Even though it could fit four cars at least, and I'm sure now that Uncle Dylan could afford that many, the garage only housed the BMW and a large van that would look more at home pulling a camper than parked in a rich bachelor's garage.

I follow Gregory through the door and into the breezeway. It's wider than it looks from the outside and the windows on both sides allow the sun to shine through in one large shaft, splitting the otherwise dark hallway in two. The door at the other end leads into the end of the hallway and when Gregory opens it I quickly run past him and into the bedroom to get my phone. No messages, no missed calls. Nothing. Not even so much as an email from any of my gamer friends. I call both of their cells again to no avail. It seems that no one other than me and, oddly, Sam cares, or knows, that my parents are missing. Unless I counted Uncle Dylan, but at this point I am beginning to suspect that whatever is going on, he has something to do with it.

I look in my phone's contacts and call Walter Knox. The receptionist says that she will connect me, but when I am transferred it goes straight to voice mail. I try the receptionist once more before I give up and leave Walter a message to call me back as soon as possible. After that I am at a loss to think of anyone else to turn to. It looks like I am on my own to figure out exactly what is going on. I sit on the edge of the bed and try to sort through all of it. Regardless of what the news reported, my parents are obviously still missing. Uncle Dylan freely admitted that he called off the search, but why? Because the police can't handle it? What kind of answer was that? More likely because he is involved with it. Whether he is involved or not, he knows something and I need to find out what. And if I want the truth I need to go to the place he is most likely to hide evidence. The one place in this house that is off limits to me.

After quickly checking on Gregory's whereabouts, I tip-toe down the hallway to Uncle Dylan's study. I go inside and close the door behind me. I waste no time heading straight to the desk, and begin looking through the papers that are scattered across the top. I don't know what I am looking for exactly, but all information is good information to me, and anything I can learn will be better than what I have now.

There isn't much on top of the desk, just a few bills and what looks like junk mail. I do find

two receipts. I can tell they have been printed from the bus company's website. The first is the one that had brought me to L.A. The second is for another ticket from Florida, but the destination is Atlanta. Both tickets had been purchased on the same day, Saturday. The day my parents went missing.

Satisfied that I have learned enough from the top of the desk, I move on. I reach down to open one of the side drawers, but stop when I hear voices coming down the hall. I panic and look around for a place to hide, but there is nothing much in the study other than the desk. The voices come closer and just as the doorknob begins to turn, I take the only option I have. I run over to the nearest bookshelf and flatten myself to the wall beside it.

I hear Gregory and Uncle Dylan come in and close the door. I try to control my breathing, but I am sure that they will be able to hear it if there is a break in their conversation. I hear one of them sit in the chair behind the desk, and I assume it is Uncle Dylan.

"Contact the council and request an audience," Uncle Dylan says.

"Da." From the sound of Gregory's voice, he is only a few feet away from me. "What should I tell them about the boy?"

"Nothing. Only that we have him and he is safe."

"Da." Gregory is farther away now. If I knew the room better, I might be able to guess exactly where he is, but all I know now is that he is moving away from me, and that is a good thing. I wish he would just sit down, though.

"Have you had any trouble from Brian?"

"Nyet." Farther away now. I am beginning to think that I might get away with this.

Uncle Dylan's cell phone rings at the same instant Gregory walks within view and sees me. His eyes narrow. He glances over at Uncle Dylan and then forcefully points to the door behind him. I quickly glance around the bookshelf. Uncle Dylan's back is to me, but his feet are up on the desk. There is no way I will make it all the way across without him seeing me. I shake my head at Gregory, but he points at the door again. He clasps his hands behind his back and walks out of sight. One last glance around the bookshelf, and I begin to slowly walk toward the door.

"Mr. Blanding," Uncle Dylan says, "I thought we were clear about you calling me."

I am directly behind him when whoever Mr. Blanding is says something that angers him. He takes his feet off the desk and jumps out of his seat. I freeze.

"It's a little late to be questioning my loyalties now, don't you think?"

He sits back down and I continue my journey. Gregory maintains his pace to stay directly across from me. I try to keep my eyes on Uncle Dylan.

"The boy is in a safe place," he says. "There won't be any trouble there."

I am nearing the door when Uncle Dylan's chair starts to swing in my direction. I freeze again, my hand stretched out toward the doorknob, sure that I will be caught.

"My brother must not be harmed or it will ruin everything."

I hold my breath and wait for him to turn far enough around to see me. There is a crash on the other side of the room. Uncle Dylan and I both turn our attention to Gregory, who is standing next to a small table that previously held a large vase.

"Sorry," Gregory says and shrugs his massive shoulders.

I take the opportunity Gregory has provided to quickly open the door and leave the room. On the other side, I hold the door tightly, not wanting to close it all the way for fear of Uncle Dylan hearing it. It is dark and smells of onions, and I am pretty sure that I'm in the kitchen pantry. I peek through the small crack to see that Uncle Dylan has returned to his seat and Gregory is bent over busily picking up the pieces of vase.

"Just stick to the plan," Uncle Dylan says and flips his cellphone closed. He turns his attention to Gregory. "Can you tell me what that was about?"

"Bumped the table. Sorry," Gregory says.

"Really?"

Before Gregory can reply the gate bell rings, and he stands up and turns to leave.

"Who could that be?" Uncle Dylan asks and follows Gregory out of the room.

I quickly close the door and exit the other side of the pantry and into the kitchen. I take a moment to try to calm my breathing and look as normal as I can before I turn the corner.

Chapter 6

Gregory presses the button on the intercom box next to the front door and speaks into it. The small video screen is only big enough to tell that there was a car outside the gate, but I am too far away to see any detail.

"Da?"

"Um. It's Sam," the box says. "Sam Lincoln. I'm here to see Brian."

Gregory turns to face me, and Uncle Dylan follows suit. I shrug my shoulders, not sure what to say.

"Come," Gregory says and presses the button that opens the gate. He opens the door and they both stand there, watching as the battered green pick-up truck comes up the drive in a cloud of smoke. Sam is still wearing his letterman jacket, but his uniform has been replaced with jeans and a black t-shirt. He parks the truck and gets out.

"Hey," he says as he walks around the front of the truck.

"Hey," I say, walking past Gregory and out the door. "What are you doing here?"

"I just thought since you didn't know anyone, you'd want to hang out," he says.

I look back at Uncle Dylan and he nods his approval. "Yes, that will be fine. I have some business to attend to, anyway. We can talk this evening."

"Okay," I say and turn to join Sam next to the truck. Gregory closes the door behind us, and I watch through the glass as they walk back toward the study. Gregory takes one last look at me before he disappears down the hallway.

"Sorry to drop by unannounced, but I've been thinking and there's something I want you to see." Sam says.

"Yeah, I've been thinking a lot, too," I say. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he said.

We get in and Sam starts up the truck. I don't know where we are going, but I hope that we will get there soon. I'm sure that there is some sort of pollution law on vehicles in California, and the last thing I need is to be stuck on the side of the road when the cops impound this piece of junk. On the other hand, I have still not entirely ruled out the possibility that Sam is a pawn in a bigger plot to humiliate me, or worse.

"My cousin owns a comic book store downtown," he says.

"And what does that have to do with me?"

"You'll see," he says never taking his eyes off of the road ahead.

We pull into the parking lot of a rundown brick building. The signs in front of each of the individual stores are faded and peeling. "The Greater Crater," which is either our destination or a sex toy shop, is situated next to a liquor store, and is the only one in the plaza that has its front doors propped open. I look around the area. We are pretty far away from "downtown," and I begin to get slightly worried. If this is a plan to beat me up, this would be the perfect place for them to do it. I try to put my fears aside as I follow Sam through the door.

Once we are inside, I will admit that I am impressed. On the walls are racks upon racks of comic books sorted by title. Some of them I have heard of, but the majority of them were probably known only to hard core comic book readers. Especially, the Japanese-looking comics that are privileged enough to have their own section in the store.

I follow Sam through the maze of comic book racks to the counter in the back of the store. Behind it sits a pimple faced guy who can't be long out of high school. He has bright red hair,

freckles and glasses to match. He is currently giving all of his attention to a copy of something called "Witchfinder." I am beginning to re-evaluate Sam's motivation for bringing me here. Maybe it is innocent after all. He doesn't seem like he would do anything to me, or anyone else for that matter.

"Hey, Chet," Sam says as we reach the counter.

Chet puts down his book and looks at us. It seems for a moment that he doesn't recognize either one of us, but realization slowly dawns on him and he smiles. "Hey, Sam," he says, "what are you doing on this side of town?"

"Coming to see you, of course."

Chet the Clerk doesn't look like he completely believes Sam. "Yeah, right. What can I do for you?"

"This is my friend Brian."

Chet and I shake hands. "Nice to meet you," I say.

He turns his attention back to Sam. "How's your mom and dad?"

"Same old, same old."

Sam looks around the store, I suppose to confirm that we are alone, and leans over the counter closer to Chet. "Brian here is not much of a comic fan, so I wanted to bring him down here."

"There's much better comic shops than mine to educate him," Chet says.

"Yeah, but you have something in here that the others don't have."

Chet looks confused for a moment, and then his eyes widen. "I'm not bringing it out," he says, "and quit telling people about it. Do you want me to get robbed or something?" Chet begins walking toward the end of the sales counter, and Sam matches him step for step from our side.

"C'mon. Just let him look at it. I promise we won't even try to touch it." Chet does not look swayed in the least and Sam turns to me. "You're not going to try to touch it, are you?"

"No," I say.

Considering that I have no idea what it is we are talking about, I feel pretty safe in promising. Cousin Chet opens a small door at the end of the counter and walks through to our side. "No. No," he says, "I don't even like that he knows about it, and you want me to show him where it is?"

I can't remain quiet any longer. "What the hell are you guys talking about?" They pay no attention to me.

"What if I told you that Brian here could get it autographed for you?"

Chet stops in his tracks and stares at Sam, then me, then back at Sam. "What do you mean?"

"Chet, let me introduce you to Brian Prescott." Sam gestures at me like I'm the grand prize on a TV show.

"Brian Prescott?" Chet looks confused for a brief second, and then a smile spreads across his face. "As in John Prescott's kid?"

Sam smiles at him. "Yes, as in John Prescott's only son, Brian Prescott."

"Holy shit," Chet says. He puts out his hand and shakes more furiously than he had the first time. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Umm...Honor to meet you too?" I say.

They both laugh. Chet goes back behind the counter and toward the door behind it. He begins to shuffle around on a bookshelf that is barely visible within the tiny room. He comes back out of the closet with a comic book that looks permanently sealed in plastic wrap. Carrying it like it's made of glass or something, he places it gently on the counter.

"Do you really think you could get it autographed?"

"I don't know," I say. "What is it?"

Chet slides the comic across the counter to me. It's old and the edge of the pages are beginning to yellow, but there are no rips or creases. Like it had been placed in the plastic right out of the printing machine. The title of the Comic book is written in large bloody letters. "Creepers." There's a woman in a long white dress on the cover being carried by a dark figure emerging from

fog. In small print at the bottom of the cover is written: "John Prescott and Cleo Mason." My father had written a comic book? I never knew that, and said so to Sam.

"Oh, man. Yeah," he says, "this is the only issue, though. That's why it's worth so much." He looks at Chet. "How much is this thing worth?"

Chet takes a deep breath and sighs. "I don't know. The last one that sold at auction went for \$2000, but that was like six years ago." He looks over at me. "If it was autographed, I could get whatever I wanted for it. As far as I know, he's never signed one." He looks back over at Sam. "You better not be screwing with me," he says.

"I'm not. As soon as Brian gets back home, he'll get his dad to sign it." Sam looks over at me. "Can you?"

"I suppose so." In reality I have no idea. I have never asked Dad to sign even a report card much less something he wrote, but I can't see any reason why he wouldn't.

Chet looks like he is about to piss his pants. I really couldn't understand what the big deal was all about. If he actually knew my Dad, I doubt that he would be as excited as he is. I mean, I don't get excited about his signature, unless it's on a check.

"Why did you want to show me this?" I ask Sam.

"Because," he says. "I could tell earlier that you really don't respect your dad as much as you should."

"So?"

"So, you need to realize that your dad is just 'dad' to you, but to some people he's a really big deal, and for good reason."

"Okay," I say, "I get it. Can we go now?"

Sam rolls his eyes at me and then turns to Chet. "Well, I guess we'll see you later, Chet." I follow Sam as he makes his way to the front of the store.

"Hey," Chet yells after us. "What about the autograph?"

Sam turns around. "You'll get it." he turns to me. "Won't he?"

"Sure, yeah," I said.

"We'll pick it up before he goes back home."

Chet seems satisfied with that, even if slightly skeptical. I follow Sam back to his truck and we leave the plaza's cracked and eroding parking lot.

"So what's this really all about?" I ask.

"I told you."

"So, You went through all of the effort to hunt me down and take me to a comic book store, because you're concerned about my relationship with my father?"

"Yeah."

"Is that how you became a fan? The comic book?"

He looks over at me. "What? You think because I'm on the football team I can't read real books?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying." I didn't think that all jocks couldn't read. I just thought that the ones who could, chose not to.

"We're not so different, you know," he says.

"I would beg to differ."

"Why? Because I'm a jock?"

"Well, that's part of it."

He shakes his head. "I only play sports because my dad expects me to. I just happen to be good at it. You don't know how lucky you have it."

I try explaining to Sam the reality of my "lucky" family life as we drive back to my uncle's house, father constantly at home but no where to be found. Usually, if he wasn't gone trying to promote his latest book, he was in his office writing the next one.

"Yeah, but at least you don't have to live your life according to his expectations."

He has a point.

We don't speak for a few minutes, and we are almost back at the house when I finally break

the silence. I tell him what Uncle Dylan told me about my parents, and the phone conversation I had overheard right before he got there.

"What? He called off the search? Why?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"Well, don't you think you need to figure it out?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You guess so?" he says. "You don't sound very concerned."

"Of course I am," I say, "do you think that I really want to be stuck in California while my life goes to shit back home?"

"Why are you worried about your life back home? Your parents are obviously in trouble, man. And without them, you have no life back home."

He is right, of course. Even if they don't understand me, or my life, I need them. I miss them. I am ready to get back home.

Back at my uncle's house, I get out of the truck and say goodbye to Sam.

"Thanks for the ride," I say. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow." I watch as the cloud of smoke he leaves behind slowly fades away.

I open the front door, and listen for sounds of Gregory or Uncle Dylan. After a few moments of silence, I head to the room that is designated as mine. I put my cell on the charger, don't want a repeat of today, and lay back on the bed. I close my eyes only for a moment when I hear a knock at the door.

Chapter 7

I hesitate. The knock is soft, so I can guess that it's probably not Gregory, and I'm not sure if I am ready to talk to Uncle Dylan yet. I know I need to, but for some reason the thought of it fills me with dread. I have many questions, but I'm not sure I want to hear the answers. There is another knock, louder this time.

"Yes?"

Uncle Dylan's voice sounds clear, even through the closed door. "I'd like to speak with you in my office."

"Now?"

He doesn't answer.

"Right now?" I ask, a little louder this time.

Still nothing.

I get off the bed and open the door. The hallway is empty. He hadn't even bothered to wait for an answer. I guess it wasn't a request. For some reason this angers me. I know I am a guest here, but not willingly. Who is he to order me around? Fine. If he wants to talk, we'll talk. But we're going to talk about what happened to my parents.

I walk down to the study. The door is closed, but I don't bother to knock. Uncle Dylan is sitting behind the desk, bent over an open book. He doesn't look up even when the door smacks against the wall.

"Have a seat," he says.

"Where are my parents?"

He does look up then. "I already told you, they're in danger."

"Yes, I know that's what you said, but that doesn't answer my question. Where are they?"

Uncle Dylan sighs and gets up from his chair. He walks around the desk and sits on the corner nearest to me. "They've been taken by Necromancers."

"Necromancers? Like the vampires in Dad's books?" I may not have read any of them, but I heard enough talk to know what they were.

"Yes," he said. "The same, but not all Necros are vampires."

Certainly he doesn't expect me to believe that. I am sure of Uncle Dylan's involvement now. What kind of moron does he think I am? He couldn't come up with a better story than my parents had been kidnapped by fictional characters? I can't wait for him to tell the police that one.

"Have you read all of your father's books?" he asks.

"Of course," I lie.

"Good," Uncle Dylan says. "Then this won't take as long as I feared."

He sits back down, closes the book that he was reading and hands it to me. It is one of my father's. On the cover is a robed figure in the midst of battle against a vampire and two zombies. Electric blue letters on the top spell out the title. The Priesthood Chronicles.

I slide the book back across his desk. "So, what?"

"This may be a little hard for you to believe right now, but all of your father's novels are true."

I need to be careful. He is either blatantly lying to me, or he is mentally unstable. Neither scenario bodes well for me.

"Are you telling me that the Necromancers really exist?"

He folds his hands in front of him. "That is exactly what I'm telling you."

They had already made it clear that I could not stay at home on my own, but it's obvious I shouldn't stay here. Maybe I would be better off with Aunt Linda. I could call the cops from her house and tell them what this nut job is trying to tell me. I remind myself to try to call her as soon as I'm done here.

"I suppose that next to you'll tell me that the Priesthood is real as well," I say.

"Actually, that is exactly what I was going to tell you next." He smiles. "Not only is the Priesthood real, but your father is a member. The stories he writes are only slightly fictionalized accounts of actual events."

I should just pretend to believe him, end this conversation and call Aunt Linda as fast as possible, but something in me is offended that he would believe me to be so gullible. "Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Actually, I did," he says. "But, I suppose it would be difficult to believe for someone who wasn't there."

"And you were?"

"For some of it."

"Then why are you reading one of his novels so intently? You should remember if you were there, right?"

He looks at me as if I am a retarded child that requires more patients than he's able to give and leans back in his chair.

"You are going to have to learn to listen for the details," he says. "I said I was there for most of it, not all."

"You're crazy," I say. "I don't know what story you're going to give the police when they get here, but for your sake I hope it's better than the one you're trying to push off on me." I stand up and walk toward the door.

"They're not just stories, Brian," he calls after me. "The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can work together to get your parents back safely."

"Whatever."

I go into my bedroom and sit down on the bed. My head is spinning. I don't know what to think. Mom and Dad are still missing and the only people who care are me and a jock I just met. I pull out my cell phone and call Aunt Linda. After several rings I get the answering machine. I want to tell her everything I know, but that might make me seem just as crazy as Uncle Dylan so I just ask her to call me back. I flip my cell phone closed and shove it into my pocket.

I hope she calls back soon. I need to get out of here fast. I'm sure now that Uncle Dylan knows that I'm on to him, I'm probably in danger. I jump off the bed and lock the door. Not that it would be able to withstand Gregory, if Uncle Dylan put him on it, but it makes me feel a little bit

safer.

On the other hand, if what he said was true, then I will need him to get my parents back. What am I thinking? How could it possibly be true? How could I believe for even a second that Mom and Dad have been taken by monsters from the pages of a novel?

I pull out my laptop and try to pass the time with a game until Aunt Linda calls back. I can't help but check my cell phone every few minutes to see if I may have missed her call. The more time that passes, though, the more dread I feel.

After a few hours, there's a knock at the door. I try to remain as quiet as possible. Hopefully, they will think that I'm already asleep and go away. After a few moments of silence, I hear heavy footsteps moving away from the door. I slowly sit up and go over to the door. I unlock it and crack it open just enough to peer out. In the hallway on the floor is a tray of food. I grab the tray and bring it inside. I close the door with my foot and put the tray on the desk. I take the covered dish and set it on the bed. Underneath is a folded piece of yellow paper. I open it up. It's a note from Uncle Dylan.

I know that what I have told you makes no sense, but please give me the chance to explain. You must have an open mind, your parent's lives depend on it. Give me until tomorrow night to show you the truth before you do anything rash. After that, if you still don't believe me, I will drive you to the police myself.

– Dylan

As much as I desperately want out of here, somewhere deep inside I know that no one, not even the police, is going to believe me over Uncle Dylan. After all, there were several adults that had already given them the same story of my parents being on vacation. Who was going to believe a 17 year old over all of them? They were already convinced enough to call off the search. It seems like I don't have much of a choice but to hear him out.

Chapter 8

The next morning I am again awakened by Gregory, but this time it is much more than a pounding on the door. One large hand grabs me by the ankle and pulls me half out of the bed. After my initial shock I become angry.

“What the hell, man?”

“You must wake up,” he says. “You're late.”

He walks out of the room and closes the door before I can reply. At least he's giving me a little privacy to get dressed. There is a new school uniform folded neatly on top of the dresser, and I get dressed as quickly as I can. I don't want Gregory to have to come back to see what's taking so long. I fumble with the red striped tie, trying in vain to remember the knot my grandfather had taught me. I have never worn a tie before, except once to church with grandfather and another for a funeral. That one had been a clip-on, though.

I give up and go into the kitchen. Gregory is just finishing up a bowl of what looks like oatmeal and my mouth waters. I realize that I have not eaten anything since lunch at school yesterday. I sit down at the bar across from Gregory. I'm not real fond of oatmeal, but I am too hungry to decline. I am no more sitting down when Gregory gets up and puts his bowl in the sink.

“Let's go,” he said.

“Don't I get any?”

“No time. You must wake up early for food.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, we must go now.”

I reluctantly get down from the bar stool and follow Gregory out of the kitchen. For a moment I debate whether to argue with him, but if yesterday taught me anything it was not to cross Gregory.

"You know, in our country it's customary to feed a guest in your house."

"You wake up. I feed."

Gregory already has the car parked in front of the house and I quickly jump into the back seat. If I'm lucky, the school will still be serving breakfast and I might be able to get something to eat. Gregory gets into the front seat and starts the car.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks.

"I did until you yanked me out of bed."

He looks at me through the rear view mirror. "So sorry." He doesn't sound very sorry, and I'm sure if I could see the rest of his face there would be a smile on it. We ride mostly in silence until we reach the edge of town. Thoughts of my conversation with Uncle Dylan continue to roll through my mind.

"Gregory, can I ask you a question?"

"Da."

"Do you know what happened to my parents?"

He looks at me again in the mirror and takes a deep breath.

"Didn't your uncle tell you?"

"Well, he told me something, but I don't believe him."

"Dylan is good man," he says. "He would not lie to you."

I sighed. "If you knew what he told me, I doubt you'd be so sure."

"I know what he told you."

I am only slightly surprised by this. "And you expect me to believe that?"

"Believe it or not, that is for you to decide." He stops in front of the school and turns around to look at me. "But just because you don't understand. Does not make it less true. You must have an open mind if you wish to know." He reaches his hand over the back of the seat and pats me on the leg. "There is much of your father in you. You will be all right."

"Sure," I say and open the door to get out. "See you later."

"I will be here."

I close the car door and walk up the steps. I'm glad to see that I am not drawing as much attention today. It crosses my mind that I might be able to make it all the way to my first class unnoticed, when there is a tap on my shoulder. I turn around to see Sam with two other kids, both obviously nerds of the highest order.

"Are you really John Prescott's son?" the smaller, red-haired one asks. Sam shoots him a look that is clearly meant to shut him up.

"Sorry," Sam says and elbows the kid in the ribs.

"If I bring you a book, do you think you could get it autographed?" the other kid asks. His glasses are taped together on the side, and they sit on his face at a slight angle.

Sam pushes the kid back and he almost falls over. "Get out of here. If I would've known you were going to act like a geek, I would have never told you."

"Dang," the ginger says. "you don't have to be an ass about it." He grabs the other kid's sleeve. "Come on, let's go." The two of them continue up the steps and disappear into the building.

"Sorry man. I guess I shouldn't have told them, but I kind of got excited."

"Don't worry about it." I say.

Sam's eyebrows furrow. "You really look like crap. Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"No, not really."

"Well, did you find out anymore about your parents?"

"I found out that my uncle is insane."

"What do you mean?"

Before I can answer, the bell rings and Sam and I are engulfed in a sea of students rushing to get to class. "Never mind" he says. "Tell me about it at lunch."

"All right," I say.

"I did a little digging of my own. Meet me at the baseball field and we can compare notes."

"Um..okay."

"Great," Sam says and gives me a playful punch on the on the arm that hurts more than I let on. "See you at lunch, then."

Sam disappears around the corner of the building, and I quickly run up the steps and head toward my locker. I take out the books for my first two classes, and slam the door closed. I am surprised to see Tori standing next to me, fiddling with the combination on the next locker over. She looks at me.

"Hello", she says.

I open my mouth to say hello, but my mind goes blank when I look into her emerald green eyes. I must look like a complete idiot standing here with my mouth hanging open. She puts her hand over her mouth and lets out a soft giggle.

"Well," she says. "I'll see you around."

She closes her locker and walks away. Real smooth, Brian. Real smooth. The second bell startles me out of my reverie and I rush to make it to my first class. I walk into the classroom and take my seat as the teacher is taking the attendance.

"Mr. Prescott," he says. "I know that you are new here, but I expect everyone to be in their seat by the second bell. The first one is a warning. The second means you're late."

"Sorry," I say, my voice cracking enough to set off a round of giggles from the other students. I slouch down in my seat, and the teacher returns to calling off names. I go through the next few classes paying just enough attention to be able to answer a question if I got unlucky enough to be called upon, but mostly my thoughts bounced between my uncle's outrageous story and Tori Spencer's eyes. No way would a girl like that ever be interested in a guy like me, but that doesn't stop me from imagining what her lips would feel like on mine.

Once the lunch bell rings, I hurry into the cafeteria and try to grab a bite to eat before I head to the baseball field to meet Sam. Luckily, today's lunch is pizza and I am able to grab it off my tray and take it with me. I eat while I'm walking, and almost drop it when a fat kid runs into me while I'm leaving the back building.

I see Sam up in the bleachers with both of the kids from this morning, but when Sam sees me headed his way, he says something to them and they both stand up, looking slightly disappointed, and walk down the steps. They don't say anything as they pass me.

I sit down next to Sam. He reaches into his book bag and pulls out a bag of chips. He offers them to me.

"No, thank you," I say.

"Suite yourself," he says and shoves a handful in his mouth. "So what did you find out about your parents?" he asks, little bits of potato chip dropping out of his mouth.

"Absolutely nothing," I say. "He's involved somehow, though."

"How do you know?"

"Why else would he make up some insane story about their disappearance, unless he just doesn't want me to know the truth?"

I briefly tell Sam about the conversation that I had with Uncle Dylan, as well as what Gregory said to me on the way to school.

"That's interesting," he says.

"Really? Why?"

"Think about it," he says. "Why would you're uncle tell you such an unbelievable story about your parents, unless there was some truth to it?"

"You're just as crazy as he is. It must be something in the air out here," I say.

"Maybe," he says. "But then again, maybe not." He shoves another handful of chips into his mouth. "Maybe you should take Gregory's advice and keep an open mind."

"Are you serious?" I ask. "Do you honestly believe that Necromancer's have kidnapped my parents?"

"Well," he says, "not necessarily. But with the lack of any other evidence, we should at least entertain the possibility that there's some truth to it."

"Well, then. If that's the case, you've read all of my father's books, where are the

Necromancer's?"

"You really haven't read any of your father's books, have you?"

"I read the first one," I say.

Sam rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Listen. Either your uncle's telling the truth, or like you say, he's directly involved. Either way, until you have more evidence there's nothing you can do about it."

"So what are you saying?"

"All I'm saying is that if you go to the police and tell them that your uncle kidnapped your father, and then told you that that Necromancer's did it, it's going to make it look like you're the one who's crazy."

He does have a point. Until I could find some evidence of what my uncle had done, there was no one I could turn to. "So what do you suggest I do?"

He brushes potato chip crumbs off of his lap and stares out over the baseball field. "There's only one thing you can do." He stands up and grabs his book bag. "You have to play along."

"Play along?"

"Yes," he says. "That's the only thing you can do."

"So I should just pretend that he's telling me the truth and run around looking for Necromancer's, like this is just some big game of Dungeons & Dragons or something?"

"Exactly."

"And how does that help my parents?"

He stops and looks at me. "I'm not saying that you have to go hunting for Necromancer's, which to be honest with you, you don't stand a chance at, just play along and gain his trust. That will buy you time to find out what really happened and hopefully get some sort of evidence that you can take to the police."

"That seems like an awfully big waste of time."

"What else are you going to do?" he asks. He reaches into his backpack, pulls out a book and hands it to me. It's one of my father's. "Here," he says. "Read this. In fact, read as many of your father's books as you can."

"Why?"

"That way, you can at least pretend to go along with what his story is while you're looking for the truth."

He turns and continues to walk down the stairs. "When you're done with that one, I'll give you another one, he says over his shoulder. "You're going to have to learn everything you can about the Priesthood and the Necromancer's. I'll help you."

"Hey," I call after him, "do you really believe this crap?"

He stops walking turns around to look at me again. He has a big grin on his face. "No," he says, "but that sure would be cool."

Chapter 9

Gregory is thankfully quiet on the ride home. I have a lot to think about. Sam is right, of course. Playing along with whatever Uncle Dylan is up to is really the only way to go. What are my other options? Aunt Linda hasn't called back. Could something have happened to her? The same people who have my parents could have her as well. Dad's agent never called, but he could be involved by now. Uncle Dylan had enough money to keep a guy like Walter quiet for a while, especially if there was a promise of a bigger payout in the end. If that's what this is about.

Gregory pulls up to the front door and tells me that he has business to attend to, and that I am to go ahead. I go inside and put my books down on the bed. I suppose that if I am going to play along I might be here for awhile, and should probably start doing the homework that was assigned.

One thing that I do take a little pride in, outside of my achievements in the virtual world, is my grades. Not that I care about school very much, but having good grades generally makes the teachers more sympathetic to me. More willing to allow me extra leeway, which can come in handy.

So far, at this school things seem to be mild, even without the protection of the staff. I wonder if has anything to do with being a friend of Sam's. I have never used a popular kid's friendship to gain favor with the rest of the school, but I have seen it done before. It is entirely possible that Sam's worship of my dad has saved me much of the torment that I would have otherwise received.

I sit down on the edge of the bed to wait for the sound of Uncle Dylan's car pulling into the garage, but then I decide not to wait. If I am going to do this, I want to retain some control of the outcome. I can't just blindly fall in line. One way I can assert my control is by meeting him on my terms. I have to show him that I will not be swayed easily. I need to gain the upper hand and keep it. So, I decide to wait for him in his study.

I walk down the hallway and open the door to see Uncle Dylan sitting behind his desk. How foolish of me. I hadn't even bothered to see if he was already in the house. I just assumed that he would come in after me like he has so far. I am going to have to be smarter than this if I want to find out what he's up to without raising his suspicions. That is the other danger in my plan. If he finds out what I'm up to, to what lengths would he go to stop me from discovering the truth? I don't know. It's obvious that he isn't above kidnapping. Murder is not such a big leap when you think about it. I try to hide my surprise before he looks up, and calmly close the door behind me.

"There is only one person who can come in here without knocking," he says and looks up. "And he was already in here."

I don't bother to reply. What would be the point? And I refuse to apologize. This is all about showing strength, after all. "I don't believe you, you know."

"Yes, so you've said."

"So, prove it."

"Prove it?"

"Yes," I say. "If what you are trying to make me believe is true, you should be able to prove it easily enough."

He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. A defensive posture. I think I read that somewhere. "I hope that you are this aggressive when it comes to getting your parents back, but make no mistake." He uncrosses his arms and leans forward. "It is you that has something to prove to me. Not the other way around."

"What are you talking about?"

"You prove to me that you actually want to help your parents."

"Of course I want to help them."

"Do you?" He stands up and comes around the desk toward me. "I don't think so. I think that you are just too weak to handle change, and you want to go back to your pathetic little life as soon as possible." He comes close enough that I take a step backwards and I can feel the doorknob dig into my back. "You know the only way you can do that is to find your parents."

"That's not true." Even as I say it I wonder if he is right.

He grunts his disbelief and thankfully turns around and walks back over to the desk. I realize that this is going to be harder than I thought. How quickly he had turned the tables and put me again in the position of weakness. I need him more than he needs me, that much is true. And he made it clear that he does not consider me a threat in the least. Gathering up all of the confidence I can muster I go over to the desk. I think about sitting down, but that would put me in the weaker position, as well.

"Fine," I say, "How do you suppose I do that?"

"There is a lot of work to do if you expect to be ready to go against the Necros."

"I'm ready now."

"I know you think you are, but you have no idea what you will face."

"Then tell me," I say.

He rolls his chair to the bookshelf directly behind the desk, and begins removing books and stacking them on his desk. "If you are willing to put in the work it will take, then that will prove to me that you are committed enough to go with me to get your parents." He turns and looks at me. "It will not be easy."

"Fine," I say. "What do you want me to do?"

He takes a notebook out of his desk drawer, places it on the stack, and slides it over to my side of the desk. There are five books in all. Three of them I recognize as Dad's novels. The other two look old and well read. The letters on their spines had long ago faded away.

"Start by reading these. The rest of your training will begin tomorrow."

"I don't understand."

"I know. That is why you must read. Your father's novels will explain most of what you need to know about the Necros. I will answer any questions you have when you're done. The notebook contains instructions for rituals. You must start performing these every day. Once in the morning and again before bed."

"Okay, I understand the notebook, but can't you just tell me what I need to know about the rest?"

"If even reading is too hard for you, then maybe you should just forget about getting involved."

"Okay, okay. I'll do it." I say. "I just don't understand why we can't find out where they are and go get them." I pick up the notebook and flip through the pages. It's all hand written and there are several charts and diagrams. "And how are doing these dumb ceremonies supposed to help?"

"Because. They prepare you to do...other things."

"Other things? Like what?"

He lowers his eyebrows and stands up straight. He looks over to my right, at the vase that had replaced the lamp that Gregory broke. He stretches his arm toward it and opens his hand as if he is reaching out to grasp it. As he raises his arm, the lamp lifts into the air. He closes his hand into a fist and quickly swings his arm toward the other side of the room like he is pitching a baseball. The lamp nearly hits me in the face as it flies through the air and smashes on the opposite wall. Tiny pieces of glass fill the air and I close my eyes and cover my face with my arm just in time to keep them from peppering my face. The shards sting my arm like tiny bees.

"What the..." What the hell was that? I look from my uncle's hand, to the pieces of lamp on the floor, to the table and back. If there is a wire or thread, I can't see it. I step forward to look at his hand more closely. There has to be something. Things like that just aren't possible. Are they?

"There is no trick."

"Then how did you--"

"You will learn, but not yet."

He walks back around the desk and takes his seat, and I am weirdly offended by the casualness of it. It seems to me that if you perform a minor miracle of that sort, you should at least act a little more... I don't know. Reverent or something.

"Keep in mind there is more, and the Necros are just as powerful. I suggest you eat a big meal tonight. Tell Gregory what you want."

I feel like I should say something, but nothing comes to mind. I just keep replaying what happened over and over again in my mind. I nod and head toward the door.

"Brian."

I stop and turn around. He is pointing to the books on the desk. I had forgotten all about them. I walk back over to the desk and grab them.

"Don't forget," he says. "Have a big meal, and do the ritual before you come to breakfast."

"Okay."

I go back to my room and sit on the bed looking at the cover of Dad's first novel. I don't know how long I sit there before Gregory knocks on the door. I tell him to come in and he pokes his head through the door.

"What for dinner?"

I really don't feel like eating and tell him so, but he insists that I have something. I can't understand their insistence that I have a big meal, but what to have for dinner is the last thing on my mind. I finally tell him to just get me a sandwich.

"Are you sure?" he says.

"Yes, that's all. And maybe a glass of milk."

"Okay," he says in a way that lets me know that what he really meant was "You're loss, comrade." He brings the sandwich back with him instead of making me come eat it in the kitchen. He sets the glass and plate down on the desk and asks me once more if I was sure I didn't want anything else.

"Yes, I'm sure." *What is it with you guys and wanting me to eat?* I wish that I would have taken their advice.

Chapter 10

I wake up to the smell of bacon and my stomach growls. I lay there for a moment wondering if I had dreamed what happened in the study. I get dressed, seeing the lamp fly through the air in front of me over and over again in my mind. Other than wires, and true telekinesis, I can offer no explanation. While the possibility of wires does still exist, I am beginning to doubt even that. Why would he go through all the trouble to find something strong enough to hold the weight of the lamp, but still thin enough to be invisible? I had looked pretty close. Why go through the trouble of doing it at all? I guess it had been pretty convincing. Was that a part of the game? Was he that thorough?

I slip on my shoes and am about to grab the doorknob when I remember Uncle Dylan's instructions to do the ritual before breakfast. I pick up the notebook and scan the instructions. It doesn't look complicated, recite some words and draw a few stars in the air with my finger, but it's definitely going to take longer than I would like. The words are mostly unfamiliar, although I had heard a few of them before. Hebrew, I think, and towards the end I recognize the names of Archangels. My stomach growls in protest and I put the notebook down.

The bacon smell becomes stronger, the closer I get to the kitchen. I round the corner expecting to see Gregory either sitting in his usual spot at the bar, or standing in front of the stove.

"Good morning, Greg--"

It takes a moment for my brain to register what my eyes are seeing. Gregory is, indeed, standing in front of the stove, but his spot at the bar is also occupied. I blink to make sure that I am really seeing Tori Spencer sitting there with a glass of orange juice up to her mouth. She drinks until the glass is empty, then wipes her arm across her mouth.

"Good morning," she says.

"Uh, good morning." I try to act natural as I walk over to the bar and take my usual stool.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I was invited," she says.

"By who?"

"Not you," she says and narrows her eyes. I guess that had come out sounding a bit rude.

"Sorry," I say.

I reach over to the plate of bacon that is on the bar and grab one of the fatty pieces. My mouth waters in anticipation.

Slap.

The back of my hand stings and I immediately lose my grip on the greasy bacon.

"Nyet," he says. "No meat for you."

"What?"

"No meat," he repeats.

"No meat? Why the hell not?" I had taken more liberty with my language than I normally

did with Gregory. I suppose it might be because Tori was here, but Gregory didn't even flinch at it.

"You ask Dylan," he says.

This is definitely not what I had expected. I suddenly realize why they were both after me to eat a big meal. I fill with fear that they might not let me have anything at all. I am really regretting not taking their advice.

"Can I have anything?"

"Oatmeal or fruit."

"Oatmeal." I almost yell it, relieved that I will not be under total fasting conditions.

I try to think of something to say to Tori as Gregory makes my oatmeal. The silence is beginning to be awkward. Well, for me anyway. She seems not to mind. Luckily, the silence doesn't last long before Uncle Dylan comes in from the pantry. This may have surprised me had I not been through the pantry exit of the study, already.

"Good morning, Brian," he says. "Hello, Tori." He walks over and kisses her on the top of her head. I admit that I am somewhat jealous of this, but I quickly put it aside. When he lifts his head back up he quickly looks at me like he has just noticed that I am here.

"You did not do the ritual?" the look in his eyes lets me know that, regardless of how it sounds, it is more statement than question.

"I--"

"Don't say anything." He turns his head away from me as if I am suddenly disgusting to look at. "Go."

"I--"

"Go," he says more forcefully.

I glance at Tori out of the corner of my eyes. I am embarrassed and I'm tempted to tell him off. He must have sensed that somehow, because he suddenly looks at me again. This time his gaze freezes me. Literally. I try to speak but my mouth won't move, and I stand up by no will of my own. I stare at Uncle Dylan. It seems that he can do much more than throw lamps across the room. I had the feeling that he could do the same to me with as much effort. My heart begins to race and my breath quickens. I have never felt anything like this and I am afraid. He must have sensed that, too, because he suddenly releases his control. I almost fall down on the floor when he first gives my body back to me. I know I am standing up, I saw myself do it, but I guess my mind is still sitting and my knees buckle when the weight became mine once more.

"Please do the ritual," he says, "and I'd like to see you in the study when you're done."

It might have been better if he had started out that way to begin with, but I'm not about to argue. For one thing, I am quickly beginning to fear my uncle, and I may need to rethink this whole situation. Clearly, I am in a deeper pile than I had originally thought. Secondly, he is giving me a chance to obey without losing too much more face in front of Tori, and for that I am grateful.

I leave quickly without saying another word. I try my best to not look at Tori before I turn around, but I am unsuccessful. She is staring down at her glass of juice, her hair partially hiding her face. I am grateful for that, too.

When I get in the room, I pace back and forth and try to calm myself down. My hands are shaking and I feel as if I've just run a marathon. This is very serious. If my uncle can control me physically, I am in for a lot of trouble. I highly doubt whether I can change my mind and call the police now, even if I wanted to. How far can he go? How far *would* he go? For the time being, I am going to have to go along. At least until I can think of something else.

I open the notebook and do my best to follow the instructions. Much of it calls for me to say words that I have no idea how to pronounce, but seem familiar to me somehow, as well as making physical gestures with my body. Several times I have to put the notebook down in order to follow the directions, and more than once I am tempted to not pick it back up. To just sit down. I wonder if he would be able to tell that I hadn't actually finished the ritual, or not. He was obviously able to tell that I hadn't done it at all, and I am more than a little scared of what might happen if I leave the room without completing it.

I continue on until I have said all of the words, called all of the angels, drawn all the stars,

and ended it as instructed. I look at the next page of the notebook just to make sure that there aren't any hidden steps. There aren't.

One of my father's novels falls off of the stack when I put the notebook on top of it. I bend down to pick it up and notice the picture of him on the back of the book. I remember that picture. My mom had taken it on the back porch. I don't remember how old I was. Old enough to remember the day, but young enough to still be playing with toy cars in the dirt, which is what I had been doing not ten feet away from him when she took it. I miss them. I feel a tear trickle down my cheek, but I wipe it away and tell myself to straighten up. Sitting in here crying is not getting me any closer to getting them back.

Chapter 11

I knock on the door of the study and wait for Uncle Dylan to answer before going in. He is standing at the window gazing out. He turns to face me quickly and I flinch. I hate myself immediately for it. I am used to being the lowest on the food chain at school, but I have never been put into the position of having to live that way.

"I'm sorry I startled you earlier," he says. "As well as yesterday. I only wanted to make an impression on you quickly. This is no game. If you are going to do this you must do it fully or not at all."

"Yes, sir," I say meekly.

"There is no need for the sir, but tell me right now, are you in or out?" He sits down behind the desk. "Sit, please."

I do as he asks. "I'm in."

"Great," he says and rubs his palms together. "Now that we have that settled, I see you've completed the ritual. How did it go?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Don't worry. The more you do it, the better you will be. You will begin to feel it's effects in a few weeks. When you have memorized it, I will give you the next one."

I'm not wild about the idea of having to memorize it and less thrilled about there being a next one. I wonder if there will be a next one after that, too, but I decide not to bother asking. What difference would it make anyway, other than just give me one more thing to worry about?

"I will," I say.

"Did you read any of John's work last night?"

"Uh..."

"Never mind. You had a lot to think about, I'm sure."

As a matter of fact I only thought about one thing last night, and it occupied my mind until I fell asleep. But he had given me much more, by far, to think about this morning. The question of how he had accomplished the flying lamp is no longer up for discussion, as far as I am concerned. Now that I have felt the effect on my own body, I have given up the search for any other explanation. My uncle has some sort of power that is as real as the floor beneath my feet.

"Gregory tells me that you didn't eat much last night."

"I wasn't really hungry."

"That's a shame. You should've had ribs or steak or something. From now on you must maintain a vegan diet."

"What? Why?"

"In order for you to fully benefit from your training, you will need to rid your body of toxins as well as any trace of animal products."

What kind of California hippie crap is that? He will probably have me doing yoga before breakfast pretty soon. Maybe that's why Tori is here. That would be one small ray of light here. I

don't think it would take much convincing for me to do yoga if Tori was the one teaching it. I cross my fingers, make a wish and ask as calmly as I can.

"Why is Tori here?"

Uncle Dylan gives me a knowing smile. "Tori is here to help you train."

"Yoga, huh?" *Yes.*

He laughs raucously at this. "I am sure you'd like that, but no." My disappointment must show on my face. "Listen carefully, Brian," he says. "You may not believe this, but Tori is very much more than meets the eye, as they say. She is a very powerful being and you would do well to keep that in mind."

"Is she a part of the Priesthood, too?"

"No. She is a Necromancer."

"Wait a second," I say. "If everything you're telling me is real, then aren't the Necromancers the bad guys here?"

"Yes, but Tori is a friend. She owes a great deal to your father. She will do whatever she can to help."

"I don't understand."

"You will. I'm sure she will tell you more if she wants you to know." He stands up and walks over to the window. I look out and see that Gregory and Tori are walking down the driveway toward the gate. "For now, follow her instructions the same as you would mine. There is much you will learn from her."

Well, that's all well and good, but I still have one question that I think needs to be answered before we go any further. Why? Why had the Necromancers taken my parents in the first place? What exactly was it they wanted? If they were as powerful as he is making them out to be, what could they possibly want with my dad? I'm hesitant at first, not knowing what to expect from him, but when I ask he is a little more forthright than he has been so far.

"Your father is not just any member of the Priesthood." He leans back in his chair and settles in. "He is the Record Keeper. He is in charge of documenting our history, that is where most of his stories come from. More importantly, as the Keeper, he is also responsible for the Relic."

"What's that?"

"Something the Necros have been after for centuries. It is the source of our power. Only your father and the five members of the Council know what it is, and only your father and one other knows where it is."

"Who's that?"

"Only John knows," he says. "It's a fail safe. If anything happens to him, the secret will not be lost, but they can only come forward as the new Keeper if John is dead."

"So, why doesn't he just rehide the relic, and then Dad wouldn't know where it is?"

"Whoever it is has probably all ready done that, if they have heard of your father's capture. But, they haven't come forward so only your dad knows who it is. Still valuable information for the Necros."

"If this has been going on for centuries, then why are they just now taking Dad?" He looks confused for a moment. It seems like a perfectly good question to me. Dad has been publishing novels for years. Did they just find out he is the Record Keeper? I suppose it's possible. After all I'm his son and I had no idea.

"Necros are generally powerful men. They have powers that match ours, but they use them for personal gain." He stands up and stretches his back. "They are CEO's, bankers, congressmen, and government officials around the world. They are usually content with worldly pleasures, but when the power structure changes they renew their interest in the Relic." He explains that when one of the members of the Necro Elders dies, most of the high priests will make a bid for the seat, usually involving promises of finding the object and fulfilling their destiny. "Politics, basically, but when it happens they pose a serious threat. Like now."

"So one of their high priests kidnapped my dad in an attempt to get elected?"

"That may have been the motivation to start with, but make no mistake, this is a very real

threat not just to your parents, but the Priesthood, as well. The whole world if they ever managed to get their hands on the Relic."

"Why? What would happen?"

He stops pacing and looks at me. "Armageddon." He allows time to make sure that the word registers with me. It does. He takes a deep breath and smiles. "Come, we have much to do." He slaps me on the shoulder and walks toward the door.

"Wait," I say. "I have more questions."

"I know, and you will get the chance to ask them, but we must begin training immediately. You are already two years past the age of a normal Supplicant." He stops and turns around at that. "I'm starting to wonder if John was going to take you to the Council or not." He shakes his head. "You know, You really should have pieced some of this together by now." He turns and walks out the door leaving me alone in the study.

Chapter 12

I go back into the kitchen, but it's empty. I open the door that leads out into the backyard. Gregory, Tori and Uncle Dylan are sitting at the table looking out. There are two men a few feet away from the patio driving small steaks into the ground. I walk over and stand next to Uncle Dylan. The men are tying a bright orange string from one small steak to the other in a sort of octagon shape. When they're done the larger of the two men, also older and looks to be the one in charge, stands up and brushes his hands off on his pants.

"You sure about this, Mr. Prescott?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Uncle Dylan stands up and shakes the man's hand. "And, you'll be back on Wednesday?"

"Yes, sir. And you'll be ready for us?"

"Absolutely."

The man shakes his head. "Alright, if you say so. C'mon Dale."

Dale finishes the knot he is tying in the string and then stands up. He picks up the roll of string and a couple of hammers and follows his boss. Uncle Dylan escorts them through the door going into the garage. I notice that Dale has left several shovels propped on the wall next to the string octagon. I think for a moment about calling after them. *They'll be back.*

"It's going to be really nice," Tori says.

"What--" I look down at her, but she was talking to Gregory.

"Da," he says and looks up at me. He has to squint one eye against the sun behind me.

"What are they doing?" I ask.

"Is new hot tub," he says. "Will be much digging."

"Yeah, I guess," I say. I don't really know anything about the installation of hot tubs, but I suppose it would require quite a bit of digging. "Good thing we don't have to do it."

Gregory lets out a bellow of laughter. He laughs until there are tears in his eyes. It is a contagious laugh and pretty soon Tori is also laughing. And even though I dread why he thinks it's funny, by the time Uncle Dylan comes back out I have joined them.

"What's so funny?"

Gregory regains his composure, if only briefly. "I say it will be much digging...and..and he.." He breaks into a new round of laughter.

Tori finishes for him. "Brian said it was a good thing we didn't have to do it."

Uncle Dylan also thinks it's funny, and now I am getting the feeling that this is an inside joke, and I was clearly not on the inside. My fears are confirmed when Uncle Dylan stops laughing.

"Come here," he says to me and I walk with him over to the string outline. "We need this hole dug by Wednesday, and you're going to dig it."

"No I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"Wait, I thought that we were supposed to be in some kind of training?"

"Yes," Uncle Dylan says. "That hole is going to be your first task."

I don't understand how digging a giant hole is supposed to help me prepare for whatever we're preparing for, and I say as much. Uncle Dylan puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me over to the shovels.

"We need to remove the toxins from your body as quickly as possible," he says. "The best way to do that is to sweat."

"Can't we go to a sauna or something?"

"I guess we could. Let me see your arm."

I lift my arm and he grabs my bicep and gives it a squeeze. His fingers dig in and I wince at the pain. "Ow," I say and quickly free my arm.

"No. The exercise will do you good. Think of it as killing two birds with one stone." He tilts his head toward the table. "See if you can impress her with your stamina." He winks at me.

"Great."

Uncle Dylan hands me one of the shovels and leaves to join the others at the table. He sits down in the chair next to Tori, leans over and whispers something into her ear. They both look in my direction and laugh. Blood rushes to my face and I quickly look at the ground. I am embarrassed and angry, but I take it out on the earth, attacking the ground with the shovel. It seems as if the joke is on me, yet again.

Chapter 13

I manage to get the hole dug for the hot tub just in time, with a little help from Sam when he comes over after school. When the contractors come back to put it in, they are impressed with my progress, but they still have to make a few adjustments to the hole themselves. It doesn't take them very long to hook everything up, and Uncle Dylan graciously lets me be the first one in it. The hot, swirling water does wonders for my sore body, and they practically have to drag me out of it after two hours.

The next few weeks are the worst of my life, but also the most rewarding. It is almost unbelievable the things that I learn. Uncle Dylan, Gregory and Tori are obsessed with beating me down as far as they can. I sometimes wonder if they really have a plan, or if they are just torturing me for the fun of it. With Gregory it was likely, Uncle Dylan a possibility, but Tori? I really hope not. The more she is around the more I become infatuated with her, and the thought of her deliberately tricking me might crush me.

After the hot tub hole, Uncle Dylan starts me on his aspect of my training schedule. In addition to the ritual he had me doing everyday, the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram, he added other rituals to my daily practice. Each new one took me several days to learn, but in a few weeks I could run through them each morning in about thirty minutes. An hour and a half if you counted the hour of meditation that also becomes a daily mandate.

Thankfully, one of the first things that he teaches me are techniques to block my mind from others, and prevent anyone from gaining the type of control that he exhibited over my body. These exercises at first seem pretty simple and ridiculous, but it doesn't take long until he is no longer able to see my thoughts. While he can still take control of my body, which he promised to only do during training, I can tell that it is getting more and more difficult for him to do so.

I also begin learning to probe another's mind, and Uncle Dylan, sometimes, will let down his guard for me to practice. I quickly become adept at reading, but control is another matter. It would take some time for that, although I am able to alter a crawling bug's path, even if only for a few

seconds.

Telekinesis training is also Uncle Dylan's responsibility. The first session consists of me being locked in the study and forced to stare at a weight hanging on the end of a string. For hours I sit there, trying to will the pendulum to swing to no avail. I would have given it up as impossible had I not witnessed the lamp. It takes two weeks of daily practice before I am able to make the weight swing even just an inch, but once I realize that I can do it I progress much faster. Uncle Dylan says that the biggest obstacle in my training would be my own self doubt. He was right, and once I get past it my progress comes easier and quicker until I am finally able to move small objects.

I am happy with my progress and am eager to gain more control and become as powerful as Uncle Dylan. I can imagine how my school life would change. The one thing I aspire to most of all, is Uncle Dylan's claim that very skilled members of the Priesthood possess the ability to change their shape, "shifting" as he calls it, into the form of any animal they have previously gained control over. It would have been an unbelievable claim to me two weeks ago, but now I take it as fact and find myself looking forward to seeing a demonstration.

Gregory is in charge of my physical training. We begin running and exercising on a daily basis and by "we" I mean that Gregory sits on the patio and watches as I obediently do what he says. He also trains me in martial arts. Systema, which I have never heard of, he claims is the secret fighting style of the "Ancient Warriors of the Motherland" that he's descended from.

In addition to hand to hand combat, Gregory quickly turns me into an expert with a handgun. After getting over my initial fear of the guns, I begin to look forward to our practice time in the woods nearby. I take to it naturally, which surprises me as much as it does Gregory, and before long I am able to accurately hit my targets even when they are out of the effective range of the weapon. The benefits of hours of alien and zombie shooting, no doubt.

Tori's training is by far my favorite for obvious reasons. At first she remained on the sidelines as Dylan or Gregory worked with me, but once I begin actually training with her, my days begin to get more pleasant. Although, I'm sure that I would have given her my full attention even if she was teaching me how to program a VCR. Her rough beauty fascinates me, and more than once she has to tell me to "Look up here, Tiger" when my eyes and mind begin to wander.

She teaches me about the Necros and their powers. Her first demonstration scares me, and I am embarrassed later when I realize how silly I must have seemed to her. She was describing a Necro's ability to create Revenants, using their dark magick to influence and control the dead, similar to how Uncle Dylan was able to take control of my body. I will admit that even after everything I have seen and learned, I am a bit skeptical about this and she must see it in my face.

She closes her eyes and sits in silence for a moment. My attention is completely on her, as I imagine what she would look like sleeping next to me until my daydream is broken by a rustling in the woods at the far side of the yard. I try to keep my attention on Tori, but I begin to get nervous as the sound in the woods comes closer.

I look toward the noise just in time to see an animal the size of a small dog lumber out of the underbrush. It takes me a moment to realize that it is a raccoon, but there is something about it that doesn't seem right to me. I stand up from the chair and take a couple of steps toward the animal. My knees get weak and I feel nauseous as what I am seeing sinks in. The animal is badly injured. Strips of flesh hang down the side of it's body and drag on the ground along side of it. It's ribcage is exposed and I can see that it is missing an eye.

"Uh...Tori?" I look back at her, but she is still sitting with her eyes closed. "Tori, I think you need--"

The creature lets out a hideous noise that sounds like a baby screaming and I jump. The animal continues to come closer. I want to run, but my feet are frozen. Closer still, and I can see maggots falling from it's empty eye socket. There is no holding back then. I jump up onto my chair like a girl running from a mouse. Tori's eyes open and she looks at me. She smiles and, for a moment, it is worth looking like a fool to see it.

The raccoon falls over with a sickening wet thump and the maggots begin to pour out of it's

body from various natural and unnatural openings. When the scent of it's rotting flesh finally reaches me, I can control myself no longer. I spew everything I have eaten today onto the table between us.

Tori jumps up out of her chair just before any of the vomit has a chance to drip off of the table and onto her lap. She looks at the table with wide eyes and then turns her gaze to me. Oh, great. I could feel my cheeks getting red. I run into the house and head for my bedroom, intent on hiding there, but the sound that the raccoon made as it fell over keeps replaying in my mind and I have to stop at the bathroom. I stay in the bathroom, kneeling in front of the toilet, until my stomach is completely void of all of it's contents. I hear a soft knock on the door but I remain silent. Just go away.

Another knock and then Tori's soft voice from the other side of the door. "Brian, are you okay?"

"Yes," I say with more anger in my voice than I had intended. "I'm fine. Please go away."

"Okay, okay." She is silent for a moment and I think she is gone until she speaks again.

"Don't worry about what happened. Almost everyone reacts that way the first time."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious," she says. "I think Gregory actually cried his first time." She giggles a little at that, and I start to feel a little bit better about it. Although, I can't imagine Gregory crying over anything, the visual picture is enough to make me smile.

"Okay. I'll be out there in a minute."

"Alright," she says in a sing-song voice that sends waves of pleasure down my spine. "Don't be too long."

"Okay, I promise."

I hear her footsteps fade down the hall and I relax a little bit. I stand and try to clean myself up. I go into my room, change my clothes, and am just about to leave when there is a knock at this door as well.

"What?"

"What the hell are you doing?" Sam's voice comes from the other side of the door. I like Sam and he has become a regular fixture around Uncle Dylan's. I am glad that he's here, but I hope that he hasn't been informed of the vomit volcano I had created in the back yard.

Chapter 14

Once I am dressed and ready to face Tori again, I go into the kitchen where I find everyone sitting down to a huge meal. It looks like Thanksgiving. There is turkey, stuffing, gravy, potatoes and several other side dishes that I'm not as familiar with. Gregory is entering from the kitchen with a platter full of rolls. I can smell them from where I am and my stomach begins to rumble. For a moment I wonder if it is a good idea to eat, then thought that even if I get sick again I would have plenty of time to make it to the bathroom.

"What are we celebrating?" I ask.

"Your progress, of course," Uncle Dylan says as he grabs one of the steaming rolls from the tray and begins to butter it.

I sit down at the table next to him in my usual spot. I am feeling much better now. I hadn't realized that I have come far enough to warrant a feast. And I hadn't. Not really. I find that out on Gregory's last trip from the kitchen. He comes around the table and places a plate in front of me. In stark contrast to the delicious smelling food that is laid out on the table, my plate consists of a mixture of fruits and vegetables. Feast or no, it seems as if my strict diet would continue.

I watch in silence as everyone else at the table piles their plates with food. I haven't had

meat in weeks, and the turkey is too tempting. I wait to see if anyone is paying attention and reach for a slice, but my hand is smacked by Tori and I am forced to give up my attempt to have some decent food for a change.

After some mindless small talk that I wasn't a part of, Uncle Dylan stands up with his glass and taps it with his fork. He looks like the best man at a wedding about to give a toast to the bride and groom. He waits for Sam to stop giggling at whatever joke Gregory had just told him before he goes on. He raises his glass in the air and the rest of the table does likewise. I don't have any wine, that is definitely not a part of my new diet, so I hold up my water glass instead.

"Brian, I want to congratulate you on how far you've come. There is still much to learn before our real mission can start, but you are well on your way and making fantastic progress." He lifts his glass slightly higher. "To Brian," he says and Gregory and Tori echoed. I feel my cheeks blush. We all touched glasses, and are about to take a drink, when Gregory stands up as well. He raises his glass, but was much more solemn than Uncle Dylan had been.

"May we always be as happy as we are right now, and may our parents never find out the reason." There is a silence after he said this as we all nod in agreement and clank our glasses once more.

The rest of the dinner is a joyous occasion for everyone else. Since Gregory's toast, I can't help but let my imagination run wild. Where are my parents? Are they still alive? How are they being treated? I am suddenly anxious to talk to Uncle Dylan in private. I know that he thinks I have a long way to go in my training, but time is running out. They have already been missing for weeks, and God only knows if they are still alive or not. I am definitely not in the mood for celebration any more.

I listen to Uncle Dylan talk with Sam. Sam knows almost as much about my father's stories as Uncle Dylan. Definitely way more than me. Since I have been here, I've barely gotten through the first novel. Uncle Dylan is impressed with the extent of Sam's knowledge and only needs to correct his information twice. Even then, it was through no fault of Sam's as my father had written a few things wrong intentionally. I had misjudged Sam and I know it. He is turning out to be a great friend. Completely supportive of what is going on here, which would make most others call the guys with the nets for all of us. The only thing I don't like is that he seems to be just as taken with Tori as I am. Yes, this causes some jealousy in me, but I try hard not to show it. I couldn't blame her if she was interested in him.

I am almost finished with my rabbit food when I feel something on my leg. My immediate thought is of the zombie raccoon and I jump and look down. There is no zombie raccoon. Only Tori's foot. I look at her across the table. She glances around to make sure that Gregory, Uncle Dylan and Sam are still engrossed in their conversation. They are deep into a discussion about the effectiveness of neuro-linguistic programming during a physical confrontation. She looks back over at me and nods her head slightly toward the door. She wants to talk to me alone? I get excited for just a moment until I realize that she probably wants to talk about what had happened earlier. I'll give her credit for wanting to do it outside. I am embarrassed about it enough, without it becoming dinner conversation.

She tilts her head again and raises her eyebrows in a questioning way. I nod back and watch as she excuses herself from the table. All of us sit quietly and watch her leave before the other three continue with their conversation. I wait for as long as I can bear it before I, too, excuse myself from the table. Their conversation doesn't stop for my exit, though. Uncle Dylan dismisses me with a wave and continues telling Sam the importance of having many different strategies at your disposal at all times.

I walk out onto the back patio. The chairs and the table are out in the grass where someone, I assume Gregory, had to hose them down. I don't see Tori, though, so I turn to walk back inside when I hear her call my name. I scan the darkness of the back yard but I'm not able to see her. "Where are you?"

"Over here," she says.

I still can't see her, but I begin walking toward her voice. I am just able to make out her

outline in the dark when I realize that she is standing close to the spot where the raccoon had entered the yard. I pause. I'm sure that someone has gotten rid of the thing, but I look around on the ground just to be sure.

"It's gone," she says.

I close my eyes and quickly put up the defenses Uncle Dylan has shown me. At some point, closing my mind from outside probing will come naturally, but for now it is a conscious effort. "Yeah, I know."

I stand next to her as she gazes out into the woods. I try to follow her gaze, but even with the full moon shining, it is too dark deeper in the brush for me to see anything. I wonder what she is seeing. I don't know if Necros can see in the dark, although with everything else I had learned in the past few weeks, it wouldn't surprise me at all.

We stand there silently for what seems like a long time before she finally speaks. I don't mind the silence. We are close and I can feel the heat of her body on my arm, which is more than pleasant in the cool night air.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"No, I'm sorry." I try to blow it off and act cool, which is definitely not one of my strongest skills. "I just didn't realize what was happening."

"Dylan is right. I should have told you first." She looks down at her feet and sighs. "You weren't ready to see that, yet."

"Maybe," I say, "but I needed to. The Necros won't warn me, will they?" Secretly, I am hurt that Uncle Dylan thinks that I am incapable of handling it, which of course he had been right about. "Besides, it could've been worse."

She giggles. "Yeah, I guess you're right." The sound of her amusement puts goosebumps on my arms. Luckily it is cool and dark, and I won't have to explain them. And how could I explain them, when I don't really understand myself the effect she has on me?

"I'm just glad you didn't wait for dinner and use the turkey." I put my hand on her shoulder and give her a gentle shove.

"I can't do it if it doesn't have a heart," she says and throws a playful punch at my shoulder.

I surprise myself by moving my shoulder backwards just enough to make her miss entirely. Her fist travels past my shoulder and her momentum carries the rest of her body toward me. I catch her in my arms and hold her there, looking into her deep green eyes, for just a heartbeat longer than is natural. She gets her feet underneath her and pushes herself out of my embrace and stands up.

"Oh, I see Gregory has taught you something after all," she says.

"Well, maybe a little." But that isn't the truth. I have progressed rapidly under Gregory's guidance. The weak, frail dork that had seen Tori the first day of school has been replaced by a lean, fit and confident guy.

"Well," she says and rocks back on her feet and takes up a fighting stance. "Let's see what you got."

"No, No."

"Awe, Come on. You afraid you're going to get hurt?" she asks mockingly.

"No, but what if I hurt you?"

I expect her to disagree with my sentiment, but she doesn't say a word. Instead, she launches a roundhouse kick to my face. I step backwards allowing her foot to fly past, inches from my nose. As soon as her foot touches the ground, she shifts her weight forward and advances.

"Wait a sec--"

Her lead fist shoots toward my face and I again move back, but not far enough this time. Her blow lands squarely on my nose. Not hard enough to make it bleed, but just enough to make my eyes water. She doesn't hesitate to revel in her victory. She immediately follows with a powerful strike from her rear fist. I step to the side and hear her fist go past my ear.

I quickly ready myself, aware now that she means to test me full force. I bend my knees slightly and straighten my spine like Gregory taught me and try to breathe in slow, controlled bursts. Her next attack is a sharp short kick to my knee. I take all of my weight off of it as soon as I see it

coming. She connects, but I allow the force of her kick to swing my leg back as the top part of my body moves forward to strike.

She dodges my fist and grabs hold of my arm. Standing on just one leg makes it much easier for her to give my arm a tug in the same direction it was already going, toppling me to the ground. As soon as my shoulder comes into contact with the wet grass, I roll away and attempt to stand back up. It's too late. Tori is much faster than I am, and she is on me before the roll is finished.

Even though Gregory has instructed me on defending from the ground, most of our training was geared toward shooting and making sure I don't get on the ground in the first place. Tori turns out to be an expert on the ground, though. She counters every move that I can remember and keeps control of me for several seconds. She is all over me and I can't escape. It's like trying to fight a squirrel that is scampering over my body in every direction. Finally, I let my body go limp in defeat. I wind up laying on my back with her straddling my torso.

"Give up?" The way she is smiling makes the sting of being beaten by a girl so much more palatable.

"Yes, Yes. I give," I say smiling back at her.

She rolls off and lays down beside me in the grass, putting her head on my outstretched arm. I freeze, not knowing what I should do next, and content to just lay here beside her. She stares up at the stars, and slowly her smile fades from her face.

"Do you think there's a heaven?"

The question stumps me for a moment. I'm not sure. Church hadn't been mandatory in my house growing up, although it wasn't frowned upon either. Although Mom had gone several times, my father and I were not made to go with her. She never even asked if I wanted to, as far as I can remember.

"I don't know," I say. "I guess it's just as likely as everything else I've been learning."

She frowns.

"Why?" I ask. "Do you?"

"I don't know." She turns her head to look at me. "If there is, I doubt I'll ever know it."

"Why not?"

She looks away. "I've done too much to be forgiven." I watch in amazement as a single tear slides down her face.

"That can't be true."

"Well, it is."

Laying here like this, the tough girl image faded away. I look at her, crying and vulnerable, and am overcome with a desire to protect her. I reach over and pull her face toward mine so that I could look into her eyes. I resist the urge to kiss her, although I want to, want it more than anything, but I'm afraid of how she would react.

"Tell me," I say.

"Tell you what?"

"All of it. I want to know everything about you."

She turns her face quickly away from me again. "No."

"Why?"

She sits up and glares at me. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious, that's all." I sit up with her. Everything had been right with the world just a moment ago and I am filled with sadness at her sudden change in demeanor. I want to pull her back down into the grass next to me and forget that this conversation ever came up.

"Well, me and my life and my mistakes are not for your amusement."

What? I am completely lost. I run the conversation back in my mind trying to find out where it went wrong, but I am at a loss. What had I done to make her do angry? What could I have possibly said to make her react this way? Now I am filled with curiosity. I look into her eyes and try to reach out to her mind like Uncle Dylan taught me. At first I get nothing. Just little bits that are too blurred to make out. It is like trying to put thread through the eye of a needle, but after several near misses I finally penetrate her mind.

Visions of her thoughts flash by like someone flipping through a picture book. Her mind raced and I can only catch small details. A gun. Blood. A woman screaming. The two of us kissing. My eyes snap open. We have never kissed, but it's obvious now that she has at least thought about it at some point. Can it be that she feels the same about me as I do about her? I smile at her, but she does not return it.

"Did you just probe my mind?" She stands up.

"No, I--"

"Liar," she says. Her brow furrows and she bares her clenched teeth. One hand raises and she holds it out, palm towards my chest. For a moment I think that she is going to try to toss me like Uncle Dylan had thrown the lamp, but it is much worse than that.

I feel a burning sensation in my chest directly at the spot she is pointing to. At first warm, but then quickly turning to a burning heat. The pain in my chest spreads rapidly out to cover my entire body. It is so much that I can't maintain my sitting position and fall to the side. It couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, but it is the most painful few seconds of my life. The pain soaks in and I feel like I am on fire from the inside. My skin feels strained under the pressure of the internal fire and threatens to rip open. I think that I am going to explode. Literally.

"Don't you ever do that again," she screams, still holding me in her painful grip. I can't answer her immediately. Yes, my mind screams, yes, I promise. Just please stop. I try to beg her forgiveness, but my mouth refuses to obey. All I can do is lay there, curled up in a ball, as the horrific pain courses through my body.

She drops her hand and I feel like I have been dropped into a tank of cold water, and the switch from being on fire to icy cold shocks my body so that every muscle spasms. She kneels down beside me and puts her face in front of mine.

"Never again," she says. Her face has contorted into someone unrecognizable. If she looked that way all of the time, I doubt that my attraction to her would be so strong. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." I struggle to breathe normally, trying to will my muscles to relax. "I promise."

Tori stands up and runs back into the house, slamming the door behind her. It is several minutes before I have enough control over my body to sit up, and by then Uncle Dylan is coming out of the house.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

"Nothing," I say.

"Nothing, my ass. Tori is hysterical." He holds out his hand to me and I flinch, fearing another attack, but when the pain fails to come I realize that he is only trying to help me up. I take his hand and get to my feet. I am still weak and it takes all of my effort to stay standing once Uncle Dylan lets go.

"Is she okay?"

"I don't know. She's threatening to leave. Says she's too dangerous." Uncle Dylan shrugs his shoulders. "Gregory is talking to her now. What happened?"

"It was my fault," I say. I tell Uncle Dylan exactly what happened. I left out a few more personal thoughts of mine, as well as what I had seen in Tori's mind. When I finish Uncle Dylan just stands quietly for a moment and then laughs. I, for one, do not find any of it funny.

"We call that the Death Grip," he says. "Hurts, don't it?"

"Yes. A lot."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I know."

"It's happened to you?"

"Yes," he says, "and I hope I never have to feel that pain again. You're lucky she likes you, it gets worse."

Worse than what I had just gone through? I don't see how it could possibly have been worse. "Could she have killed me?"

"If she wanted to, yes. It is hard though. We only call it the Death Grip because it makes you want to die."

"When will I learn it?"

"You won't. Only Necros have that capability," he says.

There is a lot I still don't know, especially when it comes to the Necros. "I thought they only had influence over death."

"That's true." He smiles. He puts his arm around me and begins leading me inside. "There are very few Necros who can do it on that level."

"What do you mean?"

He stops and faces me with his hands still on my shoulders. "There are hundreds of thousands of dead cells floating around in your body, waiting to be excreted. Blood cells, tissue cells, nerve cells. An advanced Necro can call them forth."

"Really?" I am amazed by what he is saying. "So what I felt was all of those dead cells trying to leave my body at the same time?"

"Yes."

"Wow," I say.

"Wow is right." He turns and slings his arm over my shoulders again. "Let's get inside. You need to lay down for awhile."

I don't argue. I still feel weak and am suddenly glad that Uncle Dylan is next to me. I am sure I would have fallen otherwise. He helps me all the way to my room. I see no sign of Tori, Gregory, or Sam as we walk through the house and down the hallway. I sit down on the edge of the bed and kick my shoes off. Uncle Dylan picks up my father's novel and tosses it on the bed next to me.

"You really should get up to speed," He says.

"I know." I pick up the novel and look at the back cover, at the picture of my father on the back porch, and it makes me feel homesick. Uncle Dylan leaves the room and closes the door behind him. I prop my head up on the headboard and lay down to read. I hope that Tori isn't still angry with me. I hope that Gregory can convince her to stay.

Chapter 15

Even after I hear everyone back in the dining room, I stay on the bed to read my father's novel. I can admit, now that I have read several chapters, it really is good. The story Dad tells of an ancient priesthood, predating Christ, locked in constant struggle with the Necros, battling for control of a sacred item known only to the Keeper. I wonder what Sam must be feeling. To know that everything in these books actually took place must be a hard pill to swallow. Hell, I had never read any of the books, and it threw me for a loop. But that is wrong, isn't it?

Honestly, I have been engrossed in my training, barely thinking about my parents or what I was training to do. I laugh out loud as I read of Gabriel, the main character in Dad's novel, and of the training he endures at the hands of the Priesthood. But Gabriel had been born into it, and had grown up knowing that he would one day be initiated into the Priesthood, to complete his training and eventually take over his father's seat on the Council. I, on the other hand, have only just found out about all of this, but I must admit it is pretty cool. Suddenly, a thought occurs to me. If all of these stories are true, did that make Gabriel my father?

A soft knock on the door. I dog-ear the page and set the book down. "Come in," I call.

The door cracks open just enough to let Tori's face through. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course."

She closes the door behind her and takes a seat at the desk. She looks over at the book on the bed and smiles. "That's the best one, I think."

"You've read my Dad's books?"

"Of, course." Her face darkens again. "It is required reading for Necros."

"Why?"

"The Elders want to make sure that the young ones have enough hate for the Priesthood to keep their plans in motion. So, we read of your father's exploits." She looks me in the eyes again. "Could you imagine always hearing stories where the hero is praised for destroying your people?"

"I suppose that would be hard on morale," I say.

"Yes, it makes us hate the Priesthood. The Priests are like bogeymen to Necro children," she says. "Our parents even tell us if we misbehave the Priests will come and take us away."

"Wow."

"Yeah, helluva way to grow up. Scared of being involved in any kind of religion."

"But you eventually learn the truth, right?"

"Ha. The truth as the Elders dictate." She leans back in the chair and puts her feet up on the desk.

"But you didn't believe them."

She stares up at the ceiling for a moment. "No. I did for a long time, though." She takes her feet off of the desk and pulls the chair closer to me. She leans forward to look me in the eyes. "I'm sorry for hurting you."

Me too. "No biggie. I'm sorry for trying to pry."

"It's okay," she says and leans back in the chair. "You need to know, I guess."

"If you don't want to--"

"No. You need to know."

"Okay," I say.

She moves to put her feet up on the bed, then reconsiders and takes off her shoes. "Do you mind?" I shake my head. She puts her feet up next to me and begins to tell me her story.

Her father was a Necro and his father before him and so on. "My family doesn't hold a position among the Elders, but we were a powerful family just the same. He was a Persuader." She explains that the Necros use groups of their own to intimidate businessmen and politicians into doing what they wanted. The Necros had acquired a vast amount of wealth through the years, and always strive to maintain and grow their empire.

"I thought they wanted the Relic," I say.

"Yes, they do, but there has been a sort of stalemate between the Necros and the Priesthood for centuries. In the meantime, they lust after wealth and power."

She tells me that she had trained all of her life to one day take her father's place as the leader of the Persuader clan, but she couldn't receive her title as birthright alone. She would have to work her way up the food chain just like everyone else.

"It was my first mission," she continues. "It was supposedly an easy one. I led a group of Persuaders to a congressman's home in Colorado. We threatened his life if he didn't vote the way the Elders wanted him to. It should have been easy, but this guy wasn't scared."

She tells me how she sent one of the other Persuaders into the house to get his wife and daughter. They brought them out into the front yard and made them kneel before her. Tears begin to well up in her eyes as she remembers that night.

"I wasted no time in showing him that we were not negotiating. Just as I had been taught. I drew my blade across his wife's throat and ordered one of my men to grab his daughter." She stops and stares at the ground for a moment before continuing. "I signaled Mike to put his knife to the little girl's throat, and I demanded that he change his mind."

I try to swallow the lump that is forming in my throat. Tori looks so sad telling me this that I almost wish she would stop. But I listen on quietly.

"The man still refused in spite of us killing his wife, and threatening to kill his daughter." She smiles. "A man of integrity."

She gave up when she saw that it was doing no good. One of the other Persuaders reached for the little girl, but Tori stopped him. "I don't know why. Something in her tear streaked face reminded me of my mother and I couldn't bring myself to let her come to anymore harm."

"Mike took this as a sign of weakness and didn't wait until the mission was over to make his move. He didn't have to. The rest of the crew saw everything, and Mike was justified under our

laws to kill me for treason on the spot. I knew that I couldn't defeat him, much less all of them, so I ran. They chased me through the streets until they had me cornered in an ally. That's when your father showed up."

I smile. "He saved you."

She looks back down at the floor. "Sort of. Two of the Persuaders attacked me while the rest went after your father. He stood his ground and defeated them easily. Until that moment, I had never seen a Priest, and didn't know that anyone was truly capable of defeating a Necro."

"But, you read my Dad's books. He defeats Necros in them all of the time."

"Yes, but we were told that all of his stories were written as fiction because he twisted the ending to make the Priesthood look good."

"Oh," I say. "Then what happened?"

"Mike killed me."

I am speechless for a moment. He killed her? Then how is she sitting here telling me all of this? I begin to doubt the truth of anything she's telling me. "Excuse me?"

She tears her gaze away from the floor and looks at me again. She smiles. "Some Necros are able to not only control a dead body, like the raccoon, but can actually inhabit one if it is fresh enough."

"So..."

"Yes, I'm dead."

This is getting a little too ridiculous. I know that I have seen a lot in the past few weeks, but this is a little bit more than I am willing to believe. "Yeah, right," I chuckle.

She rolls her eyes at me and stands up. She grabs my head in her hands and pulls it to her chest. My heart begins to quicken. Her breasts feel soft on my cheek. I didn't want her to let go.

"What do you hear?" she asks.

"Hear? I don't hear anything." And then I realize that I really don't hear anything. No heartbeat. I pull away and look up into her eyes. "You're really dead?"

"Yes." She sits back down in the chair and continues. "I was lucky. I was not nearly powerful enough to expect to accomplish it, but there was a young girl two blocks away dying of an overdose. I waited on this plane until she passed over and then tried to jump in. And presto." She waves her hands up and down her own body. "I was too weak in the new body to fight when your father found me. I thought he was going to finish me off, but instead he saved me and sent me to live out here near Dylan."

I am amazed at what I am hearing. "So you're living in someone else's dead body?"

"Yes. My spirit is not perfectly joined with it though. That's why I am stronger and faster. I can push the body beyond what I could if I were perfectly bound."

"How come it doesn't decompose?" I ask.

"Ah," she says and raises a finger in the air. "That is a good question and the answer is blood."

"Blood?"

"Yes, as long as there is blood in the body, I can make the heart pump enough to circulate it and keep the flesh fresh."

Only one thought pops into my head. I almost don't want to say it out loud, sure that it will make me feel stupid, but I blurt it out anyway. "So you're a vampire?"

She thinks about that for a moment and then shakes her head and laughs. "I guess you could say that, although I don't drink the blood. I inject it."

"But you could drink it if you wanted to?"

"Yes, I believe that's how the Elders do it."

I am torn whether this new information makes me like Tori less, or makes me want her even more. At the moment, it seems irrelevant. I want to ask her so many questions, not the least of which was why she hadn't told me this before. But, any questions will have to wait. There is a loud knock at the door that can only be Gregory.

"Come in," I say.

He pokes his massive head through the door. His eyes are wide and there are beads of sweat forming on his forehead and upper lip. He looks pale.

"Dylan needs you in the study."

"Me?" Tori asks.

He glances back and forth between us. "Both."

His head disappears back into the hallway and I look at Tori questioningly. She shrugs her shoulders and smiles until Gregory pops his head back in.

"Now," he says forcefully, almost yelling at us.

Chapter 16

Uncle Dylan is just hanging up the phone when Tori and I come in. He looks up at us and I can see that he is just as pale as Gregory was. My stomach starts to turn. There must be something wrong. Is it about my parents? Did they find them? Are they alive? He motions for us to sit in front of him.

"I have bad news," he says.

"They're dead aren't they?" I ask.

"What? Who..." His brow furrows in confusion until he realizes what I'm talking about. "Oh. No, I don't think so."

"They know he's here," Tori says.

"Yes."

"Know who's here," I ask. "Me?"

"Yes." Uncle Dylan runs his fingers through his hair. "I thought that we would have more time, but we must leave now."

"I don't understand," I say.

"I know."

There is a moment when we just looked at each other across the desk. "Well? Are you going to fill me in?"

Uncle Dylan sighs. "When I contacted Walter Knox to tell him that your father was in Costa Rica, I told him that you had gone to stay with a cousin in Colorado."

"I have a cousin in Colorado?"

"No, but the Necros don't know that. Or didn't anyway."

"So now they know I'm with you," I say. "So what?"

"The problem is that they will do whatever it takes to get your father to tell them the location of the Relic. And if they can't use your mother as leverage, then they will try you next."

I wonder how much my mother has suffered already at the hands of the Necros in their attempts to get my father to talk. Had she felt the pain of the Death Grip? The thought of it sent shivers down my spine. I am more determined than ever to find them and rescue them. Why run when we could capture a Necro and find out where they were holding my parents? I am about to voice my opinion when Gregory rushes into the room and slams the door behind him so hard that it makes all of us jump.

"Good," Uncle Dylan says. "I'm glad you're here. Pack the van and get ready to leave immediately."

Gregory frowns and shakes his head. "It's too late for that." He walks over to the window and opens the curtain. It is pitch black outside and I can't see a thing. Gregory must have seen the confusion on our faces. He runs out the door and I see a light turn on outside the window. He comes back in and once more pulls the curtain aside.

Now that the lights are on, I can see a figure moving slowly up the driveway toward the house. I stand up and go over to the window to see who it is. There is more than one person coming

toward the house. Behind the figure that I first saw, there are several more, staggered in a haphazard “v” formation, following behind.

The figure comes closer and I start to see more details. He is dirty and the suit that he wears is tattered and torn. And so is the skin on his face. I can see his teeth through the large hole in the side of his face and his nose is completely gone. I look at his hands. Nothing left but bone. The others behind him are the same and the line of them stretched down the driveway and off into the darkness. There are at least ten of them. Maybe more. I turn to Gregory. "Zombies? Are you shitting me?"

"Da." He grins. "Revenants."

"Go put whatever you can in the van," Uncle Dylan says.

Gregory lets go of the curtain and rushes out of the room without another word. Uncle Dylan stands up and walks over to the bookcase directly behind the desk. He grabs hold of both sides and leans all of his weight against it. It slides to the side. Behind it is a hidden room about the size of my bedroom back home. Looking in, all three walls are lined with racks of weapons in all different varieties. Pistols, rifles, shotguns and several that are unrecognizable to me, but look like they could bring down a tank or small aircraft.

"Jesus," I say.

I look over at Tori. She is staring into the room with a smile on her face and looks like she is about to drool. Even though it is the most inappropriate time, I find my self wishing and wondering what I could do to make her look at me with the same longing. *Snap out of it*, I thought, *There are zombies coming*.

Uncle Dylan goes into the little room and emerges with two pistols. He throws one to each of us. I almost drop mine when it hits my hands, but Tori catches hers expertly and immediately drops the magazine out. Satisfied that it is fully loaded, she slams the magazine back into the pistol and pulls back the slide. Not wanting to seem like I don't know what I'm doing, I repeat her motions with my own pistol.

When Uncle Dylan emerges again, he is carrying two automatic rifles. One of them I recognize, an AR-15. I have used one of those before in training with Gregory. Luckily, he tosses that one over to me and gives the other one to Tori. We once again check the magazines in the rifles. Tori shoves her pistol into the waistband of her jeans and I follow her lead.

Uncle Dylan takes out two more pistols and a rifle. This one has a large scope that looks like it could see for a couple of miles. He shoves the barrels of the pistols into his front pockets. I'm not sure that they are going to stay in there like that, but I don't say anything. He swings the rifle over his shoulder and pulls the bookcase back to its original position.

"Let's head to the garage," he says.

Chapter 17

We follow Uncle Dylan out of the study and into the hallway. Gregory is coming back through the door that leads to the breezeway, and Uncle Dylan quickly pulls out one of his pistols and points it at the door until he realizes who it is.

He is out of breath and sweating profusely. "We must hurry."

Uncle Dylan hands Gregory the other pistol and then unslings the rifle and hands that over as well. There is a sound of breaking glass from somewhere deeper in the house that makes us all look in that direction. "Okay, let's go."

Uncle Dylan opens the door to the breezeway. Tori goes through first and I follow behind her. Gregory and Uncle Dylan bring up the rear and close the door behind them. There is a loud noise from above and we all point our weapons toward the roof, ready to blast away anything that may come through.

"Necro," Uncle Dylan says.

"I'll take care of it." Tori sidesteps past the rest of us headed back toward the house, gun still trained at the ceiling.

Uncle Dylan grabs hold of her arm as she tries to squeeze past him. "No. We need to get to the van."

"But they're controlling the--"

The window facing the back yard disappears and I quickly swing my rifle in the direction of the shattering glass. The Revenant that is trying to climb through the window couldn't have been dead for very long. A black man whose lifeless flesh is still mostly intact, with no signs of decomposition. I aim carefully and pull the trigger. The shot echos loudly inside of the breezeway and for a moment my hearing is completely gone. The bullet catches the thing in the throat, ripping most of it away. The Revenant rocks backwards for a second but then continues its attack, reaching out to grab any part of us it can get its hands on.

Uncle Dylan takes a step past me and shoots it in the head. This shot is much quieter than mine had been and I can't tell if the pistol was just quieter or if my hearing has been damaged by the first report. A small hole appears in the center of its forehead, followed by a massive splattering as the back of its head explodes onto the face of another Revenant standing behind him.

Uncle Dylan turns to me. "Heart or head. Okay?"

I nod my head. "Heart or head," I repeat.

The opposite window shatters and a much more decomposed torso emerges into the breezeway. Behind it are several more, all clamouring to get in to us. Tori takes the top of its head off and it collapses half in and half out of the window. A second one, this time a woman, quickly takes its place. I feel a shove in the middle of my back and Uncle Dylan tells me to go. For a moment I am frozen, looking down the breezeway toward the door to the garage. The Revenants are tearing at each other to come in on both sides.

I get shoved again, but this time it is Tori. She pushes me past the windows toward the door. A Revenant grabs my shirt, but Tori continues to push until the fabric finally gives and my body is slammed against the door. I turn around and a Revenant has a fist full of her hair and she is yanked back. Gregory fires a shot that tears its arm in half, allowing Tori to reach me near the door. She reaches up and pulls the hand, still gripping, out of her hair and throws it down.

"Hurry," she yells.

A Revenant manages to squeeze and claw its way through the jam that they've created in the windows and falls out of the writhing mass and onto the floor in between us. Uncle Dylan shoots it in the head and it falls limp. Another Revenant at the front window is making progress, but Tori takes it out before it gets a chance to get all the way through.

"Go get in the van," Uncle Dylan says, "We'll catch up."

Before either of us has a chance to argue, Uncle Dylan and Gregory turn around and disappear back into the house. Tori looks at me briefly, then takes a shot at another Revenant that has made it into the breezeway.

"Go," she says.

"But--"

"GO."

I turn around and open the door to the garage. I wait for Tori to take down one more and get inside. I close the door and slide the deadbolt closed. It doesn't take long before the breezeway is overrun and they are beating on the door.

Tori runs toward the van and opens the side door. There is more sound of breaking glass and I look toward the wall on the other side. A rotting arm is grasping at the air through the window, but it is too small and too high for it to get in. I join Tori at the van and look inside. There is room for all four of us, but it will be a tight squeeze. Gregory has loaded the back with wooden crates filled with whatever he could pack on such short notice.

The Revenants in the breezeway are smashing into the door, and in between the pounding I can hear the door begin to crack. I wonder how long we have until they burst through.

"Where did they go?" I ask.

"I don't know, but get in so we're ready when they get here."

I walk around to the side of the van and am about to get in when we hear a knocking from within a metal locker on the wall. Tori aims her rifle at the locker and steps to the front of the van, careful to leave enough of the van in between her and the locker. The knocks get louder and then turns to forceful banging. I aim my rifle at the locker as well, and I come far too close to pulling the trigger before I realize that it is Gregory trying to squeeze through the small locker. Uncle Dylan is behind him, still coming up the hidden steps within the locker. He must see my confusion.

"Secret tunnel from the house," he says. "It pays to always be prepared."

"I guess so," I say.

"Get in," he says, pointing to the van.

He follows Gregory to the back of the garage, and on a three count begin to pull down on chains that are hanging on either side of the garage. I hadn't noticed them before, but I suppose that was the point. They tug frantically at the chains and I am surprised when the entire back wall begins to inch it's way up and out.

"Brian, get in," Tori calls from inside the van.

I jump in and get into the driver's seat. I start the van just as the breezeway door cracks down the center. It won't hold them back much longer, and Uncle Dylan and Gregory have the back wall halfway up, revealing a long tunnel that stretches out into the darkness, but it's not high enough for the van to clear it. *Come on, Come on.*

The breezeway door gives way just as Uncle Dylan is motioning me to drive through and Revenants pour into the garage. They immediately head toward Gregory and Uncle Dylan. I put the van in drive and take it into the tunnel. I stop just inside and watch for them in the mirror. Gregory is walking backwards firing into the mass of rotting bodies. Even without aiming through the scope, he hits every one of his targets and Revenants are falling over left and right.

Uncle Dylan makes it to the van first, and Tori helps him climb in through the side door. Once he is in, he takes Tori's rifle and leans back out the door and begins to fire. His aim is as good as Gregory's and he is able to hold the Revenants off long enough for Gregory to jump in. He closes the door behind him and looks at me.

"Go, go, go," he shouts, and I slam my foot on the gas and speed down the tunnel.

Chapter 18

Uncle Dylan only has to point to give me directions once we leave the tunnel, which to my surprise opened right onto a street, the only attempt at camouflage being some graffiti along the last few feet of the walls. The gunfire in the breezeway, and then in the close confines of the garage, has rendered me nearly deaf. It must have affected everyone else as well, because no one even attempts to speak until we are well on our way out of town.

I continue to drive for an hour or so until we stop to fill up the gas tank. Uncle Dylan makes us get rid of our cell phones, in case the Necros have a way to track them, and Tori confirms that they do. He takes over driving then, and once we are back on the road, it isn't long before I pass out.

I think it is the sunlight, reflecting in my eyes from the mirror, that finally woke me. The setting sun is just at the right angle behind us to bounce bright orange light sharply off the rear view mirror and into my face. I have to hold my hand in front of my eyes just to be able to see around me. I have no idea where we are, but the land all around us is flat and I can see for miles in every direction. There are storm clouds on the horizon, but God knows how far away they really are.

Gregory is in the seat next to me sleeping, and Tori has somehow curled into a ball on the floor between our two seats. I take off my seat belt and climb into the front next to Uncle Dylan, trying not to fall on top of Tori as I go.

"Where are we?"

"New Mexico."

"And where are we going, exactly?" I asked.

"Atlanta."

I wait a moment for him to elaborate further, but he doesn't. "And, why are we going to Atlanta?"

He lets out a heavy sigh and looks over at me. "The Council found out that your parents are being held in a bank there."

"In a bank?"

"Well," he shrugs his shoulders, "a bank building, anyway."

I am a bit confused as to how you could get two kidnapped people into a bank unnoticed, but Uncle Dylan explains that the majority of the bank's corporate management are Necros, all of the members of the board are, and the bank's CEO is one of the two High Priests vying for the open position among the Elders. It wouldn't have been difficult at all. It sure gave the term "evil bankers" a whole new meaning.

"I don't understand," I say. "If they can do all that, why don't they just have a zombie apocalypse or something and take over?"

"Because that's not really what they want."

"What do they want, other than the Relic?"

"It's complicated," he says.

"Well, explain it to me. What else do you have to do? It's a long way to Atlanta."

Uncle Dylan grunts and rubs the stubble that is now growing on his face. "I guess you're right. What do you know about Moses?"

"Not much," I admit.

He spends the next hour or so filling me in on history that I hadn't yet read in my father's novels, and some that would never be in them. "You have to understand that Moses was raised by an Egyptian priest," he says. "Raised to be an Egyptian priest."

I vaguely remember something about Moses being found in a river or something, but like I said, I have never been much into religion. Uncle Dylan explains that Moses had continued the practices of the Egyptians, even as he was wandering in the desert. Not only did he practice the rituals, modified to incorporate the God of his people, but he taught it in secret to a few of his trusted friends and advisers. The first Council. The modified Egyptian rituals were passed down in secret. Usually within families, but not always.

"In your dad's books, the conflict with the Necromancers began in the Middle Ages," he says. "But in reality, it began at the Crucifixion."

"Of Jesus?"

"Yes. Well, actually before the Crucifixion."

Almost unanimously the council at that time had known what was to come, but there was disagreement as to what they were going to do when it was over. Over that, the council was split evenly with the eldest of them wanting to take the body to the Temple and preform a ritual of reanimation.

"They wanted to make Jesus a zombie?" I ask.

"Not quite," he says. "They could reanimate the body by thought, just as Tori can, but this ritual. This was more than just control of the body."

"You mean the soul?"

"Or spirit," he says. "Whatever you prefer."

Uncle Dylan remains quiet and allows me to fully absorb what he has just told me. "So, the Resurrection?"

"That was going to happen on it's own, and didn't really involve his physical body. The Necros wanted to preform the ritual after the Resurrection."

"Why?"

Tori's voice from the back startles me. "The Second Coming."

I turn in my seat to look back. There were thin, red lines on one side of her face from laying it on the floor. I smile. I don't think it is funny, though. Somehow, on her it is beautiful. More than beautiful. There is something safe and normal about those thin red lines.

"So, they thought that they could force it to happen?"

"Yeah," she says. "They could have, too."

"But the Priesthood stopped them."

"Yes, they stole the body."

Uncle Dylan nods his head. "And she said unto them, they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him." He looks over at me and grins. "No body, no ritual."

"So, this is all over a disagreement that happened over two thousand years ago?" I ask.

"Yes," Tori says. "They never gave up."

"Why not? You'd think they would have gotten over it by now."

"The Relic."

Uncle Dylan looks at Tori in the rear-view mirror. There is a knowing look that passes between them, a silent conversation that I am not a part of.

"What?" I ask.

"Tell him," Tori says.

Uncle Dylan takes a deep breath. "I lied when I told you I didn't know what the Relic was." I am slightly hurt, but somehow not shocked at all to hear this. "It's a tooth."

"A tooth? From..."

"Yep. That's pretty much all that's left after all this time. That and a few scraps of cloth. That is what your father keeps hidden."

"Can they do the ritual with just a tooth?"

"Yes." Uncle Dylan is silent for a moment. "That's why we have to go get him. The Council would rather your parents die than for the Necros to find out where it is."

We are silent for a long time. I guess that they wanted the fact that my father is expendable to really sink in, but the silence isn't necessary. The silence makes me even more uncomfortable. I am relieved when Gregory wakes up to rummage around in a small box in the back. He manages to find a candy bar and shoves the whole thing in his mouth. "I'm hungry," he says.

"Me, too," Tori says, "and I have to pee."

"Okay, there's a rest stop up ahead." Uncle Dylan turns on his blinker and veers into the right hand lane. "I can use a pay phone to call the Council while we're there." He reaches over and pats his hand on my leg. "Don't worry. We're going to get them back."

Until that moment, I had never thought otherwise.

Chapter 19

There isn't a pay phone at the rest area. Uncle Dylan and Gregory are both surprised, but I'm not.

"What if we would have needed help?" Uncle Dylan says.

I think to tell him that everybody has cell phones now, everyone but us, and decide not to. We stay at the rest area a little longer than we need to. I'm not sure if Uncle Dylan is giving everyone a chance to stretch after being packed into the loaded van, or if we really are waiting while Gregory completely empties out the vending machine, one package at a time.

Uncle Dylan lets Gregory take over driving and when we finally get back on the road, the mood in the van has changed. It seems that the fresh air has put us all in better spirits and we spend the next few hours talking and laughing about nothing in particular. Almost as if we are intentionally avoiding any mention of where we were going or why. To a stranger, we could have been just another family on vacation, laughing, singing and telling each other jokes. We drive

through the night and are somewhere in Oklahoma, I think, when the reality of our trip comes back to shatter our happy family facade.

"We are being followed," Gregory says.

The smiles fall from our faces and Uncle Dylan peers into the side mirror. I try to turn around to look out the back window, but the weapons and other gear that Gregory has packed are blocking most of the view. Tori must have had the same thought, because she climbs over her seat and rearranges some of the boxes, giving us a clear view. The sun is beginning to come up and is giving off just enough light for us to make out the two SUVs that are driving side by side behind us, blocking the few cars that are on the road from passing them.

"Slow down," Uncle Dylan says.

Gregory lets off of the gas and slows the van's speed. The SUVs gain on us slightly at first, but then adjust their speed to match ours. We stay this way, all of us watching the SUVs behind us, as they began to block more and more of the traffic behind them.

"Alright," Uncle Dylan says, "Let's go."

He reaches under his seat and comes up with his pistol. Tori and I exchange a brief look and then quickly grab up our own weapons. Gregory steps on the gas hard enough that I almost lose my balance, but Tori puts her arm out to steady me. Even in the situation we are in, her touch sends goosebumps up and down my body. *You need to focus.*

"Here they come," Gregory says.

I look out the back window to see the SUVs gaining speed and closing the gap between us. One of the cars behind them tries to pass when the SUVs momentarily slip from their formation, but they are quickly cut off by the trailing SUV. I think for a moment that the little blue car will lose control and veer off the road, but the driver takes the hint, as do the other cars behind them, and slows to allow the SUVs to have control of the road.

The lead SUV pulls along side of us, and one of the occupants crawls out of the sun roof and balances himself on the top of the vehicle. Gregory jerks the steering wheel toward the car and it swerves away, but not before we hear the sound of the car-surfing Necro as he lands on top of the van. There is a muffled gunshot and a jagged hole appears in the van's roof. Tori flings herself onto the floor and hugs the side of the van, grabbing and swinging her weapon up as she goes.

Uncle Dylan fires his pistol at the roof, making several smaller holes around the first. I am frozen for a moment, not sure of what to do, until Tori sits up, grabs hold of my shirt and throws me down to the opposite side of the van.

I stare up at the roof as the Necro pushes his fingers into one of the bullet holes and uses it as a starting point to rip the metal of the van up and away. He must be like Tori. He is much stronger and faster than a normal person. In seconds, he has the hole large enough for me to see his face clearly.

I sit up just enough to bring up my own weapon and aim it at the roof. The Necro has disappeared and I can no longer see where he is. I fire one exploratory shot and hear a loud thump as he falls onto the roof. Tori doesn't hesitate and rolls toward the center of the van directly beneath the hole. She waits until the Necro finally peers down into the hole and fires one shot. The Necro's snarling face disappears in a red mist. I hear his body roll down the roof of the van and fall off of the back, and there is a short squealing of tires as someone behind us slams on their brakes and swerves to avoid the body. I try to get to my feet, but I am thrown back down as Gregory slams the van into the other SUV, sending it swerving off into the median in a cloud of dust.

"Here," Tori says and tosses me another clip for my weapon.

I eject the magazine, even though I haven't even come close to emptying it, and slam the new one into the rifle. The second SUV comes along side with another Necro balancing on the roof.

"Hold on," Gregory says and slams on the brakes. I have to brace myself on the back of his seat to keep from flying into the front. The Necro jumps from the roof of the other vehicle and flails his arms and legs in flight as he realizes that his target is no longer beneath him. I watch as he flies past the windshield of the van and lands on the road in front of us. His momentum carries his limp body as it slides down the pavement for a seemingly impossible distance behind the SUV.

The SUV stops and turns abruptly when the driver realizes that our van has stopped. Gregory waits until it has completed its turn and then lays on the gas again. Tori stands up and rips at the jagged edges around the hole in the roof until it is large enough to climb through. She reaches behind her and opens and closes her hand quickly. Realizing that she is waiting for me to hand her a weapon, I shove my own rifle into her hand. She pulls it up and has just enough time to fire several shots into the grille of the oncoming SUV.

There is only a small puff of steam, but it decelerates and rolls to a stop in the emergency lane. The driver uses the last of the vehicle's momentum to try to turn into our path, but Gregory smashes the van into its front and it spins off of the road as we speed past.

"Is everyone okay?" Uncle Dylan asks.

Tori runs her hands up and down her body, checking for wounds and then looks over at me. "Yes," she says.

"Good. Gregory, we need to get off this road."

Gregory nods once.

"Take the next exit."

Chapter 20

Gregory turns off of I-40 and we find a little diner across from a run-down motel. We all order breakfast while Uncle Dylan walks across the street to the motel. I am all for continuing the trip uninterrupted, but Uncle Dylan insists that we all need some rest before we go any further. Gregory, Tori and I do not wait for Uncle Dylan to virtually inhale the food that the waitress brings to us. When he comes back, we wait for him to catch up with his meal before anyone finally speaks.

"They know where we are," Tori says finally. "What else do they know?"

"That is exactly what I was thinking," Uncle Dylan says.

He exchanges another look with Tori, laden with messages that Gregory and I aren't privy to. "Will you?" Uncle Dylan asks Tori.

"Yes," She pushes her plate away from her. "I probably shouldn't be eating this, then."

"What?" I ask. Tori looks at me for a moment then casts her eyes down at the table. I look at each of them in turn, but no one would offer an answer.

We finish our food in silence and when we are done, Uncle Dylan pays the bill and we drive across the street to the motel. I follow Uncle Dylan and Tori into the room while Gregory gets a few bags from the van.

It is a tiny room with two single beds and a TV that looks older than me. There is one small table and a single chair, but other than that the room is not equipped with any other convenience. No microwave, refrigerator, or even a coffeemaker. There is an air conditioning unit that is missing its cover built into the wall under the window, and there is a smell of mildew that I can see is coming from the carpet underneath it.

Uncle Dylan goes straight to the sink on the far wall next to the bathroom and begins washing his hands. Not just his hands, but all the way up to his elbows. Tori sits on the edge of the first bed. I grab the chair from next to the table, slide it over closer to her and sit down.

"What is going on?" I ask.

She still won't look at me. "We need to find out what they know."

"Okay, so how do we do that?"

Uncle Dylan turns off the water and comes back over to us. "Tori can travel on the astral plane and find out."

"Oh," I say, not really sure what he is talking about, but I have the general idea.

There is a knock at the door, and Uncle Dylan opens it for Gregory. He has one bag in his hand and is shaking his head at Uncle Dylan.

"Are you sure? Did you check in the med kit?"

"Da."

Uncle Dylan sighs and turns to Tori. "We didn't bring any IV equipment."

Tori smiles nervously. "I didn't think so. Guess we'll have to do it the old fashioned way."

"What are you guys talking about?" I ask. I am beginning to get a little frustrated at always being on the outside of an inside conversation. Uncle Dylan looks at Tori, and when it is obvious that she isn't going to answer, he tells me that she will need fresh blood.

"If her body is not as fresh as possible, she might not be able to re-enter it when she comes back," he says.

Gregory hands Uncle Dylan his pocket knife, and I immediately understand what the arm washing was about. He opens it up and inspects the sharpness of the blade with his thumb. "Are you ready?"

Tori nods her head, her eyes still on her feet. Uncle Dylan sits down on the bed next to her and draws the blade across the inside of his forearm. The cut is not long, but blood flows freely from it, tiny droplets falling onto the carpet. Tori glances at me once, almost as if she is embarrassed about what she is about to do. Uncle Dylan raises his arm to her and she grabs it. She puts her mouth over the wound, and there is one last glance at me from the corner of her eye as blood drips down her chin.

I think I see the beginning of a tear form in her eye, but it doesn't fall. She swallows and lets out a sound that I have only heard muffled through walls and on the occasional porn video. Her eyes close and she clutches Uncle Dylan's arm hard to her mouth.

My face begins to get warm and a lump forms in my throat. I know that it is silly of me, but I am, at this moment, extremely jealous. I have to fight the urge to reach over and rip Uncle Dylan's arm away from her. I understand that she needs to drink due to the circumstances, but I thought--wanted--it to be me she drank from. The feeling only gets worse the more she drinks and moans with pleasure. When Uncle Dylan leans his head back and closes his eyes as well, it feels like my heart is breaking.

Gregory walks into the bathroom and grabs a folded wash cloth. When he returns, he separates Tori from Uncle Dylan, not without struggle, and places the washcloth over the wound. I have never liked Gregory more than at this moment. He helps Uncle Dylan to his feet and leads him toward the door. He looks very pale, and I wonder if Tori has taken too much from him.

"Come," Gregory says to me.

"But what about--"

"I will be fine," Tori says. I look at her, but she would only look at the floor. "I need to be alone now."

I hesitate for a moment, but finally stand up and follow Gregory and Uncle Dylan out the door. I look back before it closes all the way and see Tori as she wipes the last traces of blood from her mouth and lick it off of her hand. A fresh wave of anger and jealousy sweep over me, but only for a moment.

When the door clicks shut, I turn around and catch up with Gregory and Uncle Dylan as they walk back to the van. Gregory opens the side door of the van and gets out the first aid kit. Uncle Dylan jumps up into the seat and allows Gregory to bandage his wound.

"Now what?" I ask.

Uncle Dylan tells me that Tori needs to be undisturbed in order to enter the astral plane. He looks at me and adds, "And she needs to be nude and uncovered."

Gregory slaps me hard on the back and laughs. "You think she needs help with that?"

I can feel my face getting red, but I manage to control myself.

"Leave him alone," Uncle Dylan says.

Gregory continues to chuckle, but doesn't say anything else. He repacks the first aid kit and stows it away beneath the seat. We sit in silence until Tori finally opens the door and calls us back in.

She is wearing the same clothes that she had on, but her hair is wet and stringy. I notice that

there is a slight outline on the bed closest to the door where she had laid after she took a shower. She sits down on the edge of the furthest bed and Uncle Dylan sits across from her on the other.

"What did you see?" he asks her.

"They know everything."

"Even the location of the apartment?"

"Yes," she says. "Someone is feeding them information, but I couldn't sense who it was."

"Damn," he says.

"Wait," I say. "Who else knows where we are going other than us?"

Uncle Dylan sighs. "I informed the Council of our plans. We will have to be much more careful. There must be a traitor in their midst."

Chapter 21

Uncle Dylan paces the floor while the rest of us sit silently wondering what our next move will be. Tori makes it clear that going to the apartment that Uncle Dylan owns in Atlanta would be foolish.

"They will be waiting for us."

"I know, I know." Uncle Dylan says.

After about an hour of watching Uncle Dylan walk from one side of the motel room to the other, he finally stops and speaks.

"Gregory, what about your grandfather's cabin?"

"Da. It is close enough to Atlanta, and Necros cannot know of it. My cousin still owns it, but he never goes there."

"How close?" I ask.

"One hour," Gregory said. "Maybe two."

"Do you think you can remember how to get there?" Uncle Dylan asks.

"I think so. It has been many years, though."

"Well then, let's go see if we can find a map," Uncle Dylan says. "We might as well grab some more supplies while we're at it."

Uncle Dylan and Gregory take the van leaving Tori and I in the room alone. I am nervous and happy at the same time to be alone with her. We don't speak for several minutes.

"What is it like?" I finally ask her, more to break the uncomfortable silence, but I am genuinely curious.

"What?"

"The astral plane."

"Oh," she says. "It is like reality, only blurry."

Seeing that I am confused by her answer, she explains further. "You have never been?"

"No."

She tries to describe for me what it is like for her to leave her body. She says that she can see everything as it is, but as if through a pair of glasses that have fogged when you come into a warm room after being out in the cold. She tells me how she is able to travel to any point on Earth that she has a connection to, merely by wishing herself to be there.

"Even if I have never been to a place, if another Necro is present, it will create enough of a connection for me to go there instantly."

"Where did you go?" I ask.

"First I concentrated on the Elders and went there."

"Did they know you were there?"

"Most likely."

She tells me how she had arrived as the Elders were discussing my parents, and what should

be done if anyone was to show up to free them. They stopped their conversation suddenly as if they knew that she was there. She panicked and willed herself to where my parents are.

"I have a connection with your father, so going there was easier," she says.

"Did you see them? Are they okay?"

She looks at the ground, which I don't take as a good sign. Tears well up in my eyes and threaten to spill over. My thoughts go back to the last time I saw them. Nothing can make you feel more guilty about the way you treat your parents like the realization that they may be gone forever. Gone without knowing that you do love them, even if you don't always show it.

"Are they..."

"Yes, they are alive," she says. She looks into my eyes, tears in hers as well. "They are alive, but they have not been treated kindly."

I suppose that is a nice way of saying that the Necros have tortured them extensively. Even though we had never said it out loud, I think we all knew that it was happening. I want her to tell me more, but I am afraid to ask. They are alive. Isn't that all that matters? For now, it would have to do.

Tori comes over and sits down next to me on the bed. She puts her arm around me and pulls me close to her. The tears that I have held back came flooding out to soak her torn t-shirt. She let me cry, not once interrupting to tell me it would be okay. Partially, I think, to allow me to get it out of my system, but also because we both know that it might not.

When the tears no longer come, I turn my head to look up at her. Her eyes are red and swollen from her own tears. I hadn't realized that she cared for my father so much. She strokes the side of my face. Her touch sends comforting warmth through my face and it spreads throughout my body, relaxing the tension that I hadn't realized I was carrying.

"They are worried about you," she says.

I nod my head, not really sure of the words that could convey my guilt at how I had treated them. "I love you."

Judging by the look on her face, the words that just came out of my mouth surprised me more than they did her. She nods and holds me tighter.

"I know," she says. "But you have to know that we can't ever be together like that."

"Why?" I sit up straight, not really wanting to hear what her answer will be. Somehow knowing that I won't be able to change her mind about us, but needing to try.

"You see a girl your own age in front of you," she says, "but I am as old as your parents. It is only this body that is young."

"I don't care. Love doesn't care about age and neither do I," I say.

"And when you age, but my body doesn't? What then?"

I hadn't thought about that. "I won't care."

She turns her face away from me. "You say that now..."

I take her face in my hands and look at her in the eyes. I am momentarily surprised by my own boldness. I would never have dreamed of being so direct with a woman before, but I have changed quite a bit since my parents had been taken. I wasn't that child anymore. I am a man now.

"And I will say it again and again and again. I love you."

Fresh tears fill her eyes. I gently pull her face closer to mine. I hesitate for a split second, afraid of what her reaction might be, but I quickly push those thoughts away and take the chance. I close my eyes and press my lips to hers.

They are as soft as they look, and when they part to allow the tip of her tongue to touch mine, my whole body feels like it has burst into flames. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me in so tight that it hurts a little. My first kiss.

She pushes me away and holds me at arms length. "Promise me you will be careful in Atlanta."

"Won't you--"

"Promise," she says. Her voice cracks and her fingers dig into my arms.

"Yes, I promise."

The lock on the door slaps open and Gregory opens it wide. Tori runs into the bathroom and

closes the door. I have just enough time to wipe my eyes on my shirt before Gregory and Uncle Dylan are putting plastic bags filled with Styrofoam containers on the little table.

"We eat now," Gregory says.

"Da," I say, making both of them laugh.

Gregory tells us stories of his childhood while we eat. He had spent many summers at his grandfather's cabin in northern Georgia. He seems particularly fond of the times his grandfather would take him deep into the woods to a small river where they would fish.

"He would light fire and eat them right there," he says.

Tori dodges any attempt at eye contact with me and after dinner, when Uncle Dylan suggests that we turn in, she is the first one in bed. She gets under the covers and struggles with her clothes until she is finally able to pull them out from under the blanket and throw them onto the floor. Uncle Dylan and Gregory flip for the remaining bed and it is Gregory who ends up sharing the floor with me.

I had been dead tired when we got here, but after what happened with Tori, I just stare at the ceiling. I can't get my mind to shut down. I would like to be able to say that thoughts of my parents and the task ahead caused my insomnia, but in truth it is the knowledge that Tori is so close that keeps me from sleep. Just a few feet away, I could reach up and touch her in the dark, if I dared. And she has no clothes on.

I must have found sleep at some point because Uncle Dylan shakes me awake, and for a moment I don't know where I am. I lash out at him with a speed that I would have never been capable of without Gregory's recent training. I may have gone to bed thinking of Tori, but I had dreamed of the Necros who took my parents.

Gregory puts the dinner containers in the trash can and Uncle Dylan gathers what little they had brought in. I put my shoes on and look around to make sure I haven't left anything, even though I know that I hadn't brought anything in with me.

"Come on," Uncle Dylan says and I follow him out the door and to the van, while Gregory turns in the key. I open up the side door of the van and that's when I notice it.

"Where's Tori?" I ask.

He looks at me as though I should know better than to ask. "She was gone before we got up."

"Gone? Where? What if the Necros have her."

He points to the floorboard of the van. "Would the Necros have let her take a rifle?"

"I don't understand," I say. "Why would she leave like that?"

"To help you."

"Help me? How does that help me?"

He jumps into the van and closes the door behind him. He turns in the front seat so that he can see me through the open side door.

"Now that she has travelled, she is going to be like a beacon on the astral plane for any Necro who wants to find her." He sighs and turns his head. "She knew she would have to leave when she agreed to do it."

My heart feels like it is in my throat and my eyes burn and threaten to tear up again. I climb up into the seat and try not to look into Gregory's eyes as he walks up to the van.

"Why didn't she tell me?" I asks.

"That, I can't answer."

"Why didn't you?"

"It wasn't my place."

Gregory gets in the van and we drive back to the highway. He and Uncle Dylan talk in the front, but thankfully leave me out of the conversation. I can't believe that Tori would leave without telling me. I suppose she did it to avoid having to deal with any begging, which I would gladly have done.

Chapter 22

When we pull into the gas station off I-40 somewhere in Alabama, the sun is beginning to set causing the bottoms of the clouds to take on a shade of purple that reminds me of Tori. Although, to be honest, Tori is all I have been thinking about. I am heartbroken that she left, but am sort of happy that she cared enough to put herself at risk to help me. But, how much of that was for me, and how much was because she feels she owes some debt to my dad?

Gregory goes into the store to get more "supplies," which as I have come to learn means beef jerky and energy drinks, while Uncle Dylan pumps the gas. My legs are beginning to cramp up, so I get out and walk around at the back of the van.

"You okay?" Uncle Dylan asks.

I turn to look at him and try to give him a half smile. "Yeah, I'm alright."

"You know, you can talk to me."

"No, I'm fine." I really don't want to talk at all, especially not about how I am feeling or why.

He looks at me for a long moment then turns his attention back to the pump. I take it as the end of the conversation and start to head back to the other side of the van, but he stops me.

"Did I ever tell you about the time your dad saved my life?" he asks.

"No." I remember Gregory telling me that, though. *Another one with a debt to Dad*, I think.

"We were in high school," he says and smiles. "Our father was just beginning to teach me to work with humans. I was allowed to practice at home, but only with permission. I was told not to try outside of the house until my father thought that I was ready. But, I listened about as well as you do."

"Well, one day I'm walking down the street, scanning everyone who passes, when I get a flash of something familiar, so I turn around and follow the guy to see if I could look deeper." The gas nozzle clicks, signaling a full tank, and he puts it back in its cradle and grabs two blue paper towels from the wall dispenser. "So, I follow the guy into a bar. I remember that I was scared to go in, but no one even looked at I.D.'s back then."

He finishes wiping his hands and uses the towels to screw the gas cap back in place. When he is done he leans his back against the van and looks toward the store. He tells me how he had sat next to the guy in the bar and scanned his mind again. Only this time he found out what had felt so familiar. He came across a memory of the guy with his girlfriend at the time. He chuckles as he tells me, but I'm sure he found it less funny at the time.

"What did you do?" I ask.

"I just waited until he left and then I followed him out," he says. "I walked a little behind him until we were a couple blocks away, and then I took control of him and made him turn down an alleyway. I confronted him about her and he got angry. He came after me, but I got control of him again just as he was about to tackle me."

Uncle Dylan had made the man punch himself and run his own head into the wall several times. He noticed a dead cat by a dumpster and controlled the guy over to it.

"I was just about to make him put that cat on his head when I lost control. As soon as I realized it I started to run out of the alley, but he was too fast."

"Did he kick your ass?" I ask, smirking.

"Yes, and he would have killed me if it wasn't for your dad," he says. "I didn't even notice that the guy had pulled out a knife. He was on top of me, wailing away at my face and then he just froze with a knife up in the air. He looked down at me and said 'I won't tell father this time, but I also won't interfere again.' I was confused for a second, then I looked behind us and there was John standing at the end of the alley."

"Do you really think the guy was going to kill you?"

He thinks about it for a moment. "I don't think your dad would have interfered if he wouldn't"

have sensed the guy's intentions."

I can't imagine my dad as the type of person that would be able to do anything to save even one person's life, let alone two. But there is a lot about him that I guess I haven't bothered to notice. My view of him has changed drastically. I have changed drastically.

The rest of the drive to the cabin I wonder what he will think of me when I see him again. I am sure he will be surprised to see me. The little boy that I was when they were taken wouldn't be expected to ride in and save the day. But I'm not that little boy anymore, am I?

The more I think about it, the more I am determined to save them. I will battle whatever the Necros can throw at me and I will defeat them. I will make Mom and Dad proud, I will impress Gregory and Uncle Dylan with the skills I have learned. And I will get the girl when it is all said and done. Once it is over there would be no need for her to be away any more. That thought alone makes me wish that Uncle Dylan would drive a little faster.

Chapter 23

The cabin is three miles past a "No Trespassing" sign that hangs in the middle of the road on a chain. Gregory gets out to unhook it and takes over driving from there. It is too dark to see anything but what the headlights illuminate directly in front of us. Past the sign, the road is overgrown so bad that several times I wonder if we are actually on a road at all. The cabin itself is in the same state of care as the road. The old wood has warped and looks rotted, and the left side of the porch is not exactly level with the rest of the cabin.

"You go in," Gregory says. "Start fire. I will check generator."

Uncle Dylan goes into the cabin and I unpack the van. When he has the fireplace filled and lit we carry everything inside, which only takes us two trips. The inside is nothing at all like the outside. From what I can see by the firelight, the living area is clean and the furniture is uncovered and free of dust. If it looks like no one had been here in years on the outside, the inside looks like they have just stepped out for a moment. The lights flicker on within minutes and Gregory comes in through a back door. With the lights on I can confirm what I already suspected. The interior is spotless, but definitely lived in recently.

Gregory points me to a room and once the hot water heater has time to heat up, I shower and change clothes. When I come back out Uncle Dylan and Gregory are at the table with bowls of cereal. Fresh milk? It looks like Gregory was wrong about his cousin never coming here. I sit down with them and silently eat two bowls.

"What time do we leave for Atlanta?" I finally ask.

Gregory stops chewing and exchanges a look with Uncle Dylan that I don't like. Uncle Dylan puts his spoon down and leans back in his chair. "We're not going to Atlanta."

"Why? Did they move them?"

"No."

"Did the other Keeper come forward?" I know that if the other Keeper comes forward, it will make Dad's worth as a hostage decrease exponentially.

"No."

"Then why aren't we going?" My heart starts to beat faster.

"The Council has decided that the best course of action is for us to go to Chicago."

"Chicago?"

"There is a man there, a doctor, who has a machine that can extract your memories. They want to scan you and try to find out where the Relic is."

"But he never told me where it was," I say. I am breathing heavier now and my hands begin to shake.

"No, but there may be clues that you have seen or heard and just don't know it." Uncle

Dylan stands up and takes his bowl to the sink. "Maybe you overheard a phone conversation or maybe John said something in front of you when you were too young to remember. His machine can see into memories that you have forgotten."

"What about my parents?"

He looks down at the floor. I look at Gregory, hoping to see something in his face that won't confirm what I my fear, but he avoids my eye as he stands up and goes into the kitchen himself.

"That's bullshit," I say. "I'm not going to Chicago, I'm going to get my parents." My stomach is too full to be dealing with this and threatens to empty itself.

"I know you're upset--"

"I'm going to get them."

"--but you have to calm down."

"I will not," I scream. "You're going to leave my parents to die, and you want me to calm down?"

Uncle Dylan slams his fist on the counter and takes a step toward me that makes me flinch. "You don't think I want to go get them?"

"Obviously, not."

He stares at me, jaw clenched and eyes narrow, for a moment and then he sighs and slumps his shoulders. "It's not my decision."

"Well, I'm not in the Priesthood. I don't take my orders from the Council."

"I can't let you go," he says.

"Why, then, if you won't?"

"Because if you are caught, then the Necros will use a similar machine on you, and then they might have the clues to find the Relic."

"That's all you really care about, isn't it?"

For a moment he looks hurt, but I don't care. I understand the importance of the Council, but I don't see how he can turn his back on his own brother just because they told him to. After everything we have been through, all of the training, after Tori risked her life to help us get here, how could he just turn away now? Council be damned. Relic be damned. I need to go save my parents, and I will do it with or without his help.

I turn my back on him and go into the bedroom to put my shoes on. I come back out and waste no time. I walk straight for the front door, but just as I reach it Gregory appears in front of me, blocking the way. I turn around to try to find the back door that he had entered earlier, but Uncle Dylan is right on top of me.

He reaches out to grab me, but I quickly evade his grasp. I spin around him and continue toward the back of the cabin, but Gregory appears in front of me again. His large hand is around my arm before I can register his movement. He pulls me in close and wraps me in his massive arms. His grip is so tight that it is getting hard to breathe. I stop fighting and go limp, and thankfully, he loosens his grip a little.

"We can't let you leave," Uncle Dylan says.

"You can't hold me all night."

"But, there you are wrong."

Uncle Dylan walks over and opens one of the kitchen drawers. His hand reaches in and comes out with a syringe. It is already filled with whatever it is he's about to inject me with. They had been prepared for my reaction and planned accordingly. He walks over to me, uncapping the needle as he comes. Gregory grabs my head and wrenches it to the side, giving Uncle Dylan access to my neck. I can just feel the needle on my skin, when I surprise myself by spiting in his face.

He slowly wipes his face with his free hand. "I'm sorry," he says and sticks the needle into my neck and squeezes the plunger.

"Fuck you," I say and quickly fade from consciousness.

Chapter 24

I wake up on the couch, a pillow under my head and neatly tucked in. I would probably be comfortable if my arms and legs weren't tied. I try to crack open my eyes so that I can see without letting them know that I am awake. Gregory is across from me in a recliner asleep and Uncle Dylan is sitting at the table with a magazine. I slowly put pressure on whatever it is that is binding me. I wiggle my wrists back and forth, but there is not enough slack to do anything.

Uncle Dylan stands up and I quickly close my eyes and try to control my breathing. I listen as he walks past me and into the bathroom. When the toilet flushes and he walks back through, and I wait until I think he is facing away from me to risk a glance. He takes two steps and freezes. For a moment, I think that he had sensed me looking, but he looks toward the door and shifts into another form.

It is nothing like I had imagined. For a split second a ghost of a wolf appears around his legs, and then quickly solidifies as Uncle Dylan's human body fades away. The wolf begins sniffing the air, and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end. He let's out a long, deep growl.

Gregory jerks his head up and looks at Uncle Dylan. I close my eyes quickly and hope that he didn't notice. Uncle Dylan has shifted back again and I hear his footsteps go toward the door.

"Go look," he says.

I listen as Gregory stands up and goes outside. It is quiet for a few moments. I want to open my eyes, but I don't know if Uncle Dylan has followed Gregory outside, or is still standing in the doorway. There is a muffled voice from outside followed by a gunshot. I open my eyes then, and watch as Uncle Dylan shifts into a bear and lumbers out the door.

Movement from the bathroom catches my eye and I look over to see the small window lifting. The Necros have found us and I am a sitting duck. I don't even have a chance to fight back. I think of yelling for Uncle Dylan, then remember that he is not exactly a friend to me, either. Maybe I should let the Necros take me and try to cut a deal for my parents. Screw Uncle Dylan and the Priesthood.

A gloved hand enters the window and is followed by a tassel of purple hair. My heart races and my arms involuntarily try to reach out to her, and the bindings dig into my skin. She drops silently onto the bathroom floor and peeks out the door. She rushes over to me, and before I realize what she is doing, I am free.

"I--"

"No questions," she says. "We have to go quickly."

I nod. She grabs me by the arm, pulls me to my feet and leads me toward the front door. I look over my shoulder to tell her that Uncle Dylan went that way, but she shoves me forward. When we get to the door she holds me back and quickly looks both ways outside. When she sees no one, she yanks on my arm again and I follow her out into the yard.

She continuously looks in all directions for any sign of Uncle Dylan as we run, crouched low, toward the tree line. We run past several small trees until Tori pushes me behind the first one that is big enough to conceal me. She crouches in front of me and brings her face close to mine. I close my eyes in preparation of a kiss, but she only whispers in my ear.

"My car is at the chain gate. If he comes after us, just keep running."

"I--"

She puts her hand over my mouth and looks around the tree. She still has my mouth covered when I see the mouse come out from behind a log a few feet ahead of me. I try to say something, but Tori's hand clamps down harder. I tap the back of her hand and she finally looks at me. I motion with my eyes behind her and she turns around just as Uncle Dylan shifts back to normal.

Tori grabs me up and pushes me away. "Run," she says.

She jumps at him. He shifts while she is in the air and she slams into a large gorilla. He wraps his arms around her but her momentum sends them rolling onto the ground. I get to my feet and start to run, but a scream makes me stop and turn around. I thought for a moment she may have been hurt, but it is more of a battle cry. She is scratching and biting at the gorilla, but even with her

speed and strength, she is having trouble with him. He gets a firm grip around her and squeezes.

I move forward, not knowing what I can do to help her, but wanting to do something. She grabs him by the throat and when I get closer I can see that she is reaching for a pistol in an ankle holster with her other hand. I don't stop until she finally frees it and presses it to the gorilla's forehead.

Uncle Dylan shifts back into the wolf and Tori drops to the ground. She kicks herself backwards and tries to get back to her feet, but he pounces on her, pinning her down with his paws. He bares his teeth and lunges at her throat. She lifts her forearm to guard her neck and his teeth sink into her skin. She clamps her other hand over the wound and Uncle Dylan lunges a second time. His mouth closes over her throat and my heart stops, but the blood that I expected doesn't flow.

The wolf releases his hold on her and backs away slightly. He looks over at me and snarls. Tori rolls away and reaches for her pistol. The wolf leaps toward her. She swings up with her good arm and swats the wolf out of the air and he slams into a tree. He yelps once and falls onto the ground. Tori scrambles for her pistol and swings it around at the wolf.

He gets up and turns to look at Tori. I hold my breath and wait for the shot, but she doesn't pull the trigger. The wolf lowers his head slightly and hides his teeth from view. He looks at both of us in turn and then runs off into the woods.

I run over to Tori and help her to her feet. Her arm is covered in blood, but the magick that animates her is already repairing the wound.

"I couldn't--"

"I know," I say. "Are you alright?"

She thinks a moment and then nods her head. "Yes. Let's go."

Chapter 25

When we make it to the car, Tori drives while I change into the clothes that she brought for me. Jeans and a button up shirt with a pocket in the front. Something I would have seen at my old school on one of the more popular kids. Something Sam would wear. They are slightly too big for me, but I didn't think that mattered much. That seems to be the way you were supposed to wear them, anyway. I smile to myself. Tori probably knows that.

The small backseat makes it difficult to change, even for me. I ask her why she hadn't stolen a bigger car, but she only rolls her eyes. I climb back into the front seat and she tosses a pistol into my lap. I check the clip like I had been taught, and slap it back in the pistol.

"Thank you for coming back." I missed you. "The Council wants Uncle Dylan to take me to Chicago. They don't care about my parents anymore."

"I know." She looks over at me. "There's something else I need to tell you."

The way she says it makes it clear that there isn't any good news coming behind it. My heart sinks. What else can possibly go wrong? Only one thing I can think of at the moment. "Are my parents still alive?"

She frowns. "I don't know," she says, "But Dylan is the one giving information to the Necros."

I am surprised and disappointed at the same time, but that is quickly replaced by relief. So far, at least, the situation with my parents hasn't gotten any worse. That is the most important thing. "Then why was he going to take me to Chicago?"

"I don't think he was."

"He told me the Necros have another machine," I say. "Would he have taken me there instead?"

"Maybe. It wouldn't matter. The process would kill you no matter which probe they used."
"Kill me?"

"Yes," she says. "The machine works by placing electric probes on certain parts of the brain." She looks over at me. "Once the procedure is over, the brain itself is dead from the voltage required."

The thought of Uncle Dylan turning me over to the Necros is a hard pill to swallow, and worse that he was going to let me die. The training, the promise of rescuing my parents, has it all been just a ruse to keep me occupied until the time came to give me to the enemy? There is a new aching in my chest that Tori's presence doesn't take away. I feel hurt and betrayed.

"Can we get them back by ourselves?" I ask.

She reaches over and takes my hand. "I hope so."

We drive in silence the rest of the way to the bank, and I am glad that she never lets go of my hand. The bank is not what I had imagined. It is several stories high and fits in perfectly with the rest of the skyscrapers around it. The sun is still painting the sky various shades of red and orange, but already there are a lot of people coming in and out of the main doors.

"How are we going to get in?" I ask.

"The same way they are."

We park on the next block and walk back to the bank. I am nervous about having the pistols when we walk in, but Tori assures me that we will be fine. The reality of what we are doing hits me, and I began to sweat much more than the walk would have accounted for.

The interior looks like any other bank with the exception of the guard stationed at a desk in front of the elevators to the left. Tori puts her hand on my back and we head toward him.

"Try to control him," she whispers.

I begin to reach out, trying to make a connection, even before we get to the desk. There are too many distractions, and I am finding it hard to focus. The guard looks up at me from behind the desk. I try not to look like I am staring at him too hard. I need to focus, but he looks like I am making him uncomfortable.

"How can I help you?" he asks.

I make a slight connection, but it is weak and cuts in and out like a bad cell phone connection. "We need to go to the top floor."

His eyes unfocus and he repeats me. "You need to go to the top floor." I get excited, sure that this is going to work, but my jubilation is enough to break the connection. The guard shakes his head. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Well, I--"

"We are going to see his sister," Tori says. "She works on six." She positions herself in front of me and leans over the counter.

"What's her name?" he asks. "I'll call and let her know you're coming."

"Oh, no," she says. Her face softens and her pout portrays an innocence I wouldn't have thought possible. She tightens the muscles in her arms and I am sure that the guard is being treated to an enhanced view down her shirt. "I want it to be a surprise. We're in town from L.A., and she doesn't know we're here yet." She reaches out and touches his arm. I know how powerful that touch can be. "We haven't seen her in years."

The guard's eyes find hers again and he relaxes. "Okay, but sign in," he says and points at a clipboard.

Tori thanks him with a wink and signs a fake name on the paper. I follow her to the elevator doors and press the up button.

"Looks like you have some control powers of your own," I say.

She looks at me and smiles. "I know."

We get into the elevator and Tori presses the button for the twenty-fifth floor. We stop several times for other people to get on or off at different floors, and Tori says hello to them when they get on. Other than that, we ride in silence. When the doors finally open and Tori steps out I am surprised to see a maze of cubicles in front of us.

"Are you sure they're here?" I ask.

"Not here. Next floor up, but this elevator doesn't go there. We'll have to take the stairs."

We walk along the perimeter of the maze until we find the door to the stairwell. I stand watch while Tori disables the fire alarm mechanism on the door. Several people walk past, but no one pays any attention to us at all. Still, I take a look around to be sure that no one is watching before I close the door behind us.

My footsteps echo loudly in the stairwell, but Tori makes no sound. We take the steps two at a time up to the door painted with a giant 26, and Tori runs her fingers around the edge of the door. She grasps the handle and looks at me. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes and lets it out as slowly.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

"I hope so."

Chapter 26

Tori opens the door slowly and looks through the crack. She closes it back quickly and takes a deep breath. "Shit," she says and leans her back against the wall. I crack the door to see for myself. Shit, is right. There is a Revenant standing motionless at the end of the hallway and another one halfway down. There is no way that I can see of for us to sneak inside unnoticed.

"What are we going to do?" I ask.

"I think I can control them enough to keep them still," she says. "As long as you don't touch them."

I don't think that will be a problem. She closes her eyes and when she opens them again, they are bloodshot from the strain of her concentration. "Okay, let's go."

I open the door slowly and enter the hallway. I stop a few feet in and turn around. Tori is closing the door, and trying to be quiet with it. She looks at me and nods her head for me to go. "Remember," she whispers, "don't touch them."

I hug the wall and slowly walk toward the first Revenant. About ten feet away, I turn around to make sure that Tori is still behind me. She grabs the back of my shirt and together we inch our way closer to the Revenant. There is less room between the it and the wall than I first thought. I stand as straight as I can and shuffle my feet sideways like a man inching down a high ledge.

The Revenant looks like it must have come from a motorcycle accident. It's leather jacket is torn in several spots and most of the skin on my side of his face has been removed. The tattered edges of skin still have bits of gravel stuck in the dried blood. The Revenant shifts slightly and I have to suck in my midsection to keep him from touching me.

I look at Tori. She has paused as well, even though she isn't in immediate danger of alerting it. She has her eyes shut tightly, renewing her concentration on her control over it. There is a soft moan from the end of the hallway and I look to see the Revenant there turning toward us. I take my pistol from the back waistband of my jeans, ready to fire at both Revenants if need be, but Tori gets them back under control and they freeze again.

When Tori makes it past, she turns around and takes a knife from her pocket. She quickly grabs it from behind and sinks the blade into the base of its skull, severing its spinal cord. It drops to the ground, motionless. I look down to the end of the hall, but the other Revenant seems not to notice.

When we reach the end of the hall, Tori dispatches the Revenant with no hesitation and looks around the corner. She looks at me and holds up three fingers. She points at the Revenant on the floor between us and then holds up two fingers. She points to herself and then one finger. Two Revenants, one Necro. I nod my head.

She comes closer to me and whispers in my ear. "I won't be able to control the Necro. Once we round this corner, there's no turning back."

"What are we waiting for?"

Tori nods and kisses me on the cheek. She turns the corner and I follow her. The two Revenants are just a few feet away, but the Necro is standing next to a door a few feet down. Tori rushes to the first Revenant, shoves her knife up through the bottom of its jaw and it topples to the floor. The sound of the falling body alerts the Necro and I point my pistol at him.

"Get your hands up," I say. He does as instructed.

Tori has a harder time with the second Revenant as it is more alert and fights back, but in a matter of moments it joins the other one, lifeless on the floor. She walks over to the Necro by the door and relieves him of his weapon. He is visibly scared and nearly knocks me over when Tori tells him to leave. She puts her hands on the door handles and looks over at me. I nod and she swings the doors open and rushes inside.

The room is large and bare of anything except for the long conference table that takes up most of the floor space. The back wall is a giant window that looks out over the rest of the city. In front of it, on the floor, are my parents.

Dad has his arms wrapped around Mom, and is hiding his face in her hair. There is a thick silver band around his neck, almost like a dog collar, fastened with a small padlock to a chain attached to the floor. I start to move toward them when a side door to the room opens up, and a tall man wearing a business suit with slicked back hair walks in. He looks around, unsurprised by what is taking place. Several Necros and Revenants pour through the door behind him and line the wall on either side. Tori and I both aim our pistols at him.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he says and the Necros spread out around the walls pointing their weapons and surrounding us.

I look over to Tori for some clue as to what to do next, but it is clear that there is nothing to be done. Tori sets her pistol on top of the table and holds her hands up. I follow her lead and do the same. The man in the suit looks disappointed, and I wonder if he wasn't hoping that we would resist so that he could watch his Necros shoot us down.

"Good," he says. "Very wise of you." He turns toward the door he had come through. "Is this the one?" he asks.

My heart sinks again, when I see Uncle Dylan emerge from the doorway. He looks at Tori and then to me. "Yes," he tells the man, "that's him."

"Why?" I shout at him. "I trusted you. My father trusted you."

"I--"

"Save your speeches," The man in the suit says. "Take the boy to the lab and kill the girl."

Several of the Necros grab Tori.

"No," I scream. I try to rush to her, but two of the Necros grab me by the arms before I can even get close.

The man in the suit looks at me and chuckles. He leaves the room, followed by Uncle Dylan and the majority of the Necros. I glance at my dad as the Necros lead Tori and I out of the room. He has tears in his eyes, but he manages a smile. He holds my mother's face close to his chest. She is trying to move to see what is going on, but he keeps her close in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry," I say to him as I am pulled through the door and out of the room.

Chapter 27

The Necros force Tori and me down a long hallway that leads in the opposite direction of the way we came. There are no Revenants present, but judging by the dirty footprints on the floor and the overpowering smell of death, it has not been long since they were relieved of duty. I try to catch Tori's attention as we walk past the never-ending doors on either side of the hall, but she only stares blankly at the floor.

We turn a corner and begin to walk down another long hallway when one of the Necros

holding Tori, the one with the dreadlocks, suddenly stops.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" the other Necro holding Tori asks.

"I thought I heard something from behind that door back there."

"So what?" one of the Necros grasping my arms says. "Mr. Blanding said to take them to the lab, not check all of the offices on the way."

"Hang on," Dreadlocks says. "Let me check it out. It'll only take a second."

Dreadlocks walks back two doors down and holds his ear up to the door. He waits for a moment, then turns the knob to open the door. He leans in and looks both ways, and obviously seeing nothing, disappears through the doorway.

I look at Tori, but she is still staring down at the floor. Her other escort begins to get anxious and tells my Necros to watch Tori while he goes to get his partner. My left arm is released as the Necro grabs hold of Tori.

"Hurry up," he says. "If Blanding gets to the lab before we show up, we're all going to go missing."

The second Necro almost runs to the open door and walks in. We all wait in silence for both of them to emerge.

"Something ain't right," The Necro still holding me says.

The sound of a struggle floats down the hallway and my captor tightens his grip on my arm. I almost fall to my knees from the pain. I don't know what nerve he is squeezing, but I wish he would loosen his grip. I try to readjust my arm to relieve some of the pressure, but he only clamps down harder.

"What the hell are they doing?" he asks. "Go check."

The Necro now holding Tori doesn't look too thrilled about going to investigate, but shoves Tori toward us so that my escort can grab her. He walks much more cautiously to the door than the other two had. He calls out to them, but gets no answer. He hesitates for just a moment before stepping through the open doorway.

We don't have to wait long for him to come back out. The vision of his partner flying backwards through the door and hitting the opposite wall hard enough to crack and chip the cement causes the Necro to release his grip on Tori and me.

He pulls a pistol from a shoulder holster and aims it at the open door. Uncle Dylan steps out into the hallway and lifts his hand out toward the Necro. I am as surprised to see him as the Necro is, but Tori is still in a daze and doesn't seem to realize that there is something going on.

"Stop where you are," the Necro says.

Uncle Dylan takes another step forward. "Lie down."

The pistol in the Necro's hand begins to shake. "Stop," he says, almost pleading.

Uncle Dylan takes another slow step forward. "Lie...down...now."

The Necro begins to bend down toward the floor. His eyes grow wide and his entire body begins to tremble. He is fighting Uncle Dylan's control with all of his might. I have been on the receiving end of Uncle Dylan's control and I am briefly impressed with the Necro's resistance, but I remember that the Necro is probably much better trained than I am.

I try to shake Tori out of whatever state she is in, but she just stares. Uncle Dylan continues to move closer and the Necro, sweating from the strain of fighting, is almost fully prone on the floor. I shake Tori again, desperate to have someone that I can trust in whatever is unfolding.

The Necro finally has his cheek pressed to the floor and Uncle Dylan relieves him of his pistol. The Necro must still be fighting, because it takes both hands for Uncle Dylan to pry the gun away. He empties the pistol of ammunition and tosses it over his shoulder. It slides loudly down the hallway.

"Let's go," Uncle Dylan says.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I say. "You've done enough."

"I know you're mad, and I'm sorry, but you don't understand."

"I know that you've been working with the Necros," I say. "You were going to let them kill

me."

"No, I would never do that," he says.

"Then why have you been working with them?"

Uncle Dylan sighs. "I'm on a mission for the Council."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have time for me to explain right now."

"Well, I'm not moving until you tell me."

"Fine."

I listen as he quickly describes going to the Necros, pretending to be jealous that his brother had been given the job of Keeper, while he was delegated tasks that he found beneath him. It had taken years to gain their trust, but he finally did. He gathered all of the information he could, and relayed it to the Council at the same time leaking false information about the Priesthood to the Necros.

"Then why did I never know about it?" I was startled by Tori's voice coming from behind me.

Uncle Dylan's face falls and he looks sad and ashamed. He turns his head away. "You were supposed to be a prisoner."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"When John found you, the Council ordered him to interrogate you and then get rid of you."

"Get rid of her," I say. "You mean--"

"Yes, we were supposed to find out all we could and then kill her."

Tori stares at the floor again, and I think that she has gone back into the catatonic state, but she finally looks up at Uncle Dylan. Tears are welling in her eyes. "Why didn't you?"

"You reminded us of our sister," he says. "So, John convinced the Council to allow me to take you in."

"Sister? You don't have a sister," I say.

"No," he looks at me and says, "She died when we were kids."

"How come I've never heard her?" I ask. Surely, I thought, someone, at some point, would have mentioned her.

"We don't talk about her," he says. "We have our reasons, but I don't have time to explain them now. We must go quickly before Blanding finds out you're not in the lab."

"Why should I believe you?" I ask.

"You can ask your father when we get to him. Now, let's go."

I look at Tori for confirmation as to what we should do. She nods slightly. "Okay," I say. "Lead the way."

Chapter 28

We follow Uncle Dylan back through the hallway toward the conference room where my parents are being held. We turn the corner and Uncle Dylan stops abruptly. He holds his finger to his lips and then taps his ear. I strain to hear any sound other than the buzzing of the fluorescent lights overhead, and I am just about to tell him that I don't hear anything when the sound he is listening to finally reaches my ears. Footsteps on the linoleum floor and the rattling of door handles. They are headed our way.

Tori tries to open the door closest to us, but it is locked. She tries again on the next door down and it opens. She signals to us to follow her, and Uncle Dylan and I run past her and into the tiny office. Tori closes the door behind us and we squat down to wait. She has her ear pressed against the door, but moments later the muffled voices of a pair of Necros come through. I hear one of them open the door next to ours and tell his partner that it's clear. They must have realized we are

gone and are searching. I whisper to Tori to lock the door.

Her hand reaches up, but it is too late to lock it. The Necro turns the handle to open the door, but Tori keeps a tight grip on it. The handle turns slightly and I hold my breath, waiting on them to burst through the door. The Necro jiggles the handle one more time, Tori holding all of her weight against the door and trying to keep the handle still.

"Locked," The Necro says to his partner.

I finally release my breath when we hear them move on to the next door and jiggle it's locked handle. We wait until we can no longer hear their voices or footsteps, then Tori slowly opens the door and peers into the hallway. When she is sure that they are gone, she opens the door the rest of the way and Uncle Dylan and I follow her out.

We continue down the hall, but with much more stealth. I try to walk so that my shoes don't make so much noise, but it is difficult to do and keep up with the others at the same time even though our pace has slowed considerably. We reach the end of the hallway. The door to the conference room is just around the corner. Tori takes the lead and presses her body close to the wall. She quickly peeks around the corner and back.

"There's two of them guarding the door," she whispers.

"I'll take care of them," Uncle Dylan says. "Wait here."

He takes a deep breath and steps around the corner, hand outstretched as he had done with the other Necro, but this time places his other hand on his temple as if he has a terrible headache. He walks slowly around toward the guards and out of our view. I go to the corner and look around it, careful not to be seen. Uncle Dylan continues to move closer to the Necros.

"Stop where you are," the Necro closest to him says.

"He has been with your wife," Uncle Dylan replies.

For a moment I am confused and look back at Tori. She looks just as confused and shrugs her shoulders.

"What?" the Necro asks.

"Your friend," Uncle Dylan continues. "He has been with your wife."

The Necro's face falls and he turns toward the other guard.

"You been sleeping with my wife?"

"No, no," The second Necro says and takes a step backwards.

"You have, haven't you?"

"No, damn it. He's controlling you."

The Necro looks back to Uncle Dylan and for a moment I am unsure if his plan is working. Uncle Dylan nods his head and the Necro swings his weapon around and aims it at the other guard.

"Stop," the second guard shouts. "I didn't, I swear."

When it is clear that his friend is fully under Uncle Dylan's control, he brings up his own weapon, shaking and looking back and forth between Uncle Dylan and the other guard not sure of which one he should shoot.

"You son of a bitch," the first guard says and pulls the trigger.

The second Necro's face disappears into a fog of red that seems to hang in the air even after the rest of his body falls to the floor. The remaining Necro stands and stares at the body.

"What have you done?" Uncle Dylan asks. His voice is soft and high pitched as if he is talking to child who just dropped their ice cream cone. The Necro turns around and I can see the tears streaming down his face.

"I don't know," he says.

Uncle Dylan looks around. "I won't tell anyone."

The Necro smiles, tears still streaming down his face. "Really?"

"Sure."

The Necro's shoulders slump and a look of relief crosses his face.

"But when they find him," Uncle Dylan says, "They're going to know it was you."

The Necro frowns and fresh tears flow. "What should I do?"

"I don't know. What can you do, really?"

"Oh, God. They're going to kill me."

"If you're lucky," Uncle Dylan says. "You've seen what they do. I'll be surprised if it's that quick."

The Necro buries his face in his hands and collapses onto the floor, deep sobs shaking his body. Uncle Dylan walks over and kneels beside him. He puts his arm around the Necro's shoulder and hugs him. "There, there. I will help you."

The Necro lifts his face to look at Uncle Dylan. "You will?"

"Sure I will."

Uncle Dylan reaches across the guard and pulls his knife out of its scabbard on the guards belt and places it in his hands. The Necro looks down at it for a moment before he realizes what Uncle Dylan is suggesting.

"You want me to--"

"It would be easier, don't you think?"

The Necro hangs his head. "Yes, but I'm scared."

"I know, but I will stay here with you."

The Necro gives Uncle Dylan a brief smile and nods his head. He drags the blade of his knife across his wrist and blood begins to pour out of the wound. Uncle Dylan brings the Necro in close and pats his head trying to comfort him as the pool of blood spreads around them. Uncle Dylan looks over to me and motions with his head toward the conference room door.

"Okay," I whisper to Tori, "Let's go."

Tori and I walk softly to the door. Uncle Dylan lays the Necro down and he curls into the fetal position. Uncle Dylan stands up to join us, but the Necro grabs hold of his pants.

"Tell my wife I'm sorry, will you?"

Uncle Dylan looks down with what seems to me to be genuine pity. "Of, course."

The Necro smiles and lays his head back down in the crimson puddle. Uncle Dylan joins us at the door and opens it. He scans the room and then enters with Tori and me following. My parents are still huddled together on the other side of the room.

I walk closer to them and can see now the marks left by the Necro's interrogation. My mother is extremely pale and the thinnest I can ever remember seeing her. Dad seems more nourished, but there are red blossoms seeping through several parts of his clothes and I can see that his arms might require stitches. I take another step towards them when I am startled by a slamming door.

I turn around and see two Necros standing at the door we just came through. They must have been behind it, waiting for us to come in to slam it shut. Uncle Dylan tries to control one of them, but these two are not as gullible as the previous Necros. The larger of the two hits Uncle Dylan in the face with the butt of his weapon.

The side door opens and, once again, Edward Blanding steps into the room followed by a hoard of Revenants and Necros.

"I knew that you would betray me," he says to Uncle Dylan. He looks to the Necro standing beside him. "Kill them."

The Necro smiles and points toward us. The Revenants in the room lurch forward and more begin to pour in.

Chapter 29

The room erupts into a writhing mass of decomposing flesh. Uncle Dylan shifts into what looks like some sort of vulture and flies up to circle the room, diving at Revenants and ripping their flesh apart with his talons. Tori jumps across the table towards the Necro that is controlling the attack, but he side steps out of the way and she lands in the middle of a group of Revenants jostling

to get through the doorway.

I feel something grab hold of my shirt and I duck my head and spin my body around to release myself from the grip while simultaneously pulling my pistol out. When I complete my turn, I do not hesitate to fire into the Revenant's face. Behind it is several more, making their way towards me. I aim my pistol for the closest one when I hear Dad's voice behind me.

I look over and see my father trying to protect Mom from the bony claws of a Revenant in a wedding gown. The sharp finger bones are slashing into my father's back, leaving strips of tattered fabric and flesh. I run toward them and grab the Revenant by her throat and press the barrel of my pistol into her temple. Blood, brains, and bits of skull cover my parents as the bullet rips through the other side of her head.

I kneel down and put my hand on Dad's shoulder. He jerks his body away from my touch, and for a moment I fear that he will turn to attack me, mistaking me for the dead bride.

"Dad," I say. "It's me."

He turns his head and looks at me. It takes him a second to fully recognize me, but when he does a large smile spreads across his face. He lets go of my mother and wraps his arms around me and hugs so tightly that it becomes hard to breathe. He lets go and points behind me, eyes wide with fear.

I turn around and see that the majority of the Revenants are circling around us. I quickly scan the room for Tori. The Necro that led the attack has somehow gotten away and she is locked in battle with another. There is blood around her mouth and the Necro has a bite sized piece of flesh missing from his face. I swing my pistol up and take down two of the closest Revenants to us. I don't know how many bullets I have left, but I know that I will run out eventually.

Uncle Dylan thins out the Revenants on the opposite side of the room, leaving only about half a dozen for me to take care of. He flies up as high as he can and then dives toward Blanding. As soon as his talons make contact, he shifts into a large snake and wraps himself around Blanding's neck. Blanding reaches up and tries to pull the beast away from him.

I turn my attention to a Revenant coming towards us and fire into it's face. Before it even hits the ground, I turn to release my parents from their binds. The padlock on my father's collar is small, but strong. I wonder whether I should try to shoot it off. I am pretty sure that I can, but given its close proximity to my father's head, I quickly decide against it.

"What can I do?" I ask.

"Shoot the bolt on the floor," Dad says.

I follow the chain to where it is anchored to the floor and carefully take aim. I keep the pistol pointed at the bolt and turn my head to avoid any flying metal from striking my face.

"Brian," my father says anxiously.

I turn to see another Revenant grab his leg and open it's mouth to bite. He kicks with his free foot and sends it swaying backwards. I shoot at it, but the bullet misses by a few inches. I take aim again, more carefully this time, and put a bullet into it's forehead.

My attention moves back to the chain and I resume my position, but this time holding my arm in front of my eyes. I do my best to keep the barrel of the pistol from moving to either side and pull the trigger.

Click.

Damn. I look around for anything else I can use and spot a small machine gun clasped in the hands Tori's first victim.

"I'll be right back," I say to my father and rush over to retrieve the weapon.

It takes a moment to pry the weapon away, but I finally get it free. I venture a look around and see that Tori is surrounded. I swing the gun around and let loose a spray of bullets that drops one of the Revenants, but comes dangerously close to hitting Tori. I rush back to my parents and take out another Revenant that has come within reach of them.

Without protecting myself from ricochet, I place the barrel of the gun next to the chain and pull the trigger. Sparks fly and I feel the sting of bits of metal and cement as they pepper my face, luckily none of it hitting my eyes. My father wraps the chain around his arm and helps my mother

to her feet, but he is just as weak as she is and they both fall back down to the ground. I try to help my mother up, but she is in a state similar to what Tori was in when we were captured, and she does nothing to help me.

I look around, hoping that Tori or Uncle Dylan will be able to help me get them up and out of the room, but they are both still occupied. Tori is fighting with the last of the Necros that I can see. This one must be like Tori considering the speed at which the two of them are exchanging blows. Blanding is still struggling with Uncle Dylan's snake form and is hitting him blindly with his fists. The two remaining Revenants are getting closer to us and I move to stand between them and my parents. I aim at the first one's head and pull the trigger. One bullet flies out of the barrel, catching the Revenant in the cheek, then nothing. I throw the empty gun, but it bounces harmlessly off its shoulder.

Chapter 30

I quickly look around for another weapon. There is an automatic rifle slung over the shoulder of a Necro, but he is too far away to reach in time. I grab the nearest chair, hoping to be able to at least shield us for a moment, but it is heavier than I thought and I have to brace it on my knee to lift it. I try to position it in front of my parents, but the foot that is bearing the weight of the chair slides in a puddle of blood. My knee twists in a painful and awkward angle. The pain is horrible. I grab my knee with both hands, throw my head back and scream.

Dad moves the chair from my leg and I roll over onto my stomach to get up when I see it. From the space that I had taken the chair I can see a leg protruding from beneath the table. On its ankle is a small revolver in a holster. I crawl toward it as fast as I can. At first using even my injured leg, but finally just letting it slide behind me. I reach the leg and pull the pistol free from its Velcro prison. I probably should check to be sure that it is loaded, but I don't have time.

I sit up and brace myself with one hand. The Revenant is reaching out to grab Dad, who is reaching for something next to the window. I don't take time to breathe properly or aim like I was trained to. I just shoot. The bullet shatters the Revenant's half exposed spinal chord and its head falls forward, like a reverse Pez dispenser, onto its chest. It seems like it is making one last grab for him as its body falls to the floor, but it remains motionless.

I roll slightly to my right so that I can see the remaining Revenant. I take aim and I'm just about to pull the trigger when Blanding falls from the table onto the floor between my parents and the Revenant, the snake still wrapped around him. For a moment I am distracted by watching Uncle Dylan writhe around and squeeze Blanding's neck, but the Revenant makes a reach for Mom and I am brought back to my task. I fire at the Revenant, but the shot lodges into the wall about two inches in front of its face, and I have to reposition myself closer. I bring him down with my next shot.

Blanding and Uncle Dylan continue to roll on the floor separating me from my parents. Blanding tries in vain to pull the snake from his neck. His face goes from red to purple then he goes completely limp. The snake eases his grip and stares down into Blanding's face. With tremendous speed, Blanding's eyes pop open and he swings his arm up to catch the snake by the head. Uncle Dylan squeezes again, but Blanding has his head and bites down hard on the snake just behind its neck.

Uncle Dylan shifts back to normal form and slumps onto the floor. Blanding throws Uncle Dylan's body off of him and gets up on his knees to stand up. I take aim at his head. He turns around and holds his arm out towards me. Before I can pull the trigger, my finger is frozen and a familiar ache begins to radiate throughout my body. It quickly intensifies until I feel every fiber of my body begin to ignite with pain. My bones feel like they are on fire and I begin to shake. The Death Grip.

He twists his hand as if he is turning an imaginary knob, and the pain shoots far past what Tori had done. I collapse to the floor and convulse as waves of pain spread throughout my body. Small bumps form on my exposed skin and begin to tear as the dead cells in my body rush forward at his command. My organs begin to push into my ribcage, squeezing my lungs and preventing them from taking in more air. My arm looks like I am sweating blood, and I can feel the pressure within my skull increase. The small lesions begin to spread and grow larger. I begin to fear that he will pull my heart right out of my body and I will die watching it fly towards his hand.

Just as I am wishing that death will come quickly, Tori leaps through the air and collides with Blanding, knocking him off of his feet. His grip on me is broken instantly, but the pain is slow to go away. She rolls up on to her knees and turns around to attack. She closes the distance between them quickly and delivers a barrage of blows. Blanding easily dodges the first few swings, but gets caught in the face with a roundhouse kick that sends him staggering back. She closes the distance in a blur and strikes at his throat, but he ducks her swing and throws a punch at her side. It connects with enough force that I hear her ribs snap, but judging by the speed in which she resumes her attacks, she doesn't notice the injury.

I rush over to Uncle Dylan and roll him over. There are deep gashes on either side of his neck and they are bleeding heavily. I put my hand under his arms and drag him to the back wall and lay him in front of my father.

"Will he be okay?" I ask.

"I don't know," Dad says. "We have to stop the bleeding." He takes my hands and places them on either side of Uncle Dylan's neck, his skin nearly white beneath my bloody fingers. "Firm but gentle pressure and don't let go."

"But, I have to--"

He grabs me by the shirt and pulls my face close to his. "Don't. Let. Go."

Tori leaps forward and tackles Blanding, his head bouncing off of the floor as he falls. They roll together a few feet toward us and stop. They are close enough to us for me to be able to grab Blanding. If only I could reach out.

Chapter 31

Dad dips his finger in the blood on the floor around us, and begins tracing ancient and arcane sigil patterns on Uncle Dylan's chest and forehead. Mumbling strange words and vibrating names I haven't heard in any of the rituals that I've learned. I can still feel the thump of a pulse beneath my fingers, but it is slowing down and getting weaker.

Tori has managed to scramble onto Blanding's back. Her fingernails dig into his chest and she is trying to rip away a mouthful of flesh from the top of his shoulder. He throws his hands blindly behind him several times before finally grabbing her by the hair and throwing her off of him.

He jumps on top of her and she covers her face with one arm as he delivers several heavy blows to her head. My stomach feels like it is in my throat, and I want to do something to help. I look at my father, hoping that whatever ritual he is attempting is working. The blood that is flowing between my fingers is slowing, but I'm not sure if that is a good sign.

"Hurry," I scream.

My father ignores me and continues with his ritual. I look back to Tori who has somehow managed to get Blanding off of her and is back to her feet. They dodge and strike at each other, but they are both beginning to slow down. Tori has several small cuts on her that are not healing as fast as they should, and she looks like she is having trouble keeping her balance.

Blanding throws a heavy right hand toward her face, but instead of trying to block the blow or duck underneath it, she steps in closer letting his fist fly harmlessly behind it's target. She pulls

his head down into her shoulder and delivers a barrage of knee strikes into his abdomen before using all of the strength she has left to drive a final knee into his face. Blanding's head snaps backwards and Tori collapses in exhaustion.

I feel a hand on mine and I turn to my father as he lifts my hand to check Uncle Dylan's wounds, but quickly places it back down.

"Is it working?" I ask anxiously.

"Yes, but slowly. We need to get him out of here and get this thing off." He reaches up and pulls on the collar. For the first time I notice the sigils and runes that are etched along both edges of the silver collar. It must have an effect on his power. That would explain quite a bit.

Movement under the conference table catches my eye, and I turn just in time to see Blanding grab a small pistol from the waistband of one of the dead Necros. I try to get up, but my father grabs my wrists and forces my hands back over Uncle Dylan's neck. I try to pull away again, but my father keeps his grip and maintains my position.

"I have to--"

"You have to hold pressure," he says.

Tori is still laying in the floor where she fell. Blanding is laying on his side, but he has his arm extended and the pistol is aimed at her. Fear and anger well up inside of me. My vision becomes unfocused and there was a pressure building behind my eyes. I have to do something. If only I had Uncle Dylan's powers.

Blanding raises the pistol and steadies his shaking hand as much as he is able. Tori rolls slightly, but I don't think that she realizes exactly what situation she is in.

"Tori," I call to her and they both look toward me. I catch Blanding's eyes and he smiles. A horrible empty feeling fills my insides and my heart beats rapidly. His smile widens as he turns his attention back to Tori. She sees the look on my face and looks back to Blanding. Her eyes widen at the sight of the pistol pointed towards her. The seconds drag slowly and Blanding's finger applies pressure to the trigger as Tori looks to me once more. I think I see a slight smile for a brief moment as she closes her eyes.

My heart sinks and the empty feeling inside is replaced with an aching desperation. I look around, hoping to find anything close enough for me to use as a weapon against Blanding. Dad's grip on my wrists tighten as if he can sense my thoughts. The hatred I feel for Blanding, and the hopelessness I feel at the situation seems to build into a solid mass just inside my forehead.

"No," I scream with all of my might, wishing, praying that something will interfere with Blanding's aim. I look at one of the chairs that is laying on it's side between us. I take a deep breath and exhale sharply while I imagine a wave of energy leave my body and slam into the chair.

The chair flies through the air with a force much stronger than the one I imagined in my mind and smashes into Blanding's outstretched arm just as the pistol spits fire from it's barrel, the bullet behind it thrown just enough off course to hit the wall next to Tori's head, sending small chips of cement to embed into the skin of her face.

She covers the side of her face with her hand and my jubilation at what I have done fills me with a mixture of pride and relief, but it is short lived as I watch Blanding pull back the hammer and aim for another shot.

I feel small hands over mine and my father's grip on my wrists is relieved. I turn and see that my mother has come to take over my duties as medical assistant to my father. She looks at me, her face not showing any hint that she realizes the full extent of what is happening.

"Go," she says.

I am stunned for a moment, but quickly regain my senses. I roll to my left and grab up another pistol from the floor. I take aim at Blanding, send a silent prayer that I haven't grabbed a weapon that is empty and pull the trigger. The kick of the pistol is more than I expect, but when the blue-gray smoke clears from in front of the barrel, Blanding is laying face down and motionless. I am relieved and filled with excitement over my victory. *I did it. I saved her.* My elation is short lived, though, and the smile on my face slowly fades as I watch a fresh pool of blood begin to spread outward from underneath Tori's body.

Chapter 32

I rush over to where Tori is laying and gently roll her limp body over. With his last bullet, Blanding shot true. A small hole in her chest is slowly oozing the blood that is escaping from her damaged heart. The exit wound in her back is much larger, and I am glad that I have rolled her over so that I don't have to look at it.

I pull her head into my lap. The teardrops falling onto her face are making pale clean streaks through the blood. There is an aching hollowness in my intestines that I have never felt before. My thoughts are swirling through my head and I can't grasp on to any one of them. My shaking hands move up and down her body, certain that there is something I should be doing with them to help her, but for the life of me, not being able to decide what.

I stroke the side of her face with the back of my hand. My chest tightens, threatening to cut off my breathing. I want to cry. I want to kill Blanding again for taking the only person I have ever loved away from me. I hold her close to me, her body already losing the artificial heat created by the magick that animated her. Where is she now? I look around the room. Is she still here, watching me?

"I love you," I whisper.

I don't know how long I sit there, cradling her and staring at her beautiful face. She looks like she is merely sleeping peacefully, other than the splatters of blood. My mother kneels beside me and puts her arm around me, kissing the side of my head like she has done since I was a child. Even though it always helped to take the pain away, this time it doesn't work.

I am no longer the child that I was when she last saw me. These are not a child's tears for a lost toy, or a superficial scratch or bruise. I am a man now, and it is a man's love that I have lost. A man's pain that I am feeling, and it is a pain I will have to face alone. No motherly kiss will be able to take this away from me.

I resist the urge to shrug her arm away from me. I know that she is only trying to comfort me, but how can she know the extent of my loss. How could she know that I am feeling as if half of my soul has been ripped away. Torn out just like the bullet from Blanding's gun has shredded Tori's heart?

More tears that I thought I didn't have left fall on her face and I gently wipe them away. I pull her head closer and kiss her for the last time. One, gingerly on her forehead and another directly on her stiffening lips. I try to remember the warmth and softness that those lips had possessed just a few hours ago.

The deep sadness within me changes, shifts, into a burning anger. I scream at the sky, demanding that God replay the last few minutes. Just give me one chance to pull my trigger just a little faster. To let go of Uncle Dylan's neck and help her sooner, regardless of the cost.

I look over and see that Uncle Dylan is sitting up and leaning against my father. Why should he live and she has to die? Was any of this worth losing her? He is barely keeping his eyes open, but he sees the figure in my lap and immediately understands what has happened. He buries his face in my father's shoulder for a moment, and then loses consciousness again.

"We have to leave now," my father says.

I don't want to leave her here. I find it offensive that her body will lay here with her enemies until more of her enemies show up to clean the mess. But, I can already hear the sound of police sirens coming, and it will be hard enough to make it out of here without carrying a dead body along.

One last kiss, and I gently lay her head back onto the floor and get up to turn away. I stand there for a long moment, my mother at my side, and stare down at her. My vision is affected by my emotion, and her face is the only thing I can see. The rest of the world has faded into blackness leaving only her pale face and...movement.

One of the Necros laying next to her begins to stir. I fight the urge to smash his face in with my shoe until there is nothing left to identify who he was, but instead, my eyes fall on the pistol in Tori's hand. She must have been trying to reach it to take Blanding out herself, but like me, she was too late in doing so.

I bend down and pick up the weapon and aim it at the Necro's face. I could have shot immediately, but something inside wants him to see me. To beg me not to end his life the way that mine has seemingly ended.

"Wake up," I say, holding the barrel of the gun close to his face. He finally opens his eyes and a shocked look crosses his face. That look makes me feel good inside.

"No, Brian," my father says from behind me. He is standing up now, Uncle Dylan propped up on one of his shoulders. "No."

I put just enough pressure on the trigger to make the hammer pull back. Just a little more, and I will have the revenge that I cannot have on Blanding.

"Brian, honey," my mother says beside me. "Don't do it."

She puts her arm around me again, and I am overcome with emotion. I nearly collapse to the floor with exhaustion and sadness, that I suddenly realize has a very real weight to it. The Necro lifts himself up on his elbows and examines the wounds in his leg and abdomen.

The Necro looks up at me and smiles, an act that nearly makes me disobey my father and blow his face off. How dare he smile when Tori's dead body still lays beside him? It wasn't his bullet that took her from me, but he is close enough to punish in the place of the one who did.

My father and Uncle Dylan finally make it to where I am and they both look down at him. A smile spreads across my father's face as he struggles to keep Uncle Dylan on his feet. He reaches down with his free hand and helps the Necro to his feet as well.

"Hello, Tori," he says.

"Hello, John."

Chapter 33

Mom comes up with the idea for us to change into the Necro's uniforms. I don't even bother looking for one that will be small enough to fit me, so I help Dad undress two Necros for him and Uncle Dylan. Putting the uniform on Uncle Dylan is easier now that he is slowly beginning to come around, but it is still a chore.

The man who is now Tori helps Dad with Uncle Dylan, and we make our way back to the stairwell. We enter the door on the next floor and are met by a wall of policemen. My mother grabs hold of me and says something about finding my parents. The wall parts and the cop in charge gives Dad directions to where the paramedics are located, and the wall coalesces again behind us and charges through the door and into the stairwell.

We don't go to the paramedics, but instead find a service elevator on the other side of the building. We take it down to the underground parking garage and exit. Headlights illuminate the darkness and Gregory pulls the van out of it's spot and pulls it up to the elevator doors.

We all get in and Gregory manages to get the van out onto the street before the police have a chance to block us in. We don't stop until we are well south of Atlanta, and then only long enough for Gregory to remove the collar from my father. He preforms a proper ritual with full power on Uncle Dylan, and before long he is excitedly telling Gregory what happened in the bank. I find it curious that he leaves out the part where he convinced the Necro to commit suicide, but I suppose that he would fill in those details later, in private.

When he calms down, he fills my father in on what has happened while he was gone, including my training. My father looks at me with a pride that I have never seen in his eyes before,

but he doesn't ask me about it or seem to want to discuss it at all.

Mom tries to coddle me, and she apologizes for leaving me all alone. I don't think much of it. My priorities have definitely changed in the past few weeks, and I know that there is no reason for her to apologize to me. I am the one who needs to apologize. To Dad, too, but I don't want to do it in the van, and think that it can wait until we get home.

Tori, or Matthew as we find out from his wallet, sits beside me the entire trip, but we don't speak at all. I am happy that she is still alive, and I want to hold her and kiss her like we did that night at Uncle Dylan's, but the fact that she is now inhabiting a man's body makes even the thought of holding her, or his, hand feel weird and uncomfortable. I wonder if our relationship will ever be the same, but again, that is a conversation best left for later. She seems to sense that change in me and makes no attempt to touch me, other than a strong hug once we leave the bank and get into the van.

The Necros clean up the mess pretty well. Even though we listen to up to the minute reports on the radio all the way home, in the end the battle in the bank only rates a short story of a disgruntled employee in the next morning's news. The suspect had been arrested, from what the newswoman said, and I wonder who is going to jail in order to cover up what really happened.

Uncle Dylan, Gregory, and Tori/Matthew leave for L.A. almost as soon as they drop us off at our house. I expect them to stay, at least overnight, and Mom does her best to make them stay, but Uncle Dylan thinks it would be best for us to have some time alone after all that has happened. He promises her to come back in a few weeks.

There is an awkward moment when they are leaving when Tori/Matthew tells me goodbye. I am confused. I want to kiss the girl I know is inside, but it is a strange man that stands before me. I am unsure of whether to hug him or shake his hand, and I think I try to do both. The hug is longer than I am actually comfortable with, but I endure it, not wanting to strain things between us anymore than the circumstances already have.

When they leave, my parents try to sit me down in the living room to talk, but I tell them that now is not the time. They have been through more than I, and I'm sure that they would rather just get a shower and get some sleep. My father looks relieved to hear me say it, and smiles. They take turns kissing me on the forehead and then disappear into their room.

I go up to my own room. Nothing feels the same now. It feels like the room of a kid much younger than me. Could this really have been all that my life consisted of? I sit down at my desk and turn on the computer. I am about to type in my email password when I realize that I really don't care to check it as much as I thought. I take off my shoes and lay across my bed, and for the first time in over a month I sleep in my own bed, even though it doesn't feel like it belongs to me anymore either.

Uncle Dylan returns the following weekend and Dad decides to have a barbecue dinner. I am glad to see that Uncle Dylan has brought Sam along. I thought that if I could really talk to anybody about Tori, it would be to him. He gushes over my father, and Dad happily autographs every book Sam brought, which I think is every one he owns.

From the outside it could be just another joyous family reunion. We don't speak of anything that happened until Mom asks for help in the kitchen, and Sam and Matthew follow her. Dad, Uncle Dylan, and I are left alone standing next to the smoking grill. We just stand there for a long time, silently watching the smoke rise out of the grill.

"I have a message from the Council," Uncle Dylan finally says.

"And?"

"They want you to know that they are wishing you well, and that the Elders sent you an official apology."

"Well, that's nice of them."

"Yes," Uncle Dylan says. He sticks his hands in his pockets, looks down at the ground, and sighs. "They were interested in Brian, though."

"Me?" I ask. "Why me?"

"I trained you without permission."

"So?"

"So, now that you know our secrets, they want you to be initiated."

"I don't know if I want that for him," Dad says.

"It doesn't look like you have a choice, Brother. They have summoned the both of you at the next full moon."

"But, that's in eighteen days," my father protests.

"I know," Uncle Dylan says and looks at me. "We have a lot of work to do."

THE END

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