

**GOD'S CHOSEN:
STAND AND FIGHT**

BY: JEREMY GATLIN

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To God, family and friends

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PROLOGUE

390 YEARS AFTER THE FLOOD

The man was unrecognizable to everyone. He didn't even look human. There wasn't a single strand of hair present on his nude, discolored body. His skin smelled of decay and sulfur. It was sloughing off, leaving bloody wounds all over his body.

He hobbled through the village of Aditya shrieking at everyone, sounding like a cat that had its tail stepped on. People ran in all directions trying to get away from him, all the while he tried to grab the nearest person with his skinless fingers. He latched onto a young girl named Keren and hissed at her.

“I need a body!”

The girl screamed and her mother, Gavi, came running. By the time she got to the man, he lifted Keren up to look into her eyes. Gavi shouted at the man, “Flee from us in the name of God!”

The man dropped Keren and gasped as he drew back. His body jerked violently and thick

streams of black fog streamed from his eyes. The fog dissipated and the man collapsed to the ground. He exhaled his last breath and died.

“It’s gone now. You’re safe,” said Gavi holding her daughter tightly to comfort her.

Gavi picked up her frightened daughter and took her back home, which was close by. She put Keren down when they got in the house. “Are you alright, Keren?” asked Gavi.

Keren’s face was flushed white. She answered in a stunned, quiet voice, “His eyes were filled with darkness. There was so much evil in them. He... it needed a body.”

“It’s gone my child.”

Gavi guided her shocked daughter to bed and laid her down. She walked away and let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, God, for allowing no harm to come to her.”

Gavi was a young, beautiful woman. She was twenty-four and took care of her eight-year-old daughter on her own (her husband died a couple months ago from a severe illness); therefore, all of the laborious chores fell on her shoulders. She had to watch after Keren and tend to her livestock.

Life was stressful for her. A woman in her culture wasn't allowed to find work, and that made it much more difficult to support her small family. Luckily, she had a few friends that helped carry her load.

There was a rapid knock at the door that made Gavi jerk. She went to the door and asked, "Who is it?"

A deep voice answered, "Daton and Ami."

They were her friends. She opened the door and let them walk inside.

Gavi shut the door and Ami said with concern, "We just saw what happened to Keren. That demon surprised us all. It just came out of nowhere. Did it hurt Keren?"

Gavi shook her head. "She's in shock. I put her to bed so she could rest. I'm so glad I was able to get to her in time."

Daton lowered his head and let out a heavy sigh. He clenched his fist and declared, "This has to stop. All the evil that's swept over the land has to be put to an end."

Ami turned to Daton. "How?" she asked.

They were all silent for a moment. Gavi

spoke up, “Let us pray to God for the answer. First, we go get Jael and Eved so they can pray with us.”

Ami and Daton nodded. They walked out the door to retrieve Jael and Eved.

A few minutes later, Ami and Daton returned with Jael and Eved. Gavi had a small bowl of incense burning in the main room. The five of them gathered around it and Gavi thanked them for coming to pray with her.

“I believe that God, in His great wisdom, will show us the way,” said Jael.

They held hands and bowed their heads.

Gavi prayed, “Heavenly Father, we come to You in great need. Dark forces are overtaking us and we cannot fight them alone. God, please help us. Show us what we should do.”

God warmed their troubled hearts when He answered their prayer. His deep voice was calm and steady when He answered, “I will provide you with a warrior, a protector. Look to the young man in your village named Abner. He is the one I choose to protect my people. He will be equipped to fight the evil forces. My dear Gavi, you will be

equipped to help Abner in his times of need when fighting evil. Go now and take this sword to Abner.”

Gavi and the group opened their eyes to see a sheathed sword lying in the center of the circle, next to the bowl of incense. Eved gasped in astonishment. “Our prayer has been answered,” she exclaimed. Gavi picked up the sword and rose to her feet.

“I must go! Please watch after Keren. It will be much too dangerous for her to come with me. I’ll return to her as soon as I can.”

Gavi went to see her sleeping daughter and knelt down beside her. She had no idea when she would be back to be with her. *I don’t want to leave my baby girl*, she thought. “I love you, Keren. I’ll come back for you,” she said as tears streamed from her eyes.

She kissed Keren on the forehead and then bolted out the door. She felt God’s hand guide her through the village until she arrived at a small house. Abner, a sixteen-year-old boy, was standing outside the house with his parents. He turned to his parents and said, “This is the woman

that was supposed to come to me in my vision just now. I must go with her and fight. It is God's will."

His parents had puzzled looks on their faces. His mother clung to his arm when he turned to his parents.

"Let somebody else go and fight the forces of darkness," said his mother. "Please don't leave us."

Abner hugged his mother and father. He smiled at them.

"I knew that God had a purpose for me. He has made it known to me now. I'm proud to serve Him. Now I must go and fight."

A couple of days later, Abner and Gavi arrived at a Pagan village called Gervindoth some distance away from their own. Gavi instructed Abner, "The same demon that attacked our village is here somewhere. Use the sword that I gave you to fight it."

They walked through the village and saw that

it had been ransacked. There were mangled bodies strewn across the ground along with debris. They passed by an elderly man who appeared to be dead. Suddenly, he latched onto Abner's leg making Abner shout.

The man wheezed. "You must leave! There is something horrible here!"

He released Abner's leg and collapsed.

Abner drew his sword and continued walking with Gavi close behind. They came upon a man whose back was turned to them.

The man spun around with lightening speed and hissed at them. He looked at Gavi and exclaimed, "I have found a body!"

The man was a devil worshipper, a suitable host for a demon. He tilted his head back and roared. His entire body burst into flames and Abner and Gavi backed away.

A brief moment passed by and the flames vanished. The man had transformed into a hideous, androgynous creature. It was black as soot and had the whitest eyes and red veins were pronounced and mapped all over its chiseled body. It snarled and revealed its jagged, sharp teeth. "I

am Jafor!” declared the newly formed creature.

Jafor lunged at Abner and knocked Gavi to the ground. Abner didn't have the chance to raise his sword to strike because Jafor was so fast. The creature's attack caused Abner to fall on his backside and drop his sword in the process. Abner tried to get up, but Jafor pounced on him. Jafor opened up his mouth to bite Abner's face. He put his hands on the creature's head to push it back, but it was too ferocious in its attempts to get to his face. Abner finally slung Jafor's head to the side and slammed it into the ground.

Gavi rose to her feet and saw Abner trying to crawl out from underneath Jafor. The creature remained on top of him, clawing and trying to bite him.

“Get off of him!” shouted Gavi.

Suddenly, grass from the ground grew rapidly behind Jafor. Gavi was astonished by the sight and realized that she was willing the grass to grow.

Abner finally kicked Jafor off and the long blades of grass caught Jafor. The blades of grass grew tightly around the creature and kept it from moving. Abner grabbed his sword and declared,

“Back to Hell, demon!”

He began to swing his sword at it, but the demon burst into flames again. Jafor shot a steady stream of fire at Abner. The blast knocked him back several feet. He smacked into a tree at the edge of the woods and slumped to the ground.

Abner’s body had a searing pain all over that refused to go away. His body quaked from it and he was sure that he was going die. The smell of his own burning flesh made him nauseous. He laid there broken, unable to move.

Jafor’s flames dissipated when the grass was completely burned away. The demonic being turned to face Gavi, but she wasn’t there. The creature felt something smash into the back of its skull and fell to the ground. It was Gavi. She had found a big rock close by to help her keep Jafor down momentarily.

Gavi threw the rock down and sprinted to Abner. She feared for the worst. *He can’t be dead. Please God,* she prayed. *It will all be over if he is dead.* When she got to Abner, she discovered that his body was healing. It was a miracle! His burnt skin became new and his

broken body became mended. Abner felt the pain vanish and sprang to his feet.

“You’re alright,” observed Gavi.

Abner quickly pulled Gavi to the side when he saw Jafor fast approaching. The demonic creature sprang into the air with a deafening screech. Abner let out a scream and swung his sword right before Jafor was going to land in front of him. The blade of Abner’s sword cut into the creature and separated its torso from its lower half. Jafor exploded into a black fog and then the fog burned away after a few moments.

A handful of villagers that were in hiding came out and cheered for Abner. “You are our protector,” said the people.

They bowed down to him and Abner rebuked them. He pointed his sword up to the sky and shouted, “No, to God be the glory!”

The people stood up and looked at the sky. They pondered what Abner said.

After that, Abner and Gavi traveled to wherever evil roamed and fought it. Along the way, they formed a small army that fought by their side.

CHAPTER ONE

PRESENT DAY

The siren of a police car echoed through the Wednesday night air of Rock Hill, South Carolina. Officer Chad Nelson was responding to a call that was made by a woman who had finished pumping her gas and was about to go inside and pay. She saw two masked men pointing their guns at a cashier in the store and immediately called 911.

Officer Nelson sped into the parking lot of the Airport Express and quickly radioed to dispatch that he had arrived at the scene. After he parked beside the woman who reported the robbery he got out of his car and said to her, “Ma’am, you need to get down!”

As soon as he finished his sentence the two crooks bolted out of the store with bag of money and started firing their guns at him. A stray bullet hit the woman in the left shoulder and spun her around. She fell to the ground and Officer Nelson ducked behind his car. He got his Glock 22 out and quickly radioed to dispatch again with his

shoulder walkie-talkie and said, “10-53! Shots fired! Civilian down!”

While he was calling in his emergency the thieves fired a few shots into his car as they were sprinting across the street to run into the tall brush. He popped his head up to see where the crooks were. He saw them making it across the street. One of them turned around and fired at Officer Nelson. The bullet missed his head by a couple inches and he fired back, hitting the crook in his right forearm.

The two crooks ran into the brush and dropped down so they wouldn't be seen. As the two of them were crawling away the wounded one whispered to his partner, “Ricky, I dropped my gun when I got hit!”

“I'll keep you covered, man,” replied Ricky.

By the time Officer Nelson made it into the elbows-high brush he had called in for back up. He got his Strion LED flashlight off his belt, turned it on and shined it around looking for the crooks. He was slow and cautious.

“Police officer! Come out with your hands up,” he shouted.

The two crooks looked behind them and saw that the officer was several feet away from them.

“We’ve got to hurry,” the wounded crook whispered softly.

The two crooks quickened their pace when all of a sudden they heard a low growl. A growl unlike any other growl they had ever heard before.

Officer Nelson and the two crooks stopped dead in their tracks. Officer Nelson had the strange feeling that something was watching him. He flashed his light to his right side and caught a glimpse of rusty brown hair. The creature dodged the light before he could make out what it was. Whatever it was, it was big and fast. Officer Nelson decided to ignore it and got back to trying to find the crooks.

“Come on guys, give it up now,” he shouted.

The two crooks were still on the ground and Ricky whispered to his partner, “Pete, let’s make a run for it. I’ll cover you.”

“Alright.”

Ricky and Pete got up and started running hard. Officer Nelson saw them and gave chase. As Ricky was running he turned around and fired a

couple shots at Officer Nelson. One of the bullets hit his flashlight, shattering it and hit him in the chest. His bullet-proof vest caught it and he was knocked to the ground. The wind was knocked out of him and he gasped for air. As he was laying there catching his breath, he heard a loud growl and the crooks' screams. Then there was the sound of flesh ripping and a loud, punch-like sound that sent them flailing over to Officer Nelson. Ricky landed on the left side of him and Pete landed above. Neither one of the crooks moved. Officer Nelson jerked, startled.

By this time, he had caught his breath and was trembling with fear. He got to his feet and glanced at the crooks. They were a bloody, mangled mess. He pointed his gun all around him. Then he looked straight ahead from the direction that he had been chasing the crooks. He heard the sound of running feet getting closer to him and he saw the tops of the brush giving way to the creature. With tremendous force, it knocked him to the ground, hitting him head on.

He lay on the ground limp with pain, close to blacking out. Still, he fought to stay conscious and

to observe his surroundings through blurred vision. His left arm felt like it might have been knocked out of socket, most of his ribs were definitely broken, and he was gasping for air from the heavy blow. He didn't know where his gun was, so he settled for his taser gun on his belt. He frantically unsnapped it with his right arm, which was still unhurt. Afraid to move, he held the gun close to his aching torso, not knowing if he was safe from the mysterious creature.

Images of Officer Nelson's wife, Claire, and their newborn baby boy, Pruitt, entered his thoughts. He pictured her singing a lullaby to Pruitt while holding him in her arms. He recalled her pleading with him to take a desk job so she would be sure that he would come home to her and the baby every night. She had told him that she feared that one day one of his partners would come to her front door with bad news. Repeatedly, he assured her that he would be just fine and that he was always cautious. He was now regretting not having ever transferred to a desk job.

He was startled by some warm, smelly breath that touched his face. He tilted his head back to

see the creature's mouth. His vision was still blurry, so he still couldn't make out what the creature was. The creature let out a low growl that went into what seemed like a mischievous laugh. Saliva dripped from the creature's mouth onto his forehead making his heart pound so hard it felt like it was going to burst.

He felt a sense of dread come over him. A voice in the back of his mind repeated over and over that he was about to die. He tried to silence it. There had been plenty of dangerous situations that he had been in and he had always managed to come out of it unscathed. He was determined that he was going to live now.

All of a sudden he had a surge of adrenaline and let out a scream. He jumped up to face the creature and was about to fire his taser gun, but the creature foiled his attack with an amazing one-two combo. The beast crushed his arm with a hard blow and ripped away the flesh with its claws. Then it delivered a blow so powerful that his skull was crushed. He fell to the ground never to move again.

Officer Nelson's back up, which were three

policemen, ran into the field that he was in. They shouted his name a couple of times. The creature ran off when it saw the policemen's flashlights, but not before tearing Officer Nelson's right arm off.

One of the policemen spotted the fallen officer on the ground and ran to him, the other two followed. The policeman saw his mangled partner and choked out, "Oh God!"

CHAPTER TWO

The clanging of metal bounced off the walls of the Northwestern High School gym. Ting! Tang! Tink! There were a handful of students dressed in defensive gear fencing with foils while their teacher, Miss MacManus, supervised them.

She walked over to two of her students, Jeffrey Allan and Ray Dalton, and observed them. Miss MacManus praised them. “Good form, guys. You’ve really improved, Jeffrey.”

The boys stopped and turned their attention to her. Jeffrey lifted his mask and asked, “Am I really doing better? I feel like I’m being too stiff.”

“You’re doing just fine. You just need to relax and focus on your opponent,” reassured Miss MacManus.

“Thanks, Miss MacManus.”

The teacher walked away to assist some students and Jeffrey turned to Ray, who formed a grin under his face mask and jeered, “Personally, I think you’re holding back.”

Jeffrey laughed. “Oh yeah? You think so?”

He put his mask back on and took his on-guard position.

“I’ll show you holding back,” he declared.

He lunged forward and jabbed with his foil, Ray deflected his attack. Jeffrey quickly formed another attack and then another. Ray did his best to deflect Jeffrey’s advances and form counterattacks.

They were light on their feet as they maneuvered during the match. It looked like they were putting on some kind of dance. They were fluid in their motions as they picked up speed. The clanging of their foils became more rapid, catching the attention of their classmates. Everyone stopped to observe the dual and cheered them on.

In one swift move, Jeffrey knocked Ray’s foil out of his hands. The dual was over and everyone clapped. Ray lifted his mask to reveal his dark-skinned, sweaty face.

He was winded when he said, “Dang, dude. Take it easy on a brother. I thought I was the master at this.”

Jeffrey shrugged and smirked through his

mask.

After class, Jeffrey and Ray left the gym to go to their lunch period.

“Man, I’m hungry. I’m glad it’s lunch time,” declared Jeffrey.

He was slightly shorter than Ray with a stocky frame, fairly short dark hair, and blue eyes. Ray had a fairly muscular build, short black hair and brown eyes.

Ray sarcastically said, “Why? It’s not like you put forth any effort in fencing today.”

They both chuckled and Ray said, “Seriously, you really brought it today.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure, dude. You just gotta have some confidence in what you’re doing. I wasn’t that great at fencing when my dad first started teaching me and I thought I’d never beat him, but then I believed in myself that I could do it. And I *did* do it.”

“It did feel good. I don’t know what came over me, but it sure was awesome.”

Marie Ashley couldn't take her eyes off of the 95 that her Spanish teacher had written at the top of her test sheet. *I thought I failed*, she thought. *I'll make an A or B in this class after all.*

She stood up smiling cheerfully, put her folder and test in her book bag and skipped out of the classroom. Her day seemed to be going just right. She wanted to sing and dance so everybody could see just how happy she was. Amused at the idea, she chuckled softly.

She was a seventeen-year-old senior who was a straight-A student. She was average height, slim, and had long, light brown hair that had a healthy sheen to it. Her emerald green eyes were very attractive and often earned her compliments from many people. Her smile was perfect and contagious to other people. She was gorgeous but she didn't let her good looks go to her head.

As Marie pranced out of A-building, her friend Jess Cain caught up with her. She was equally as beautiful as Marie, only a couple inches shorter. Her shoulder length hair was curly and light brown. The color of her eyes was a soft baby

blue.

“Hey, Marie,” she said.

“Hey, girl,” cheerfully said Marie.

“You’re in a good mood. Who’s the guy?”

Marie cut her eyes at Jess. “There doesn’t have to be a guy involved for me to be in a good mood.”

“You’re right. So what’s up?”

“It’s just one of those days where everything is going perfectly. I wasn’t late to school this morning; I’m having a good hair day; and I did better than expected on my Spanish test.”

“That’s great. So who’s the guy?” asked Jess with a grin. “You can’t hide it from me. You have that look in your eye.”

“What look?”

“Your eyes have a sparkle like you’ve just been swept off your feet.”

“It was just a dream I had about a certain guy, but I don’t want to say anything until I’m sure.”

“Sure of what?” pressed Jess. “That the dream comes true? Please tell me who it is. I won’t say anything to anybody.”

“Not yet. I don’t want to get my hopes up.

It may sound silly, but I'm afraid if I say anything now then the dream won't come true."

Looking to change the subject, Marie spotted Jeffrey and Ray walking towards D-building to go to the courtyard for lunch. She flanked Jeffrey and Jess flanked Ray. The two girls smiled brightly at the boys and greeted them in unison.

"How was fencing?" asked Marie.

Jeffrey smiled at Marie's bubbly mood. "Not too bad. Today was a better day," he answered.

Ray nudged Jeffrey's shoulder, "Come on, man. Don't be modest. You owned me," he said.

A short laugh escaped Jess's mouth and she exclaimed, "You got owned? How does the son of a fencing extraordinaire get owned by a rookie?"

"Jeffrey brought his A-game today."

"I can't believe it! Maybe you aren't really the son of a fencing master."

Ray threw up his hands. "All right! All right! Take it easy on me."

Marie chimed in. "We're just giving you a hard time. We don't mean anything by it."

"I know. Y'all are just cruel," Ray said

smiling.

The four friends reached the double doors to D-building and Jeffrey opened the door for his friends to go inside. As they entered the building, Jeffrey asked, “So what’s got you girls so cheerful today?”

Marie answered, “Oh, I don’t know. It’s just been a great week so far. I’m caught up on all of my work and I’ve been getting back some good grades.”

Jess added, “And it’s a gorgeous day.”

Jeffrey entered the building and let the door shut behind him. They walked down the hall and Jeffrey commented, “Well, I’m happy that y’all are happy.”

“And all of God’s children are happy,” quipped Ray

They laughed together as they arrived at the double doors to enter the courtyard. They entered to find their friends Gary Dunn and Brian Moss already seated at a round table getting ready to eat their meals.

Gary was average height, had blond hair long enough to cover his ears and bluish-green eyes.

He was a little on the slender side, but not too skinny. Brian was about the same height as Gary, but had short hair that was jet black. His eyes were hazel and he had a thick build.

It was a sunny day. The sky was blue with a few tufts of clouds sprinkled here and there. It was warm, but not to the point of being uncomfortable. A cool, gentle breeze would blow every now and then. It was calm and smooth. The wind would flow over the walls of D-building and into the courtyard like water spilling from a cup, creating a peaceful feeling for the group. That's why they liked being out there at lunch time. It was like having a picnic. The courtyard was their escape from the noise of the crowd of students. If it rained, however, they would be forced to eat in the cafeteria or under the covered walkways.

Gary smiled and greeted his friends. They pulled up extra chairs to the table so they could sit down and he said, "I'm sorry, guys, but I haven't had time to prepare a bible lesson today. This week has been kind of hectic."

Jeffrey retrieved his lunch from his book bag and said, "It's all right, buddy. Hopefully, next

week won't be so hectic. Or I could do it."

Gary nodded and said, "Yeah, that would be good. I actually do have a really, really short lesson for y'all so y'all won't go away empty-handed. We have to remember that no matter how big our problems are, God is always bigger and He'll bring us through the storm."

Marie agreed and said, "Well said."

She turned her head to Jeffrey, who was sitting on her right side and smiled. Jeffrey looked her way and smiled back at her.

Jess said, "Maybe it's good that you didn't have the lesson today because Cody keeps missing it."

"The past two weeks it seems like he's missed most of it or all of it. He's either late getting here or he doesn't come at all," chimed in Jeffrey.

Ray said, "I've seen him talking to some of those Goths, the really creepy ones."

"The ones that remind me of Brandon Lee from *The Crow*?"

"Freaks me out, man, but I try to be nice and talk to 'em."

“What’s so wrong with them? They’re nice people,” said Brian.

Marie answered Brian. “They’re not all bad, but some of them are pretty wild and crazy.”

Cody Jackson opened one of the double doors and walked into the courtyard to sit down with the group.

He was a short and stout red head with a lightly freckled face, his light brown eyes had a certain twinkle about them.

“There you are,” said Jess. “Where’ve you been?”

As Cody pulled up a chair he smiled and said, “Talking to Beth Ann Nicole.”

“Oh,” said Marie. “She’s such a nice girl and a lot of fun to be around.”

Ray was surprised. “Whoa! How’d y’all start talking? She’s like the hottest girl in the school,” he said.

Marie jumped in and said, “Hey! What about me and Jess?”

“Don’t mind what Ray said,” explained Jeffrey while looking at Marie. “You’re both beautiful.”

While Jeffrey said that he reached over with his left hand and touched Marie's right hand, not realizing what he was doing. Her hand was small and delicate. And her skin was smooth and soft. Just the slightest touch made Jeffrey's heart putter with excitement.

Marie looked down at their hands touching and then looked up at Jeffrey and smiled. Their eyes met and Jeffrey blushed. He slowly pulled his hand away hoping that no one would notice, but everyone saw it.

Gary asked Cody, "When did you and Beth Ann start becoming close to each other?"

"A few weeks ago in Biology class."

"We thought you've been hanging out with the Goths," said Jeffrey

"I have a little bit," answered Cody. "I had heard them talking some about their wild escapades on the weekends and decided to talk to them. I wanted to see what those people were all about."

Cody was going to continue, but Brian interrupted. "Okay, okay. Get off the Goths and tell us more about Beth Ann."

"All right, I was gonna get there," said Cody.

“She’s a really sweet girl. As y’all know she’s a cheerleader, but don’t start with the cheerleader jokes. She sits in front of me in Biology 2 Honors in first block. She’s a junior and she’s so smart that she’s in that class. One day I had a question about what the teacher was going over and asked her and we’ve been talking ever since. We’re just friends right now, but we’ve been talking a good bit. She’s going with us Friday night to the movie, so y’all will get to meet her.”

“Oh, I’m glad you mentioned Friday night. Y’all remember talking about going to the movies, right?” asked Marie.

Everyone nodded and then she continued, “Can y’all still make it?”

They all said that they could and Jeffrey asked Ray, “Do you know if James Auten can make it? I talked to him last night and he said he was going to tell you in your English class.”

Ray answered him, “Yeah. I meant to tell you, but I forgot.”

Jess chimed in, “Shaina Cartwright is coming.”

Gary became inexplicably uneasy at that and

looked over at her. “Really?” he asked.

She nodded at him and then he asked her, “Hey, would you like to ride with me to the movie?”

“Of course,” chirped Jess.

While they were talking amongst themselves, a girl opened one of the double doors to the courtyard and walked up to the group with a note in her hand. The group stopped talking to acknowledge her. She looked down at her note and looked back up at them.

“Which one of you is Jeffrey Allan?” she asked.

“I am,” Jeffrey answered.

The girl said, “Ms. Potters wants to see you in the library now.”

Jeffrey thought it was very odd to be called to the library because he didn’t have any overdue books.

The girl exited the courtyard and Jeffrey got up from his chair.

“See y’all later,” he said.

The group wished him farewell as he threw away his trash and put on his book bag. Marie

jumped up and gathered her things as well. She wished everyone goodbye as she followed Jeffrey to the door. She had remembered that she needed to finish reading an English assignment, so she was going to go to class early to finish it. Jeffrey saw that she was coming and held the door open for her. She walked through it and chirped, “Thank you!”

He followed her through the door and said, “You’re welcome.”

As they were walking toward A-building where the library and Marie’s class were, Jeffrey’s heart began beating faster than normal and his stomach felt like it had butterflies in it.

Now’s your chance, he thought. Just go for it.

He choked out, “Marie.”

They stopped and looked at each other. She answered him, “Yes, Jeffrey?”

He asked her, “Would you like to go out on a date with me? Go to dinner and then meet up with the guys at the theater?”

“Yeah! I’d like that very much,” she said excitedly.

Jeffrey was about to ask Marie for her phone

number when she reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. She handed it to him and gleefully said, “Here’s my number.”

He took it and looked at it. It contained her home phone number and her cell phone number.

They started walking again and he chuckled. “How’d you know that I was going to ask?”

She answered, “I just knew.”

CHAPTER THREE

When Jeffrey and Marie entered A-building they went their separate ways. He walked into the library and strolled up to the front desk where Lara Potters, the new librarian, was standing. She was a pretty woman who looked to be in her early 30s, had a nice figure, and dirty blonde hair that was layered and had a flare to it. She was very not librarian-like in his eyes; and quite attractive too.

Lara's face looked familiar to Jeffrey and he tried to think of where he'd seen her before. He realized that he'd seen her in a dream a couple of months ago. It was a dream that reoccurred frequently and told him that he would meet her. Jeffrey had been anticipating this day and he was frightened. He knew why Lara was there. She was going to tell him that he was the next protector and that he was going to have to fight evil. This was something that he didn't want to hear.

Jeffrey became tense all over and felt ill. He thought, *this can't be happening. I've got to do something to get out of this.*

He decided that he'd play dumb and act like

he didn't know what Lara was talking about.

"Hello, Jeffrey," said Lara. "I'm Lara Potters. You can call me Lara."

She extended her right hand to Jeffrey and they shook hands.

"Nice to meet you. How did you know my name?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

Jeffrey waited. He gave her a look that indicated that he had no clue. Maybe if he played dumb, he figured, she would leave him alone.

"I was sent here by God to watch over you," explained Lara, "because you're the new protector."

She motioned him to sit down at the closest table to them and they pulled out a couple of chairs. Jeffrey took off his book bag and sat it down beside his chair. He acted like he wasn't expecting such an odd response from her and said, "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Long ago, the devil unleashed thousands upon thousands of demons onto the Earth to do his bidding. God appointed a Protector to keep his people safe until the Second Coming and the last Protector was killed almost two months ago while

we were in Europe. It took us a little while to find you. Anyway, you're the next in line and you must answer the calling. You must take on the duties and responsibilities of the Protector. You're God's chosen."

"This is crazy! It explains the weird dreams I've had, but I can't do it. There must be some mistake."

"The dreams of God's hand touching you, empowering you and the light overpowering the darkness?"

"Something like that. How did you know that?"

"Then there's no mistake. All the protectors before you have had the same dream or something similar."

"This is insane! I don't know what to say to this. I'll go along with this for a second and ask you what I'm empowered with."

"Super strength, the ability to heal quickly from almost any injury, and you live a very long time and age very slowly. The reason for that last bit is to carry out your duty as long as you can. There's more to tell you, but over time I'll give you

the rest.”

“Right. So what’s the oldest age a Protector has lived to be?”

“351, but that doesn’t matter right now. Your first assignment is to find out what’s behind the mysterious killings and attacks that have occurred in Rock Hill and the surrounding area. You’ve heard about it, right?”

“Yeah, but no way. I can’t do it. I’m almost 18 now and a senior in high school. I have to make my grades count! I can’t do that by saving the world. Find someone else.”

The bell rang and Jeffrey got up, threw his book bag on and began to walk toward the exit. Lara said to him, “There is no one else. You’ve been chosen. Don’t run from this. You’ll only make it hard on yourself!”

Jeffrey heard her, but chose not to respond and went on to Journalism class.

CHAPTER FOUR

After school, Jeffrey had to go to the dentist for a cleaning and routine check-up. On his way he thought about what Lara told him. Why did God choose him? Why him? There had to be someone else. The conversation had made him nervous and now he was in denial of the idea of being a Protector. He wondered if everything Lara told him was true or if she had made it up. *Why would a librarian make up a crazy story like that and call a student away from his lunch to tell him about it,* he thought.

It was all unfortunately true because it fit the dreams that he had not too long ago. The conversation between Jeffrey and Lara ran through his mind so many times that it gave him a headache. He felt uneasy, not just about what Lara had told him, but like he was being followed. He looked in his rear-view mirror and saw a black van in the distance. He was pretty sure that the van had been following him ever since he left the school. The van turned right onto another road and Jeffrey felt a little more at ease. *Don't get yourself worked up,*

he thought. *It's gonna be okay.*

Jeffrey needed to hear a friendly voice, so he opened up his arm rest and pulled out his cell phone. He flipped it open and called Marie's cell phone; he had programmed both of her numbers into his phone. After a couple of rings she answered.

"Hello?"

It was refreshing to Jeffrey to hear her voice; it was soft and silky smooth. The sound of it had a calming effect on his nerves.

"Hey! This is Jeffrey. How are you?"

"I'm good. I hope you are. You sound kind of down."

"It hasn't been the best day. I needed to hear a friendly voice."

"Oh, you're sweet. Sorry you've had a bad day, but I hope it's getting better. What are you doing?"

"I'm on my way to see the dentist. What about you?"

"Ooh, sounds like fun. I'm at home doing some homework. The same old thing, basically."

"I was wondering, where you would like to

eat on Friday night?”

Now he became a little tense because he was sure that she was going to cancel on him and say that she couldn't go out with him Friday night for some odd reason, never to go out with him at all. That was something that usually happened to him.

Why do girls do that, he wondered. Why can't a girl just be honest and tell the guy that's asking her out that she isn't interested instead of leading him on?

The way it usually worked for Jeffrey was that he'd ask a nice girl out on a date and she'd say yes, initially, and then cancel on him. Later, he'd see the same girl out with a guy that was of the bad-boy variety. He could never understand why some girls operated the way they did.

“Let's see,” she said. “I'll eat anything as long as it's not living. Umm, how about Moe's?”

Jeffrey laughed at the funny statement as he pulled into the parking lot of the dentist office. He parked in the space closest to the entrance and turned the car off as he said, “Yeah. I love Moe's. I could eat there all the time. So I'll pick you up at 5:30?”

“That sounds good to me.”

“Great. Well, I got to go now because I’m
at the dentist. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Jeffrey told her good-bye and they hung up.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Jeffrey got out of his car he saw a black van parked on the other side of the parking lot. A lump rose in his throat and he felt a little more nervous than he already did. *Get a grip, Jeffrey*, he thought.

He hit the lock button on the inside of his car door before closing it and went into the dentist's office. The secretary was at her desk when Jeffrey walked inside. She greeted him and he said, "Hello. I'm here for my appointment."

The secretary said, "Okay, honey. What's the name?"

"Jeffrey Allan."

"Thank you, Jeffrey. Take a seat and we'll be right with you."

He thanked the woman and sat down in one of the chairs in the empty waiting area. The chair had arm rests that were too short and small to adequately serve their purpose. The seat of the chair had padding that was worn thin, making it a hard seat. His backside hurt after a while, so he shifted his weight in the seat. He rested his left

hand on the arm rests and felt something sticky on his palm. *Eww*, he thought as he pulled his hand away and rubbed it on his jeans.

There was a big screen television at the front of the waiting area that was playing something called the “Teeth Channel.” It showed disgusting up close shots of people’s mouths being cleaned and various kinds of dental work being done on them. Jeffrey looked at it for a few moments, but got grossed out and turned his head.

A couple of minutes dragged by; Rose, Jeffrey’s cleaner, opened the door to the waiting room. She smiled at him. “Hey, Jeffrey, come on back,” she said.

Jeffrey stood up from the chair that made his back rather stiff and walked straight back to Rose’s room. She motioned for him to get in the chair and he sat down. Using the controls behind the chair, she reclined him back and he asked, “How are you today?”

Rose replied, “Doing well. Oh, I forgot something! I’ll be right back.”

He heard her walk out of the room and scream. This was followed by a punching sound

and a thud on the floor. Then there was a series of popping sounds and hissing sounds. Jeffrey heard lots of commotion, people panicking, and then falling to the floor. *My God*, he thought as he trembled with fear. *What is going on?*

He began to climb out of his chair and look over the head rest to see thick, white smoke outside the room. *Is that sleeping gas*, he thought.

A black gloved fist punched him in the right cheek dazing him. He slumped back in his chair and his senses slowly came back to him. Two men dressed in black commando gear came on either side of Jeffrey and held his arms down, while another stood at the foot of the chair. He lay very still and studied the three men. They wore ski masks with breathing masks on top to protect them from the sleeping gas.

The man at the foot of the chair spoke to Jeffrey in a low, calm voice.

“We’ve been looking for you for quite some time. It’s nice to finally meet the new Chosen One.”

The second man on Jeffrey’s right then said, “This is just some wuss! If he really was the

Chosen One then he would've gotten up to fight."

"I'm not the Chosen One, the Protector, or whatever you wanna call it," choked out Jeffrey. "I'm just an ordinary guy. Let me go!"

The third man at the foot of the chair looked at his comrades. "He's it. This is the guy she saw in her vision. He just hasn't realized his power yet, I guess. But, I'm not gonna complain about it being easy. The Master will be pleased that we got him. Before we take him, let's have some fun."

The man on Jeffrey's left chuckled insanely and said, "Let's do some dental work!"

The man at the foot of the chair walked over to the desk and found Jeffrey's chart. He found a note that read, "Do not use Novocain; it makes his heart speed up."

He searched the drawers of the desk and found a syringe and a bottle of Novocain. He took them out, sat the bottle of Novocain on the counter, stuck the needle into the bottle, and drew up a good quantity of the contents. The man looked at Jeffrey and coolly said, "Hold his head."

Jeffrey tried to wriggle, but a pair of hands

came from behind the chair and held his head still.

Oh great! There's a fourth one, he thought.

The man with the syringe strolled over to Jeffrey and leaned in. Jeffrey squirmed as the man lifted up his upper lip with one hand and stuck the needle into his top gum with the other. There was a pinching sensation as the needle pierced his gum, making him tense up and sweat all over. The man injected all of the Novocain in multiple spots of Jeffrey's gums and then threw the syringe away in the trashcan by the door.

Jeffrey's mouth became extremely numb shortly afterwards. The man stood back and said, "This should be good."

The Novocain in Jeffrey's bloodstream traveled to his heart, causing it to speed up just like his chart said. His heart pounded so hard he could feel it in his ears and his whole body began to jerk and shake. He panicked and became somewhat hysterical. He looked at the man that injected the Novocain into his mouth and shouted, "What did you do to me?!"

The man leaned towards him and answered, "Novocain. Isn't it great?"

Jeffrey got a huge surge of adrenaline and felt a strength that he had never experienced before. He growled, "I'm gonna kill you!"

In a blind fury, Jeffrey jumped up from the chair ripping free from the three men holding him down and lunged at the man in front of him. He grabbed him by his shirt and with incredible strength, pushed him against the wall, denting it. Then, Jeffrey grabbed the man's face and bashed his head through the wall. After that, he let him go and his lifeless body plopped to the floor.

Jeffrey turned to face the remaining three. As he did this one of the men rushed him and he punched the man squarely in the face with all of his strength. His skull crunched loudly under Jeffrey's fist and his head flopped back so violently that his neck snapped killing him instantly. His limp body flipped backwards a couple of feet and landed with a thud.

The remaining two men charged Jeffrey, who grabbed a tooth drill that was hanging up above his chair and jabbed in into the neck of the man that reached him first, knocking him out of his way to face the next man.

The man threw a punch and Jeffrey grabbed his arm and jerked him to the ground. He landed on his back and Jeffrey lifted up his right foot and crushed the man's neck with a powerful stomp.

Jeffrey stood there in a sweaty daze and couldn't believe what he had just done. He was startled when he felt something grab at his waist from behind him. He spun around to see that it was the man that he had stabbed in the throat with the tooth drill. The man was making gargling sounds while blood flowed from the hole in his neck. He desperately grabbed at Jeffrey, whether it was for help or to complete his mission was unknown, but Jeffrey knocked the man's hands away and kicked him down.

Jeffrey noticed that the man's glove was knocked off his right hand and that there was a marking branded on there. He leaned over to look and see what it was. The marking was "666."

He winced at the sharp pain in his chest that slowly began to spread to his left arm. *What's happening to me*, he thought. *It hurts so badly.* Without warning, the supposedly dead man grabbed at Jeffrey with his left hand. Jeffrey kicked him in

the face and ran out of the room. As he exited the building his heart began to ache and the pain in his chest and arm worsened.

Outside in the parking lot, he stumbled to the ground before getting to his car. He fell to his knees and grabbed his left arm with his right hand. The pain made him wince so that he couldn't breathe. He blacked out. While he was unconscious, he dreamed of a bright shining light. A low, comforting voice came from the light and said, "Jeffrey, do not run from the task I have given you. Do not be afraid, there is nothing to fear. Embrace it and fulfill your duty. Now rise!"

Jeffrey woke up to see Lara standing over him. She knelt down and helped him stand up.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I had a heart attack! The strange thing is that I feel perfectly fine now."

"You need to get out of here and go home now. Somebody woke up in there and called the police. We'll talk tomorrow before school starts."

"How'd you know I was here?"

"My people and I have been searching for you. We decided to watch you and didn't realize

you were being followed by those people.”

“A lot of good y’all are. Those people could’ve killed me.”

Off in the distance police car sirens could be faintly heard and Lara said, “Go home!”

Jeffrey angrily got in his car and tore out of the parking lot. He drove home slowly to try and calm his self down, and to avoid getting home too early and cause suspicion.

CHAPTER SIX

When Jeffrey pulled his car into the garage his mother, Katie, rushed out of the house to see him. As he got out she said, “Jeffrey, I’m so glad you’re home! I tried to call you on your cell phone and, oh, I’m glad you’re all right.”

She ran over to him and embraced him. He hugged her back. They pulled away from each other, Jeffrey said, “What are you talking about? Of course I’m okay.”

“It’s all over the news that there was some kind of terrorist attack at the dentist office.”

Jeffrey thought to himself, *Oh crap! Who called the news? Doesn’t matter now, just play dumb.*

He got his book bag out of the car and walked inside the house with his mother.

They entered the house through the kitchen and walked into the living room, sitting down on the couch. As they walked inside Jeffrey said, “I guess the attack must’ve happened right after I left. And I’m sorry I didn’t answer my phone. I guess I didn’t have the ringer turned up loud enough to hear

when I was coming home.”

“I’m glad you’re okay. You look like there’s something troubling you though.”

You need a better game face, he thought. Better think fast to say something to convince her otherwise.

Jeffrey was going to answer, but got distracted by the television. He hoped that his mother wouldn’t inquire anymore about his demeanor. The news was on about some more strange animal attacks by mysterious animals. The reporter was interviewing a man who claimed to be attacked by a large animal. The man had cuts and bruises all over his face. He claimed that early that morning when it was still dark he heard strange noises outside of his house. The man said that he went outside with his shotgun and was attacked by the creature. He told the reporter that he narrowly escaped it by shooting it several times.

“Did any of your neighbors hear all of the noise?” asked the reporter.

“Nope,” answered the man. “Just me; its growling and all outside my window woke me up.”

“Are you sure that you aren’t just making up

a story to be on the news?”

The man froze and then adamantly shook his head. “No, no. I was attacked!”

The camera man panned over to the man’s front door to reveal claw marks dug deep into the wood. The reporter stated, “This attack is just one of many in a series of mysterious attacks that have plagued the Carolinas for the past several months. Luckily, this one wasn’t fatal.”

Jeffrey and Katie heard the door in the kitchen open and then close. A manly voice said, “Hello?”

It was Jeffrey’s father, Keith, he had just got home from work. He walked into the living room and Jeffrey and Katie greeted him. Keith looked at Jeffrey and said, “I heard about the attack at the dentist office on my way home, are you okay?”

Jeffrey answered, “It must’ve happened after I left. Did anybody get hurt?”

“They said on the radio that there were four commando like men that had been killed, but they didn’t know by whom. Before they were killed they had gassed the place putting everybody to sleep.”

Katie pondered, “I wonder why they attacked the dentist office.”

Jeffrey’s father shrugged at the question and said, “I don’t know, Katie. Did you both have a good day?”

“It was good until I heard about the attack,” answered Katie. “I started worrying about Jeffrey. How was your day?”

Keith answered, “Work was busy, but good. How about you, son?”

Jeffrey had a gnawing feeling in his stomach. *You can’t tell them what’s going on*, he thought. *At least not yet.* He let out a sigh and said, “It was rough. Statistics is hard, especially for someone like me, who isn’t good at math. Mr. Goodson flies through the problems and doesn’t allow everything to sink in. He’ll go from talking about a math problem to talking about his wife or the Wif as he calls her.”

“Is that what’s bothering you?” asked Katie. She hoped that he would answer her question this time.

“A little bit. I’m just nervous because I’m going out on a date with Marie Ashley Friday

night.”

Keith and Katie congratulated him. Keith said, “I’m glad that you have a date. Don’t worry about math; just give it your best shot. If you ever need any help let me know. Now, I’m gonna go change and go outside to grill the burgers.”

Keith strolled down the hallway and turned into his and Katie’s bedroom on the right and shut the door. The events of the day started to weigh on Jeffrey’s mind again, making his head hurt. The gnawing feeling in his stomach worsened and he began to feel nauseous.

“I’m gonna go get a shower, Mom,” he said.

While Jeffrey was in the shower, the day’s events raced through his head over and over. He still couldn’t get over the things that Lara told him about, like being some kind of great protector.

Were the things that she said to me really true? Some of it made sense, but I can’t be the right man for the job, thought Jeffrey. And those four men! I killed those four men like there was nothing to it! I killed. Then I had a heart attack and lived through it. Did God to speak to me? God did speak to me! He wants me to be a

protector and I just don't think I can do it. This must be a bad dream and I'm still waiting to wake up.

He stood under the shower head for a few minutes and let the warm water hit his body. It soothed him and helped him relax a little bit, but it didn't take away his edginess.

Later at supper, he picked at his food and hardly said a word. Keith and Katie noticed his odd behavior and gave each other a questioning look. Keith said, "What's the matter, son? Usually, you're digging in because you're starving."

Jeffrey wished he could tell his parents what was going on with him, but he didn't think they would believe him. There was just something about telling his parents "Hey, I'm God's chosen protector and I've gotta save the world from certain danger" that didn't seem believable. Plus, he wasn't sure what would happen if he revealed that he was the person that killed the commandos. There would be so many questions that his parents and the authorities would ask him. He didn't want to deal with all the hassle. Instead, he lied to them and said, "I think I have a stomach virus. It's been

going around at school. I don't feel good at all."

Katie said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Why don't you go lie down and see if you feel better."

"Okay, I'll do that."

Keith asked, "Are you feeling pretty sick on your stomach?"

Jeffrey answered, "Yeah. The nausea is coming in waves."

"It's 6:45 now. If you can wait a few hours, I'll give you something at bedtime that will help you sleep and calm your stomach down. It's the same medicine I brought home for your mom that time she was so sick."

"Yeah; that helped me out a lot," added Katie.

Jeffrey backed his chair away from the table, stood up, and said, "Okay. For now, I'm gonna go back to my room to lay down and watch a little television.

As he walked back to his bedroom he felt a wave of nausea hit him and his stomach ached hard. He ran to the bathroom, flipped on the light, and knelt down in front of the toilet. He vomited violently and the contents in his stomach rushed out of his mouth and into the toilet bowl. Trying to

calm himself was a futile effort. He kept heaving anyway, until there was nothing left in his stomach. After a few moments, it was all over and he sat down on the floor. He had broken into a cold sweat and he was exhausted from the vomiting. His empty stomach was sore and his throat burned.

His parents came to the door to check on him. Brian said, "I'll go ahead and get you the medicine."

Katie helped Jeffrey up and he walked over to the sink. He turned on the faucet and threw some water on his face. Then, Katie helped him walk to his bedroom.

Jeffrey got to his bed and took off his socks and pants. He sat down on his bed and put his legs under the covers. Katie told him, "I'm sorry you're so sick. You'll feel better now after getting everything out."

Keith walked into the room with a cup of water in one hand and a pill in another hand. Jeffrey took the pill first; then he took the cup and sipped some water, swallowing the pill. Brian took the cup and said, "You lie down and rest now. We'll come check on you later."

Katie leaned over and kissed Jeffrey's forehead and then she walked over to his window and shut the blinds. As Katie and Keith walked out of Jeffrey's room he said, "Thank you."

Jeffrey lay down and began to say his prayers in his head. His prayer faded and gave way to his worries. Slowly, his worries faded too. Within a few minutes he became completely relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the morning, before school started, Jeffrey went to the library to talk to Lara about the events that took place yesterday. Jeffrey stormed up to the front desk where she was sitting at her computer checking her email. She saw him and turned to face him and began to greet him, but he spoke first. There were a few students close by, so he angrily whispered, "I came in here to tell you a few things and then I'm gonna leave. I don't want any part of the stuff that you've told me about because my life has been turned upside down. I killed four men yesterday and I'm trying very hard to keep my nerves together! Anyway, one of those men had 666 on his hand. I assume all of them did."

Lara calmly responded, "They all did. My men and I checked them all, but then we had to leave before the police got there."

"I only told you that so you and your men can figure out who they are. It's not my job, okay? Y'all can handle it."

"We're here only to back you up. It's your job to find out who those men were and if there's

more of them out there.”

“Where were y'all to back me up yesterday when I was getting tortured? And no, I'm not doing any investigating!”

“We're extremely sorry about not being there for you. We would've been there if we knew those guys were there. They were very covert.”

“Who are your people anyway?”

“They are called the Fold and they began with the first Protector. They are a group of people who have dedicated their lives to helping him fight evil. A lot of them have died in battle over the course of time and are hard to replace. Plus, a few went missing a few months ago and we haven't been able to find them since.”

“I see. This is all very interesting,” he said sarcastically. “Keep going.”

“And there's another group who wants to be a part of the group and call themselves The Circle, but I call them a pain in the butt. They're all the time breathing down the Protector's neck making sure he doesn't abuse his power. They started doing this when one of the Protectors appeared to be bad, but was actually being controlled. They

tried to kill him and it turned into an ugly mess. It's a long story, so we won't go into that. We try to keep those people in the dark because they try to follow us everywhere. They might pop up at anytime."

Everything sounded so bogus to him that he had to hear more. He needed a good laugh after what he had been through. He was actually intrigued by Lara's story. He looked at her and waited for her to go on. Lara continued. "I hope that we can get past our rocky start. I want you to realize that you're special. You're not the typical, everyday high school student. You're so much more than that."

Jeffrey didn't want to hear Lara tell him that he was special. In fact, he really didn't want to hear anymore that she had to say. *Just walk away now*, he thought. *Turn around and leave.*

Why didn't he leave? He felt something compel him to stay and listen to her. He just didn't know what it was. Whether it was the fact that he was actually convinced of the things that she told him, or that he was afraid that if he didn't cooperate then she would use the fact that he killed

the terrorists in some mysterious and devious plan to ruin him was unknown to him. The latter made no sense to him.

You think too much, he thought.

“Okay. Fine,” he said.

Hopefully, that would satisfy her and she wouldn’t say anymore. He turned around to walk away and Lara said, “Don’t you want to know who one of your attackers was? It was Craig Cook. I didn’t recognize the others, they weren’t high school kids.”

Jeffrey’s jaw dropped and turned to face her again. He said, “No way.”

“Way. Did you know him?”

“I knew of him. He was pretty popular, a really big prep.”

“One of those bored rich kids, I suppose. We’ve got to get to the bottom of all of this.”

The school bell rang, Jeffrey looked at his watch and said, “Not we. You.”

“You’ve got to do this, Jeffrey. Find out who his friends were and talk to them. Find out what he did in his spare time. Here’s my phone number for you to reach me if you find out

anything.”

She handed him a piece of paper with her phone number on it. He took it and nodded.

“Whatever,” he sighed. *I’m not gonna call you*, he thought. *I don’t know who you are!*

Jeffrey walked out of the library and went to class.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jeffrey drug his feet into Statistics class a few minutes early and dropped his book bag beside his desk, near the back of the room to the left of Cody. He slid into his desk and Cody greeted him. Jeffrey leaned over to Cody and asked him, “Are you understanding this stuff alright?”

“Yeah, I think I’m getting the gist of it. It’s kinda crazy when Mr. Goodson goes from explaining a problem to talking about his wife.”

“Yeah, the Wif! Why do we need math? I’m sure that I’ll never see this stuff again!”

“I know. I would love to skip this class and go straight to lunch! Oh, wait, I already have!”

Mr. Goodson was on a roll with a story about his wife, so Jeffrey and Cody stopped their conversation to listen for a moment. He was at the front of the classroom talking to some students seated closest to him.

He said, “And so I went home and not a darn thing had been done to the house. The place was an absolute wreck. It looked like a friggin tornado had blown through and ransacked the place. The

Wif hadn't cleaned anything and we had company coming later. I told her this and asked her why she hadn't cleaned the house. Do you know what she said? She said she went to do some shopping and forgot about our friends coming over later. Geez! Do you know what she does all day while I'm here enriching your young minds? Eats bon-bons and reads her Harlequin romance books! Oh, boy, I don't know what I'm gonna do with her."

Jeffrey and Cody continued their conversation and tuned Mr. Goodson out. Cody asked Jeffrey, "Do you hear that crazy man?"

"Yes I do."

Jeffrey sighed and rested his chin on his right fist. Memories of yesterday presented themselves to him once more, making him feel like the world was going to end. He said, "Man, I feel like I have so much on me and that it's weighing me down. Sometimes, I wonder how I'm gonna make it out of here alive."

"Jeffrey, that doesn't sound like you at all! What's got you down? You're not your usual chipper self. You look really bothered."

"Some stuff has happened. I can't talk

about it right now. I don't know if I can tell anybody."

Cody became even more concerned and touched Jeffrey on the shoulder saying, "Sounds pretty serious. I won't force you to tell me, but I will say a prayer for you. If you ever want to talk I'm here to listen."

"Thank you."

The bell rang and a few late students scurried into the classroom and found their seats. Jeffrey and Cody faced the front of the classroom and got their pencils and notebooks out of the book bags. Cody leaned over to Jeffrey and said, "Let's hear some more about the Wif and all the bon-bons she eats."

He hoped that his comment would help cheer Jeffrey up.

Jeffrey managed to crack a smile. He had temporarily found a distraction from his worries.

CHAPTER NINE

News of the so-called terrorist attack on the dentist office had spread all over the campus at school and everyone was devastated by Craig Cook's death. At lunch, Jeffrey's friends talked about the shocking news while he said very little about it. The last thing he wanted to talk about was something that he wanted to put behind him and never think about again. He did his best to act as if he wasn't troubled at all. His friends talked so much that they barely touched their food. "Man, that's crazy that Craig Cook was involved in that; that's just messed up," said Ray.

"I can't believe it," added Jess.

Gary wondered out loud, "How did he get into all that? He had a lot going for him."

Jess said, "I can't imagine what his family must be going through, they must be devastated."

Marie wiped away the tears in her eyes and said, "I talked to Craig's sister, Bree, this morning and she is just absolutely shocked."

She had always been so caring and loving towards other people. It was a trait that she picked

up from her mother, Emma, who always showed compassion toward others, making sure that their needs were met.

“She came to school?” asked Brian.

“Yeah. She came to get her assignments and then left. She said she got home late last night because she was at work. She told me she got home about 9:00 and the FBI had searched her house. They found cocaine and some other drugs in his drawers and some satanic stuff.”

“Like what?” asked Jeffrey.

“She didn’t say.”

“We should go visit her.”

Jeffrey questioned what he had just said internally. Did he want to go visit Bree Cook to comfort her or to investigate her brother? Was he really going to do what Lara told him to do? He felt something tugging at him inside to go question Bree about her brother, but he tried to resist it. For one thing- it would be wrong to go question a grieving girl he barely knew. And two- he would just be getting himself into a deeper mess with the stuff he might find out.

He felt so uncertain about his situation; so

cornered. There was something amiss going on in his town and it was now up to him to make it right. *If I don't do anything about it is Lara gonna keep after me?* he wondered. *She could be up to no good, too for all I know. She knows that I killed those men. What if she were to somehow blackmail me into doing what she wants me to do?*

Gary agreed with Jeffrey and said, "Yeah, I'm sure she could use some friends."

Brian sneered, "I wouldn't feel sorry for him or shed a tear if I knew he was into all that stuff. He got what he deserved!"

Everyone at the table looked at Brian in disbelief at that. Ray fumed, "How can you say that, man? Sure, he made a lot of bad decisions, but you ain't gotta be like that. We're shocked more than anything."

Jeffrey asked Brian, "Did you know Craig or have something against him?"

"Not really. I just feel like if you do something stupid like Craig did you're gonna pay for it."

"Yeah, one day we'll all own up to the choices we've made. We'll all own up to our

mistakes.”

Jess jumped in, “Nicely put, Jeffrey. During times like these, Brian, you should be careful how you say things and not be so harsh.

Brian hardly paid any attention to Jess and Jeffrey, picked up his sandwich, and bit into it.

Gary thought for a moment and said, “I wonder if anybody here at school knows what Craig was up to?”

Cody looked at Gary and nodded. “I was wondering the same thing. I’m sure somebody had to have known something about the attack yesterday.”

Cody chuckled a little at the thought, “What was so important at the dentist office for them to go there?”

“And to use sleeping gas to knock everybody out,” added Jess.

Ray pondered, “I don’t know. I wonder who killed Craig and the other three guys.”

All the talk about Craig Cook and the dentist office was starting to do Jeffrey in. Everything that happened yesterday and this morning raced through his mind. His stomach started churning

and tensing up and he began feeling nauseous. He sprang up from his chair, catching the attention of everyone at the table. Brian said, “What’s up?”

Marie touched his arm and asked, “Are you okay?”

“My food’s not agreeing with me,” groaned Jeffrey.

After he said that, he ran into D-building and found the closest men’s restroom. When he entered, he dashed into the first stall and vomited forcefully into the toilet. He managed to calm his stomach down after a moment. *God I want to this to be over*, he thought. *It’s too much. It’s too hard keeping everything I know to myself.*

Tears welled up in his eyes and started to stream down his face. He wiped them away and walked over to the sink. He drew some cold water, splashed it on his face, and looked at his troubled face in the mirror.

“Be strong,” he told himself.

Jeffrey waited until closer to time for the bell to ring before he went back to the courtyard to collect his book bag. He hoped that by the time he returned, his friends would’ve gone to class so he

wouldn't have to answer any of their inquiries as to what was wrong with him.

Finally, the warning bell sounded and he slowly made his way to the courtyard. When he arrived, he was relieved to see that no one was there.

CHAPTER TEN

Jeffrey and Marie pulled into the parking lot of Moe's, which was right across from Manchester Cinemas and parked in the space closest to the door. Jeffrey hopped out of his car and walked around to the passenger side to let Marie out. He opened the door and offered his hand to help her. She took it and he gently pulled her out, closed the door and locked the car. He didn't know if he should hold her hand while they walked to the door or just stay close to her. He decided to go for it and held her hand. She smiled at him and he smiled back. When they got to the door, he opened it for her and said, "Ladies first."

She grinned and chirped, "Why thank you."

He tried to stay calm and not appear nervous. He swigged a good dose of Maalox before he left the house because his stomach had a terrible gnawing feeling since lunchtime. It was chaos inside his mind as it continuously assessed his situation and what he should do about it. So far, he hadn't come up with any solutions.

They sat down at a booth by the back door

after they got their food. Jeffrey said, “Would you like to bless the food or me?”

“I’ll do it,” said Marie.

They bowed their heads and Marie prayed, “Lord, thank you so much for this day and this time that I’m getting to share with Jeffrey. Thank you for this food and please use it to the nourishment of our bodies. Amen.”

After the blessing, they began eating and Jeffrey said, “This food is so good. I could eat here all the time.”

In between bites Marie said, “I know. I could eat this for breakfast, lunch, and supper. Okay, maybe not breakfast.”

“That would be taking it too far.”

“I think you’re right. If I ate here all the time I’d blow up like a tick!”

“Yeah. It would go straight to my hips.”

They both laughed and Marie said, “I’m supposed to say that, not you.”

Jeffrey responded, “I made you laugh, though. You know it was funny.”

“Yes, you made a funny. I got to ask you a question.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“What was wrong with you at lunch today? I waited for you to come back, but I didn’t want to be late to class.”

“Oh, I must’ve eaten something bad.”

“Are you sure? I could tell that something was bothering you. Even now it looks like something is bothering you. Did something happen recently?”

Jeffrey didn’t know how to respond. What would he say? It was too hard to make up a story right there on the spot. Plus, he didn’t want her to think that he was shutting her out, which was something he didn’t want to do. He tried to blow her question off by saying, “Oh, let’s not talk about it now. Maybe we can talk about it later.”

Marie was hoping to get a better answer than that and said, “Okay. I just noticed something was wrong. I hate seeing you not smile and, uh, never mind.”

She stopped herself because she thought she might irritate him. She didn’t want to force the issue, so she changed the subject.

Marie took a sip of diet coke.

“I’m glad that we’re getting to do this. Thank you for asking me out.”

Jeffrey smiled. “Well, thank you for going out with me. I’m having a good time,” he said.

“Me too.”

“So how did you know I was going to ask you out? It was kinda funny because you had your phone numbers written down and ready to go.”

Marie chuckled and said, “I can’t tell you that.”

“Why?”

Marie blushed a little and cautiously said, “I had a dream the night before that you would ask me out.”

She was afraid to reveal that to Jeffrey because she was afraid she might come off as being too forward. She became quiet for what seemed like a couple of minutes, but actually only a couple of seconds. She felt like she may have created an awkward moment. Jeffrey said, “Really? I had a dream that you said yes.”

“No you didn’t! You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

They both laughed a little at each other. He

said, "Feel better about what?"

"I just went out on a limb and revealed something very personal and you made fun of me."

"You're not really mad are you?"

"No. It's good to see you smiling and laughing now. You had me worried there for a little bit."

"Yeah, I really needed this. You've really cheered me up."

After he said that, he looked at Marie for a moment. She had the darkest green eyes that he had never seen before, they were almost hypnotic. He could gaze upon her eyes for hours and get lost in them. If that were possible, then he would do it to get away from the harsh realities of his world.

He noticed how her straight, dark brown hair flowed down the side of her face and brought her eyes out even more. For the first time since yesterday, he felt at ease. Marie had a calming effect on him and made serious matters seem less important. She was euphoric to him, she relaxed his troubled soul. *Thank God for her*, he thought.

Marie noticed Jeffrey staring at her and asked, "What is it?"

“Huh?” He asked. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking at how green your eyes are. They put me in a trance. They’re so green!”

He laughed at himself and blushed. Marie giggled.

“Thank you,” she said. “You’re sweet.”

“You’re welcome. I try, I try. How’s your Fat Sam?”

“Delicious. A few more bites and this baby’s gone. How’s your John Cocto, uh, how do you say it?”

“John Coctostan. Almost gone as you can see. I love it. I get this every time I come in here.”

“Every time and you don’t get tired of it? Wow, I try to pick something different every time, but certain things stick with me.”

They finished their last bites and were finally done eating. Marie said, “I don’t know if I’m going to have room for any popcorn.”

Jeffrey said, “I’ll make room. I’ve got to have my popcorn during a movie.”

“My gosh! I’m about to pop. I don’t see how you can do it.”

Jeffrey shrugged and they both laughed.

“That takes talent,” joked Marie.

Jeffrey looked down at his watch while Marie asked, “What time is it?”

He answered, “7:35. The movie starts at 7:50, but do you want to walk on over to the theater and see if everybody’s over there?”

“Yeah, sure. That’ll give us time to talk. You’ll like Beth Ann, she’s awesome.”

“What about Shaina?”

“I don’t know her. Did you see how Gary acted when Jess mentioned her name? What’s up with that?”

“You got me. I don’t even know.”

They got up from the table and Jeffrey dumped their trash into the trash can by the back door. After that, he opened the back door for Marie and she walked out onto the promenade where there was a fountain. Around the fountain were a few round tables and chairs. Jeffrey walked up beside her and said, “We should have eaten out here, but I didn’t even think about it.”

Marie said, “Yeah, me neither. Maybe we can eat out here next time.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As Jeffrey and Marie walked over to the theater, they saw their group of friends standing and talking. Cody saw them holding hands as they walked up to the group and said, “Here come the love birds!”

“Look at that, they’re hold’n hands,” added Ray.

Brian chimed in, “Who’s going to sit between them during the movie so they don’t start making out? I want to be able to hear the movie, not their heavy breathing.”

Beth Ann laughed and said, “I can’t believe you just said that, Brian!”

Gary lightly punched Brian in the left shoulder and said, “Come on now, you don’t need to take it that far.”

“Ah, leave them alone,” said Jess. “They do make a nice couple, though.”

Jeffrey and Marie greeted their group of friends when they got to them. Beth Ann ran up to Marie and hugged her.

“Hey, girl, are you having fun?” she asked.

Marie answered, “Hey yourself. Yeah, I’m having a great time. Have you met Jeffrey?”

“I’ve seen him in the halls at school, but we’ve never actually met.”

Beth Ann and Jeffrey shook hands.

“I’ve read your commentaries in the school newspaper and they’re awesome,” said Beth Ann. “It’s good to have somebody stand up for our beliefs.”

Jeffrey said, “Thank you; that means a lot.”

Marie complained, “I hate how a lot of people put him down in those letters to the editor.”

After she said that, she scanned the group and didn’t see Shaina and asked Jess, “Where’s Shaina?”

“Beats me. I called her cell phone just a second ago and she didn’t answer.”

James walked up to Jeffrey and said, “Hey, man, why didn’t you tell me you were going on a date? That’s awesome.”

Jeffrey grinned and touched James’s shoulder. “Sorry, James. Uh, I’m on a date now, James!”

They chuckled and James said, “Thanks,

dude.”

Marie looked over at Brian and saw that he was wearing his fingerless biker gloves. She asked him, “Brian, why are you wearing biker gloves, it’s not even cold? You wear those things everyday and you don’t even ride a motorcycle!”

Brian answered in a matter of fact tone, “I like wearing them.”

Marie looked at Jeffrey and shrugged and said, “Okay.”

Ray heard their conversation and said, “Man, I’ve been trying to figure Brian out since the beginning of the school year. That dude is locked up tight like Fort Knox!”

Shaina briskly walked from the parking lot on the left side of the theater to get to the group. Jess spotted her and said, “There she is. Now the gang’s all here.”

As Shaina got closer to the group she said, “Sorry I’m late! I’m a little rushed!”

When she reached the group they all noticed that she wasn’t quite like them. She wore a snug black shirt with a plunging v-neck that revealed her cleavage and skin tight blue jeans that accentuated

her curves. Compared to the way the other girls dressed in the group, she seemed out of place. Even still, the group welcomed her.

Jess hugged her and said, "I'm glad you made it. I tried to call you."

"Yeah, I know. I was on my way. It was hectic at the house. My mom had some friends over and they were all talking to me and I was trying to get out the door."

She noticed Gary standing nearby and said, "Hey, Gary, how are you?"

Gary suddenly felt a little uneasy, but did his best to hide it. He answered, "Fine, how are you?"

"Doing good. It's been a long time since we've talked."

"Yep."

Shaina's cell phone rang and she reached into her purse, pulled it out, and answered it. "Hello? No, I told you I wasn't coming tonight. I'm out with friends. Maybe I'll be there later, I don't know. Bye."

She tossed her phone back into her purse and said to the group, "Is it about time for the movie?"

James answered, "Yeah. We went ahead

and got our tickets, so you might want to hurry and get yours.”

Jeffrey looked at Marie and said, “Oh, I almost forgot to get our tickets.”

He ran up to the box office to get his and Marie’s tickets, Shaina followed him. After they got their tickets, the group went inside to watch the movie.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After the movie was over, the group met outside the theater. Beth Ann was standing beside Brian and her hand brushed up against his. “Oh, sorry about that,” said Brian.

Beth Ann smiled at him and said, “That’s okay.”

They briefly looked into each other’s eyes, but then Beth Ann looked away. She looked at Cody and smiled; who smiled back and didn’t notice the sly flirtation.

Jess asked the group, “What do y’all want to do now? The night’s still young.”

James looked at his watch and said, “Yeah, it’s only a little bit after ten o’clock.”

Jeffrey thought for a moment and asked James, “Don’t you have a pool table at your house?”

“Yeah, in the game room. I’ve got a ping-pong table, too.”

Ray asked, “Do you think your parents would mind a buncha people com’n over?”

“It should be all right,” answered James.

“We can go in around the back so we don’t bother them.”

James and his parents had finally finished putting the final touches on his new game room. At the front of the room was his entertainment center where he could play his video games or movies and enjoy it with surround sound. His parents had to tell him a few times before not to turn the volume up so loud when he was watching his epic action movies. James liked to experience an action movie to its fullest capacity when watching one and the surround sound helped him achieve that. He felt like he was in the movie when the sound waves hit him from every direction. Also, he had a big, soft leather couch for all of his friends to relax on and love seats on either side of it. In front of the couch was a coffee table for James and his friends to put their snacks on while they played. At the back of the room, was where he had his ping-pong table and pool table set up.

Shaina was standing near Gary and Jess when her cell phone vibrated in her purse. She reached in, pulled it out, and answered it. “Hello? I can’t hear you for all that noise. Where are you? Oh.

What? You're not making any sense. Oh no, not tonight. Did Eddie get you to call me this time? He called me a few hours ago and I told him I wasn't coming. I'm hanging up now!"

She pushed the "end" button on her phone and then put it back in her purse.

"Are you going to a party tonight?" asked Gary.

"I had thought about it, but I'm not going. I have to work tomorrow."

"Sounds like a crazy party."

Jess added, "Yeah, I bet."

Shaina cautiously said, "Yeah, I guess you could say that. They get a little too crazy sometimes."

"Same old Shaina," muttered Gary.

He cringed when he realized he said it out loud. Gary felt like could die and wanted to be anywhere but there at that moment. He hoped that no one, especially Shaina, heard his remark.

Jess didn't quite hear all of what he said and became a little puzzled.

"What?" she asked.

Shaina heard Gary and folded her arms and

sneered, “What is that supposed to mean?”

Jess was confused and asked, “Y'all know each other?”

The rest of the group focused on the little confrontation that was occurring between Gary, Shaina and Jess. Shaina asked again, “Well, what do you mean?”

Gary froze and his face turned red. He wanted to turn invisible so everyone would stop looking at him. Hoping that the moment would pass by, he acted innocent and said, “Uh, nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“Uh-huh, right.”

Jess said, “Somebody please answer me, I’m in the dark.”

“We knew each other a long time ago,” stated Gary.

“Not that long ago,” spouted Shaina.

Ray was feeling a little awkward, as was the rest of the group, so he decided to do something. He hopped outside of the group and clapped his hands one time and said, “Hey fellas, let’s go shoot some pool or play some ping-pong!”

The group dispersed and everybody began

walking to their cars. Shaina said, "I'll follow y'all to James' house."

James said, "It's not hard to find. It's on Aragon Beach Road."

Gary and Jess walked to Gary's car.

"What was that all about?"

"It was nothing."

"Oh, it was definitely something. Y'all were a couple at one time, weren't you?"

"I don't want to talk about it now. I'll tell you later."

They got in the car and Jess said, "All right, but I would like to know what happened between the two of you."

Gary nodded and started the car.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The group drove to James' house in a caravan of five cars. The ones riding together were: Ray, James, and Cody; Jeffrey and Marie; Brian and Beth Ann; and Gary and Jess. Shaina drove by herself and followed closely behind to James' house. The caravan was driving down Mount Gallant Road and was about a mile away from Aragon Beach Road. They were coming up on the Mount Gallant Elementary School when some kind of creature flew out in front of Ray's car. Ray was terribly startled and shouted. James cried, "What is that?!"

Ray jerked the car to the right and stomped on the brakes. The left side of the front of the car clipped the creature as it came to a screeching halt. The impact jolted the car and shook up Ray, James and Cody. Luckily, the only damage done to the car was a busted left headlight. The rest of the caravan stopped before plowing into the back of Ray's car.

Ray got out of his car and warily walked over to the animal lying on the road. He stopped about

a foot short from the creature to keep his distance. He wasn't sure what it was because its flesh was ripped and torn beyond recognition. He gasped, "Oh, man!"

It had huge gashes all over its body and was a bloody mess. Its chest slightly rose and fell and slowly became fainter and fainter, until it was no more.

James and Cody got out of the car and strolled past Ray and got closer to the creature. They got on either side of it and observed it for a moment. James, who was on the right side of it, closest to the road, said, "I think it's a deer, a doe."

"Was a deer," added Cody.

Ray said, "There's no way my car did all that to her."

The rest of the group came walking up to see what was going on. Jeffrey said, "I saw something run in front of y'all. Y'all okay?"

Ray turned around to Jeffrey and answered, "This deer didn't run, it was tossed. It's pretty bad. You might want to keep Marie and the girls back."

"Do you need help moving it, Ray?" asked

Gary.

“She’s pretty big,” said James. “We could use all the guys.”

All of a sudden, 10 commandos wearing black ski masks ran out of the woods, five of them coming from both sides of the road. *Oh no!* thought Jeffrey. *I can’t let them hurt my friends!*

He shouted to his friends, “Run!”

After he said that, one of the commandos nearest to him shot him with a taser gun. The two barbed probes, which were attached to the ends of the wires, stuck into his chest and then electricity surged through his body causing all of his muscles to tense up. He groaned with pain and collapsed to the ground. His muscles convulsed as he tried to get up, but failed to do so. Marie screamed and put her hands over her mouth in shock.

“All we want is him,” said one of the commandos to Jeffrey’s friends. “So don’t get in our way.”

Jeffrey’s friends stood in shock as most of the commandos zeroed in on Jeffrey, who was lying limp on the ground. There were two commandos who kept an eye on the group. James thought,

You've got to do something. I can't just stand here!

Something inside James insisted on him taking action. He didn't know who those commandos were or where they came from. He didn't care. All he cared about at the moment was saving Jeffrey.

He looked down, saw a 2 x 4 that had fallen off a truck, and immediately knelt down and picked it up. As he tossed it to Gary, who was closest to the guards, he shouted for him to catch it. Gary caught the board and swung it, like a bat, at one of the commando's heads who was standing guard. The board connected with the commando's head and sent him to the ground. Then he knocked the second commando and was shocked at how fast he had just moved.

Both of the commandos started to get back up and Gary proceeded to deliver another blow, but one of the commandos working with Jeffrey threw something similar to an asp at him. It hit him on the right side of the head and he dropped the board and fell to the ground with a splitting headache.

At the same time, the rest of the group ran

over to Jeffrey to get the commandos away from him, but the commandos dispersed and assumed battle positions. Ray quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out his Swiss army pocket knife. One of the commandos pulled out a large combat knife and pointed it at Ray. “Aw, dang!” exclaimed Ray.

The commando smiled through his mask and said, “You’re gonna need a bigger knife than that!”

While Ray, James and Cody fought two commandos, the rest of the group tried to fend off the remaining seven. Beth Ann managed to spray pepper spray into one’s eyes and he screamed in agony. He put his hands up to his eyes and Brian started punching and kicking him. He knocked him to the ground, but was blindsided by another commando who sucker punched him in the face. Shaina jumped onto that commando’s back and put her arms around his neck. She started pulling back on his neck and Jess ran up to the commando and kicked him in the crotch with all her might. Shaina released the commando’s neck as he doubled over in pain. Shaina saw that the commando had a Para Ordnance P18-9 pistol with a

silencer on his belt. She quickly grabbed it and shot the man three times.

She turned to shoot another commando that was running up to her, but he knocked the gun out of her hands and got behind her, wrapping his arms around her. He squeezed to restrain her as she tried to wriggle out of his arms. She threw her head back and hit him in the throat, since he was much taller than her. He hacked and coughed and gasped for air. She threw her head back again much harder. His squeeze softened and she wriggled free and turned to face her attacker.

Jess charged and threw her left shoulder into the man and knocked him down. Jess said, “Where’s the gun?”

Shaina answered, “I lost it!” After she said that she and Jess ran over to the commando and started bombarding him with kicks. Jess kicked him in the ribs while Shaina kicked him in the head.

Another commando tried to grab Marie, but she dodged him and ran over to the side of the road. Her foot hit something and she quickly looked down to find an empty liquor bottle. She picked it up swiftly and reared back to hit the commando.

Beth Ann came up behind the commando and kicked him in the back of his right knee as hard as she could, making his leg buckle.

Marie whacked him in the head with everything she had and he stumbled to the ground. Dazed, the commando drew his gun and shot in Marie's direction. The bullet hit the liquor bottle shattering most of it, leaving the neck and a long, jagged edge. Marie screamed and turned her head away from the flying pieces of glass. Luckily, she was unharmed by the debris.

Beth Ann lunged at the commando and fought him for the gun, but he threw her to the ground. He pointed his gun to shoot her and Marie sprang towards him. She raised the jagged edged bottle over her head and drove it into the left side of the commando's neck. He winced with pain and turned his attention to Marie. She quickly yanked the edge out of his neck and then sank the edge straight down into the side of his neck. The gun fell out of the commando's hand and dropped to the ground. Then, he fell heavy to his knees and fell over on his right side, dead.

Jeffrey finally recovered after a few moments

and rose to his feet, pulling the probes out of his chest. He ran over to assist Ray who wasn't fairing too well in his knife fight. The commando slashed at Ray and he jumped back, but the blade still managed to nick his forearm.

Jeffrey caught him by surprise and threw a left punch into his gut with tremendous force. The commando hunched over as Jeffrey ripped the knife from his hands and dug it into the back of his neck. After that, Jeffrey snatched the knife out of the wound as the commando plopped to the ground and threw it at the commando who had just punched James to the ground. The blade bit into the right side of the commando making him shout. Jeffrey ran over to the commando and gave him a hard, right upper cut. The man's lower jaw cracked as his head jerked back fiercely causing him to stumble. Jeffrey grabbed his left arm and pulled the commando towards him. Then, Jeffrey grabbed the commando by his vest and threw him to the side of the road like a rag doll. The commando smacked into a tree, fell to the ground and didn't move.

Jess and Shaina had the last commando

beaten down, until he found the opportunity to pull their feet out from under them. The commando pulled out a knife from his belt and raised it over his head to stab Jess and she screamed. Jeffrey heard her scream and was going to rescue her. Before he did, he saw the 2 x 4 that was lying next to Gary, who was struggling to get to his feet and picked it up. He ran over to the commando and jabbed the board into the commando's stomach. The commando bent over in pain and Jeffrey smacked him in the face, shattering his nose. The blow knocked the commando onto his back and Jeffrey raised the board over his head to deliver another. Then he cracked the board over the commando's head, killing him. A chunk of the tip flew off leaving it sharp.

Jeffrey dropped the broken 2 x 4 and looked around at his friends who were staring at him in shock. Gary was rubbing the right side of his head. He asked Jeffrey, "How did you do all that?"

"You threw that one dude like he was nothing," said Ray.

Jeffrey said, "We need to get out of here now.

We'll go to James' house and figure everything out there. Hurry, before more of them come!"

Everybody listened to Jeffrey and ran to their cars and got in them. None of them wanted to be there for another second.

As Marie and Jeffrey went to the car, she was shaking and crying. She asked, "You know something don't you? Are you hiding something?"

Jeffrey started getting into the car and he answered, "I'll tell you everything when we get to James' house."

Suddenly, something landed on top of Jeffrey's car and startled Marie and Jeffrey. As Jeffrey looked up to see what it was, a fist plowed into his forehead knocking him to the ground. Jeffrey was dazed for a moment, but tried to quickly collect himself.

He looked up at the top of his car and saw a shirtless Caucasian man wearing tattered blue jeans. The man was a few inches taller than Jeffrey and was very muscular. He had blood splattered on his chest and smeared all over his face. The man jumped off the car and landed near Jeffrey's feet.

Jeffrey sprang to his feet and asked, "What do you want? Who are you?"

The man grabbed Jeffrey's arms and pulled him close and answered in a low voice, "I want you." The man's grip was tight and started to hurt Jeffrey's arms. He tried to wriggle free, but couldn't. The man lifted Jeffrey off the ground and continued, "We've been looking for you for a while now. The Master will be pleased."

Jeffrey trembled with fear and for a moment he came face to face with the man.

The man's strength was incredible. He held Jeffrey off the ground effortlessly. Jeffrey's arms were beginning to ache from the man's vice-like grip and he wondered how he was going to get free. "They told me to stay back and come in when they needed me. I bet they wish now that they had let me handle things. Would've been so much quicker. It's time to go now!" said the man.

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" shouted Jeffrey.

After he said that he kicked off the man's chest with both feet with all his might, freeing himself his grip. The man stumbled back and

Jeffrey fell to the ground. He quickly sprang to his feet and exclaimed, “What are you?”

The man grinned and said, “I’m a plague.” His grin changed to a sneer when he said, “A disease you can’t get rid of!”

Then he lunged at Jeffrey and they locked arms.

James had quietly gotten out of his car and found the 2 x 4 that Jeffrey used to kill one of the commando’s with. He knelt down and picked up the board. Then stood up and softly snuck his way up behind the man. James held the board with both hands and directed the point towards the man’s back. He knew he probably had only one shot and prayed to God that he wouldn’t screw it up.

The man slung Jeffrey to the ground with such force that Jeffrey’s body ached from the impact to the pavement. James skewered the man with the board and he shouted with pain. The man spun around to face James and belted out a roar that didn’t sound human. He grabbed the point of the board that stuck through his stomach, ripped it out and threw it to the side. Blood squirted out of the wound onto James shirt and pants.

The man's face drastically changed. It became more beastly looking when his eyes became more slanted and his mouth became slightly bigger for his long sharp teeth. The wound in his back and stomach began to heal. He began to grow in size and became wider and more muscular.

James froze with fear and tried to scream but couldn't as the freakish man rose his massive right arm to strike him down. Before the beast could deliver his blow, a sharp silver tip of a blade erupted through the left side of his chest. White and black flames erupted all over his body. The flames vanished and he was gone.

In his place was Jeffrey holding a bloody combat knife with one hand and shielding his eyes with his other. He removed his hand from his eyes and said, "Now we need to get out of here!"

"This is so messed up," choked out James.

Jeffrey and James ran to their cars and got in them. Then the group caravanned to James' house very quickly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The group parked their cars and walked around to the back of the house to the game room. James fumbled for the house key with his jittery hands, finding it after a moment. He unlocked the door and opened it for everyone to go inside.

Everyone entered the game room and walked over to the entertainment center. Jeffrey and Marie sat down on the coffee table facing the couch while Shaina, Jess, Beth Ann, James, and Cody sat on the couch. Gary and Brian sat in the love-seats; Ray went to the bathroom that was to the left of the entertainment center to clean the cut that was on his arm. After a moment he came back and sat on the couch.

Silence fell over the group for a moment, except for some sniffing and crying coming from Shaina and Beth Ann. Marie and Jess had done their crying in the car.

Cody broke the silence by asking, "Who were those people?"

Jeffrey decided he couldn't hold what he knew inside any longer and spilled it out. He

gushed, "They were commandos or something like that and they were after me! I hate that y'all got caught up in it."

Marie was puzzled. She looked at him and said, "What? Why do they want you?"

He continued, "Those people were the same ones who attacked the dentist office on Thursday. They're not terrorists, they're cultists."

Ray spoke up and asked, "Cultists? You mean they have some weird religion or something like that?"

"Yeah. They have '666,' the mark of the beast, branded on them. They came for me, just like they did tonight."

Cody gasped, "My God, you killed those commandos at the dentist office just like you killed the ones tonight! How did you learn to fight like that?"

Marie was blown away by what she was hearing. "What," she said, "I thought you said that the attack happened after you left. What do you have that they want?"

Jeffrey answered, "I'm about as shocked and puzzled as y'all are. I'm trying to understand

everything myself. I'm going to try to tell you everything I know the best I can. Man, this is going to sound weird! Lara Potters, the new librarian, is my guide or something. She told me that I was chosen by God to protect His people from demons until the Second Coming. There was a Protector before me and he got killed somehow. Now, God has given me the power to fight evil."

Jess interrupted, "Like super strength to throw that guy like you did!"

Jeffrey added, "And I'm able to heal quickly from injuries. Yesterday, the commandos tortured me when I was in the chair. They gave me Novocain, which speeds up my heart and I had a heart attack after I killed them. I fully recovered within a minute. I don't know what they want from me. I do know that I don't want to be chosen."

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner?" asked James.

"I was afraid. I didn't know what y'all would think. Because of me y'all almost got killed tonight"

Beth Ann was stunned. "Oh my gosh!

What are we gonna do?" she managed to say.

Marie looked at Jeffrey and said, "You shouldn't have kept this from all of us. We're your friends! If God has chosen you to do something then don't resist it. You'd be making a big mistake not doing what God asks of you. I saw you fight tonight and I saw something special."

She had a strange feeling as she spoke. It was as if she wasn't the one moving her mouth but someone else was, telling her what to say.

Jeffrey shook his head. Chuckling in denial, he said, "But I can't do it all by myself."

Ray asked, "What makes you think you have to do it all on your own? With God's help you can do all things. You should know that. You *do* know that. We'll back you up."

Jeffrey nodded as James added, "Yeah, I'll back you up, too, but we still need to go to the police. If there are more of those commandos then the police need to know about them."

"Yeah," agreed Shaina. "We might not be as lucky next time."

Jeffrey quickly answered, "No! That's too risky."

“Why?” asked Jess.

Brian answered, “Because it would create a huge mess. The commandos might find out that we told the police and come back and kill us.”

Gary got up from his love-seat rubbing the side of his head. He said, “What was up with that one dude going up in flames?”

Jeffrey shrugged and answered, “He must’ve been a demon. That guy must’ve been what happened to the deer, but I really don’t know. I’m pretty sure the others were human. Lara said I had to find out who these commandos are and how Craig Cook was involved. I also have to get to the bottom of the strange attacks.”

Gary stumbled to the bathroom that was to the left side of the entertainment center and shut the door as he said, “That’s some major stuff.”

Brian shook his head and spoke to Jeffrey in a somewhat sarcastic manner, “This all sounds so crazy! You were chosen by God to protect his people? Whoa.”

Cody said, “Yes, it does sound bizarre, but you can’t deny it. You saw what Jeffrey did tonight.”

Jeffrey leaned forward and rested his head in his hands for a moment and said, “I don’t know that I’m ready for something like this. Y’all said that y’all were behind me, but it’s too dangerous for y’all to get involved.”

Shaina snapped, “Too late! We’re already involved and I want to know what’s going on. I want answers. Like, who is Lara?”

He sat back up and said, “She said she was sent by God. She’s supposed to guide me, I guess. I don’t know a whole lot; this is all so new to me. I do know that we need to talk to Bree Cook and ask her how her brother was involved with those commandos. I don’t want to do that, but I have a feeling that things will only get worse. We also need to talk to Lara and tell her everything that’s going on.”

Jess asked, “Do you think Bree will feel like talking?”

“I hope so. Marie, do you have Bree’s number?”

Marie nodded and Jeffrey said, “We’ll call her tomorrow and see if we can go over to her house and talk. I’m going to go check on Gary.”

As Jeffrey got up to go check on Gary, James' father walked down the staircase that was in the middle and to the back of the game room.

His name was Dale Auten. He was wearing a white t-shirt and gray sweat pants and he had bad bed hair. He said, "Oh, I thought I heard somebody drive up."

Dale trotted up to the group and saw how some of them had been roughed up some. He saw blood on James' shirt and became very concerned.

"My gosh, son, what happened to y'all tonight?" he exclaimed.

James jumped up from the couch and quickly thought of something to say.

He said, "We hit a deer and tried to move it out of the road. I thought it was dead when we tried to move it, but it put up a fight."

Cody joined in on the lie and added, "And then it died."

"Are y'all alright?" asked Dale. "How about the car?"

James said, "The car is fine. It was Ray's car that took some damage. I think we're all a little bruised because we took turns trying to move

the deer.”

Jeffrey opened the door to the bathroom and saw Gary sitting on the floor with his back against the wall at the toilet. He rushed over to Gary and called over to Dale for him to come into the bathroom. Dale ran to the restroom as Jeffrey knelt down to Gary and said, “Are you alright?”

Gary said, “My head hurts and I threw up.”

His head dropped and he began to doze off. Dale said, “What happened to him?”

“He got hit in the head pretty hard,” answered Jeffrey.

After he said that, he patted Gary’s face to wake him up and said, “Gary! Oh, man, don’t go to sleep! Wake up, buddy. I think you have a concussion.”

Dale ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breath. He said, “We need to get him to the emergency room right now. Call his parents and tell them I’m going to take him to the hospital.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dale rushed Gary to the emergency room at Piedmont Medical Center and was very fortunate to be seen almost right away by a doctor. While Gary was being checked out, his parents, Roger and Diane, sat in the waiting room with Dale, James, Jeffrey and his parents, Marie and Jess. Ray decided to go home and Cody got him to drive him to his house. Shaina felt that she had had enough for one night and went home and the group to call her when they found out anything about Gary.

Roger looked over at James. “So what exactly happened?” he asked.

James answered, “We were coming home from the movie and hit a deer. We tried to move it out of the road and it hit Gary in the head. He started feeling bad when we got to my house.”

“He was okay driving to James’s house, I guess the adrenaline had worn off by then,” added Jess.

Diane said, “I wish y’all hadn’t fooled with that deer. You should know how injured animals act.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know,” said Jeffrey. “We’re sorry. It was lying so still, we thought it was dead.”

Katie said, “I hope Gary’s okay and that the doctor can just give him something for the pain.”

“Me too,” added Keith.

Roger walked over to Dale, who was sitting across from him, and shook his hand. He said, “Thank you so much for bringing Gary here.”

“No problem, Roger. If you and Diane ever need anything just let me know.”

The doctor walked into the waiting room and Roger and Diane stood up to greet him. The doctor said, “Your son has a small concussion, but he should be fine. I examined him and everything came out fine. I know he was experiencing a little nausea and dizziness, but that’s not uncommon with a concussion. I have given him some pain meds to take away any throbbing that his head may be experiencing. I think it’ll be okay for him to go home tonight. He needs to take this weekend to rest and not do anything strenuous. If he does have any problems please call.”

“Thanks so much, doctor,” said Diane.

“Glad I could help. Y'all have a good night.”

After the doctor shook Roger and Diane's hands he turned and walked out of the waiting room.

Jeffrey turned to his parents, who were sitting to his left, and said, “I'm going to take Marie and Jess home now. I'll be home later.”

Keith said, “Okay. We're about to head home in a minute too.”

Katie said, “Y'all be careful.”

“We will,” said Marie with a smile. “It was nice meeting y'all.”

Jess looked at Gary's parents and asked them, “Will it be all right if I come over tomorrow and see how Gary's doing?”

“You sure can,” answered Diane.

Jeffrey, Marie and Jess said their goodbyes and walked out of the emergency room.

Outside of the emergency room, two paramedics had taken a moment to talk. As Jeffrey, Marie, and Jess walked out of the emergency room they overheard the paramedics' conversation. One of them said, “It was the

strangest thing I've seen in a long time; a mangled deer and 10 dead commandos."

The other paramedic said, "What the hell's going on with these commandos? Who are they?"

"I don't know. It's getting a bit weird around here."

Jeffrey, Marie and Jess continued on their way to the car.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next day, Jess drove over to Gary's house to take him lunch and to check on him. She had gone to Wendy's and got them both a Classic Single with cheese, a medium fry and a medium Sprite. She parked the car in the driveway and turned it off. After grabbing the Wendy's bag and drink tray from the passenger's seat, she managed to climb out of the car. Then, she trotted up the side walk to the front steps, climbed the steps and finally made it to the front door.

She breathed in and sighed in relief that she had made it without spilling the drinks. Being a waitress was something she figured she could never do. There were some things that she wasn't good at multitasking- carrying multiple things and walking was one of them. She stuck her right elbow out and pushed the doorbell with it to ring it. After it rang Diane opened the door. Jess smiled and said, "Hey, Mrs. Dunn!"

Diane smiled back and took the drinks from Jess.

"Hey, honey, let me help you with that.

Come on inside,” she said.

Diane moved aside to let Jess walk in; then she shut the door and led Jess to the living room where Gary was. He was sitting on the right end of the couch reclined back in the seat watching television.

Diane sat the drinks on the coffee table and then left the room for a moment. She returned with two paper plates and set them on the coffee table. Gary was surprised when he saw Jess walk in the living room. “Hey! What are you doing here?” he asked.

Jess put the bag of food down on the coffee table and answered, “I’m here to see you, duh. I thought I’d bring you some lunch.”

“I’ll leave y’all alone,” said Diane. “I’ll be upstairs if you need anything.”

After she said that, she walked out of the room.

Jess sat down beside Gary and said, “Are you doing okay?”

Gary picked up the remote control to the television that was on his lap and turned it off. He said, “I’m doing a lot better than I was last night.

How about you? I know last night was really tough on you.”

“That’s an understatement. I’m good, but a little jumpy at times.”

“Do your parents know anything? I mean, have they asked a bunch of questions about last night?”

“I think they believe me about the deer, but I think they might suspect something. You know, I told them that the deer went crazy when we tried to move it and all that. They started to freak out when they read in this morning’s newspaper about the commandos and the deer being found last night. I told them that we took a different road home and that we knew nothing about it.”

“Yeah, my parents are little suspicious, too. Maybe, it’ll all be forgotten in time.”

“I still keep thinking and wishing that it was a bad dream, but it wasn’t.”

“We were close to getting killed last night, but God allowed us to live by sending us Jeffrey. I have a feeling that we’re a part of something much bigger than us.”

“Oh yeah, definitely. We could’ve all been

killed, but we weren't. God just might have a plan for us all, but I can't handle thinking about it right now. Let's eat."

Jess leaned forward and grabbed the bag of food off the coffee table, reached in it and pulled out the hamburgers wrapped in paper, sitting them on the paper plates. After that, she dumped the fries out of their boxes and onto the plates. Gary folded his chair up so he could sit up and eat. Jess handed him his plate. "Thank you. You didn't have to do this," he said.

Jess got her own plate and leaned back onto the couch. "I know, but I wanted to. There is one thing I wanted to talk to you about."

Gary took a small bite of his hamburger and asked, "What might that be?"

"What was that between you and Shaina? Were y'all a couple at one time?"

Gary became a little uncomfortable about the topic and it showed on his face. He said, "We were a couple for about five months in the 11th grade. We met the second semester in my history class."

"And? I can tell you don't like talking about

this.”

Marie took a bite of her hamburger and sipped some Sprite. Gary continued talking, “And we started talking and dating. At first, I thought she was really sweet, but the real Shaina started to show after a while. Before I realized how she really was, I fell in love with her real hard.”

“How she really was? You mean she liked to party?”

“Yeah. I figured you might know that, since y'all are friends. I didn't realize you knew each other until the other day.”

“I'm trying to be a good friend to her. I talk to her, but at the same time distance myself. She needs to be around somebody that's a good influence.”

Gary grabbed a few of his fries and ate them, chasing them down with some Sprite. There was something that came to his mind that he cringed at and was afraid to confess. He paused for a moment.

Jess noticed his odd behavior and put her hamburger back on her plate. “What? What's wrong, Gary?”

Gary dropped his hamburger on his plate, lowered his head and answered, “My relationship with Shaina became more and more physical as time went on. Whenever we were together we didn’t talk very much, probably because we didn’t have much in common. Instead, we were all over each other kissing and whatnot. I knew something wasn’t right, but I didn’t stop it. We eventually had sex and then I knew I had made a huge mistake and told her so. She was my first and my only one.”

Jess was floored by what she had just been told and said, “Oh my gosh, I had no idea.”

“You’re the only one that knows, except for my youth pastor. Shaina didn’t see anything wrong with it and wanted to do it more. She kept pressuring me and pressuring me until I couldn’t take it anymore. I felt so sick inside because I knew I had let myself down, I had let my parents down and I had let God down. Finally, I told her that I didn’t want to be with her anymore and broke up with her, and like most break ups, it was nasty.”

“Do you know if you were her first?”

“I don’t know. I would hope so. I do

know that when we were a couple she would hang all over other guys when she would be at parties. People at school who had been to those parties would stare at me and laugh and I'd be clueless as to why. I confronted her about it when we broke up. She told me that she hung all over those guys and made out with them because it was fun. Then I realized why those guys laughed at me. Now you know, but why did you ask?"

Jess's eyes filled up with tears and Gary looked up and saw her. "What's wrong? Why are you tearing up?"

She wiped her tears away with the back of her right hand and then grabbed Gary's left hand and answered, "Because I care about you and it hurts me to know that someone can be so cruel to somebody else. Seeing her last night must've opened up some old wounds didn't it?"

Gary held Jess's hand and said, "Yeah, but I'm going to be okay. What hurts more than anything is knowing that she hasn't changed. I still pray for her hoping that she'll see that she's making the wrong choices."

"There's hope for her," replied Jess. "Her

time will come when God will get her attention. You have to have faith that that will happen. Will you do something for me?"

"What's that?"

"Hold your head up high and don't hang it in shame. The things you did in the past are in the past and can't be undone. Let God tend to those things. You have the future ahead of you to make the most of."

Gary smiled at Jess and said, "You're so great! Thank you for making me feel better."

Gary and Jess began eating their meal again and talked some more. After they finished eating, he turned the television on and reclined his seat back. She propped her feet up beside his on the foot rest. After a few moments, she laid her head on his chest. She thought that he might abject, but he never did.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Marie called Bree at 11:00 that morning to see if she, Jeffrey, Shaina and Cody could come visit her. Bree allowed them to come over about 1:30. The four rode in Jeffrey's car and they arrived at the Cook residence right on time. They walked up to the front door and Cody knocked.

Jeffrey's stomach began to churn again, he wasn't too crazy about what was about to take place. *This is stupid*, he thought. *What are you getting yourself into? It's too late to turn back now.*

He reached in his right pocket and pulled out a Rolaid, put it in his mouth and chewed it up. Marie noticed Jeffrey's nervousness and grabbed his left hand, squeezed it and rubbed his arm.

Anthony, Bree's father, opened the door and said, "Hello. Can I help you?"

The group noticed his haggard face and the manner in which he held his tired body. He looked as if he needed a good night's rest.

Marie answered, "Yes, sir. I'm Marie Ashley and my friends and I are here to see Bree."

“Oh, right. She’s expecting you. Come on in.”

Anthony moved out of the doorway and let them walk in. Shaina closed the door behind her. They were immediately in the living room when they entered the house. There was a staircase to their left and Bree was standing on the bottom step.

She was a short, petite 16-year-old sophomore. Her hair was dark, layered, and just barely touched her shoulders. Her eyes were a beautiful yellowish green, but the allure that made them so attractive was somewhat brought down by her sad demeanor.

“Hi, Marie,” she said.

Marie replied, “Hey, how are you doing?”

Anthony walked away and went into the kitchen nearby. He sat down at the table and began reading the newspaper.

“I’m all right,” answered Bree. “About as good as can be expected.”

“These are my friends: Jeffrey, Shaina, and Cody.”

“Nice to meet y’all. Come up stairs with me.”

Bree turned and trotted up the stairs. The group followed her. When they reached the hallway upstairs Bree led them into Craig's bedroom, the first room on the left. Bree sat down on Craig's bed and said, "Thanks for coming over to see me. I realize, though, that y'all are here about Craig, so that's why I brought you to his room."

Jeffrey couldn't help thinking about fighting the commandos at the dentist office. *One of them was her brother and I killed him*, he thought.

Here he was, standing in front of her and she had no idea that he was her brother's killer. He felt like panicking. Running out of the room seemed like the best thing to do, but he did his best to hold it together. The phrase "I killed your brother" repeated in his head over and over, getting louder and louder. He thought he was going to say it out loud for sure.

"I," he started to speak and stopped himself. Everyone looked at him and waited.

Chill out, Jeffrey.

He walked over to Bree and said, "I know this is hard for you, but we would like to ask you a few

questions about your brother. I'm sure this may seem strange to you that we're doing this, a bunch of people you hardly know coming into your house and asking you stuff concerning your family."

"It's all right. I'm hoping that this will help me understand what happened, how my brother became the person that he did. I was at work when the FBI was here, so they didn't get to ask me any questions."

Cody scanned the walls of the room and saw that they were bare and white.

"How had your brother been acting recently?" he asked.

Bree thought for a moment before she answered, "He used to be nice and we'd talk about stuff. He got on my nerves some with the way he dressed so preppy, but you know. We'd argue every now and then, but it would just be about stupid stuff. He hung out with his friends a good bit. They would sometimes come over here and swim in the pool or watch movies."

"Did you like his friends?" asked Marie.
"What were they like?"

"They were some of the preppy girls and

boys, but they were alright,” answered Bree thoughtfully. “His friends were actually pretty nice, the only thing I had against them was that they were so conscious of their looks. They stopped coming over and then some different people started coming over. I guess this was about a month or two ago. I didn’t like his new friends. He came home one Saturday night real late and he was high. I saw him stumbling around and running into things.”

“Who were his friends?” asked Shaina, speaking for the first time.

“Ty Sanders and Amelia,” answered Bree. “I can’t remember her last name. I don’t remember the rest of the people’s names. I’m sorry.”

“Ty is in the Rebel’s Club, he’s so obnoxious.”

Cody said, “Yeah, I know who that is and I think you’re right.”

The Rebel’s Club was a club started by high school students in the 70’s and had continued on to the present day. The club was known for its wild escapades and partying. Northwestern High

School officials made it clear many times that the club was not affiliated with the school. Many people knew that the club existed, but they didn't know where the club had its meetings.

Jeffrey turned around and walked over to the desk by the door. It had an open space on the right side to study and do homework. The left side had a peculiar box-shaped object that had a key hole at the bottom and a handle.

“What is this, Bree?” he asked.

Bree answered, “Oh, Craig was talented at many things. One of those things happened to be wood work. He made that box thingy to keep us away from his computer for some reason. That happened a while back, I guess.”

“We should open it. Do you have the key?”

“No, but we could pick the lock.”

Jeffrey looked on the desk and found a paper clip attached to a stack of papers for a research assignment. He took the paper clip and held it up for everyone to see.

“Who's good at picking?” he asked.

Cody strolled up to Jeffrey and took the paper clip. He inserted it into the key hole and worked

with it until it clicked. Then, he grabbed the handle, lifted the little door up and slid it back to reveal the computer. It had a small web cam attached to the top, and the screensaver showed a ball bouncing across the screen. Cody grabbed the mouse and moved it around on the pad. The screensaver vanished. All of the icons appeared and in the background was a voluptuous, nude model.

Cody spun around to face the group, his face beet red.

“No wonder he kept it locked!” he said.

Marie looked at the background photo for a moment and the model's name came to her. She said, “That looks a lot like Amelia Nash from school. That's her name, Bree. I'm not completely positive, though. I've only seen her once or twice around school.”

Bree hopped off the bed and walked up beside Cody and said, “That's Amelia all right, in all her glory. The freak! I heard her and Craig talking about it one day that she was over here.”

Jeffrey marched up to the computer, looked at Bree, and asked, “I guess they were, uh, pretty

physical?”

“It was so obvious and Dad was furious. I’ve heard so many people at school talk about Amelia and how she got around, if you know what I mean.”

Shaina added, “Yeah, Ty is known for getting around too.”

Jeffrey looked at the picture of Amelia and noticed that her right eye lightly pulsated a soft red color. Jeffrey pointed at her eye and asked, “What is that, Bree? I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Bree thought for a moment and said, “I don’t know. Something he made, I guess. Craig was also good at making computer programs. As y’all know, he was in the computer club at school.”

Cody moved the mouse pointer over to the eye and the pointer changed to a hand. Cody said, “I can click on it. Maybe it’ll take me to something.”

Shaina said, “Probably so. Do it and see what comes up.”

Cody clicked on the eye and an internet page popped up. The page loaded quickly to reveal a

sexually explicit website that contained S&M and bondage. Marie turned her head away. “Ew, that’s disgusting.”

A small box appeared in the middle of the page that became a streaming video. A scantily clad woman appeared sprawled out on a cheap looking bed and she sensuously said, “Hello, Craig.”

Then she sat up when she realized it wasn’t Craig and spoke in a curious tone, “Who are you people? Do you like to watch too?”

Jeffrey observed, “Craig got into some crazy stuff.”

Bree noticed on the web page that the membership cost was over \$40 with a major credit card. She said, “The credit card bill came in recently and Dad said there were a bunch of charges on there for some unknown thing. I’m guessing that would be the unknown thing. Oh, I can’t believe this!”

A light blue box appeared at the bottom right corner. It read, “You have 1 new message.”

Cody clicked on the box and Craig’s Hotmail inbox appeared. In the subject of the new message

it read, "Saturday night's party." Cody opened it and it read, "Brothers and Sisters! Saturday night is rave night. The party will be at the Full Moon in downtown Rock Hill where the old mall used to be; a night of fun that you'll never forget. Be sure to bring plenty of friends. The doors open at 8:00."

Shaina skimmed over the message and saw the date that the message was sent. It was sent Thursday, the day Craig died. "Look at all the people this message was sent to," she said. "It looks like a hundred people or more."

Jeffrey said, "Yeah. It's strange that the message addresses everyone as a brother or sister. Something tells me we should go and investigate."

Shaina nodded, "Good idea."

"Do you think we might find out something?" asked Marie.

Jeffrey answered, "Maybe. This could help us find out more about what Craig was into. Cody, who sent that message?"

Cody looked at the message and said, "I'll have to spell it out, I can't pronounce it. D-a-r-a-r-i-f-e-d-r at hotmail dot com."

“Okay, forward that email to Lara Potters.”

Cody nodded and went to the Northwestern High School website, found Lara’s e-mail address, highlighted it with the cursor and saved it. Then, he went back to the email and pasted Lara’s email address in the box that read “to.”

Jeffrey said, “Okay, guys, I think we found out all that we can here.”

After he said that he turned to Bree.

“Thank you for talking to us, you’ve been a big help. If you need us or think of something, call us.”

Jeffrey picked up a pencil that was lying on the desktop and jotted his number down on a piece of paper, then he handed it to Bree. She took the paper and studied it. A feeling of disappointment came over her. She didn’t fully understand why her brother died like he did. She thought she would after Jeffrey and his friends came over.

“Why exactly did y’all come here and ask all these questions,” she asked with an inquiring face. “Why are y’all so interested?”

Jeffrey put his right hand on Bree’s left shoulder and said, “We’re trying to figure out

what's going on. A lot's happened in the past couple of days and I'm trying to make sense of it. If I told you now what I knew, you might not understand."

Jeffrey and his friends said their good-byes and saw themselves out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After Jeffrey took Marie, Cody and Shaina to their homes, he went to his house. When he went in the house his parents met him at the door. They had concerned looks on their faces which made Jeffrey ask, “Hey, what’s wrong?”

As he walked inside and shut the door Katie said, “We want to know what’s going on. Your father and I read in the paper this morning about a deer and 10 dead commandos being found on Mount Gallant Road.”

Keith jumped in and said, “Did y’all come home that way?”

His eyes peered at Jeffrey, hoping for him to respond truthfully. Jeffrey kept his cool and tried not to panic. He answered, “No, we came home a different way and hit a deer there.”

Keith asserted “Something’s going on and we don’t know what to think. I hope you’re not involved in anything. Those commandos were found Thursday and then last night in places that you’ve been to.”

Jeffrey could feel his heart beating in his ears,

but he tried not to let it show as he said, “I left the dentist office before they got there Thursday. And last night, we didn’t go down Mount Gallant, we went down India Hook. Nothing’s going on. I promise.”

Katie said, “We’re worried because you’ve been acting differently lately. We want to be able to be here for you when something’s wrong. I just hope you would come to us for help if you were involved in anything.”

If only you could help me out of this now, thought Jeffrey. Then he said, “I’m just stressed out with school right now. The semester is coming to an end and the teachers are really piling on the work now.”

Keith put his hands on Jeffrey’s shoulders and lovingly said, “We just want you to be able to be open with us and not feel like you have to hide stuff, like your brother Dylan.”

“Who has gone off to college only to get into trouble,” added Katie.

Keith took his hands off of Jeffrey. Jeffrey smiled at his parents and reassured them, “I’m not going to turn into Dylan, I promise. Nothing is

going on. Speaking of Dylan, have you heard from him today?"

Both of his parents shook their heads and Jeffrey said, "It's been two weeks now since we've heard from him."

Keith said, "I know. That's why I hope you understand our concern."

"I do," Jeffrey said. "I love y'all and I'm glad that y'all care."

"We love you too," said Katie.

Jeffrey went to his room and shut the door behind him. He sat down on his bed and thought for a moment. *What is going on? I'm in way over my head, I'm scared to death, and I can't tell anybody about it because I know they probably won't believe me. I've got my friends sucked into it and I know that they must feel the same way. Ugh! And I'm going to a club tonight to investigate. What am I supposed to look for?"*

His stomach began to churn, then he had a bitter taste in his mouth as he went deeper into

thought. Reaching into his right pocket, he pulled out a roll of Tums. He peeled back the paper and got two to eat, then put them in his mouth, chewed them up and swallowed them. He put the roll back into his pocket and was startled by his phone on his bedside table ringing.

Jeffrey picked up the phone and answered it, “Hello?”

Gary was on the other line and said, “Hey, Jeffrey, it’s Gary.”

“What’s up? I was about to call you.”

“Marie called me and told me what y’all found out. Are y’all going to that club?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what I expect to find.”

“I’m not sure, either, but watch out for Shaina. Don’t let her get y’all into trouble.”

“Right. Do you have a bad feeling about her?”

Jeffrey didn’t know anything about Shaina because he and Gary met shortly after they broke up. Gary gave him a brief history of his involvement with Shaina.

“I think it’s best that you don’t trust her and

watch her carefully. Y'all just watch your backs," said Gary with firm urgency. "I just thought you should know."

"Thanks, man."

After Jeffrey got off the phone with Gary his head began to hurt and he noticed that his hands were jittery. He sat on the edge of the bed, leaned forward and laid his head in his hands. Running his fingers through his hair, he sat back up and sighed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ray pulled into his driveway and saw his father Marvin's blue truck. *Oh good. He's home*, he thought. *He'll be glad to hear that the repairs didn't cost that much.* He parked the car beside the truck and turned it off. He got out, walked to the front of the car and observed the repairs. He ran his hand over the left headlight and smiled. "Just like new," he said aloud. "Crazy demon people better stay away from me and my car."

He walked into the house and called for Marvin but he didn't answer. Ray walked back to Marvin's bedroom and called him once more. He peered into the bedroom and saw only one pillow on the bed. This was a sight he still wasn't used to seeing. Frowning, he turned and walked out to continue his search.

Making his way to the basement door, Ray could hear the clanking of metal and huffing and puffing. He trotted down the stairs to find Marvin bench pressing weights in his typical red gym shorts and white tennis shoes. Marvin's brown skin

glistened with sweat; his muscles bulged with each press.

“Hey, Dad,” said Ray.

Marvin hung up the weights, sat up and exhaled slowly through his mouth.

“I didn’t hear you walk up,” he said.
“Everything go smoothly at the shop?”

“Yes, sir. My friend was working today so he cut me a deal.”

“That’s good,” said Marvin wiping his face off with a towel.”

“How’d the counseling session go?”

“Eh. Not as well as I’d hoped. There’s still stuff that she won’t talk about. I mean that I can that she’s hiding stuff.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, but I’m certain that she’s hiding something.”

Marvin and Tyra had been happily married for 25 years until six months ago when Tyra became distant from him and Ray. As time went on, she progressively became more and more withdrawn. It was three months ago that she moved out and got her own apartment. Marvin

and Ray both tried to get her to come back home, but their attempts failed.

A few weeks ago, Marvin and Tyra started marriage counseling after he persisted that they try to save their marriage.

“I wish she’d talk to us,” said Ray. “It’s like she’s a completely different person.”

Marvin stood up and walked past Ray to his water bottle sitting on a stool. He put his hands on his hips and looked at the floor. He said, “She *is* a different person. I wish I knew what was going on inside her head.”

“Dad, did she cheat on you?”

Ray dragged his question out of his mouth, afraid of what the answer might be.

Marvin turned toward Ray and nodded. He looked like he’d been slapped in the face.

“Yeah,” he quietly answered. “She did. I’m willing to work it out with her if she’d just come back home.”

Ray suddenly felt weak in his knees, like he had just been on a roller coaster. He realized that he had just become part of a statistic about broken families that people read about. He struggled for

words.

“Why have you kept this from me?” he finally asked. “For three months I’ve been tryin’ to figure out what’s goin’ on and haven’t been able to get a straight answer from either one of you.”

Grabbing his water bottle, Marvin gestured for Ray to sit down on the work out bench next to his. They both sat down and Marvin took a gulp of water.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know about her unfaithfulness until a few weeks ago. I wasn’t trying to hurt you. All I was trying to do was keep you from getting distracted from school.”

“I know. You were just looking out for me.”

Patting Ray on the shoulder, Marvin said, “We’re gonna make it. We’ll get through this together.”

Ray managed to smile and nod.

“You know what we haven’t done in a while?” asked Marvin thoughtfully.

“What’s that?”

“Fenced. Are you up for a few rounds?”

A smile formed on Ray’s mouth.

“You’re on,” he said.

Marvin went to go find the fencing suits and sabers.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jeffrey, Marie, Jess, Brian and James met Ray at his house at 7:30. They congregated outside of the front door so that Ray's parents couldn't hear their conversation. Ray said, "All right, fellas, I got my car fixed up today. A deer better not run out in front of me!"

"Don't worry, Ray, that won't happen tonight," replied Jeffrey. "Well, hopefully that won't happen tonight. Oh, has anybody heard from Shaina?"

"No," answered Jess. "I've tried to call her, but she never answered."

James asked, "Do you think if we watch her closely tonight we might find out something?"

"That's even if she shows up, but what makes you think that?" asked Marie.

"When we were at the movies someone called her cell phone and she asked the person where they were at. It sounded like a girl. Anyway, she just seems so secretive. I was standing beside her when the person said they were at the Full Moon. Just by the conversation it sounded like she had

been there before.”

Ray jumped in. “Yeah, that’s right. Shaina asked the person if Eddie told them to call her.”

“We could learn something from her if we watch her closely,” added Jeffrey.

Brian spoke up and somewhat snapped, “Just because she’s a party girl doesn’t mean she’s part of some dastardly plot to take over the world.”

Jess gave Brian a questioning look. “No one ever said she was a part of a plot to take over the world. We’re just trying to figure out a plan.”

After she said that her cell phone rang and she answered it. It was Shaina. “Hey, I’ve been trying to call you. What’s going on?” she said.

“I’ve been busy.”

Jess waited for more. Finally she asked, “Oh, doing what?”

“Uh, just stuff. The usual, I guess.”

“Okay. You’re always so secretive. Anyways, are you coming with us to the Full Moon? We’ve been waiting for you at Ray’s house.”

“Yeah. I’ll meet y’all there. Go ahead and

go. I'll see you later."

"Okay. Bye."

Jess hung up with Shaina, agitated and said, "I always have a hard time getting through to her. She always keeps to herself and never really cares to open up about anything. Anyways, she said for us to meet her there."

Marie said, "Well, let's go see what we can find out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They arrived at the Full Moon at 8:20 and weren't sure if Shaina was even there yet. Before they walked inside Jeffrey said to the group, "Let's split up and see what we can find out. The first sign of trouble you call me or each other."

They agreed to what Jeffrey said and they walked inside the crowded club where the place was filled with music. The fast techno beat covered the room like a blanket. The lighting was dim so the glitter ball hanging from the ceiling could reflect the strobe lights that were strategically placed throughout the club.

Jeffrey walked through the sea of people who were dancing and drinking colorful drinks. He thought to himself, *Yep, this is a rave.*

A giggly young woman stumbled onto Jeffrey's path and dangled a little plastic bag, containing a white powdery substance, in his face and asked, "Want some?"

Then she gushed, "It'll make you feel real good!"

Yep, definitely a rave, thought Jeffrey. Then

he answered, “No.”

He made his way around the girl and kept walking. Stopping for a moment, he scanned the area in hopes of finding Shaina. He decided to search some more and took a right. He waded through a group of people who were dancing, caught up in the beat of the music. A young man, holding a cup in his right hand, backed into Jeffrey’s left side causing him to stumble. The young man turned around to face Jeffrey and said, “Oh, man. Sorry about that.”

Jeffrey did a double take when he realized the young man was his brother, Dylan. He said, “Dylan?”

“Jeffrey, what are you doing here?” asked Dylan.

“Uh, just looking for somebody. What are *you* doing here?”

“Hanging with some friends, having a good time.”

“I haven’t talked to you in a long time. Why have you stayed away from home? Why haven’t you returned any of our phone calls?”

“I’ve been busy learning about a new way of

life!”

“What?”

Dylan put his left hand on Jeffrey’s right shoulder and gushed, “Jeffrey, it’s amazing, I’m finally becoming free. I’m about to give my life to him. I can do whatever my heart desires because my god wants me to get all the enjoyment that I can out of life. I’ve seen him, Jeffrey and he’s coming soon.”

Before Dylan could go on, a girl he was with pulled him away from Jeffrey to talk to him. Jeffrey tried to lean in to hear what she had to say. He could only hear the first part of her sentence, which was, “Dylan, were not supposed to talk about-” because the deejay made an announcement. “Yo, what’s up, y’all? I got all the tunes to keep y’all going all night! Here’s one to get your juices flowing.”

The deejay put on a hip-hop song that got everybody pumped up and dancing some more. Dylan and his friends started dancing and the girl that pulled Dylan away poured some white powder from a small plastic bag into his drink. Dylan grinned at the girl and she grinned back. He put

the cup to his mouth and turned it up, drinking all of the contents. Jeffrey's jaw dropped and he thought, *No, Dylan, no! What are you doing? What have you become?*

Marie walked in the direction of the bar and saw a few people sitting there with their backs turned to the crowd. A girl spun around in her chair to face the audience, it was Amelia Nash. Marie saw that she was wearing a tight, form-fitting white shirt that had a plunging neckline to show her abundant cleavage and tight low-rise blue jeans that were so tight that they could pass as a second skin. Marie said to herself, "That looks like Amelia for sure."

She walked over to Amelia and Amelia gave her a strange look as if she might've known her. Marie sat down in an empty seat on the left side of Amelia and said, "Hey."

Amelia turned her chair to face the bar and said, "I know you from school, right?"

"Yeah, I'm Marie. I thought I'd check this place out tonight."

"Yeah? It's great isn't it?"

Marie nodded enthusiastically. She touched

Amelia on the leg and said, “How’ve you been doing since Craig passed? I know it must’ve been a real shock.”

Amelia shook her head and casually blew it off saying, “No, I’m doing great. Craig’s death was toward a good cause.”

“What cause might that be?”

“Freedom. All that you see here and more. This is all for the glory of our messiah. We’re winning people over for him.”

“The messiah? You don’t mean Jesus do you?”

“No. This is someone else who offers so much more than Jesus. My god offers freedom to do whatever your heart desires and the power to conquer.”

“The power to conquer what?”

“Opposition. Anyone who stands against us.”

“So what’s the name of your god?”

“He’s forbade all of us to say because he wants people to find out on their own.”

Marie thought to herself, *In other words, trick them into getting sucked into this weird crap*

probably the way you were.

A young man walked up behind Amelia and put his hands on her sides, slowly slid them around to her stomach, and hugged her. Amelia smiled and positioned herself to face the man and said, “Hey, baby.”

The young man slyly said, “Hey yourself.”

He leaned in and they engaged in a very passionate kiss, Marie looked away and sneered her nose. He pulled away from her and Amelia said, “Mmm, yum.”

The young man said, “Come dance.”

“All right.”

Amelia hopped out of her chair and bent down to pick her purse up off the floor. Her tight jeans rode down a little as she bent down and Marie looked down and noticed that she had the number “666” branded on her lower back. Amelia stood back and turned to Marie and said, “Bye.”

Then she walked off with her boyfriend.

Jess, James and Brian happened to cross paths near where the deejay was set up and Brian said, “Y'all find anything?”

Jess and James shook their heads in a

somewhat discouraged manner. James said, “Have you seen Shaina anywhere?”

Brian answered, “No, I haven’t scoped out the whole place yet. It’s so crazy in here. I don’t think we’re going to find her”

Jess said, “I think it’s time we try to call her.”

As she reached into her purse to get her cell phone it rang. She answered it and Marie was on the other line.

“Jess, I need you over here at the bar. I’m freaked out.”

“Okay. I’m coming with James and Brian right now.”

Jess hung up and said to James and Brian, “Marie wants us to meet her at the bar.”

While Jess, James and Brian were making their way to Marie, Shaina was with three friends towards the back of the club on the right side close to the wall. Shaina was drinking a mixed drink while her three friends, a guy and two girls, passed a joint back and forth. She already had a shot of liquor and a bottle of beer. Shaina had forgotten that she was supposed to meet Jeffrey and the others there. That was typical of her to forget to do

important things assigned to her that appeared not to benefit her. She was always wrapped up in her own little world and thinking about seeing her friends.

Shaina was slowly getting wasted. She took a few hits off of a joint that one of her friends gave her. She had only smoked weed once before, so the effects that it had on her were still strong. She was mellowed out and was having trouble focusing on things and people around her.

Her cell phone rang, she reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She read the caller id and saw that it was Jess. She gave an annoyed sigh and dropped her phone back into her purse. One of the girls said, “Wild night, huh, Shaina? I don’t usually see you on rave night.”

Shaina said, “I know, but I’m having a bad weekend and need to get loosened up.”

Her boyfriend asked, “Are you not going to answer your phone call? I bet it’s your friends looking for you.”

“I might meet up with them later.”

Her boyfriend gave a devilish grin and said, “They won’t be here later.”

Shaina gave her boyfriend a puzzled look as one of the girls dropped two little white pills into her drink. The girl said, "Try those. They should make you feel better."

Shaina asked, "What is it?"

Her boyfriend chuckled and answered, "Oh, man! I can't think of the name right now, but they're awesome. They dissolve in your drink."

He leaned in to her and whispered in her ear, "You were here last Saturday night and took one. We went upstairs to my office and we fooled around. You said that was the best sex you've ever had."

Shaina laughed a dazed laugh and said, "Maybe with two of these it will be twice as good!"

She put her cup to her mouth, knocked it back and downed the rest of the contents.

Ray was strolling through the crowd when he happened to see Shaina with her group of friends from a distance, who walked away from her. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called Jeffrey to tell him where she was. As he talked to Jeffrey, he noticed that her face looked pale and flushed. After he finished talking, he tried to get

to her, but people kept getting in his way.

She had become terribly ill and her body ached. A cold sweat covered her body and her hands were shaking. She dropped her cup and it shattered on the floor. Her head blindingly ached so much that it felt as if it was going to burst. Putting her left trembling hand to her head, she looked for a place to go. She didn't know where she needed to go or what she needed to do, she just needed to leave.

Her breathing became labored and her heart raced. Seeing that a door was a few feet to the right of her, she began to walk to it. She discovered that her legs were like rubber and she felt like she couldn't stand at all. Stumbling to the door, she grabbed the knob to turn it. She opened the door, staggered inside and shut it behind her. As she entered the room, her vision blurred severely and pain gradually entered her left arm as she took a couple steps forward. The pain worsened and seized her chest. She gasped, hugged her chest and collapsed onto the floor. Her body began to convulse intensely for a moment and then lightened up until it stopped. The pain in her chest remained

and she wheezed for air.

Shaina heard a couple of voices whispering in her head. Then they became clear. They sounded hideous and ghastly. They sounded as if they were whispering in her ear. One voice, in a low, conniving tone said, "Look, she's dying! We've got another one. We've *got* her!"

The other voice said, "The master will be pleased. Another one will burn!"

They laughed a scathing laugh that put goose bumps on her arms and legs.

In an instant, she saw a dark, fiery place that glowed red. It was as if she was floating above the place. She saw a massive pit of fire and lava with men, women and children in it. Their skin boiled and was charred black. Their faces had expressions of sheer terror, unlike any other expression she had seen before. They flailed their arms in the air and they screamed for help, but no rescue came. They screamed for water, but no relief came. They screamed for Jesus, but no salvation came. They remained in the pit where they would burn alive continuously.

On the embankment of the pit was an area

where black-hooded creatures were torturing people. They stuck their victims with hot pokers and Shaina could hear the victims' skin sizzle. Also, they beat their victims repeatedly with whips, chains, clubs and other various objects. If the victims screamed, then the hooded creatures would beat the victims harder.

She saw one black-hooded creature with his back turned to her. He was working vigorously on a man who was screaming at the top of his lungs. The creature stopped and turned around to face her. He pointed at her and growled, "You're next!"

Trying to form words with her lips, she struggled to speak. She kept trying until she had some success.

"N-n-no," she groaned. Then she mustered the strength to scream, "No!"

She started sobbing and cried out, "Oh Jesus! Save me. Don't let me die here. Jesus, I need you!"

Suddenly, the hellish images disappeared and she was back in the room. Her vision was clear, all her pain was gone and she was completely sober. A wave of comfort washed over her, putting an end

to her sobs. She felt a little more at ease, but was still on edge.

Ray burst into the room as Shaina sat up. He rushed over to her and knelt down to see her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. Ray thought it strange that Shaina hugged him, but she probably would've hugged anyone who came through that door after what had happened to her. Ray hugged her back and then they pulled away from each other. He asked, "We've been looking for you. Are you okay?"

"I am now. I need to get out of here."

Ray looked over the room as he helped Shaina to her feet. He saw a man and woman sitting on the floor passed out against the wall on the left side of the room near a door. Also, he noticed an elevator door at the back of the room that had a strange symbol on it. The symbol looked like this:



Ray began to walk towards the elevator door to get a better look, but the door on the left side of the room flew open and two tall, muscular men popped out. Before one of the men grabbed him, he was able to see inside the room for a moment. It was full of people sitting in desks watching a video being projected on a screen at the front of the room. The people sounded dazed and robotic as they repeated what they heard.

The two men dragged Ray and Shaina out of the room and then out of the back door of the club, where they joined Jeffrey, Marie, Jess, Brian and James. They were being guarded by three other muscle men that had asps. The five muscle men stood near the door with their backs to it, while Jeffrey and his group stood in front of them. The muscle men made sure that there were a few feet between them and their captives, so if their captives tried to attack them they would have time to react.

Shaina's boyfriend walked out of the back door holding a Ruger P90 with a silencer and got between his muscle men. He stood there looking tough and authoritative. Shaina asked her boyfriend, "Eddie, what's going on?"

Eddie rubbed his blood shot eyes before crossing his arms. He was obviously high.

“I got word that your friends here are snooping around my place,” he sneered. “I know trouble when I see it. Your friends are bad for business.”

“Baby, what are you talking about?”

She looked at him and waited for an explanation. None of what was going on right now made any sense right now. *This can't be*, she thought.

Earlier in the evening, Shaina went to the club and walked into Eddie's office upstairs where he was sitting behind his desk working on his laptop.

Everything on his desk wasn't very organized. There were papers that pertained to different matters of business scattered about on his desk. Somehow, he was able to always find what he needed and get important things accomplished. She shut the door behind her and he looked up from his laptop, noticing the worried look on her face.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“Some people are saying some things about

you,” she said as she approached his desk. “Really bad things.”

Eddie stood up and walked over to her. “Who is it? And what are they saying?”

“It doesn’t matter who it is. They were implying that you’re a part of a cult with these creepy military guys that are going around doing weird stuff.”

“No,” said Eddie with a laugh. “That’s crazy.”

“They showed me an email-”

“Honey, stop,” he said as he rubbed her arms. “Do you hear how silly all of that sounds?”

He flashed Shaina a smile that brightened up her face. She took in a deep breath and said, “You’re right.”

“People always want to cause trouble for me. I’ve got the best club in town and people want to screw that up.”

Shaina chuckled. “I feel stupid for letting those people make me believe that something was going on.”

Eddie looked deeply into her eyes while touching her shoulders. “Nothing is going on here.

Trust me.”

He pulled Shaina into him and they hugged. She tilted her head up to his and kissed him.

“Let’s get out of here and party.”

Shaina agreed and they left the office to go downstairs.

I can’t believe I was stupid to believe him, she thought. I could just kick myself.

Eddie paid no attention to Shaina’s question and said, “They want my place shut down. If they do that, then I’m out of a job.”

He looked to the muscle man on his right side and said, “Take care of it. I know you’re a good shot. If they try to run I know they won’t get far.”

Eddie uncrossed his arms and handed his gun to the man on his right side, then he started walking back inside.

“Make the Protector watch you kill his friends,” he said as he went inside. “Then bring him to me. I’ve got to take care of some other things.”

While the man was cocking the gun, Jeffrey slowly reached into his right pocket and pulled out a small glass cup that he grabbed off of someone

while he was being drug outside. At the time, he was trying to grab something to use as a weapon and the glass cup was the first thing he saw. He hid it in his pocket and hoped that it would come in handy later.

The man pointed the gun at Jeffrey and Jeffrey threw the glass cup with tremendous force at the man's gun. The cup hit the tip of the gun and shattered. Pieces of glass sprayed into the man's face and eyes. The man screamed in agony, dropped the gun and put his hands up to his face.

Jeffrey charged the man and did a jump kick that slammed the man into the wall. The man dropped to the ground and rolled around in pain. One of the other men swung at Jeffrey with an asp and he ducked. Jeffrey grabbed the top off a metal trash can that was by the door and whacked the man on the side of the head with all his might, sending the man to the ground. He turned to face the next man who was in mid-swing. Jeffrey raised the trashcan top and blocked the blow and clocked his attacker in the face with a right uppercut. The man was raised a couple of feet into the air before hitting the ground. The remaining two attackers charged

Jeffrey and he threw the trashcan top like a Frisbee at them, but one of the men deflected it with an asp.

Ray and James rushed the two men from the side and pushed them into the wall. The man Ray pushed went into the wall shoulder first and managed to shove Ray to the ground with his free hand. The other man bounced off the wall and whacked James in the gut. James cried out from the sharp pain in his stomach. He wanted to double over, but he ignored his pain to help Jeffrey.

The man raised his asp to strike again, but Jeffrey hit him in the head with the trash can. The dazed man stumbled aimlessly and James reared his left fist back and hit the man in the jaw with a strong left hook. The man plopped to the ground.

Ray brandished his pocket knife and faced off with the last attacker. The attacker swung his asp at Ray and he dodged it. Ray swiped his knife at the man and made a long, deep cut on the man's left arm. While Ray and the man fought, James picked an asp off of one of the men. James snuck up to Ray's aggressor while they were locked up and whacked him in the back of the leg. A bone in the man's leg snapped from the blow and he shouted.

He fell to his knees and Ray kicked him in the left side of the head. The kick to the head knocked him to the ground, but he tried to get back up. The pain from his injured leg didn't allow him to do so.

Jeffrey looked at his group of friends and said, "Let's get out of here!"

He quickly whipped out his cell phone and called Lara Potters. She answered after a couple of rings and Jeffrey said, "Lara, we need to talk, like right now."

She said, "Okay, what's going on?"

"Too much. Can we meet somewhere?"

"Meet me in the library at Northwestern."

"Okay, we'll be there soon."

Jeremy and the group hopped into their cars and screeched out of the parking lot. They didn't slow down until they were positive that they weren't being followed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jeffrey and the group parked in the senior parking lot closest to A-Building where the library was located. Lara Potters was waiting for them near the doors. Brian saw how beautiful Lara was and leaned over to Ray and slyly whispered, “I think I’ll be going to the library more often, but it won’t be for reading books. You know what I mean?”

“Shut up, man.”

Lara said, “Come on into the library and we’ll talk.”

She led them to the library and took them back into her office. She knelt down on the floor and lifted up a hidden hatch. She looked up at the group and said, “No one will find us down here. We can talk in peace.”

They walked down a flight of steps that led to a well lit area. The room was large and had lights hanging from the ceiling. The left side of the room had all kinds of guns hanging on the wall with a bunch of ammo on a table nearby. There was a small area in close proximity designated for combat

training. In that area there were many different swords and knives that hung beside the guns. Also, on the right side of the room was an area set up with a large computer screen and a desk with a keyboard that served as some sort of command center. In the middle of the room was a large table that could seat 20 people. A member of the Fold was already sitting at the table. At the back of the room was a tunnel connected to the sewer line that the Fold used to get to the hideout.

The whole group was shocked by the sight of the room. James asked, "How did y'all build this place?"

"We didn't build it," answered Lara with a shrug. "Perhaps someone else did. This must've been some kind of hiding place from long ago. Then the school was built over it. We found it and moved right in."

She motioned for all of them to go sit at the table and they went and sat down. Before Lara sat down she introduced Eli Hoffman, the member of the Fold, to Jeffrey and his friends. His skin was dark brown; his black hair was buzzed close to his scalp. He had a round face with dark eyes and a

square jaw that always made him look serious. The way he held himself made it quite clear that he could handle himself quite well through any combat situation. The hard lines in his face suggested that he had been through a lot in his life. It was difficult for Jeffrey and the rest of the group to determine how old he was. They thought he was 50-years-old when in fact he was only 34.

After Lara introduced Eli, she sat across from Jeffrey and asked, “What's been going on?”

Jeffrey answered, “My friends and I, three of which couldn't be here, got attacked last night by those commandos on our way back from a movie.”

“Yeah, I saw that on the news this morning. There was a mangled deer, too?”

“It was thrown into Ray's path. We all stopped, got attacked by the commandos and fought them off.”

Marie jumped in. “And then some demonic guy attacked Jeffrey.”

“He was really strong,” Jeffrey said. “He was about to turn into something, but I don't know what. I killed him right as he started to change.”

“What was really strange was when he went

up in flames,” commented James

“All I did was stab him in the chest,” stated Jeffrey.

Lara scratched the top of her head. “None of the others went up in flames?”

“All the others were human. Although this guy looked human.”

Eli thought for a moment. “The commandos and the strange attacks must be connected then. The question to ask now is if the demon Jeffrey killed is the only one.”

“There’s no way of knowing that right now,” said Lara to Eli.

Jeffrey continued, “The other thing I wanted to talk about was that we went to Craig Cook’s house and talked to his sister, Bree. Apparently, Craig was a pretty smart guy and hung out with the preps. Then he got with a different crowd and got into drugs. We found out that he went to a club called the Full Moon, which we went to tonight.”

Jess looked at Marie. “Didn’t you tell me on the way over here that Amelia had the Mark on her lower back?”

“Yeah,” answered Marie thoughtfully.

“Amelia was involved with Craig. She must’ve got him into the cult. Now we know that the commandos are part of the cult.”

“Cults do what they can to increase their number,” explained Eli. “They brainwash their members by giving them drugs and possibly torture them to stay.”

“Well, there were plenty of drugs at the club tonight,” said James.

Ray added, “And brainwashing.”

Shaina started to tear up and stood up, trying not to let anyone see her tears. She walked away and announced, “I’ll be right back.”

She exited the library to go to the restroom and Lara asked the group, “What’s wrong with her?”

“Something happened to her tonight,” explained Ray. “I found her on the floor in a room at the club. She wouldn’t say what happened to her. Man, I hate to think it, but I believe she’s somehow a part of this mess.” He paused for a moment. “There was a symbol on an elevator door in that room. It was something that I’ve never seen before.”

Eli asked, "Can you go back to the club and get a picture of it?"

"No," answered James shaking his head. "Those people know who we are. Come to think of it, they knew we were coming and were ready for us. They have some really tough fighters."

"All right. I'll get a team together and we'll go down there and check it out."

Lara looked at Eli. "That's a good idea. Go early in the morning when the club has closed."

Eli stood up and said, "I'll notify my team right away."

He immediately walked out of the room.

"Do you think Shaina warned them that we were coming?" asked Brian.

"I hope not," said Marie.

"She acted like she knew that man," stated Jeffrey. "He acted like he was the owner of the club. She called him Eddie and 'baby'. We need to find out who he is."

Lara nodded. "I agree. I think he may have been the one to send the email. Were y'all able to find anything else out at the club?"

Marie said, "Craig's girlfriend talked about

having freedom and doing everything their heart desired all for the glory of their god. She referred to her god as the messiah. She wasn't at all upset about Craig's death. She said it was all for the cause."

Jeffrey sighed as he added, "My brother is involved in this, but I don't know how much. I saw him tonight and he said that his god is coming soon. He was about to tell me some more until his friend told him not to talk about their god."

Marie was on Jeffrey's right side and she rubbed his arm to comfort him.

Jess thoughtfully said, "It sounds like they're keeping it a secret, but then again they're not. You know what I mean? You don't just tell somebody-'hey, I'm a part of some cult, wanna join?'- you invite them to one of the cult's functions, like the club."

"It's a lot easier to suck people in that way," agreed Lara.

Shaina came back into the room, calmer. She sat down at the table, clueless that the group had been talking about her. Jeffrey asked, "What do we do now? What do I do about my brother?"

Lara looked at Shaina as she answered, “I’m gonna talk to Shaina here about Eddie. It looks like you have some explaining to do, honey.”

Then she looked back at Jeffrey. “The best thing to do for your brother is to reach out to him. Pray for him and show him love.”

Jeffrey nodded. He and everybody except Lara and Shaina left the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jeffrey pulled into Marie's drive way and turned the engine off. He opened his door, climbed out and ran around to Marie's side to let her out. He offered her his left hand to help her out of the car. She took it and climbed out, shutting the door with her free hand.

He walked her up the steps to the front door where they stopped and faced each other. Jeffrey was so anxious and tried to not let it show. He really cared about Marie and he just knew that she was going to avoid him now after all they had been through. It was just his luck for a decent girl to slip through his fingers. "I'm so sorry that we haven't had a date yet where we haven't almost gotten killed," he said. "I never meant for you to get sucked into it all."

He was going to continue, but Marie interrupted, "Jeffrey, stop apologizing for something you have no control over. I admit that everything that has happened to us is pretty wild. I'm still trying to get over last night, but I'm going to be okay."

She tried to be strong for him. It was a part of her personality to be encouraging to someone during hard times, even if she was going through the same thing. Deep down, she was terrified. She felt wound up tight inside and couldn't relax. There was so much tension, so much anxiety inside her that needed to find a way out.

"All right," said Jeffrey. "I'll understand if you don't want to go out again."

Marie smiled and gently grabbed Jeffrey's hands and said, "Tell me if you think this means I want to go out with you again."

She leaned in, closed her eyes and pressed her lips against his. *What am I doing*, she thought. There were a dozen other thoughts running through her mind that cautioned her. It was as if her thoughts were screaming at her. *This is so reckless!* She usually listened to her cautious thoughts, but not this time. There was something inside her that pushed her to go for the kiss. And it felt so right, taking a risk ruining the beginning of a relationship. Her thoughts became a whisper, then faded completely out; the tension and anxiety inside her calmed down for the moment.

He closed his eyes too and kissed her back. Letting go of her hands, he wrapped his arms around her. He slid his hands to the small of her back and tenderly pulled her closer to him. Their lips locked perfectly like they were meant for each other. The kisses were slow...passionate.

Marie put her arms around Jeffrey's waist and hugged him tightly as if she were going to lose him. She needed him. She needed Jeffrey to comfort her, but she didn't want him to know it, since she was trying to be his rock. He was looking for that same kind of comfort too.

Their lips smacked as they kissed and time seemed to slow down. Jeffrey could taste the sweetness of Marie's strawberry lip gloss.

Neither one of them wanted the moment to end, but they both knew that they needed to stop. The passion that had been awakened between them felt like a tingling sensation similar to an electric current running through them. It excited them, yet frightened them at the same time.

They kissed one more time before they pulled away from each other. Marie slightly blushed, never having been so aggressive before.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Jeffrey nervously answered, “Oh, I’m convinced.”

They unlocked each other from their embrace and Marie dug into her purse and found her keys. She said, “I got to go get some beauty sleep.”

“Why?” he asked. “You’re already beautiful.”

She smiled and kissed Jeffrey on the lips one last time.

“You’re so sweet,” she said. “Goodnight.”

Jeffrey smiled back at her. “Goodnight, Marie.”

He watched Marie go inside the house and then he walked to his car. He got in and drove away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Meanwhile, Lara and Shaina stayed in the library to have a heart to heart. Lara sat across from Shaina and leaned forward. Shaina sat back in her chair with her arms crossed, she was nervous and uncomfortable about the interrogation that she was about to undergo.

Lara's voice was calm, but stern as she said, "It's important that you tell me how you met Eddie and who he is. I think it might help if we know more about him."

Shaina's voice jittered a little as she said, "Can we talk about it another time?"

"No. We're gonna talk about it now. This is very important and it can't wait."

Shaina frowned and nodded. She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I had been going to some of the parties the Rebel's Club put on and there were some people who were a little wilder than the others. They had formed their own group, but still came to the Rebel's Club sometimes. I thought they were really fun so I joined them. There were times though that they were too wild for

me.”

“How so?”

“They got high on some hard drugs. They took me to the Full Moon where they hung out a lot. I met Eddie Farrar there and we started talking. We had a lot of fun being together. I thought he loved me, that he really cared about me, until tonight. He never mentioned anything about a cult or any of the stuff y'all have been talking about. I swear I never knew. He owns the Full Moon and has rave nights there every now and then. I don't know how he knew we were coming tonight. Anyway, the police had been called out there a couple of times, so he had to not have so many rave nights. The police would put him out of business if they found out what he was doing.”

“How old is he? Where does he live? Where did he go to school?”

Shaina froze. She didn't know the answer to Lara's questions. She sheepishly shrugged her shoulders. “I don't know. He might be in his late 20s. He would've gone here to Northwestern.”

She tried to think of an answer but couldn't. Her eyes had suddenly been opened as to how

careless she'd been. *What was I thinking?* she asked herself. Her body tensed up like she was on a roller coaster going down a steep incline when she realized she didn't really know anything about the man she'd slept with a few times before. Tears filled her eyes as Lara gave her a concerned look.

"Shaina," she said with a gentle voice. "'Might be' and 'could've' are not going to cut it when you're in a romantic relationship. I hate to say it, but I don't think you could call your relationship with Eddie romantic. Your relationship was built on the foundation of drugs and the party life. Am I right? Did you sleep with him?"

Shaina remorsefully nodded her head as tears rolled down the sides of her cheeks.

Lara got up from her chair, walked around to Shaina's side and sat down in the chair next to her. She put her left hand on Shaina's right shoulder and softly said, "Honey, how do your parents feel about you doing all the things you've been doing? Do they know?"

Lara removed her hand as Shaina looked at her and choked out, "My parents are split up. I

live with my mom and she works all the time, so she's hardly around. When she is around she doesn't ask me about anything going on in my life. She doesn't ask where I've been and what I've done when she knows I've been out late. It's as if we were two strangers living in a house together. We talk, but it's not mother-daughter talk; whatever that is."

Shaina wiped her tears with her hands and then positioned her chair so she could face Lara. Her bottom lip quivered as she continued to speak, "I know it's no excuse for me to do the things that I've done."

She felt a lump rise in her throat and it kept her from speaking. More tears started to come, but she fought them back. Lara noticed this as she asked her, "What happened to you in the club tonight?"

Shaina cleared her throat to remove the lump. "I was drinking and getting high on some pills and overdosed. I was about to die and I saw Hell and there were these voices, horrible demons. Oh, they were terrible! I've never been so scared in my life! I prayed for the first time in my life and

Jesus saved me from that wretched place. I sobered up like I hadn't touched any alcohol or drugs."

"That's amazing, truly amazing."

Shaina hung her head down for a moment and then looked up at Lara with a sorrowful face. Lara asked warmly, "I see you trying so hard to fight back your tears. You have so much pain. I can see it in your eyes. What is it, Shaina? Tell me."

The lump in Shaina's throat returned as she said, "Where do I go from here? I've messed up so much in my life, how can God love somebody like me?"

Shaina began to sob and Lara held her arms out to her. She went into Lara's arms and they embraced. Powerful sobs escaped her, making her body shake.

"Let it out," gently said Lara. "Let your pain go. God loves you no matter what you've done. He's a God of many second chances. This is your chance to live a better life, to take the knowledge you've gained from your mistakes and use them to your advantage. But right now, cry it all out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When Jeffrey got home, his parents had already gone to bed and were asleep. He quietly raided the medicine cabinet in the kitchen and tried not to make too much noise. His stomach was churning again as thoughts of his brother, Dylan, raced through his mind. He thought, *How could this happen? How could he have become one of them now?* He was on edge and his moist hands trembled. The muscles in the back of his neck were stiffened.

He found a Mylanta bottle and unscrewed the top. He took a swig, screwed the top back on and placed it back in the cabinet. He saw a new roll of Tums at the front of the cabinet. He ate all of his earlier so he took the roll, peeled back the paper and ate one.

After he brushed his teeth and took off his clothes, he got into bed and turned off his lamp on his bedside lamp table. As he lay on his back, he stared at the ceiling for what seemed like the longest time and somehow fell asleep.

He began to dream of the times he shared

with Dylan when they were younger. The dreams started with the time when Dylan was nine-years-old and Jeffrey was six. It was a sunny day with not a cloud in sight. They were swinging on their swing set in the backyard. Dylan said, "I bet I can swing higher than you."

Jeffrey returned the challenge and said, "Uh-uh. I bet *I* can swing higher than you!"

They both held on tight to the chains that connected to their seats and rocked back and forth. They swung higher into the air and Dylan shouted, "I dare you to let go of the chains when you swing forward."

Jeffrey cheerfully agreed and said, "Okay."

Their swing seats swung back and then swung forward. When they swung forward they let go of the chains, flew forward a couple of feet and landed on the ground. They barely landed on their feet and then they tumbled over laughing at each other.

Jeffrey dreamed of another time that he and Dylan were fishing at a lake with their father. It was a cloudy day and looked like it might rain soon. They were standing on a dock and the three of them

had just cast their lines. “Be sure to keep a tight grip on your pole,” said Keith. “You never know when a fish will bite and jerk it right out of your hand.”

Their father was sharing stories about the times his father took him and his brothers fishing. He told them about some of the funny mishaps that happened while fishing and about the fish he caught. Chuckling at the thought of a particular instance he said, “When I was eight-years-old I went fishing with my dad and I was having no luck whatsoever. I got a massive bite and it was all I could do to keep that fish from yanking my rod and reel out of my hands. Finally, I pulled back with all my might and that fish flew out of the water and smacked my dad in the face. He just kind of stood there dumbfounded.”

He also shared some wisdom with them about life and God. Jeffrey and Dylan listened closely to every word he said, while trying to keep a close eye on their lines.

The last dream was of a time when Dylan was eighteen and Jeffrey was fifteen. They had gone camping in Kings Mountain with their parents.

They were standing around a picnic table on the camp grounds about to eat lunch, holding hands as their father said a prayer to bless the food.

The dream flashed forward to them sitting at the table eating hamburgers and potato chips. They were talking and laughing as they enjoyed the outdoors. Dylan threw a potato chip at Jeffrey and it hit him on the forehead and then landed on his plate. Jeffrey picked it up and threw it back at Dylan. Dylan ducked to dodge it.

The dream flashed forward again to them walking on a trail. Dylan and Jeffrey were walking side by side as their parents walked behind them. They enjoyed the beautiful scenery as they walked. Rays of sunlight shone on them through the tops of the trees. A bird's chirpings echoed through the woods and their mother said, "What a beautiful sound!"

Without warning, the light dimmed to an eerie darkness and Jeffrey was suddenly alone. He spun around to see that Dylan and his parents were gone.

"Mom," he shouted. "Dad! Dylan! Where are you?"

No one answered. Calling for them again, no one answered. He saw something lurking in a thick patch of woods up ahead of him. He walked slowly towards it and he could make out its figure.

“Dylan, is that you?” he asked hesitantly.

As he got closer he said, “Dylan? Dylan, what’s going on? Where’s Mom and Dad?”

He stopped when he got close enough that he could hear the shape breathing. Jeffrey thought it strange that he still couldn’t see who it was. All he could see was an outline.

“Dylan?” he called out again.

He reached out his hand to the figure when all of sudden the figure lashed out at him.

The only thing he could see was a ghastly, pale face with fangs and large claws going for his throat.

He woke up with an abrupt gasp in a cold sweat. Quickly sitting up, he whispered, “Dylan.”

He put his face in his hands and silently prayed, “God, help him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was 4:30 a.m. and Eli and a team of eight of his men arrived at the Full Moon in two dark gray vans. They hopped out of the vans and quickly assembled in front of them. Eli walked in front of them to give them orders.

They were dressed in black fatigues complete with bulletproof vests. On each of their vests was a small camera that transmitted footage of any activity back to the command center for Lara to see. They all had headsets as well to communicate with each other and Lara. Also, they each had Colt Le Tact Carbine 223's with silencers and flashlights on top of the barrels. They each had belts that held ammo, gadgets and a SIG Sauer P220 as a backup gun in case they lost their primary weapon.

Eli gave the orders to his men, "This mission is to be as covert as possible. Let's go in, get the picture for identification and get out. Remember to stay alert; you never know if someone may be waiting for us!"

While staying low to the ground, Eli and his men ran up to the front door of the Full Moon. Eli

pulled a small lock pick out of his utility belt and inserted it into the lock. After a moment, Eli had the door opened, and one-by-one, his team went inside. They clicked their flashlights on and started checking the place out. They cautiously moved to the right side of the room. One of the men asked, “Where’s the elevator with the symbol, Eli?”

Eli flashed his light across the right side of the club and found the door. He kept his light on the door. “Right there.”

Eli walked briskly to the door and stood by it. He motioned for two of his men to approach, while the rest of Eli’s team spread out into the club to keep an eye out for any possible threats. They stood there with their guns pointed at it, while Eli turned the knob and pushed it open. The room was clear and the two men walked inside to check out the room that was on the left side. They flashed their lights inside and declared it to be clear. Eli approached the elevator and saw the symbol.

He talked into his headset and said, “Lara, do you see this?”

Lara replied, “Yeah. I’m saving it now so I

can research it.”

Eli said, “Good.”

Eli and his two men heard the elevator turn on and Eli said, “Someone’s coming up. We need to get out of here.”

Watching the live feed, Lara said, “I wonder what’s down there.”

Eli replied, “I would like to find out. There might be some very important information down there.”

A low, muffled growl came from behind the elevator doors.

“That doesn’t sound good,” he said.

Lara replied, “Forget about it for now. Get out of there. You don’t know what that thing is.”

Eli radioed to his team, “We got what we needed, let’s move out!”

He and his two men ran out of the room and shut the door behind them. One of the men found a chair that was against the wall nearby and wedged it under the door knob. Eli grinned and said, “Yeah, that ought to hold it.”

Suddenly, Eli felt a sharp point quickly pierce the left side of his lower back. He winced with

pain and tried to spin around to face his attacker, but his attacker's arm was locked around his chest, preventing him from moving. Eli yelled to Jonas, his man closest to him and threw his head back into his attacker's face before ducking his head down.

Jonas took aim and shot the commando in the head, sending him to the ground.

Eli reached behind him and winced as he yanked a combat knife out of his side. Jonas asked, "Are you okay, Eli?"

"I've had worse. I'll be fine," replied Eli. Then he radioed to his men, "Let's get out of here now."

Lara was watching the live footage of all nine of the men's individual cameras on screen at the command center under the library. The screen was divided up into nine boxes that showed what each man saw. She saw all of them starting towards the exit when two of the men fell to the ground, without warning. Lara asked, "What happened?!"

One of the men quickly replied while returning fire in the direction that the shots came from, "Muffled gun shots! Garret and I are wounded."

Eli put on his night vision goggles, looked up, and saw eight commandos quickly sliding down ropes from the ceiling while firing upon the team. *They must have come through the air ducts*, he thought. Then he radioed his men, "Take cover!"

He and Jonas jumped over the counter of the bar and ducked down as bullets whizzed by them. Bottles of liquor on the shelves exploded, showering them with glass and alcohol. Jonas stood up to return fire and was tackled by a commando, dropping his gun. The commando whacked Jonas in the head with his gun, sending him to the ground dazed, and shot Eli in his bullet proof vest. Eli returned fire as the impact of the bullet knocked him down, shooting the commando down.

For a moment, there was a break in the action where the battered team had pushed the commandos back. They all heard a menacing roar that came from the back of the club as Eli got to his feet. He took a couple flash grenades off of his belt and threw them in the direction of the commandos. Then he helped Jonas to his feet and ordered his team to bolt towards the exit as the grenades went

off, managing to get away.

The flash of the grenades could be seen in the windows of the club as Eli and his team quickly hobbled and limped to their vans. They piled into the vans and tore out of the parking lot. Lara radioed to Eli and asked him, “Eli, is your team okay?”

Eli replied, “We’re all pretty messed up. They knew we were coming.”

He winced as one of his comrades doctored his wound in the back of the van.

Lara said, “Someone told them you were coming.”

As Eli was about to reply to Lara, there was a loud thump on the roof of the van causing it to slightly cave. Jonas was sitting next to Eli and said, “Crap! There’s our friend!”

There was a low growl and a large, hairy arm with long black claws smashed through the driver side window and grabbed the driver’s head. He screamed and got yanked out of the van through the window. Eli and the three other remaining men watched in horror as the van careened into the left lane and clipped the speeding car of a drunk driver.

The man in the passenger seat lunged for the steering wheel to correct the van, but it was too late. The van and car collided and an explosion of noise of metal smashing against metal erupted. The second van was behind them and came to a screeching halt when they saw the crash.

The left side of the van and the car smacked with such violent force that the car bounced back and the van spun and flipped multiple times. The men inside the van were tossed around and the man that was in the passenger seat was ejected through the windshield. The van finally stopped after the fifth roll and landed on its side. A dazed Eli lay on the sliding door with his head facing the windshield. His body ached all over and he was unsure if he could move. He gasped for his breath and it returned to him slowly. He scanned the inside of the van for survivors and saw that no one was moving.

Eli began to crawl towards the busted out windshield to get out of the van, but stopped when the hairy feet of some monstrous creature landed at the front of the van. He froze and thought, "What is that?" He heard muffled gun shots of his

comrade's Colt Le Tact Carbine 223's and felt relieved. The sound of police sirens could be heard in the distance and the creature's legs bent and sprang into the air. Eli heard the voice of one of his men say, "All right, that thing's gone, whatever it was! Let's go check for survivors."

Eli heard his men run around to the front of the van and he crawled toward the windshield. The four men knelt down at the windshield and one of them reached out to Eli with his hand. Eli took his hand and the man drug him out. The men helped Eli to his feet and two of the men helped him stand. Eli asked hem, "What was that?"

One of the men answered, "I don't know, it was standing on the other side of the van. It sure was quick, though, whatever it was."

Eli said, "Let's get out of here, it sounds like those sirens are coming this way."

His comrades helped him get to their van.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The next day, all Jeffrey could think about was what Dylan was becoming and what he should do. His parents kept asking him if everything was okay, because they noticed that he was very preoccupied. He told them that he was fine and was under a lot of pressure at school. Jeffrey wanted to tell them that he saw Dylan and that he was in a lot of trouble, but then he would have to explain how he knew and his own situation.

Jeffrey was in his bedroom sitting on his bed studying history when his cell phone rang. He grabbed it and flipped it open. To his amazement, the caller id read, "Dylan." He pressed the "send" button and put the phone to his ear and said, "Hello?"

Dylan said, "Hey, Jeffrey, what's going on?"

"Uh, studying. What are you doing?"

"I was wondering what you were doing at the Full Moon last night?"

"Trying to get answers as to what has been going on lately. What were *you* doing there?"

"Just enjoying the fellowship of my brothers

and sisters.”

Jeffrey listened to what Dylan had just said and thought, *The fellowship of my brothers and sisters? He really has lost it!*

Dylan said, “Hey, man, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, we sure do. Can you meet me at Wendy’s in a little bit, say 5:30?”

“I’ll be there.”

After Jeffrey got off the phone with Dylan he hopped off his bed and walked over to his closet. He opened the doors, pulled out a pair of tennis shoes and put them on. He closed the doors and walked into the living room where his parents were sitting on the couch watching television. Keith looked away from the television and saw Jeffrey and asked, “Where are you going?”

Jeffrey lied and said, “Marie called and asked me to meet her for a quick little bite to eat.”

Katie said, “That sounds nice. Be careful and have fun.”

He felt a wave of guilt come over him. He knew that his guilt would show on his face, so he turned his back to his parents and walked into the kitchen to grab his car keys off the hook, next to the

stove. Jeffrey became nervous and tried not to let it resonate in his voice when he said, “Okay, I’ll see y’all later.”

As he walked outside to get into his car he thought, *I hope they don’t suspect that I’m lying to them. I know they miss Dylan and want to know what’s going on his life just as much as I do, but I can’t tell them that he’s in a cult. Then, I would have to explain how I knew and all the trouble I’m in.* His stomach began to gnaw again and he reached into his pocket and grabbed a Tum and ate it.

Jeffrey was on edge the whole time that he was at Wendy’s, while Dylan was calm and strangely lively. How does one act around someone they love when that person has practically gone off the deep end and ignored them for a long amount of time? Dylan had been living in his own world as Jeffrey was pondering this question.

They sat at a table by the window on the right side of the restaurant closest to the exit and engaged in some forced conversation. Now, Dylan was tearing into his burger and fries, while Jeffrey only picked at his food. He’d only managed to eat half

of his burger because his stomach was rumbling and churning. It made him feel unsettled and it only added to the anxiousness that he felt all over his body.

He picked up the other half of his burger and was about to bring it to his mouth and then put it down on the tray. He couldn't take it anymore; he needed to *really* talk to Dylan. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Dylan wiped some ketchup off of the side of his mouth with a napkin and replied, "What were you doing at the club last night?"

"Looking for answers. A classmate from school was involved in that strange attack at the dentist office and was a part of cult. I'm trying to figure out what the cult is up to."

"You're talking about Craig Cook, he wasn't in a cult. I didn't really know him, but he seemed pretty cool. Why are you the one looking for answers?"

Jeffrey couldn't tell Dylan that he was the Protector and that he was on a mission, so he had to quickly formulate a story. He answered, "I'm on the school newspaper staff and I'm doing a story on

cults and seeing how they affect the population of Northwestern. You know, everybody's opinion on cults and what everyone considers a cult."

Dylan kind of nodded his head and said, "That's interesting, but Craig Cook and those other guys weren't in a cult, neither am I. We're a part of a brotherhood, a sisterhood. We're a family."

"No, Dylan, I'm your brother. I'm your family."

"My god says anyone outside of the brotherhood is my enemy and is not my true family. I don't want you to be my enemy. I don't want anything bad to happen to you when my god comes."

"What are you talking about? When is your god coming?"

"He said he's coming soon to purify the earth, to eliminate everyone who stands in the way of the perfect life he promised us; especially one in particular who has always stood in his way. Jeffrey, I want you take the mark just like I did!"

Jeffrey couldn't believe the way his brother was talking and was hurt that he had taken the mark. Jeffrey had the funny feeling that Dylan

was referring to him as being the one standing in the way of Dylan's god. Jeffrey said, "No, Dylan, I won't do it. I can't do it."

Dylan said, "You won't be safe if you don't join me. Make the right choice and join me. I promise that you'll live."

Jeffrey couldn't bear to hear his brainwashed brother talk anymore. He got up from the table and firmly said, "I've made my choice. Goodbye, Dylan."

He turned and walked out of the exit of the restaurant and got into his car and went back home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

That evening, Marie, Beth Ann and Jess decided to have a sleepover over at Marie's house, since they didn't have school the next day because of Martin Luther King Day. The three of them were in their pajamas sitting in a circle on Marie's bed. They were talking in a low whispers about everything that had happened since Friday night. They didn't want Marie's parents to hear them talking in case they walked into her room.

Jess said, "I haven't been able to sleep ever since Friday night and I'm so freaked out."

"Same here," agreed Beth Ann. "I was hoping that I was having a bad dream and hadn't woke up yet. Everything that's happened just blows my mind; it's way too much to take in."

"I guess you could describe the whole thing as being surreal."

Marie jumped in the conversation. "I've been trying to keep cool and not lose it so I can better understand this situation. What's been really hard is convincing my parents that everything's fine. I try not to let on, but they still

suspect something and they keep asking if I'm all right, and I say I'm okay. I don't know what to tell them. Do y'all have that problem?"

Beth Ann nodded, "Yeah, you don't want to be secretive and you want to tell them what's going on, but at the same time you fear that you might suck them into the situation."

"Yeah, I suppose. I don't know that they would believe me. It would sound absurd if I said to my parents, 'Mom, Dad, this guy I'm dating is fighting cults and demons.'"

They chuckled and Marie continued, "I don't mean to be funny about it, but I think y'all know what I'm saying. It's eating me up inside keeping this to myself."

"I know what you're saying," nodded Jess. "Maybe this will all be over soon and we won't have to carry this on our shoulders."

Marie pulled her hair behind her ears and pondered out loud, "Who are we to get involved in all of this?"

Beth Ann and Jess looked at her inquisitively as she continued, "I mean, anybody else in our situation would be running the other way. We're

searching for answers and putting ourselves in more danger. Another thing that's weird is that we've fought and killed trained commandos like we also were trained to fight."

They all became silent for a moment and there was a knock at Marie's door. She turned and faced the door. "Come in."

The door opened and Marie's mother, Emma, peeked her head in and asked, "You girls doing okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Marie.

"Just talking about boys," said Beth Ann with a friendly smile.

Emma smiled back at the girls. "All right, let me know if you need anything."

After she said that she left the room and closed the door.

Beth Ann said, "That's a good idea, let's talk about boys. I don't want to talk about that other crap anymore."

The subject of boys was always a favorite topic for Beth Ann to discuss. It seemed like she was always surrounded by boys at school and that they were always asking her out on dates. Beth

Ann was a beautiful girl with a nice, trim figure and she knew it. She was a real heartbreaker, in the sense that she would drop one guy and go on to the next without warning. It was brought to her attention by one of her friends that she was shallow and didn't treat her boyfriends right. She had formed a bad habit and was trying not to become absorbed in herself and her own looks. She was a cheerleader and it was every guy's dream to date a cheerleader, even it was just one time.

They all agreed to the changing of the topic and Beth Ann looked at Marie. She said, "Tell us about you and Jeffrey. I'm new to the group, you'll have to fill me in."

Marie said, "Our first date was Friday and you see how crazy that went! He's a really sweet guy and I like him a lot and I think he likes me back. I think I might've messed up last night."

"Oh, what?" asked Jess. "What did you do?"

"I kissed him! I was a little shaken up after the club, although, I tried to hide it and I kissed him. I think I was looking for reassurance or something."

Jess gasped in disbelief. "Did he kiss you

back?"

"Yeah, it was a good kiss too."

Marie had a worried expression on her face and Beth Ann told her, "You look a little worried about it"

"I'm worried that I made a mistake," replied Marie. "Stressful situations can make people do things they wouldn't normally do and now it feels awkward. It's not like me to go in for a kiss like that. And the way things are right now, I don't know that it's the best time for him to get involved in a relationship. We haven't talked since Saturday and I'm afraid to call him because I feel like I would be bothering him. I guess I'll just talk to him tomorrow at school about our relationship."

Jess patted Marie on the knee and said, "Don't worry yourself. God will allow y'all to be together if it's meant to be. Something tells me y'all are right for each other, y'all just have to help each other through the awkwardness."

Marie nodded and gave a little smile to Jess and said, "Yeah, you're right. Is there any romance in your life?"

Jess smiled and nodded. "I think

something's happening between me and Gary," she said, "I went over to his house Saturday to see how he was feeling and we talked for a little while. We watched TV together and snuggled on the couch."

Beth Ann asked, "Did y'all kiss?"

Jess shook her head and continued, "It was a nice moment together. We've been friends for a while now and it's exciting to see our friendship turn into something else. Well, I'm hoping that it does."

Marie looked over at Beth Ann and inquired, "How are things with you and Cody? I know it was a rough date Friday night with the ambush, but did it still go okay before that?"

"Yeah, we've been talking," answered Beth. "I think he's a sweet guy. He's pretty cute too. What's strange, though, is Brian kind of caught my eye Friday night. That is his name, right?"

Marie and Jess nodded. Beth Ann went on with what she was saying, "I don't know what it is about him, but he seems so mysterious. What's he like?"

Jess said, "He is mysterious. He keeps to himself, so we don't really know much about him."

Marie added, “He’s the kind of person that’s hard to talk to, so when he talks to us or contributes to the Bible study, we talk back to him, but that’s not very often. I think it’s best to say that he comes off as stand-offish.”

Jess added, “Whatever you do, don’t hurt Cody because I think he really likes you.”

Beth Ann twirled her hair with her left hand as she thought for a moment and then let her hair go. She said, “I don’t know what to do.”

The girls continued talking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Shaina was in her bedroom watching television while relaxing on her bed. She was home alone. Her mother was out on a date. Who knows when she'd be back home. Shaina turned off the television. She had had enough of it. There was nothing on worth watching. Plus, she was in one of those moods where nothing she did really suited her.

Her cell phone on her bedside lamp table next to her rang and startled her. She reached over and answered without looking at the caller id. The angry toned voice on the other line said, "What are your friends doing sneaking around my club?"

The all-too-familiar voice made Shaina quiver and she sat up. "Eddie?"

"Yeah, that's right," answered Eddie. "Your friends are trying to cause problems for my club. They're gonna be sorry. You can believe that."

"Leave them alone. What's going on, Eddie? Are you a part of this cult?"

"It's not a cult! You don't know what you're talking about."

Eddie's response answered Shaina's question. She asked, "Why did you keep all of this from me? I thought you loved me."

Eddie scoffed at her. "You were something to play with. What? You thought you were the only chick I was banging? You meant nothing to me. I never loved you! I didn't have to tell you anything!"

Shaina began to tear up and her bottom lip quivered. *How could I've been so foolish to get involved with this man, she thought. I hardly knew anything about him; now look where it's got me, a whole lot of trouble.*

"What do you want, Eddie?" she finally asked.

Eddie snarled through the phone. "I'm going to kill you and your friends when you least expect it."

She started to cry and hung up on Eddie. She was scared now and didn't want to be alone. She called Marie's cell phone.

"Hello?" answered Marie.

"Hey, it's Shaina." she said as she tried to fight back tears. She sniffled and wiped her tears

away with the back of her hand.

Marie could detect something wrong in Shaina's voice. "What's wrong, honey? Are you okay?"

"No. I'm by myself and I'm scared. Eddie just called and threatened to kill all of us. He doesn't know where I live, but I'm still scared."

"Come on over to my house. You can join my sleepover with Beth Ann and Jess. I'll text you directions to my house."

"Thank you so much. I'll be there in a few minutes."

After Shaina got off the phone with Marie she received the text message from Marie. She grabbed her purse, left her house, and quickly drove to Marie's house.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Later that night, the girls finally settled down and went to sleep, except for Marie. She lay in bed and tossed and turned occasionally. Her mind was full of worry about the trouble she and her friends were in and her mind wouldn't slow down. She couldn't stop thinking about the question she had asked her friends earlier. Who were they to get involved in Jeffrey's dilemma? Who was she? The question she was most afraid of asking was when was all of this going to end. It didn't seem like it was going to end anytime soon. She was tired of the questions, tired of thinking. Marie was exhausted.

Finally, she fell asleep and felt herself become weightless. She drifted into oblivion and entered a whole other realm of being.

She was in a forest full of trees that towered over her. The tree trunks were thick, wide and tall. Their tops were so full that they choked out all of the sunlight, except for the occasional beams of light that pierced through, almost looking like spotlights. A cool, gentle breeze blew through the

forest and caressed her body.

The wind whispered to her, "Follow me."

Marie followed the wind out of the forest to a grassy cliff that overlooked a pasture of lush, green grass that went on for as far as the eye could see. The grass was tall and looked like waves that rippled in the ocean when it blew in the wind. There was a bright rainbow that arched high in the sky off in the distance. Marie had never seen a rainbow so beautiful before.

A light shone from the sky and enveloped her. The light was warm and soothing. Marie heard a voice say, "All of this land that you see and all of the land beyond the borders is mine, Marie. I have tasked Jeffrey to protect it and my people from danger."

"God?" asked Marie.

"Yes, my child."

Marie knelt down and bowed her head. She said, "I'm afraid, Lord. What am I supposed to do? Why am I involved in this? Oh, I have so many questions."

"Do not be afraid. I have you. You are to be there for Jeffrey. He will need encouragement,

love, and support. You are to fight alongside him. Love him as I have loved you. Dark times are ahead. You are all going to need each other.”

The rainbow in the distance faded and the sky became gray. A wave of soldiers armed with an assortment of weapons came charging towards the cliff. Marie started to panic and God said, “Remember that I have you. Be strong, my child.”

Marie discovered that she was dressed in armor and equipped with a sword and shield. She looked on either side of her and discovered her friends also dressed in armor and equipped with weaponry. God commanded, “Stand and fight!”

Despite the advancement of soldiers, she felt at peace. God was with her and had armed her and her friends. She raised her sword and shield and let out a battle cry. A few soldiers jumped onto the cliff and she and her friends used their shields and swords to deflect the advances of the enemy. Then Marie brought her sword down on them and cut them down, one by one.

Suddenly, she woke up and discovered that it was morning.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The next day, Principal Hyatt was sitting at his desk in his office at Northwestern High School. He and the teachers were there for half the day to make preparations for the next day. Principal Hyatt used the time to finish any incomplete paperwork from the week before and the teachers finished grading papers and planning lessons.

Principal Hyatt had been flooded with phone calls, e-mails, and letters from parents concerned by Thursday's events with Craig Cook. The parents wanted answers as to what was going on at the school and what was being done to keep the students out of danger. Principal Hyatt didn't know what to say or do about the situation because everything had been handled carelessly.

Somehow, Craig Cook's name and the identity of the other assailants that were involved in the attack at the dentist office were leaked to the news and then aired on the Friday six o'clock news, which caused a frenzy with the student body's parents. Therefore, Principal Hyatt was put on the spot to make a statement on the six o'clock and

didn't have a statement of action that sounded credible.

He had been at Northwestern for fifteen years and had handled problems before that caught the attention of the media, but none like this. Not one where a student was involved in what appeared to be an extremist group of some sort. He was completely stumped with this crisis and didn't know where to begin to alleviate people's worries. He was stressed out, worried, and sleep deprived.

His door was open and Lara stepped inside to see him sitting at his desk looking down at some papers. He had a troubled look on his face and had his head resting in his hands. She gently knocked on the door and Principal Hyatt put his arms on his desk and looked up to see Lara. He leaned back in his chair. "Come in, Miss Potters."

He motioned for her to come in and she walked in and sat down in a black leather chair placed in front of his desk. Principal Hyatt gave a forced smile and tried to be pleasant. He asked, "Hello, how are you?"

Lara answered, "I'm doing well. Are you all right?"

“Not really, I’ve been swamped with phone calls and letters from angry parents wanting to know what’s going on at school and what I am doing about it.”

“I heard about the news prematurely releasing Cook’s name. That was wrong of them.”

Principal Hyatt sighed and scratched the top of his head. “Yep, I plan to talk to Cook’s father and find out who his friends were, and then talk to them. I plan to dig and find out what kind of activities my students are involved in.”

Principal Hyatt stopped himself, rubbed his hands over his face, and gave a broken smile. He said, “I’m sorry, Ms. Potters, I didn’t mean to unload my troubles on you. How can I help you?”

Lara smiled and reassuringly said, “It’s all right. If I were in your situation I’d feel the same way. The reason I’m here is to ask you about a student that may have graduated from here. I’m not sure what year he was, but I know that his name was Eddie Farrar.”

Principal Hyatt thought for a moment and then said, “The name sounds familiar, why do you ask?”

Lara anticipated this question and thought of an answer that wouldn't expose her, Jeffrey and the group. She pulled out a folded sheet of paper containing Eddie Farrar's email and handed it to Principal Hyatt. He took the paper, unfolded it and read it. Lara said, "A student that I talk with frequently here at school came across this email and gave it to me to give to you. The student thought it might be helpful."

Principal Hyatt looked up from the sheet of paper and asked, "Does this student have a name? Is it Cook's sister? I see here that the email was sent to Cook."

Lara had spoken to Bree Cook only once or twice before when she came in the library, but she decided to pretend like she spoke to Bree frequently. Lara answered, "Yes, it's Cook's sister. She wanted to help, but not to get into this whole mess any further."

"I understand. This email suggests that the raves must've been held at different locations. What does this have to do with Eddie Farrar?"

"He's the one who sent that email. He mixed the letters of his name up to create his

address.”

“How are you so sure that it’s Eddie Farrar?”

“One of my friends dated him and told me he was pretty shady. She wouldn’t tell me anything about him, except that he worked at the Full Moon and that he bragged about having a bunch of high school kids coming in.”

“I see. Well, I’ll take a look on my computer.”

Principal Hyatt navigated his chair a little to the left to get to his computer and searched the student record files. After a moment he found Eddie Farrar’s file that held his picture and information. Principal Hyatt turned his computer monitor around so that Lara could see Eddie’s face.

Lara quickly read Eddie’s profile before Principal Hyatt turned the monitor back around.

She saw that he was born January 12th, 1980 and got his GED in 1997.

Principal Hyatt said, “Now I remember him. He got into trouble a lot here. I remember when a few of those kids in the Rebel’s Club got into some trouble with the law they brought up Eddie’s name, saying he was the one to blame for the trouble.

Those kids said he wasn't what those club members were used to, and that he was a real Hell-raiser. He somehow got through the law's fingers that time."

Lara said, "Oh."

"He was more extreme than the rest of the Rebel's Club was used to. He did harder drugs and did some other things that I can't remember. I do remember him getting arrested one time for busting out car windows and house windows with bricks and spraying graffiti on buildings."

Principal Hyatt stopped himself and looked at the sheet of paper and then back up at Lara. He said, "Sorry, but I don't believe I should tell you anymore, Ms. Potters."

Lara smiled and said, "That's fine. I respect the whole student confidentiality policy."

"Good. Thank you for bringing this e-mail to me. I'm going to contact the police right away."

Lara thanked Principal Hyatt for taking the time to talk with her and they shook hands. As soon as Lara walked out the door, Principal Hyatt picked up his phone and began dialing the police. He was eager to share the information he had just

received so the police could further their investigation.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jeffrey was sitting on the floor in his room with the bedroom door shut, looking over some statistics problems that the teacher had gone over in class at one time. He'd gotten so frustrated with it that he really wanted to get the hang of it. He tried to do the problems on another sheet of paper without looking at the answers. After that he went back to look and see if he was doing them correctly. He was relieved to see that he was slowly catching on to the process.

His cell phone rang. He looked at the caller id to see that it was Lara. He quickly answered it and Lara, in a tired tone, said, "Hey, Jeffrey, do you have a minute?"

Jeffrey pushed his math work away and answered, "Yeah, what's up?"

Lara answered, "I spoke to Principal Hyatt earlier and he's going to contact the police and show them that copy of Eddie Farrar's email. I'm hoping something good will come out of that."

"Yeah. That's good."

"There's more. The Fold went to the club

and got a picture of the symbol and some of the guys got killed, unfortunately.”

“What happened?”

“Someone tipped off Farrar’s people that they were coming. They let the Fold come in and then pounced on them. Some kind of creature attacked them, too, but they didn’t get a good look at it.”

“Do you think we have a mole?”

He realized that he sounded like he was a part of Lara’s team and winced.

Lara’s voice sounded confident when she answered, “Yes, it appears that way. I don’t know who it is, but I think it’s someone in our group.”

“Do you think it’s Shaina?”

“No. After talking with her last night, I found that she’s just a messed up girl.”

Jeffrey put a Tum in his mouth and chewed on it as he spoke, “She seemed like someone to be weary of. So what do I do about it?”

“Be careful who you trust and don’t let your guard down.”

“I spoke to my brother and he said that his god is coming soon to purify the earth of everyone that stands in his way. Something’s got to be

done, but I don't know what."

"I'm sorry that your brother is involved in this. All I can say is to keep pushing."

After she said that, Jeffrey's parents knocked on his bedroom door. He told Lara that he would talk to her later and hung up.

Jeffrey stood up and told them to come in. They opened the door and walked in. He asked, "What's going on?"

Katie answered in a concerned tone, "We were wondering if you were going to stay in your room and not have anything to do with us today, seeing that we're home for Martin Luther King Day."

Keith chimed in and said, "You haven't been yourself and we're worried about you."

Jeffrey started to feel cornered and knew that there was no way to casually blow them off. He said, "I don't mean to be distant. If I have been, it's not on purpose. It's just that a lot's happened at school with Craig Cook's death and all the talk that's been going around with that."

Keith said, "You have been distant and you don't have to be. We can tell that something is on

your mind.”

Katie warmly added, “Don’t hold it in. Please don’t shut us out. Don’t shut us out like Dylan has.”

The thought of Dylan moved to the front of Jeffrey’s brain and he decided that he needed to tell them what Dylan had gotten himself into. He nervously said, “Um, I didn’t really go out to eat with Marie last night. I had supper with Dylan.”

Katie gasped, “Really?”

Keith had a stunned look on his face and inquired, “And?”

Jeffrey continued, “He called me and asked me to meet him. I wanted to see him because I’ve missed him so much. Well, we all have. He’s so different now. I don’t know how, but he’s gotten into a cult and he asked me to join him. I tried to talk some sense into him, but he’s so adamant in what believes in that he won’t listen.”

Katie was crushed and started to cry and Keith hugged her. “I can’t believe it,” she cried. “He’s stayed gone for so long, hardly having anything to do with us and now he’s done this.”

Tears formed in Jeffrey’s eyes and he didn’t

know what to say anymore. He said, “I didn’t know how to tell y’all. I’m sorry.”

Jeffrey walked over to his parents with tears running down his face and hugged them. He said, “I’m sorry.”

Keith reassuringly said, “Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault, son.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Later that night, Bree had just finished her shift at Harris Teeter. It was difficult for her to cashier and be cheerful to customers while mourning the loss of her brother. Her manager offered to let her go early, but she declined. She and her father had a funeral for Craig on Friday and she was still trying to heal. She felt that it was best for her to stay busy and not think about her brother's death or the thought of him having been in a cult. She became furious every time she thought of her brother and wanted to push him out of her brain. She was bitter and wanted to forget him like he never existed.

He would still be alive he hadn't been so stupid to get into that cult, she thought.

There was sense of shame that came from the knowledge of Craig's involvement of cultist activities. It hung in the air at the funeral and it made Bree want to crawl under a rock.

The fact that Craig was a cultist and involved in last Wednesday's events made it suddenly difficult for some people to remember good things

about him. Even Bree had lost her good memories of Craig and she felt guilty for it.

Walking out of the grocery store, she quickly spotted her car out in the middle of the parking lot. She unfortunately had to park far away from the store, because all of the parking places closest to the store had been taken when she came in to work. She always tried to park close under a light post if she was getting off late, so she could quickly get to her car and leave, but had no such luck tonight. It was unfortunate that the parking lot didn't have a designated area for employees.

As she walked to her car, she began to feel uneasy. The feeling that she was being watched came over her, but she didn't see anyone when she scanned the area. She heard a little bit of commotion to the right of her in the woods by the parking lot. Her heart began beating faster and she quickened her pace to get to her car. It seemed like she was walking a mile just to get to there.

Finally, she arrived and heard something getting knocked around under the car next to hers. She froze for a moment and thought, *What's wrong with you, Bree? You don't know what it could be,*

get in the car and go home!

She started to move again, and a black cat sprinted out from under the car, followed by a mountain dew bottle that the cat had been playing with rolled out after the cat. Bree jumped back and screamed. Feeling foolish, she put her hand to her face and said to herself, “Just go home.”

After she said that, she got into her car and left.

When Bree got home, she noticed that the power was out in the neighborhood. A tree limb a few houses down had fallen on the power line and caused a power outage. She let herself in the front door where Anthony awaited her with a hug. When she got in the house, closed the door and locked it, Anthony embraced her. Bree noticed that he had strategically placed a few small battery powered lanterns throughout the living room so it wouldn't be completely dark. She said, “Hey, Dad.”

Anthony said, “I'm glad you're home. I was watching the news earlier and they were telling people to stay inside. They said those animal attacks have become more and more frequent over

the past year or so. I would hate to lose you, too.”

They let go of each other. Bree gave a comforting smile and said, “I’m home now, daddy. You’re not going to lose me.”

Anthony smiled a broken smile to Bree and his eyes began to tear up. A lump rose in his throat and he managed to whisper, “I know I’m not.”

He turned away from her so that she couldn’t see his tears and walked towards the kitchen. Bree grabbed a nearby lantern and began walking upstairs. She said, “I’m going to go change my clothes.”

She walked up the steps. The second set of steps turned to the right and led to the second floor. She heard a muffled boom and the splintering of wood. She heard Anthony shout something and then heard his hurried footsteps. She was frightened by the noise and froze for a brief moment. Then she briskly walked down the steps just enough to peer around the wall to see the front door.

The lights of the battery-powered lanterns were so soft that she could barely see the debris of

the front door scattered across the floor. Also, she could see Anthony standing frozen stiff looking at the monstrous outline of something standing in the doorway. She could barely hear Anthony's trembling voice say, "What are you?"

The monstrosity raised its right arm and brought it down on him. Anthony went down to the floor hard and then the creature kicked him to the wall. Bree gasped and tried not to scream. She didn't want to draw attention to herself and ran back up stairs. She heard the creature growl and thought it might have heard her.

Bree heard the creature walking up the stairs as she entered the doorway to her bedroom. The creature's footsteps were heavy and brisk. She quickly shut the door behind her and locked it. Dropping the lantern as her body shook with fear, she backed away from the door. She looked at it and thought, *This has got to be a nightmare. It's all in my head. None of this is real.*

She wished it was a nightmare, but realized that everything that was happening was very real. Her body trembled with fear and she almost lost control of her bladder.

She heard the creature's loud footsteps nearing her room. The sound of it sniffing at her door sent a shiver through her body.

A large, dark, hairy gray arm burst through the middle of it and clawed at the air. The creature pulled its arm back through the door and hissed, "Bree!"

Bree started sobbing as she ran to her window. She quickly unlocked it, pushed it up and thanked God that her window didn't have a screen to kick out. Trying to kick out the screen, she'd determined, would have slowed her down tremendously and she would've died for sure.

She crawled out of her window and onto the roof that overlooked the pool in the backyard. She stopped sobbing and calmed herself down so she could concentrate. She cautiously began walking down, trying not to slip and fall off. She heard a crash in her room and she thought, *It's in my room, I've got to hurry up!*

Finally, Bree reached the edge of the roof and jumped. As she landed on the ground, her left ankle popped and started stinging. She ignored the pain and quickly hobbled to the pool, which was

only a few feet away. The deep end was closest to the house and when she reached the pool she lowered herself into it, took a deep breath, and went underwater. She stayed close to the wall and pressed her hands against it, forcing herself deeper.

She kept her eyes open and looked up to see if she could see anything coming near, but that was only wishful thinking. It was too dark to clearly see anything and she was slowly running out of air. Looking down for a moment, she closed her eyes to concentrate on holding her breath.

It was crucial that she stay underwater as long as she could. She thought she could hear muffled sounds, but she wasn't about to come out of the pool.

There was a splash in the water right beside her and she felt something grab her. She opened her eyes and started thrashing, but she stopped when she realized that the thing that had grabbed her was a human. It was her next door neighbor, Walter Price. He grabbed a hold of her arm and brought her back above the water.

Walter, a middle-aged man, reached for Bree's hand. She grabbed his and he pulled her

out of the pool. She was breathing heavy now and wanted to cry, but her breathing was too labored. Her adrenaline was going full force and she was tired and weak now. She looked around her and saw a rifle placed at the edge of the pool. Also, she heard the sirens of a police car and an ambulance pulling up to her house.

Walter knelt down beside her and said, “I called the police, honey, are you okay?”

Bree didn’t answer his question and instead asked her own, “Is it gone?”

“Yeah. I shot it a couple of times.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know. It was too dark to tell. I heard all the noise and came running.”

Bree remembered her father and gasped, “Oh my gosh, Daddy!”

Struggling to her feet, she felt an incredible soreness in her left ankle. She started hobbling back toward the house and Walter tried to grab her arm, but she snatched her arm away. No one was going to keep her from seeing her father, she had decided. She was going to see her father at that very moment.

A police officer came from the side of the house and met her. He asked, “Ma’am, are you okay?”

Bree started to cry and asked, “Where’s my dad? I want to see my dad.”

The police officer had a look on his face that suggested that he knew something she didn’t. He said, “Not yet. The paramedics are going to take him to the hospital. I saw you limping; let’s have a look at your ankle.”

Bree started sobbing and her body trembled hard. She cried, “I want to see my dad!”

The police officer repeated, “Not yet.”

Bree became faint and fell to her knees. Her stomach wrenched and then she vomited. After that, she passed out and fell over on the ground.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

It was early morning now and Bree had been shuffled around to the hospital and police station. Now she was at her cousin Hendrix Walton's house. He was a police officer and his shift ended at midnight. For the time being, he and his wife, Brittany, were taking care of her until other arrangements could be made. They had two children and didn't have room for Bree to live with them.

Bree was exhausted from her ordeal and drained of all her strength. She was tired, but couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the horrible images of her father being attacked. She cried until there were no more tears left to cry and her eyes were red and puffy.

She and her father were both taken to the emergency room at Piedmont Medical Center where her sprained ankle was treated and his major injuries cared for to the best of the ability of the doctors.' Bree insisted on seeing her father, but the policemen that came to her house, and her father's doctors told her that it was best to

remember him the way he was before the attack. That wasn't good enough for her; she had to see him one last time. That time never came when he passed away during the night.

The doctors themselves had a hard time looking at him and had to force themselves to look past the blood and gore. They had seen some pretty horrific things in the past, but nothing quite like Anthony's case. The beast had practically ripped his face off rendering him unrecognizable. The blow he received to the head traumatized his brain and put him into a coma. Also, he suffered several broken bones from the beast kicking him. His body finally gave out from the trauma and he died.

After the hospital, the two police officers took her to the station where she agreed to answer their questions. It seemed like an hour to her as she explained what happened at her house, and then answered the policemen's questions concerning her brother, and his involvement in the cult.

They wanted to know if she knew he had been involved in it and if she had ever participated in it. They also wanted to know if she knew about

the emails from Eddie Farrar, and if she knew where he was. The police were desperate for answers and wanted to quickly put an end to the cult.

Finally, her cousin Hendrix came to her rescue and scolded the police officers for being hard on her with all the questions. He told them that they were being harsh and insensitive and that they needed to give her time to grieve. Maybe she would be willing to answer questions at another time when she was emotionally recuperated. That's when Hendrix's shift ended and he took her home with him.

Now Bree was lying on the couch in the living room with her head propped on a pillow, and a blanket covering her. It was dark in the room, the lamps were turned off and the curtains closed. The morning sun was trying to peek through like a ray of hope. She was searching for a ray of hope in her heart, but couldn't find one. Her life was shattered and she felt completely numb. *I wish Mom was here to hold me*, she thought. *She would tell me that everything would be okay. And Daddy would hold me in his strong arms and make me feel*

safe.

She remembered a time when she was four-years-old and she fell and skinned her knee; her mother, Allie, picked her up and doctored her knee. Allie sang her a lullaby to calm her down, gently rocking Bree in her arms.

Thinking of the time when she found out about her mother died in the car accident, she remembered how Anthony held her tightly in his arms. She remembered feeling like her world had come to an end, but being in his arms and smelling his Stetson cologne helped to ease her pain. He was her rock and he was gone now.

Hendrix quietly walked into the living room and gently said, “Bree?”

She sat up and looked at him and dryly said, “Hey.”

Hendrix turned the lamp on and motioned for Bree to scoot over. She moved over and he sat down next to her. “Have you slept any?”

“Hardly. What time is it?”

“Seven o’clock. I called Uncle Joe in Tennessee about five-thirty this morning and he’s going to get here early in the afternoon. I think

you're going to live with him."

Bree shook her head and buried her face in her hands. She objected, "I can't go to Tennessee!"

Hendrix put his hand on Bree's shoulder and said, "Honey, if Brittany and I had extra room we would take you, but we don't. All the other family members are scattered about and Joe happens to be not so far away. I don't know what else to do. If there was a better option, I'd use it, but there isn't one.

Bree pulled her head up and frowned, a tear rolled down her cheek as she asked, "What am I going to do about the funeral?"

Hendrix took his hand off of Bree's shoulder and said, "Brittany and I will handle it. Now, what is it about moving to Tennessee that you're so against?"

Bree leaned towards Hendrix and confessed, "I have friends that are trying to put an end to the cult and the animal attacks. They discovered that email on Craig's computer that allowed the police to raid the club."

Bree's voice became angry as she continued

speaking, “My brother was mysteriously killed last week and my dad was killed last night by some beast that tried to attack me! I feel no closure, no peace. I felt closure a couple of years ago when my mom died in a car crash because I knew it was an accident. I want to know what’s going on. My friends and I need your help. We can work together to put this chaos to an end.”

Hendrix looked at her with a stunned expression and said, “Bree, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I could get fired for sharing information on investigations outside of the department. I could get into a lot of trouble.”

Bree grabbed his hand and held it as she said, “Please help us. I’m begging you.”

Hendrix gently squeezed her hand and patted it with his other hand. He was perplexed by Bree’s request.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

That morning before school started, Jeffrey was standing outside near A-Building with Ray, James, Jess, Gary and Brian. They were going over all that had happened over the weekend and how they were scared, and didn't know how to handle their situation.

Jeffrey didn't say much or comment on the conversation. He felt like there wasn't much to say anymore about the past events. There wasn't anything he could say to make him forget about it or make him feel better about it. He felt trapped, caged like an animal with no way out.

His life was turned upside down and he wasn't sure if it would ever be the same again. He lost the closeness that he once had with his parents. They suspected something was going on with him and his friends, but he couldn't tell them what it was. He was afraid that he might be putting them in danger by revealing his secrets. Also, he was afraid of how they might react.

Jeffrey was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't even see Marie walk up to him. She

touched his hand and said, “Hey, Jeffrey.”

He came out of his fog and replied, “Oh, hey. Sorry about that. I was in some deep thought.”

“I could tell. Can we talk for a moment alone?”

Jeffrey nodded and they walked a few feet away from the group. They stood there for a moment and looked into each other’s eyes, but the moment seemed much longer to Marie.

Inside her mind, she was scared, and kept going over in her head what she was going to say to Jeffrey. She tried to speak, but she couldn’t get started while she was looking at him. She looked down for a second and mustered the courage to speak, but she was still fidgety when she said, “It’d be an understatement to say that right now is a hard time for everybody, so I feel bad for even bringing this up.”

Jeffrey looked at her inquisitively and she continued, “We’ve been friends for a while and then we went out together over the weekend and I kissed you. *We* kissed. I was freaked out of my mind and kissing you felt right, but I think I might’ve messed things up. It got to be a little too physical.

Anyway, I didn't know if we were a couple now because we haven't talked since Saturday."

Marie grimaced when she said that and then gushed, "I feel so selfish."

Jeffrey smiled and said, "Don't feel that way. You have a right to know where you stand. I'm sorry I didn't call you, I hope you're not mad at me."

"I'm not mad. I know that you've had a lot on your mind."

"Yes, I have. I talked to my brother Sunday night and he's completely brainwashed. I broke the news to my parents about him and it just crushed them. I didn't know what else to do. I had to tell them what was going on with him."

"I'm so sorry."

"But back to what we we're talking about. I want us to be more than friends and I want us to be careful about getting too physical. I always enjoy being around you and talking to you and I don't want to mess any of that up. I can't describe how you make me feel inside, but I do know that it's special."

Marie smiled at Jeffrey, and he smiled back at

her. They hugged each other tightly and Marie said, “You make me happy, too. Jeffrey, if there’s anything I can do to help you with your brother or anything else please tell me.”

They pulled away from each other and Jeffrey looked at Marie. “But you’re in this mess, too. We’ll help each other through it all.”

Marie grinned and said, “Exactly.”

The couple hugged again and held each other close for a moment. Ray, James, Jess and Brian saw them, and started teasing them with various remarks. Jeffrey and Marie pulled away from each other a little embarrassed by the group. Marie slipped her hand into Jeffrey’s and together they walked back over to the group and talked before the bell rang for classes to start.

Meanwhile, inside A-Building, Lara was on her way back to the library after using the restroom when she heard someone call her name. She stopped and spun around to see Principal Hyatt. He walked up to her and spoke in almost a whisper, “I just wanted to say thank you for the information that you gave to me yesterday.”

“You’re welcome, Principal Hyatt.”

“I informed the authorities immediately after you left and they raided the club. They didn’t tell me much, except that they taped the place off and searched inside and out. They didn’t elaborate on anything that they found. Also, they looked for Eddie Farrar and he’s nowhere to be found, and they searched his home and found drug paraphernalia. They didn’t elaborate on what kind of drugs he had either.”

“I hope they didn’t go bothering Bree asking her questions. Did they?”

Principal Hyatt frowned as he said, “I’m afraid I have some bad news about that. Bree and her father were attacked last night by one of those creatures. Mr. Cook died during the night at Piedmont Medical Center and Bree was only treated for a broken ankle.”

Lara was stunned by the news and shook her head. The only thing she could think of saying was, “That poor girl. She’s been through so much. What’s she gonna do?”

Principal Hyatt said, “Right now she’s staying with her cousin until other arrangements can be made. I don’t know where she’s going to go, or if

she has anymore family in this area.”

Lara thanked him for the report, and then the bell rang. This prompted Principal Hyatt to excuse himself. He shook Lara’s hand as he said, “I’ll see you around. I’ve got to go take care of some things.”

He smiled with a nod and walked away.

Lara walked back into the library and manned her station at the front desk. She sat down in her chair and got out her cell phone. She sent a text message to Jeffrey while he was just getting seated in Statistics. The message read, “We need 2 find Eddie Farrar soon as possible. The police aren’t able to find him.”

Jeffrey replied, “How do I find him?”

“Through Dylan.”

Jeffrey wasn’t exactly thrilled at the task that he was given, but he himself said that something had to be done. Maybe if he found Eddie Farrar and turned him over to the police then everything would be better. Then he could be closer to his parents and brother and they could be a family again. This was all wishful thinking and he knew it.

Cody saw Jeffrey trying to keep his cell phone hidden while he corresponded with Lara. He leaned over and whispered, “What’s up?”

Jeffrey slid his cell phone in his pocket and had a worried look on his face as he whispered back, “Lara’s got a plan to find Farrar. I’ll tell you later at lunch.”

Cody noticed Jeffrey’s concern and reassuringly said, “It’s gonna be okay, man.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Brian was walking in the hall of D-Building when he saw Beth Ann and three of her friends walking towards him. Beth Ann said to her friends, "I'll catch up with y'all in a minute." Then she strolled up to Brian and smiled at him as her friends walked on by.

He sneakily looked Beth Ann over and grinned as he smoothly said, "What's up?"

Beth Ann answered, "I was about to go eat lunch, but then I decided to talk to you."

"Are you not going to eat with your boyfriend, Cody?"

"Oh, he's not my boyfriend. We're just friends."

Brian delighted in hearing this news and slyly said, "Then I guess he won't be calling you tonight will he?"

"I don't know," replied Beth Ann. "He might call."

"How about I call you instead?"

Beth Ann giggled and reached into her pocket book to retrieve an ink pen and a small notepad.

As she wrote her phone number down she said,
“You better call me.”

“I won’t let you down,” he said with a smile.

She tore the page out that contained her phone number and handed it to him. He took it, slipped it deep into his pocket, and smiled at her. She smiled and chirped, “Bye. I’ll talk to you tonight.”

They parted ways and Beth Ann walked briskly to catch up with her friends. Brian watched her leave, observing how her hips moved.

That night, Jeffrey was leaning against his car, waiting for Dylan to arrive in the senior parking lot. He had called Dylan after school and told him that he had had a change of heart, and wanted to be a part of Dylan’s “family.” Jeffrey had his parents thinking that he was at school working on his page for the school newspaper. It was going to burn him bad. He just knew that all of the lies he’d been telling were going to catch up with him.

Eli and his team were in two black vans

parked in a gas station across the street. Jeffrey had discussed his plan with Eli. Eli and his team were to follow Dylan and him to the location of the meeting. Then, they were to locate Eddie Farrar and capture him for interrogation. It was to be a quick in-and-out mission- hopefully.

Dylan pulled into the parking lot, rolled up beside Jeffrey, and waited for him to get into the car. Jeffrey opened the passenger side door, climbed in, and shut it. He buckled his seat belt and said, "What's up?"

Dylan drove the car out of the parking lot and onto the road. He replied, "Not much, just the usual, I was really surprised by your phone call earlier. So what changed your mind?"

"I got to thinking that I didn't want to be without a brother," answered Jeffrey. "I've hardly seen you since you've been away at school and I want that to change."

What he said was sincere. Hopefully, his brother would buy it. Dylan kept driving and said matter-of-factly, "I found my true family when I went away. I'm sorry if you've felt neglected. Tonight, that can all change. You have an

opportunity to become a part of my family.”

Jeffrey kind of nodded at what Dylan said and held back his urge to scream at him. Everything that Dylan was saying was nonsense and Jeffrey wanted to tell him that, but that would ruin the plans to capture Eddie.

Dylan turned onto a dirt road that led deep into some woods. They came to a clearing, and Dylan parked behind a dozen other cars. Jeffrey and Dylan got out of the car and walked to the middle of the clearing to join a large crowd, where they stood at the back. The area was lit up by four torches arranged in a large square. At the front of the crowd was a small stage that was raised up high enough for an orator to see over his audience.

Eddie Farrar stepped onto the stage and opened his arms up to the crowd as if he were going to embrace them all.

“Welcome my brothers and sisters,” he said with a warm smile. He put his arms down and the expression on his face became serious. Then, “There have been threats to put an end to our family! These threats have been made by people who don’t believe in our god. They broke into my

establishment and snooped around, putting their noses where they don't belong."

While Eddie was talking, Eli and his team set up a perimeter to surround the clearing. Eli radioed to his team members and whispered, "Let's wait and listen to what he says. We might learn something that we need to know."

Eddie declared, "These people must be stopped! Everyone who stands in our way and everyone who doesn't believe must be destroyed. They are filled with hate towards us and want nothing more than to kill us. Oh, how I can't wait for the day that Kelax comes to save us. He will lay to waste all opposition. We must find the Horpycanthyl artifact and give it to him as an offering. Then, he will come to save us all."

Eli gave the word, and he and his team rushed in with their guns drawn. Most of the crowd tried to disperse, leaving Jeffrey and Dylan exposed to Eddie's line of sight. The Fold kept everyone from escaping. Eddie shouted, "Fight them!"

A few people, who were skilled fighters, tried to fight. They were suppressed by the Fold and Eli recognized them to be some of the missing

members of his team.

Eddie hopped off the stage and marched towards Jeffrey and Dylan. At the same time, Eli was a good distance away and was headed towards Eddie, who had a disgusted look on his face. He whipped a gun out of the back of his jeans and shouted at Dylan, “Look at what you’ve done!”

Eddie raised his gun and fired. Time seemed to slow down at that second. Jeffrey saw the fire come out of the barrel of the gun but didn’t hear the report. His legs were strangely stiff and he didn’t run. He turned to Dylan and saw his head jerk back. Blood and fragments of his skull splattered Jeffrey’s face, making him flinch and scream in horror. His face flushed white as he watched Dylan fall to the ground.

Eli ran harder, despite his injuries, when he realized Eddie had a gun. He took aim when he got closer and shot the gun out of Eddie’s hand. After that, he smacked Eddie in the head with the butt of his gun, sending him to the ground unconscious. Then he radioed his men and said, “Team One, notify the police and hold the cultists until they get here to apprehend them. Team Two,

come with me back to base to interrogate Farrar.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

A few minutes later, Jeffrey and Team Two were back at the base under the library. Eli and one of his men tied Eddie to a chair. They strapped his arms and legs down so he couldn't fight if he tried. He was starting to come to after being knocked out.

Jeffrey stood a few feet away from Eddie and stared him down. He'd cleaned his face off on the way back to the school. His mind was blank, yet it was racing at the same time. He was on edge, and wanted that scumbag known as Eddie Farrar to wake up so he could be interrogated. Seeing Eddie's expressions of pain while Eli tortured him for answers would be such a glorious sight to behold. Then, he wanted to kill Eddie himself. Also, he wanted to scream and curse at Eli for leaving Dylan's body behind. How dare Eli leave Dylan like that! Why didn't Jeffrey do those things now? He couldn't. He didn't have the energy. Tears tried to mist in his eyes so he could cry for his brother, but they wouldn't come. Quite simply, Jeffrey was way past fed up, way past

emotional. Perhaps, he'd been pushed past his brink.

Jeffrey was in a daze brought on by the shock of his brother's murder. He was snapped out of it by the sound of a squeaky cart being pushed by Lara. She placed the cart containing interrogative tools on the left side of Eddie. The sight of Lara made Jeffrey's blood boil. All of his pain and anger rose to the surface once more.

Eli took a syringe off of the cart and injected its contents into the bend of Eddie's arm. Almost immediately, Eddie woke up screaming and writhing in pain. Lara walked up to Jeffrey and said, "He's awake now. Do you wanna interrogate him?"

Jeffrey didn't look at her and stiffly answered, "No."

Lara knew about Dylan's death and didn't know what to say to Jeffrey; Eli had called and told her about it when they were on their way back. She decided not to say anything to Jeffrey at the moment. Instead, she directed her attention to Eli. "Go ahead, Eli, see what you can get out of him," said Lara.

By this time, Eddie was no longer in pain and had regained his composure. He took a moment to see where he was, and saw Jeffrey.

“I was wondering who was gonna get me first; the cops or you people,” he said with a sly grin. “Are you happy that you got me, Jeffrey? Oh, wait. How can you be? I shot your brother in the head.”

Jeffrey’s face reddened and he balled up his fists. He clenched his teeth and hissed. “I’m gonna kill you.”

He started stomping towards Eddie, but Lara raised her hand towards him and firmly said, “No!”

Jeffrey stopped and Lara put her hand down.

Eli stood directly in front of Eddie and knelt down to be eye level with Eddie. Eli had a serious but calm tone in his voice when he said, “You’re going to tell me everything that I need to know.”

Eddie grinned. “Am I really?”

“Yeah. I’ll put you through a lot of pain if you don’t.” Eddie nodded. He was oddly amused.

Eli asked, “Are you the god that the cult is waiting for? Are you going to appear in another

form?”

Eddie chuckled when he answered, “I’m not God. You’ll see who my god is right before he kills you. That’s all you need to know.”

Eli stood up and snatched a pair of pliers off of the cart. He grabbed the fingernail of Eddie’s right index finger with the pliers and looked Eddie in the eyes. Eli asserted, “I’ll tell you when we’re done. You don’t call the shots.”

Eli ripped Eddie’s fingernail out of the nail bed and Eddie threw back his head and shouted a few obscenities. Eli backed away and asked, “Who is Kelax?”

“My god.”

“Is he here? Is he waiting for the right time to show himself?”

“Maybe,” he said while observing his bloody finger.

He grinned and didn’t say anymore. Eli placed the pliers back on the cart.

“You wanna play games, huh?” asked Eli. “You’re only gonna make this harder on yourself.”

He grabbed a cattle prod and stuck it to Eddie’s chest and shocked him. Eddie jerked

violently for a moment and groaned harshly in pain. Eli pulled the cattle prod away.

“Answer the question! Why is he waiting to receive that Horpycanthyl artifact?”

It took Eddie a moment to regain his strength. All the muscles in his body still felt like they were tensing up. He finally answered Eli, “He’s building an army to crush all opposition. The Horpycanthyl will make him stronger than you could possibly imagine!”

Eli said, “Tell me where he is.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Eddie shaking his head.

Eli started to grab another tool and Lara stopped him. She pulled him away and whispered, “I think that we should stop now. I doubt that he’s gonna tell us anymore.”

Eli replied, “Yeah. He’s pretty brave to be resistant, knowing full well that he’s gonna get tortured.”

“He must’ve been trained to withstand pain.”

“Yeah, by my own men!”

“I think we should knock him out and put a tracer in his arm. Let’s see where he goes and tip

off the police.”

“Great idea.”

Eli grabbed a syringe off of the cart and filled it with some drugs. He stuck the needle into the bend of Eddie’s right arm and injected the contents. Within moments, Eddie was unconscious.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Jeffrey and Lara went upstairs to the library while Eli worked on Eddie. Jeffrey started to walk towards the exit, but Lara gently grabbed his right shoulder. Jeffrey yanked it away from her as she said, “Jeffrey, wait. I’m so sorry about what happened.”

She was going to say more, but Jeffrey spun around to face her. He had a look in his eyes that somewhat startled her. For a moment, she thought he was going to attack her. He was looking for the opportunity to unload on her and here it was. Jeffrey was going to take it.

He snapped at her. “Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare try to say that you know how I feel, because you don’t. You don’t know me! In the few days that I’ve known you my life has been turned upside down.”

His face was red and hot with anger. His jaw was set. He was shaking all over, barely able to contain himself.

Lara stood her ground and tried to remain calm. She said, “I never meant for any of this to

happen. You've got to believe--"

"I don't have to believe a blessed word you say! My brother is dead. He's dead! And Eli left his body out there. Why did I ever bother listening to you anyway? I barely even know you."

"I didn't know that any of that was going to happen. If I had known then we would've done things differently. This isn't an easy job and things happen that none of us have any control over. Eli and the team had to get out of there before the police got there. You and I both know they didn't have time to get Dylan. I'm sorry. I really mean that."

Jeffrey shook his head. He wasn't buying a single word Lara said to him. Since she had shown up all he had known was grief. He said, "That doesn't help me any. How am I going to tell my parents that I watched my brother get killed?"

"I'm so sorry, Jeffrey. I don't know what to say."

"I'm done. I'm through with this whole mess. Find somebody else to take my place."

"You can't give up!"

“Watch me!”

Jeffrey turned around and stormed out of the library. On his way out he shouted, “Stay out of my life!”

I’m so screwed, he thought. *What am I gonna do?* As he walked to his car he wished that he’d never been born.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Eli entered the library and walked stiffly to Lara, who was facing the exit with her arms crossed.

“Are you all right, Lara?” quietly he asked so he wouldn’t startle her. She turned around to present to him a worried face.

“I’ll be fine,” she reassuringly said. “It’s Jeffrey I wonder about. He’s so furious with me. He probably hates me. I guess I would hate me too.”

“There wasn’t anything I could do to save his brother. And you’re doing the best that you can.”

Lara unfolded her arms, placing her hand on her hips.

“Things just go terribly wrong sometimes,” she said. “And it makes me feel like a real screw up. I just hope Jeffrey will learn to trust us.”

“He will. Just give him some time.”

Eli sat on a table closest to him to try to ease the pain throbbing from his knife wound in his back. Compared to other injuries, he thought, this was nothing. Lara sat beside him and asked,

“What did you mean earlier when you said Eddie Farrar must’ve been trained by your own men to withstand pain?”

“I saw some of my own team members there at the meeting. They were part of the cult.”

“How can that be? They must’ve been brainwashed.”

“Remember when we arrived in Charlotte a week after the Protector was killed in Angers and Malcolm called me in a panic?”

She nodded and they went over the past events in detail. Eli, Lara, and four members of the Fold had just arrived at a Holiday Inn that Sunday evening when Malcolm called.

“I don’t know why,” Malcolm said over the phone. “But I have a bad feeling unlike any other I’ve had before.”

“About what?” Eli asked.

“Like my team and I are being watched.”

“By whom?”

“We don’t think it’s a person, but some thing. Something evil. There’s been times that I’ve felt it watching us.”

“Just sit tight, Malcolm. How many men are

with you?”

“Sixteen including me.”

“Text me directions to your location and we’ll come to you.”

A couple of hours later Eli, Lara, and their team arrived at a dilapidated two-story white house with a barn out back in the country of Clover, South Carolina. Not a light was on in the house.

The headlights of their van shone on the house to reveal that the front door had been obliterated.

“Get the guns,” ordered Eli from the driver’s seat. “This doesn’t look good.”

The group armed themselves with Colt Le Tact Carbine 223s that had silencers and flashlights on top of the barrels. They split up and half went in the front, the other half went in the back.

Lara held her gun tightly as she entered the house through the front door, shining the flashlight to guide her steps. Chunks of the door lay scattered about on the floor, as well as body parts that most likely belonged to members of the Fold.

“My God,” gasped one of the men with her.

The air stunk heavily of gun smoke as the

three of them walked down a hallway. The walls had been riddled with bullets, blood spatter was everywhere. A member of the Fold lay face down on the floor decapitated, his back ripped to shreds. His gun rested beside him, having failed to protect him.

“What happened here?” she asked rhetorically.

A moment later she heard Eli call for her and she ran in the direction of his voice, the two men with her followed close behind. On their way to Eli, they saw more mutilated bodies.

When they found Eli, he was knelt down in front of Malcolm who was sitting against the wall. His left arm and both legs had been ripped off. He had deep gashes all over his body, his clothes wet with blood.

“He’s not gonna make it,” said Eli with a grave tone.

Malcolm’s face was pale and clammy, his teeth chattered.

“So. Cold,” he said.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get here in time,” said Eli.

“We were secret as always. Not supposed to happen.”

Malcolm’s eyes grew more distant, his breathing became more shallow.

“Who did this?” asked Lara.

Malcolm’s gaze became a blank stare, his breathing increasingly became more labored.

“They took prisoners,” it became harder for him to speak. “We were...secret. Not supposed...to happen.”

His head dropped low, his breathing stopped. Eli closed Malcolm’s eyelids and slowly stood up. One of the men asked, “What do we do now?”

“Burn the house down,” Eli said grimly. “Hopefully nobody will find the bodies. Go collect guns.”

“What about the others?”

“I hate to say it,” sighed Lara. “But I’m sure they’re dead. And whatever it was that did all of this is long gone.”

Eli said, “I’m sure whatever it was will turn up again. We need to keep moving and find the Protector. Maybe that thing will show up again and the Protector will kill it.”

They collected weaponry from their fallen comrades and loaded it into the van. Collecting hay from the barn, they thickly sprinkled it throughout the house and set it on fire with the cigarette lighter from the van.

Within minutes, the house was ablaze and the group hopped back into the van and sped back to the hotel. Eli, as well as the rest of the group, was silent for the longest time. Finally, he glanced at Lara on the passenger side and said, "I'll start working on your new identity tonight. You know how long it takes. I gotta find a way to get close to the Protector. Perhaps you could be the librarian at his school."

Lara hopped off the table and shook her head saying, "The cult has been planning for a long time. Someone's helping them."

"Who do you think?" asked Eli.

"Someone who must know a lot about us. They certainly knew how to find Malcolm and his men."

"The cult must be planning something big."

"Yeah. And they need to be stopped very soon."

CHAPTER FORTY

Eddie woke up on a picnic table at the Burger King across from the high school. He was somewhat fuzzy headed from the drugs and was slightly hung over. He sat up and looked around. He asked himself, “How did I get here?”

He looked down at his watch and saw that it was 1:00 a.m. He realized that he needed to get to his new hideout, but needed a car. He would just have to steal one.

Eddie got off the table and started scanning the area. Then he sprinted over to a car stopped at a red light and yanked the driver’s side door open. Eddie jerked the man out of the car and slung him to the ground. He quickly hopped in and slammed the door shut. He made the tires squeal as he speedily turned left onto the road.

Meanwhile, Lara and Eli were watching Eddie on the computer screen at the command center. They were able to look onto Eddie’s location by using satellite imaging. Eli was sitting at the keyboard and Lara was standing behind him. She said, “Eli, see if you can zoom in on his license

plate so I can tell Hendrix what to look for.”

Eli replied, “Sure thing.”

He typed in a command on the keyboard and the car’s license plate came into full view. Lara got out her cell phone and called Hendrix and informed him of Eddie’s location.

A few minutes later, Hendrix was zeroing in on Eddie. He thought about what had happened in the last couple of days and wondered how he got put into the awkward position of being the inside man for Bree’s friends. He tells Jeffrey and company what he knows, they tell him what they know so the police can act on it. That’s how it was supposed to work. He didn’t like it, and he didn’t understand the reason why a group of teenagers wanted to bring down a cult. Hendrix admired them for caring, but thought that it was a bit unusual.

He remained a few car lengths behind Eddie so he wouldn’t be noticed. Eddie zoomed by a police car that was parked on the side of the road waiting for speed demons. The policeman, Officer Chuck Gaines, turned his lights and siren on and chased after Eddie. Hendrix saw what just

happened and thought, “Oh crap! This is not good.”

He followed suit to Officer Gaines and turned on his lights and siren.

Eddie cursed when he realized that he was being chased, and stepped on the gas even harder. The car's engine revved up loudly and the car accelerated.

Officer Gaines radioed Hendrix and said, “Why weren't you giving pursuit to this car?”

Hendrix radioed back and replied, “Because that's Eddie Farrar and I'm following him. I have a hunch that he'll lead me to the cult. I was gonna call for back-up when I got to his location. Just trust me all right?”

“Trust you? You're acting alone on an unauthorized mission!”

“I just happened to spot him a few minutes ago. Following him could bring us closer to shutting the cult down. This could be our only shot.”

“Fine, but I'm calling for back-up.”

Eddie closed in on a Buick and fish-tailed it. The Buick flipped and rolled, projecting debris

everywhere. Hendrix and Officer Gaines both swerved and narrowly missed the car. Officer Gaines called for back-up and medical assistance.

A few minutes later, Eddie arrived at his destination, an abandoned warehouse. He brought the car to a screeching halt and jumped out of the car, not even bothering to turn off the engine. Eddie darted into the building where about fifty of his cult members were waiting for him. He had alerted them that the police were coming by sending an emergency text message that read, “911.”

The cultists were armed with their commando gear and weapons, waiting for Eddie’s orders. He looked out the window and saw several police cars and a S.W.A.T. truck. Eddie quickly rounded up a team of his ten best commandos and said, “Come with me out the back. We’re gonna pay Jeffrey and his friends a visit when they least expect it.” Then he turned to the remaining commandos and gave them their orders. “Hold them off as long as you can. Give them hell and don’t surrender!”

Eddie and his small army ran off to the back of the warehouse and disappeared out the back door. The remaining commandos were startled by

a couple of tear gas grenades that shot through the windows. The grenades burst when they hit the floor and created a thick cloud of smoke. The commandos scrambled to put on their masks to protect themselves from the tear gas and headed towards the door, but they were knocked back from the door when the S.W.A.T. team busted it open. The leader of the team shouted at them, “Freeze!”

Immediately, the commandos fired upon the S.W.A.T. team. A few of the team members got shot while taking cover behind some wooden boxes, but weren’t seriously injured. The team returned fire and knocked a few commandos down. The rapid firing of guns filled the warehouse and it almost became deafening.

Hendrix and his fellow police officers came in through the back door and took several commandos by surprise. They wounded the commandos, making them no longer a threat.

Nearby, a commando had a grenade in his hand and was preparing to throw it. Hendrix saw him and shouted, “Put it down! Put it down, now!”

The commando reared back his arm and

started to throw the grenade, ignoring the order that had been given to him. Hendrix quickly took aim and shot the commando in the head.

Blood sprayed from the soldier's head and his body fell back and plopped to the ground. On the way down the grenade fell out of the commando's hand and Hendrix turned around and ran. He shouted to his comrades, "Grenade! Run!"

As Hendrix and the S.W.A.T. team members near him dove over some wooden crates nearby, the grenade exploded, setting off the remaining grenades that the commando had on him. The commando's body disappeared in a ball of flames, as well as the few commandos that were with him. A couple S.W.A.T. team members couldn't get away fast enough and were knocked off their feet from the blast.

Smoke and debris filled the warehouse and the battle finally ended when the very few remaining commandos surrendered.

Minutes later, Hendrix called Lara when he got the chance to step away from his fellow police officers. Lara answered her phone and Hendrix said, "Eddie got away somehow, but we did manage

to shut down his commandos. They had quite an arsenal.”

Lara said, “Yeah. I’m afraid we lost track of Eddie. He must’ve known that he had a tracking device on him and somehow destroyed the signal.”

“That’s not good. So what do you want me to do now?”

“Nothing. You did a good job. Eddie can’t run forever. We’ll put an end to him and this whole thing soon.”

They ended their conversation and Hendrix went back to rejoin the other police officers to go over the events that had just occurred.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

A few minutes later, the S.W.A.T. team, Hendrix, and the other policemen raided the Full Moon in search of Eddie Farrar. The S.W.A.T team rushed into the dark building first, with their flashlight mounted FN P90 submachine gun showing them the way, and the policemen followed. A few members covered the ground level while a few searched upstairs. They all reported the areas to be clear.

One of the S.W.A.T. team members found the power switch and turned the lights on to the ground level. Hendrix stood in the middle of the dance floor, taking a look around. He shrugged to himself and thought, *I've never understood the club scene. It smells of cigarettes and beer.*

He heard a policewoman nearby say, "There's spent rounds everywhere. And flash grenades."

Looking down, he saw a small puddle of blood, as well as more bullet casings. "I've got blood over here," he said to the policewoman. "This must've been some crazy gunfight. It's a

wonder nobody heard all the racket.”

Officer Barry Costner walked up alongside Hendrix and replied, “It wouldn’t surprise me if they had silencers. The commandos, I mean.”

“Yeah. You have any theories as to what went down, Barry?”

Barry wagged his head. “I’m as puzzled as everybody else, partner.”

Hendrix and Barry met in the police academy 10 years ago on the first day of training. They encouraged each other when times got rough and quizzed each other on material they learned in the classroom. They became close friends and Hendrix and Brittany occasionally had Barry and his wife over for dinner.

“The only thing I can think of is that vigilantes did this. They came looking for Farrar and he unleashed his commandos on them. Strange that there are no bodies; they must’ve carried them off.”

“That’s a crazy theory you got there,” replied Hendrix.

“You asked.”

The crazy thing is that he could be right,

thought Hendrix. *Lara, did you do this? If you did and you get found out then it'll get back to me that I was helping you. I'll be done for if that happens.*

He put those thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on the matter at hand. His eyes locked on the strange looking symbol on the elevator door towards\ the back of the club and started walking toward it, tapping Barry on the shoulder to come with him.

“Check this out,” declared Hendrix when they arrived at the door.

“Do you know what it means?” asked Barry.

“No. It almost looks German, Nazi-like, but I’m not sure. The symbol most likely stands for what they believe in.”

“Let’s get some S.W.A.T. guys to accompany us down to wherever this elevator leads. Maybe Farrar is down there.”

Hendrix agreed and called over four S.W.A.T. team members. They entered the elevator and rode it down to the basement, taking only a few moments.

On the way down, Barry commented, with a

smirk on his face, “Thank God. There’s no music. I hate elevator music.”

Nobody replied as the elevator hummed to a stop. The door slid open and the S.W.A.T. team members rushed out to secure the area.

“All clear,” said one of the team members.

Upon entering the cold, dank basement, Hendrix and Barry were met with an eerie feeling. It was a large room, dimly lit by a few light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Two elegantly designed gold candle stands that held white candles were positioned on either side of a brown wooden lectern. The pungent smell of blood hung stiffly in the air.

At the center of the room was they symbol from the elevator door painted in red on the concrete floor. In the center of that was a man whose arms and legs were bound to a metal chair with duct tape. His head was tilted back with a funnel sticking out of his mouth. There were bruises on his face from being beaten, his bottom lip busted. He was completely soaked and his shoes and socks were missing. On the floor to his right were over a dozen gallon jugs, most of them being

empty.

Directly in front of the man was a middle aged woman chained to the wall by handcuffs. Her body was slumped in a pool of blood as she hung by her arms. Her arms had been slashed near the armpits.

“This must be the cult’s place of worship,” deduced Hendrix. “Perhaps it’s for the truly devoted.”

Two S.W.A.T. members walked up to Hendrix and Barry. One of them said, “We found an extra storage room containing a pretty impressive weapon cache, although most of the crates are empty. I haven’t seen anything like this around here in quite some time.”

“Neither have we,” replied Barry.

Hendrix walked over to the man in the chair to study him for a moment.

“What were these people doing to this guy?” he asked. “Were they hazing him?”

Buddy got a closer look at the man and shook his head.

“I highly doubt that.”

He picked up one of the gallon jugs and

sniffed inside it.

“These were just jugs of water. The poor guy was forced to ingest all the water that was in these containers. He’s so bloated he’s about to bust out of his clothes.”

“I never thought that drinking so much water could kill someone,” said Hendrix.

“Oh yeah. You know I’m all the time looking up random facts. Well, I read somewhere that if the body takes in over 10 liters of water in a short amount of time then the body’s electrolytes get all screwed up, the brain’s regular activity is disrupted, and all the cells in the body swell up. Also, the victim can suffer from vomiting, headaches, seizures, and in this case, death.

“I have a friend who used to investigate cults for the F.B.I. He worked a case that involved cultists who took people into the cult against their will. If the people didn’t renounce their beliefs, then the cultists thought they could cleanse the people of their beliefs by forcing them to drink copious amounts of water. That made some people renounce, others died horribly like this guy.”

“And this woman was forced to watch him

die before they killed her. I don't know who got it worse, the guy or the girl. What I don't understand is why they were left here to be found."

Maybe it isn't such a bad thing Lara and her people are helping out after all, thought Hendrix. He couldn't believe that he was thinking such a thing.

"They probably viewed these victims as trash and didn't care one way or another what happened to them. You gotta remember, these people are sickos."

"You know what else?"

"What?"

"We're all gonna be here a while."

Eddie radioed to dispatch for a coroner and ambulance.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

It was early morning and Jeffrey was lying in his bed wide awake. He hadn't slept all night. The image of Eddie Farrar shooting Dylan kept running through his mind. He remembered the warm, wet blood and the fragments of skull hitting his face. The cringe inducing smell of blood still filled his nostrils. The images and thoughts in his head wouldn't let up. He hated Eddie with a passion and wanted to kill him. He wanted to rip his head off with his bare hands. He could probably do it. After all, he did have super strength.

Jeffrey also hated Lara for ruining his life. If she hadn't come to him and told him that he was some kind of protector everything would be fine. Or would it? He despised Eli, too for leaving Dylan's body behind. Eli could've had enough time to get Dylan, right? Jeffrey realized that he should've gotten Dylan himself. He could've killed Eddie while he was at it, but he didn't do it. He froze. Jeffrey had been in shock and paralyzed with fear. Now he hated himself. He felt like

such a failure.

The phone rang abruptly, and it startled him. Jeffrey's body cringed with each urgent ring, because he knew who was calling and for what reason too. He suddenly felt a huge knot form deep inside his gut. It sat very heavy and didn't move.

He heard his mother answer the phone in her bedroom. Katie's voice was hesitant and full of concern. "Yes. I'm his mother. What's going on?"

There was a long pause. "No! That can't be! Are you sure?"

"What?" Jeffrey heard his father say. "What is it, Katie?"

Jeffrey heard Katie sob to Keith the bad news.

"Can we see him?" asked Katie. "Why not?"

Another long pause. She cried much harder and Keith asked, "Can we see his body?" Katie sobbed. "No. He was shot in the face! They said it would be best to have the funeral as soon as possible.

Jeffrey walked into his parent's bedroom as Katie hung up the phone on her bedside table. Katie clung to Keith and they cried together. Keith whispered, "I was worried something like this would happen."

Katie said, "Me, too."

They pulled away from each other when they realized that Jeffrey was standing at the foot of the bed. Keith's voice was full of hurt when he spoke. "Jeffrey, we have some bad news. Your brother was killed last night. The police think that the cult had something to do with it, but they're not sure."

Jeffrey hung his head low and said nothing for a moment. He waited for the tears to come, but they never came. He shamefully said, "I was there."

His parents looked at him with disbelief. He continued. "I went with him last night. I was hoping that I could help him. I thought I could persuade him to get out of the cult. And then it happened. I didn't know what to do. I got scared and ran."

Jeffrey looked up to see their shocked faces and then looked back down.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” asked Keith.
“Why didn’t you tell us?” There was a hint of anger in his voice, but mostly disappointment.

“I didn’t know how to,” sheepishly replied Jeffrey. “I-” he stopped, not knowing what else to say.

He turned to walk away and quietly said,
“I’m sorry.”

His parents got off the bed and they both embraced him. They were overwhelmed with grief and didn’t say a word. He waited for his tears to come, but they never came.

Later that day at school, Cody was walking to D-Building when he saw Beth Ann walking towards him. She smiled when she saw him and gave a little wave. They stopped to talk to each other and Cody said, “Hey. I’m glad I ran into you. Did you hear about Jeffrey’s brother?”

Beth Ann frowned and nodded. “Yeah. Marie told me a little bit ago. That’s so horrible.”

“Have you been doing okay?”

Cody's tone changed with the question. His voice became a little stern and interrogative. Beth Ann was puzzled by Cody's change in behavior. She answered, "Fine, I guess."

Cody asked, "So what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you haven't returned any of my calls and you hardly give me the time of day. I'm surprised that you're even talking to me now. I thought we were close."

Beth Ann gave a little smile and touched Cody's arm. She said, "We were, and then I met Brian."

She started to say more, but stopped when Cody became angry. His voice was full of disappointment when he said, "You're talking to Brian now and pretty much ignoring me?"

Beth Ann softly said, "I'm sorry, Cody, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"But you did hurt me! You could've at least had the decency to tell me that you weren't interested in me. Instead, you left me wondering what was going on. Now I know."

Cody walked off and Beth Ann started to

apologize again, but figured it was useless. She felt ashamed of herself for being the self-absorbed girl that she was. She realized that she had gone against what Jess had told her and broke Cody's heart. She said to herself, "Way to go, Beth Ann. You did it again."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The ride to the funeral home the next day felt like hours to Jeffrey when it was only minutes. He stayed quiet in the backseat, afraid to say a word. His parents hardly said anything either. The awkward silence grated on his nerves, but there wasn't anything he could say. All he wanted to do right now was curl up into the fetal position and disappear.

It was early afternoon and Jeffrey was wishing that the day would end. He was hoping that better days would come where everything was back to normal.

They arrived at the funeral home and Keith parked the car. Neither one of them moved for a few moments. Then Keith touched Katie's leg and looked at her with eyes full of sorrow. "Are you ready?"

Katie nodded as she unbuckled her seatbelt. Keith looked back at Jeffrey and said, "Let's go."

He felt so sick inside because he felt somewhat responsible for his brother's murder. The look of disappointment on his parents' faces

when they looked at him tore him apart. He knew his parents were upset with him and he didn't blame them. Things became strained between them after Jeffrey's confession the day before and not much was said.

They walked inside where the visitation director greeted them and took them to the room in which they would be taking visitors.

Jeffrey scanned the room to take it all in. At the entrance was a brown wooden podium with a white guestbook and matching ink pen on it. The rest of the room, in Jeffrey's opinion, wasn't anything special. He had seen nicer funeral homes. There were some paintings of the country on the wall that was probably meant to give the room an inviting feel, but it didn't do him any good.

Finally, his eyes rested on the back wall where Dylan's casket was positioned. He cringed at the sight as he and his parents walked toward it. His legs became heavier with each step as he got closer to it.

The casket was a dark shiny black with some gold trimming. At the foot of the casket was a stand that held an oil painting of Dylan from his

senior year at high school. On either side was an assortment of colorful flowers.

In the painting, Dylan had a carefree, happy-go-lucky expression on his face. His eyes were full of zest, his smile contagious to anyone who saw it when he was alive. This was the Dylan that Jeffrey remembered.

Jeffrey stood at the casket and thought, *It all happened so fast. I can't believe that he's gone now.*

He touched the casket and felt the cold, hard steel. The image of Dylan getting shot in the head entered his mind once more. He pulled his hand away and closed his eyes, hoping that the memory would go away. It did for a moment, only for a dreadful thought to enter his mind- Dylan's dead body was probably as cold as the casket.

He looked over at his parents, holding each other while looking at Dylan's painting. "I wish we got to see him one last time," he head Katie say.

"Me too," said Keith.

I should be the one in that casket, thought Jeffrey.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Jeffrey and his parents stood by Dylan's casket in the visitation room to receive condolences from friends and family. Jeffrey felt beside himself, watching himself talk to his friends and family. It was as if he was there, but wasn't there at the same time.

Everyone that passed by him said the same thing to him, only each remark was phrased differently. One person would say, "I'm sorry for your loss."

Another person would say, "If there's anything I can do just let me know."

None of it made him feel any better. The pain and guilt he felt remained the same.

A man from Jeffrey's church walked up to him and they shook hands. The man said something heartfelt to Jeffrey, but he didn't hear it. He began feeling ill. His chest tightened and his heart pounded. The walls in the room appeared to be closing in on him and he needed to escape.

Jeffrey was having a full on panic attack and he needed to get away from everyone. He excused

himself and started to leave the room. Katie asked, "Where are you going, Jeffrey?"

He answered in a frantic manner. "I need to leave. I can't handle this."

Everyone in the room looked at him with questioning eyes as he left the room.

Jeffrey bumped into Marie on his way out of the building and she saw the condition that he was in. She touched his arm and asked, "Are you all right?"

"No," he answered. "I don't know. What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you and your family."

Marie looked at Jeffrey and saw how exhausted he looked. She went to hold his hand and discovered how clammy it was. She asked, "Is there something I can do for you; anything at all?"

"Take me home."

"Okay. Come on"

On the way to Jeffrey's house, Marie asked, "Are you feeling some better now?"

"A little bit," he answered.

Marie wasn't satisfied by the way Jeffrey

answered her question. She pressed on. “Do you think you should tell your parents what’s *really* going on? I think it would be the best thing for you; maybe for all of us.”

Jeffrey shook his head. “No. Nobody’s going to believe us!”

“You could try. It would be a lot better than holding it in. It’s hurting you and I can tell.”

“I’m scared too. Plus, my parents hate me.”

Jeffrey didn’t like admitting that he was scared, but he was.

Marie reassured him. “Your parents don’t hate you. They’re just shocked at how everything went down. Everything between y’all will get better. Your parents love you.”

Marie pulled into Jeffrey’s driveway and parked the car on the carport. Jeffrey’s disposition had changed some. He said, “Thank you for trying to make me feel better.” Marie smiled and touched Jeffrey’s cheek.

She said, “You’re welcome. You should go inside and rest now.” She pulled her hand away from his cheek and he said, “I’m gonna change clothes and go to school. I need to work on some

stuff for the newspaper.”

Marie nodded. She didn’t want him to go to school, but she couldn’t stop him. She wasn’t going to try to fight him anymore. It was just best to let him do what he wanted to do.

She leaned over to Jeffrey and kissed him on the cheek, then pulled away from him and said, “I’m going back to the funeral home to pay my respects. Afterwards, I’ll come visit you at school and bring you a pizza. How does that sound?”

Jeffrey looked at her with tired eyes. He momentarily brightened up and smiled. He said, “That sounds great. Thank you for being so good to me.”

Marie was relieved to see him smile. They said their goodbyes and Jeffrey got out of the car.

She watched Jeffrey go into the house and then she drove off.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Katie and Keith were quiet in the car on their way home from the visitation. Keith kept both hands on the steering wheel and his eyes focused on the road. Katie had her head rested on the passenger side window with her right hand touching her forehead.

"Where did we go wrong, Keith?" asked Katie.

Keith took the question in and thought about it for a moment. He remembered when he and Katie got married and how they dreamed of having children. It didn't matter to either of them what gender their children were, they just wanted to love on them and raise them the way their parents raised them; which was by disciplining them when they needed it and spending a lot of quality time with them. They vowed to not be like the parents they saw that let their children run amok and hardly spent time with them. It was their dream to watch Jeffrey and Dylan grow up to be upstanding Christian men. That dream had been shattered.

He answered, "I don't know, honey. I

thought we did our best with Dylan. That's all we could've done."

"I feel like such a terrible mother. I must not have loved him enough nor done the right things for him to join a cult."

"Don't do that to yourself."

"But it's how I feel."

"I know. I feel that way myself. God knows we did everything we could for Dylan. We showed him love, took care of him, and raised him in the church."

"You're right. I just feel so hurt, so betrayed knowing what he did. And I wish that Jeffrey would've come to us and told us about Dylan before it was too late."

"Me too, but it's not Jeffrey's fault about what happened."

"You're right. I'm not angry with him for what happened to Dylan and I hope he knows that. Jeffrey could've gotten hurt or killed too. I wish he hadn't been so secretive. I don't know what he was thinking."

Katie took her hand down from her forehead and sat up. She shifted in her seat to face Keith

and said, "Are you concerned about Jeffrey as much as I am? He's been acting so strange lately."

Keith nodded in agreement and briefly looked at Katie. He said, "Yes I am. I've definitely seen a change in him. I know that some of it has to do with Dylan, but I think that there's more."

"Like with the commandos being at the places he was at?"

"I don't know. It's possible. Although, he said that he wasn't at those places."

"Something's going on and I want to know what it is. Marie said that Jeffrey is at school, we should go talk to him now."

"No. He needs his space right now. We do need to talk to him, though. He's a good kid and I want to believe that he isn't mixed up in anything."

"You don't think he's in the cult do you?"

Keith shrugged. "I hope not," he said in a serious tone. "I do know this. If he keeps acting strange and he doesn't be straight with us, then we're gonna have to think of something to make him talk to us."

"You're right. I'm so afraid of losing him. I wish he'd come to us and tell us what's going on."

"Me too. All we can do is pray."

The two of them became silent again. They needed a break from talking about Dylan and Jeffrey. They were exhausted from planning Dylan's funeral and being at the funeral home all night. Their minds continued to race, trying to figure out what Jeffrey was hiding.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

After Marie went back to the funeral home and paid her respects to Katie and Keith, she ordered a pizza for Jeffrey when she got into her car. Then she called Jess as she pulled out onto the road.

“What’s up?” asked Jess.

“I’m going home to change clothes and then take a pizza to Jeffrey at school.”

“Why is he at school?” asked Jess in a surprised tone. Gary was in the passenger seat and could faintly hear Marie’s voice. He frowned at the fact that Jeffrey wasn’t at the funeral home. It saddened him that Jeffrey was being so hard on himself.

“I thought the visitation was tonight,” said Jess. “I’m on my way there now.”

“It is tonight,” answered Marie. “He couldn’t handle being there. He’s in bad shape right now and I’m afraid he’s gonna give up.”

Jess passed Marie’s car as she asked, “What do you think we should do?”

“Let’s round up the group, if we can, and go

over to the school and show Jeffrey that we're behind him."

Jess pulled into a driveway so she could turn the car around and head in the opposite direction. "Gary and I just passed you a second ago. We're turning around and heading over to your house if that's okay."

"That's fine. We'll ride over to the school together."

After Marie and Jess got off the phone with each other, they and Gary started calling everybody in the group.

It was twenty minutes later when Marie, Jess, and Gary pulled into the high school parking lot, discovering that the rest of the group had already arrived. They were standing beside James's car talking to one another. Marie parked the car and she climbed out of the car and greeted the group. Jess and Gary did the same.

The three of them approached the group and Marie said, "Thanks for meeting us here."

“You talked to Jeffrey earlier?” asked Brian.

Marie nodded. “He’s not doing so well. I think if we go talk to him and show him that we’re there for him then it might cheer him up.”

Shaina was leaning her back against James’s car. She stood up and said, “That’s a good idea, except we’re all freaked out of our minds too.”

“Which is all the more reason for us to stick together and support one another. I believe that we were meant to help Jeffrey.”

Cody furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I had this vivid dream last week where God spoke to me. He told me to be there for Jeffrey and that some dark times are ahead.”

James was stunned. “What? That is so bizarre. Were you on a cliff overlooking a grassy field where a bunch of soldiers came marching?”

He laughed at himself for sounding so silly. The others gasped. “Did y’all have the same dream too?”

Cody answered, “Yeah. I think all of y’all were in my dream. All of you were dressed in armor.”

Marie's heart fluttered. "Do you know what this means?" A moment passed before she continued. "It means that God has revealed our destiny!"

Silence fell over them. Marie's revelation excited her, giving her butterflies in her stomach. She felt honored that God had chosen her and her friends to fight alongside Jeffrey. The idea of going off to battle and brandishing a sword sounded exciting and romantic, but the blood and gore not so much. Her excitement slowly turned to dread when she realized that there would be more moments of near-death experiences to be had.

"We're warriors?" asked Jess, breaking the silence.

"Sounds like it," answered Cody. "Look at what we've been through so far. You can't deny any of it."

Silence fell over them once more until Ray said, "I'm havin' trouble computing all of this."

Shaina blew air out of her mouth heavily. "Oh man."

"There's no sense in trying to understand it all," offered Gary. "Maybe we aren't meant to

right now. We need to have faith that God will take care of us and keep moving forward.”

They all agreed. Marie said, “Let’s go.”

The group turned and started walking to A-Building.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Jeffrey was sitting at a computer in the journalism classroom working on one of his articles. There were six other students in the classroom working on their articles too. They were all being supervised by their teacher, Mr. Dommer.

Mr. Dommer had been informed about Dylan's death and was surprised to see Jeffrey at school. He got up from his desk, walked over to Jeffrey, and knelt down beside him. He warmly said, "Jeffrey, I greatly appreciate the effort you put into this school newspaper. Without you, the paper wouldn't be what it is today."

To Mr. Dommer, not only was Jeffrey a great student, but a huge asset to the school paper. Before Jeffrey became co-opinion editor, the student body hardly ever read the paper. After Jeffrey started writing commentaries on issues from a Christian point of view, the student body erupted in controversy and there were many letters sent to the editor.

Mr. Dommer continued. "Jeffrey, I hope you understand that you don't have to be here. I

can get someone else to take over until you're ready to come back."

Jeffrey looked at Mr. Dommer and said, "I'm fine. I need to do this."

Mr. Dommer stood up, lightly patted Jeffrey on the shoulder, and returned to his desk. Jeffrey continued working on his article, trying to block out all of his negative thoughts.

Marie walked into the doorway of the classroom and called Jeffrey's name. He turned to see her holding a pizza box and he smiled. He got up, walked over to her and took it, then placed it on the nearest desk and asked, "Aren't you coming in here with me?"

Marie had a stern look on her face when she answered, "I will in a minute. First, I need you to come out here with me."

Jeffrey was confused. He asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, trust me."

Jeffrey followed Marie out into the hall where Beth Ann, Brian, Ray, James, Cody, Shaina, Jess and Gary were standing. He looked at everyone and asked, "What are y'all doing here?"

Marie stood with the others while Jess explained. “We’re worried that you’re going to give up, so we wanted to come talk to you.”

Jeffrey sighed and said, “I’m just so tired. I can’t do what Lara asks of me. I can’t be the Protector.”

James stepped in and asserted, “You can do it, Jeffrey. You’ve got to have faith that you can handle it. God gave you the task and He’ll equip you with the necessary tools to accomplish it.”

James made a very good point, but he was afraid just like Jeffrey. Fear and doubt had entered his and the others minds, but they came together to encourage one another. They were all terrified and had witnessed things that they had never dreamed of. Yet, here they were taking a leap of faith in helping Jeffrey.

Marie said, “James is right, Jeffrey. God told me in a dream that I was meant to fight by your side.”

“That’s right. We all had that dream. All of us are meant to help you and we want to help you. You can’t give up. If you give up, then the bad guys win. The cult will only get bigger and

those creatures will still roam,” declared Gary.

Cody nodded and said, “And more people will die.”

Ray stepped forward to get closer to Jeffrey.

“Yeah,” he said. “Eddie is still out there,” he pointed out.

Jeffrey looked at the group and felt a sense of comfort. He saw a group of extraordinary people willing to stand against evil and fight. He thought for a moment and considered what everyone had said; “If I get Eddie and put him away then the cult will be over for good. And if I kill whatever those creatures are then our lives will go back to normal,” said Jeffrey in a pensive manner.

Marie responded, “Yeah. But first, you need to go be with your family, not here punishing yourself. Your parents need you.” Everyone in the group nodded their heads in agreement.

For a moment, Jeffrey was quiet. He knew Marie was right. Deep down, he knew his parents didn’t hate him, but the fear was still there. Jeffrey wanted to be with his parents, but he didn’t know if he could look them in the eye.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Lara sat at her desk in the library, thumbing through old occult books to find out the meaning of the symbol from the club. “I’ve got to find out what this means very soon,” thought Lara. She turned to a page in the book she was reading and found the symbol. She became excited and exclaimed to herself, “Yes!”

She read the page and discovered that the symbol was once an ancient rune called Wolfsangel, used to frighten away werewolves. The symbol was later adopted by devil worshippers after the discovery of werewolves. The Wolfsangel cult was thought to be disbanded in 483 A.D., but resurfaced in WWII. The cult found its way into Hitler’s group of guerilla fighters and their Wolfsangel symbol, as well as the name werewolf, were chosen to represent them. The guerilla fighters continued fighting the Allies when Germany’s Wehrmacht was defeated and the German territory was occupied.

A light bulb came on in Lara’s head after reading the information. She thought, *The*

werewolves have come out of hiding again! I have to go tell Jeffrey.

Lara rushed out of the library and into the lobby of A-Building. She started towards the stairs, but froze when she saw Eddie Farrar leading 10 commandos into the lobby. They spotted each other and Eddie gave her a chilling grin. He asked, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Lara answered with confidence, “Putting a stop to you.”

“That’s what you think.”

Eddie turned to one of his commandos and gave an order. “Handle her, Drake.”

Eddie and his commandos turned to leave and Lara started to raise her arms in preparation for an attack, but was overpowered by Drake’s speed. He charged Lara and threw his body into her like a locomotive. Lara went flying back into a panel of glass and landed in the courtyard. She laid on the ground unconscious, bleeding from multiple tiny cuts on her face and arms. Drake looked at her and grunted. Then, he ran and caught up with Eddie and the commandos.

“Thank y'all for coming to talk to me,” said Jeffrey to his friends. Knowing that he had support from all of his friends made him feel better, but the uneasy feeling he had before slowly crept its way back to him. It came without warning and he didn't understand why he felt the way he did.

Ray put his hand on Jeffrey's shoulder as a gesture of support. He could see the worry in Jeffrey's eyes and said, “It's gonna be all right. Go eatcha some pizza, man.”

Jeffrey looked to his left and saw Eddie and the commandos creeping down the hall. Eddie and his soldiers raised their TDI Kriss V submachine guns to fire at Jeffrey and his friends. He shouted for his friends to take cover before they were fired upon. Marie dropped the pizza box as she and the group ducked, scattering as they were being shot at. Bullets whizzed over their heads and shot into the cement walls. Chunks of cement exploded from the walls and sent debris all over the floor.

Jess and Marie scrambled into the journalism classroom and frantically shouted at the wide-eyed teacher and students, “Jump out the window! Quick!”

The girls sprang to the closest window and opened it. They jumped out, as well as a few other students and landed in the bushes below.

Mr. Dommer opened a window closest to him and rushed the remaining students out. He started to climb into the window and looked back. He saw a commando enter the room and take aim at him. Mr. Dommer jumped right when the commando opened fire.

He landed in the bushes below and Jess and Marie rushed over to help him up. Jess asked, “Are you hurt?”

Mr. Dommer shook his head and Marie urgently said, “Come on, let’s call the police.”

Jeffrey and Ray bolted into the girls’ restroom, which was the nearest, and hid in the stalls. They both hid in a stall of their own and stood on the toilet seats so their feet couldn’t be seen. Neither one of them moved and tried to stay as quiet as possible. Both of their hearts pounded so hard that they could feel and hear it in their ears.

“God,” prayed Jeffrey, “you gave me the ability to fight these people before. Please help me to do it again.”

He stepped off the toilet seat and Ray heard Jeffrey's shoes touch the floor.

"What are you doing?" whispered Ray.

Jeffrey didn't answer and grabbed hold of the toilet seat. He ripped it off the hinges as quickly as possible, hoping to not make too much noise.

Two pairs of footsteps entered the restroom. The sounds of the footsteps got closer and closer to the stalls. Jeffrey could see the black boots of one of the commandos under his door. He took in a deep breath and clutched the porcelain toilet tightly in one hand. With the other hand, he slung his stall door open and slammed it into the commando. The commando got knocked into the wall and Ray jumped out of his stall and pounced on the man. Jeffrey whacked the other commando's gun out of his hands with the toilet seat. The attacker whipped out his combat knife and lunged at Jeffrey, but received a tremendous upper cut from the toilet seat. The attacker's head snapped back and a loud crack sounded. The would-be assailant stumbled back against a sink and fell down.

Ray got punched to the ground by the commando and froze when the commando pointed

his gun at him. Jeffrey threw his toilet seat at Ray's attacker right before he squeezed the trigger. The toilet seat whirled through the air and smacked the attacker in the head with amazing force. The commando went to the ground and remained motionless.

Ray got to his feet and picked up the commando's machine gun and combat knife. Jeffrey found a smaller firearm with a silencer and whispered to Ray, "Get the smaller gun with the silencer so we can take them by surprise."

Ray put the machine gun down and slid the knife into his pocket. Then he searched the commando and found the firearm with the silencer. He took in a deep breath and said, "Let's do this."

Shaina, Beth Ann and Gary were hiding in the janitor's closet. They were scared out of their minds and Shaina felt responsible for what was happening. *I've caused Gary so much pain, she thought. Now his friends are hurting because I couldn't see what kind of man Eddie was.* If she

had known that the man she had been sleeping with was a psycho involved in a cult she would've done something about it. Especially, if she'd known that everyone's lives were going to be in danger.

Shaina turned to Gary and Beth Ann and quietly said, "I'm so sorry. I'm at fault for all of this. If I had known who Eddie really was--"

"This isn't your fault," interrupted Gary. "You didn't make Eddie do this."

"I do hold some blame, Gary," she asserted. "And most of all, I'm sorry for all of the pain I've caused you. God has opened my eyes and has shown me just how wrong I've been. Will you forgive me?"

Gary gave a tense, half smile that Shaina couldn't see for the dark. He found her hand and squeezed it. He assured her, "I forgive you."

Jeffrey peaked out of the door and looked to his right and didn't see any commandos. He looked to his left and saw three of them creeping down the hall towards the janitor's closet. He

motioned for Ray to follow him out of the restroom and then they crept out into the hall.

A commando was in the next restroom and he had just finished checking the stalls. He turned to walk out of the restroom and James fell through the ceiling tiles and landed on the floor. The commando was startled by the noise and whipped around. He immediately fired his machine gun and shot up the wall, sending debris all over James. Luckily for James, the commando didn't take the time to see him on the floor.

Jeffrey and Ray heard the gunfire and darted into the restroom. They gunned the commando down before he had the chance to shoot James.

At the same time, Shaina found a glass bottle on the cleaning cart in the janitor's closet. She poured some kind of liquid from another bottle into the glass bottle and stuffed a thin cleaning rag into it. Then she set the rag on fire with her lighter.

The flame from the rag lit up the closet and they were able to see each other now. Beth Ann had a concerned look on her face. She whispered, "What are you doing?"

"Making things right," replied Shaina.

Her body jittered and her hands became clammy. *I can't do this*, she thought. Then she reassured herself, *Yes you can. All you've thought about is yourself. Now it's time to stop being so selfish.*

Shaina's adrenaline pumped as she flung the door open and took the three commandos by surprise. Shaina threw the Molotov cocktail at the commando in the middle and all three of them erupted in flames. The commandos screamed in pain. One of them fell to the floor and another raised their gun to shoot. Shaina panicked and rushed them, pushing them directly into a classroom. She ignored the intense heat of the flames; this was something she had to. One of her hands felt a grenade on one of the commandos' belts and she pulled the pin out.

Beth Ann and Gary rushed out of the janitor's closet only to be knocked down by the force of an explosion from the classroom. The explosion from the one grenade Shaina pulled the pin from caused the other two commandos' grenades to blow up. Pieces of wood and cement sprayed all over Beth Ann and Gary.

Jeffrey, Ray and James ran out of the restroom to find Beth Ann and Gary. James asked, “What just happened?”

Gary was in shock.

“She did it,” he said. “I can’t believe she did it.”

Beth Ann rose to her feet and helped Gary to his feet.

“Shaina sacrificed herself,” explained Beth Ann.

The five of them hurried around the corner and scattered once more when they saw four commandos. The four commandos opened fire on them and Jeffrey and Ray dove into a classroom beside them. A bullet hit Ray in the upper leg and he screamed.

James jumped into another classroom and felt somebody grab his shoulder from behind. He spun around and saw that it was Cody. James whispered, “Are you okay?”

“I’ve been a lot better!” answered Cody.

Gary and Beth Ann ducked into the side stairwell and a stray bullet grazed the side of Beth Ann's left arm. She cried out and grabbed her wound. Gary grabbed onto her arm and started to urge her to move down the stairs, but stopped when he saw a commando enter the stairwell. He immediately lunged at the commando and forced him against the rail. Gary grabbed his machine gun and tried to pull it away. They struggled for a moment and Gary bit the combatant's hand, making him drop the gun down the stairwell. The combatant snatched his hand away and punched Gary in the face, knocking him to the ground. The man whipped out his combat knife and anticipated his next move.

Jeffrey and Ray hid in the back of the classroom behind some desks. Their adrenaline surged through their bodies. Ray's bullet wound was no longer an issue at the moment. He barely felt any pain.

Two commandos entered the classroom and

Jeffrey and Ray fired at them from behind their desks. One of the commandos got wounded in the arm, but still able to use his weapon. He and the other attacker sprayed bullets in Jeffrey and Ray's direction.

Sparks flew off the metal chairs and Jeffrey and Ray dove to a safer location in the room. The attackers stopped firing for a moment and Ray pulled out his combat knife. He quickly stood up and hurled the knife at one of the commandos. The knife twirled through the air and the blade of the knife sank into the commando's face. The commando dropped to the floor and the remaining commando started shooting again.

Ray ducked down and Jeremy tossed a desk at the shooter. The desk smacked the man and he dropped his gun. Jeffrey sprang to his feet and aimed his gun at the attacker. He squeezed the trigger and shot the commando in the head. The commando's head jerked back and then he fell down.

In the other classroom, James and Cody hid on either side of the door. James was armed with a yard stick and Cody with a long steel blade detached from a paper cutter. Together, they waited for the commandos to walk in. They stood with their backs against the wall and remained still.

The two commandos walked inside and were attacked from behind. James whacked the commando closest to him on the head with his stick. The stick snapped in half leaving a jagged edge and the man was pretty much unfazed.

Cody raised his steel blade like a sword and hacked the other commando in the back a few times with bloody results. The commando screamed in agony as the blade cut into his back and tried to spin around to face Cody. When he did turn around, Cody sliced him just below the neck and a stream of blood squirted from the wound. Cody tried to dodge the blood as the commando collapsed to the floor.

The commando James was fighting threw him to the floor and was about to shoot him. Cody blindsided the combatant and hacked the gun out of his hands with the steel blade. Then, Cody swung

the blade and sliced the man in the throat; the man made a disgusting gurgling sound and stumbled over some desks before falling to the floor. James looked at Cody with bewilderment and exclaimed, “Oh my God!”

Beth Ann and Gary continued to fight for their lives as well. Beth Ann jumped onto the commando’s back and dug her fingernails into the sides of the man’s face. The man groaned as Beth Ann’s fingernails ripped his skin and drew blood. He whipped the back of his head into Beth Ann’s face and she fell off and landed on her backside.

Gary ran up to the commando and threw his knee into his crotch. The commando doubled over, but remained strong. Beth Ann went to kick him in the face and he slung her down the first set of steps. She tumbled down the steps and hit her head at the bottom, knocking her unconscious.

The combatant was taken by surprise when Gary threw his body into the combatant’s back. They both tumbled down the steps and landed

beside Beth Ann. Battered and bruised, they both rose to their feet at about the same time. Gary was a little slower and the commando saw the perfect opportunity to stab Gary in the thigh. The blade dug into Gary's flesh and scraped against bone. The pain caused him to buckle, but he fought to keep standing. Tears welled up in his eyes as he threw a right hook into the commando's head. The commando was stunned only for a moment and attacked once more.

While fighting, Gary realized that his keys were hanging out of his pocket. He thought to himself, *Those could come in handy.*

He snatched his keys out of his pocket and jabbed the ignition key into the commando's left eye. The commando screamed and tried to counter attack Gary's move, but Gary fought with all of the strength he had. He pushed the commando against the rail and ripped the knife out of his thigh. Gary raised the knife above his head and sank the blade deep into the commando's chest. Then he pushed him over the rail and the commando fell down the stairwell, making a loud thud when he landed.

Gary felt the warm blood escape from his

wound. His adrenaline had subsided and he could no longer stand. He collapsed to the floor and his limbs suddenly felt sore from tumbling down the steps. A throbbing pain radiated from his wound and staying still helped it to not hurt so bad.

Jeffrey put his head under Ray's arm to support him. "Come on Let's get out of here."

"You should leave me in here," argued Ray. "There's more out there."

Suddenly, Jeffrey heard Eddie's voice out in the hallway. "Come on out here, Jeffrey. This has gone on long enough!" Jeffrey sat Ray down on a desk and walked out into the hallway. Eddie stood in front of a commando that held Brian at gunpoint.

Brian had a bloody nose and a busted lip. His eyes were black and blue. His left eye was almost swollen shut and his shirt was torn. "Let Brian go," demanded Jeffrey, "If you're going to kill anyone then kill me."

Eddie nodded his head and motioned for the

commando to release Brian.

The commando shoved Brian to the side and he limped away from them. James and Cody stood in the doorway of the classroom and motioned for him to come over. He limped over to them and together they watched the action take place in the hall.

“As much as I’d like to kill you,” explained Eddie, “I can’t because Kelax needs you for something.”

Jeffrey asked, “Why?”

Eddie ignored Jeffrey’s question and continued, “Which really pisses me off because you’ve really screwed things up, sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. I really wanted to fool you guys into thinking that our plans had been foiled and catch you off guard. Now I’m gonna rough you up before I take you away.”

The very sight of Eddie made Jeffrey’s blood boil once more. All he could think about was Eddie killing Dylan and how he was about to get his revenge. He declared, “I’m not just gonna rough you up, I’m going to kill you!”

Eddie tossed his gun onto the floor and

grinned. “Let’s dance!”

Something inside Jeffrey snapped. The rage he felt before was reborn and it felt good. He chucked his gun aside and charged Eddie. He slammed him to the floor and Jeffrey pounded his face with his fists. It felt therapeutic to Jeffrey to exert all of his pent up anger on Eddie. The sensation of feeling Eddie’s facial bones breaking underneath his fists was amazing to him. Every punch was for the hurt that Eddie put him and his friends through. Jeffrey wanted him to feel as much pain as he did. If Eddie didn’t die from the crushing blows, then Jeffrey hoped that he would have severe brain damage.

The therapy ended when Eddie overpowered Jeffrey with surprising strength. He grabbed Jeffrey’s arms and looked at him square in the eyes while laughing. His skull mended and the swelling in his face went down. Jeffrey’s eyes widened in amazement.

“Feels good doesn’t it,” asked Eddie, “giving in to all that rage inside? You can have so much pleasure letting it run wild with you.”

“Oh, I am,” said Jeffrey through gritted teeth.

Eddie kicked Jeffrey off and into the lockers.
“Your fun time’s over!”

Then he stood up and grabbed Jeffrey and slung him to the floor.

A commando ran up and kicked Jeffrey in the ribs and made him roll over a couple of times. Somehow, Jeffrey mustered the strength to get to his feet and was ready to fight some more. The commando charged and Jeffrey dodged him. He kicked the commando into the lockers and then pounced on Eddie. Jeffrey kneed Eddie in the stomach and then punched him in the face. Eddie stumbled back into the lockers and then attacked Jeffrey once more. He grabbed Jeffrey by the throat and lifted him up high off the floor.

“How are you so strong?” asked Jeffrey in bewilderment.

Eddie tossed Jeffrey like a rag doll a good length down the hall. Jeffrey landed on the hard floor and tumbled. He struggled for a moment to get up.

James grasped the handle of his steel blade tightly and attacked the commando. The combatant knocked the blade out of James’ hand.

Then, he hit James with his arm, using it like a baseball bat. James flew back into the lockers, bounced off, and fell onto the floor. He lie on the floor and groaned in pain, barely able to move.

Eddie and the commando looked at Jeffrey and let out an inhuman roar. The sound sent chills down his spine and he realized at that moment that he was going to die.

Jeffrey's two enemies started to grow larger and taller. Dark brown hair sprouted all over their muscular bodies as their clothes ripped off. The bones in their legs slightly rearranged and the sound of them popping could be heard. Their faces became wolf-like and they stood almost 10 feet tall. Jeffrey stood frozen in fear and muttered, "They're werewolves!"

The werewolves got on all fours and started running towards Jeffrey. He screamed and turned to run away, tripped on his feet, and fell. Jeffrey looked up and saw Lara standing over him. He watched her form silver spikes out of thin air and shoot them at the werewolves. The spikes sank deeply into the werewolves' chests and pierced their hearts. They burst into black and white flames and

then disappeared.

Jeffrey got up and looked at Lara with questioning eyes. "How did you do that?" he asked.

"Not only did God send me to guide you," she explained, "He gave me powers to help you when you needed it."

James rose to his feet and joined Ray, Cody and Brian as they hobbled over to Jeffrey and Lara. Beth Ann rushed out of the stairwell as best she could in her battered state. She was sobbing and Lara rushed over to her. She asked, "Are you all right?"

"No," frantically answered Beth Ann. "Gary's in the stairwell and he's been shot in the head. He's not gonna make it."

Tears welled up in Jeffrey's eyes and he said, "No." He couldn't lose someone else. He ran into the stairwell with Lara and the others behind him. They found Gary lying on his back at the bottom of the first set of steps.

Jeffrey gasped when he saw Gary on the floor convulsing off and on. He had been shot execution style and there was a pool of blood under

his head.

Gary tried to form words with his mouth and made awkward sounds with his mouth. Jeffrey knelt down beside Gary and cried, "I'm so sorry, Gary. I didn't want any of this to happen."

Gary's convulsions grew stronger and he groaned. He tried once more to speak and Jeffrey listened, but none of it made sense. Finally, the convulsions stopped and Gary became still after he exhaled his last breath.

Jeffrey stood up and wiped away his tears. He saw Lara and the others crying too. He balled up his fists and clenched his teeth. He declared, "I'm gonna put an end to this chaos, even if it kills me. I can't lose anybody else."

Suddenly, a S.W.A.T. team rushed up the stairs. Two S.W.A.T. team members escorted Jeffrey and the rest of the group outside to two ambulances where Jess and Marie were waiting. The paramedics took Ray, James, Cody and Brian aside to treat their wounds.

Jeffrey walked past the paramedics and went to speak to Jess and Marie. The girls hugged Jeffrey and Jess asked, "Where's Gary and Shaina?"

“Are they okay?” asked Marie.

The girls pulled away and waited for Jeffrey to answer their questions.

He looked down at the ground and quietly answered, “They didn’t make it.”

Jess and Marie both broke down into tears. Marie hugged Jeffrey and cried, “Oh, Jeffrey! I want this to be over.”

She was stunned and didn’t know what else to say. Jeffrey held Marie tightly and sighed. “I want it to be over too. It’s far from it, though... far from it.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

EPILOGUE

It was Wednesday, two days before Eddie attacked Jeffrey and his friends at school. Bree arrived in Harrogate, Tennessee late in the afternoon with her uncle, Joe Turner. She followed him in her car. They pulled into the driveway of a two-story brown house with dark green shutters. They parked in front and climbed out of their cars. Bree's sprained ankle was still sore, but showing signs of improvement.

Uncle Joe looked at Bree and smiled. He tried his best to make her feel better and cheerfully said, "We're here. Home, sweet home!"

She gave him a forced smile. "Yeah."

That's all she could say. That one word that sounded so insincere. She was grateful that Joe and Rebecca were taking her in, but she wished that she could be back in South Carolina with all of her friends. Instead, she was miles away from home, forced to start her life over and make new ones. *I never knew that I could feel this miserable*, she thought. Part of her wished that that creature had killed her too that night. She felt guilty that she

survived. There were times that she told herself that she was a coward for running, leaving her father behind. She never would've guessed that she would lose her family in such tragic ways.

Bree and Joe unloaded a few bags of clothes and accessories. Rebecca, Bree's aunt, opened the front door to let them inside. Bree came in behind Joe and put her stuff down. Rebecca opened her arms up to Bree and gave her a warm hug. She smelled the soft scent of Rebecca's perfume; it reminded her of the perfume that her mother wore. Rebecca said, "Oh, honey, I'm so glad to see you. I'm sorry about what's happened."

They pulled away from each other and Bree nodded. "Me too."

She started to say something else but decided to let the subject go. Instead, she observed the spacious living room and its décor. It reminded her a little bit of her living room back home, but this was much nicer.

"Y'all have such a nice home. It's much bigger than I remember," commented Bree.

"Thank you," said Joe. "We always wanted a big house so there would be plenty of room for

family and friends to come visit. I think you were just a little thing when you came for a visit.”

Bree cracked a smile at his comment. He put the luggage down and said, “I’ll go get the rest of your things.

“Come with me, Bree,” said Rebecca. “I’ll show you where your room is.”

They picked up their luggage and Rebecca led her upstairs. Bree passed by Rebecca and Joe’s room to the right and could smell more of the perfume that Rebecca had sprayed on earlier that morning. She also felt an air of security that came from that room. It was a lot like the feeling that she got from her parents’ room when they were both still alive. *Strange*, she thought. *I wish that I was at home with Craig and my parents and that everything was just fine.*

If she could make her wish, close her eyes, click the heels of her shoes together, and wake up in a better time in her life then she would do it in a heartbeat. She knew not to kid herself because she was going to be staying her a long time.

Rebecca led Bree into the first room on the left and said, “This was Stacy’s room. I figured

this room would suit you best.”

“Thank you. I remember that she joined the Peace Corps. How is she?”

“She’s doing well,” she said with a proud smile as she sat the luggage down on the floor. “She’s been in Uganda for about a year now. Last I heard, a missionary in one of the villages that she’s working at has got a crush on her. His name is Patrick Augustine. He’s from London.”

“He must be very charming,” said Bree managing to smile.

“Yes. I think you’re right.”

Rebecca patted Bree on the shoulder. “I’ll let you get situated.”

She walked out the door and Bree called after her. She stopped and faced her.

“Thank you for taking me in,” said Bree.

“You’re welcome, honey.”

Rebecca turned and walked away. Bree put her luggage down and observed her new room. The room was spacious and, to her surprise, it had a bathroom. The walls were simply white. The bed was king sized. It had a lavender comforter with throw pillows that were a darker shade.

There were two dressers, one with a vanity that looked brand new, except for a few accidental scratches. She felt reassured that she could store all of her clothes in them. The room also contained a desk where she could do her school work.

She lie down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. She pulled in a deep breath and held for a moment before releasing it. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing living in Tennessee. She would learn to like living there.

Saturday, three days later...

Hendrix found out that the ballistics reports from the forensics lab showed that none of the bullets from the commandos' guns matched the one that killed Gary. The bullet that killed Gary belonged to a very small pocket-sized gun that had just enough firepower for a bullet to penetrate Gary's skull and get lodged in his brain.

Hendrix and a few other police officers decided to go back to Northwestern. They went to the stairwell that Gary was killed in and looked for

the gun.

School would open on Wednesday the following week so everyone could grieve over the tragic event that had taken place. Major repairs would have to be made to the broken window in the lobby and all of the bullet holes in the wall. The classroom that had been blown up would be a huge undertaking; a very costly one at that.

They searched all around in the stairwell and couldn't find the gun. Hendrix saw a trash can at the top of the stairs and climbed up to it. He took the lid off of the trash can and sifted through the garbage. His fingers searched until he could feel cold steel through his gloves. Hendrix grabbed the gun and pulled it out of the trash can. There was a silencer on the gun, which explained how no one heard the shot. He called out to his comrades. "I found it!"

Later, Hendrix called Lara and told her about his discovery. Lara said, "Gary was trying to say something right before he died. I strongly believe that he was trying to say the word 'mole,' which confirms my suspicion that there is a mole in our group. We're just gonna have to figure out who it

is.”

Hendrix responded, “Yeah. It doesn’t help that there’s no prints on the gun.”

That afternoon, Dylan's funeral was held at Jeffrey's church- Tirzah ARP. The sanctuary was filled with family and friends. His parents sat on his left side, his mother right next to him, and Marie sat on his right side. During the service, Jeffrey felt like people were staring at him...judging him. Perhaps he was just paranoid and was imagining that people’s eyes were burning into him. He wondered if everybody knew that he was with Dylan when Dylan was killed. Some people had to have known.

He felt anxious; uneasy. Shifting in his place on the pew, he couldn’t get comfortable. A lump rose in his throat and he wanted to run away. Marie noticed him fidgeting and touched his hand. He looked at her and she offered him a warm smile. She mouthed to him, “It’s gonna be okay.”

Katie started weeping and she dabbed her eyes with a tissue. Jeffrey noticed her crying and hung his head in shame. He caused his family so much pain. He couldn’t stand seeing his mother

and father so torn up. He had to leave.

Jeffrey began to get up and Marie looked at him with a confused expression. Katie gently grabbed his left hand and he sat back down. He looked at her and she whispered, “Don’t leave me, honey. I love you.”

He nodded and gently squeezed her hand.

**JEFFREY ALLAN
WILL RETURN IN

GOD'S
CHOSEN:
BECOMING

EARLY 2012**