

# THE LINEAGE



Gabrielle Faust



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*“The devil never tells the truth, does he? If he told the truth no body would visit Hell, or sign one of his contracts. In other words, the worst thing that anybody can do when dealing with demonic forces is believe a syllable of what they are being told.”*

— *Clive Barker*



## WHAT THE PRESS IS SAYING ABOUT GABRIELLE FAUST



“Faust writes with a simplicity that betrays the fact that she’s a seasoned artist and accomplished author. Also, Faust’s artistic inclinations enter the book every time she uses words to vividly paint a landscape. Max Ernst, Edvard Munch and H.R. Geiger are all mentioned in the book and Faust’s writing is at times reminiscent of each artist’s work.”

— Gabino Iglesias, *The Austin Post*

“Faust writes beautifully, with a seasoned artist’s touch and a flair for the dramatic. Her descriptions dance across the page in a flow that feels both elegant and brutal.”

— *Paperback Horror*

“Gabrielle Faust is a fascinating new voice emerging from the nightmare of sound-alike authors. She is a writer to watch.”

— Del Howison, Bram Stoker Award winner

“For those that crave vampire fiction with a dark soul, Gabrielle Faust delivers on all levels.”

— *Scars Magazine*

“With prose the texture of deep velvet, Faust draws us down to the depths of a story as old as fear, as dark as sin, and as deep as Satan’s heart. The lines between friend and foe are re-drawn. She captures desperate obsession and hunger, outlining each with the passion for existence that burns in all beings.”

— *Fantasy Book Spot*





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



After a long time of darkness, this book is finally seeing the light of day. Which, for some may seem odd seeing as how it is a vampire story. It would not have been possible without the love and support of my friends and family who never gave up on me even when my own dealings with devils threatened to consume me. I began to list out individually those who directly impacted my life over the past couple of years and are the reason I am still writing, but that list quickly began to take on the space of several pages. You know who you are and there are no words that could ever truly do justice to the immense gratitude I feel towards you all. From the Bouldinshire Angels to Neko's Dragon's Den to all of the vampires, witches and otherkin who surround me with their strength and love, I count my blessings each night knowing you are in my life. Thank you.

XOV""VOX

Gabrielle Faust





## CHAPTER 1



The silver Airstream trailer smelled of rotting flesh. Even the unmerciful winter wind howling through the open back window could not cleanse the stench that had embedded itself deep within the fibers of the vehicle, the scuffed lacquered wood, scarred aluminum and ragged fabric, like a boring beetle. They had disposed of the corpses of the two teenagers they had picked up along the Michigan border nearly a day before, burying them in a bank of snow far away within the woods, so deep that it would take until early spring to find them, if the wild things did not whittle them down before the first blooms emerged. However, it had not been before the preliminary signs of decay had begun to manifest in the bodies, rigor mortis stiffening their limbs, their bellies bloated and skin sallow.

It was a lilted prose, a marred poetry that needled with brimstone bitterness at the edges of reality. Yet, silence prevailed, an oppressive quiet, the kind born of resignation and betrayal for all knew there was only one among them

who kept them in such destitution, such squalor. Neil, whose love affair with heroin continued well into his new life, had an obsessive fascination with the dead. He would mumble of mummification practices and ancient rites to honor the deceased as he treated their expired victims like precious dolls, showing them a respect and mercy in complete contradiction to the torture he had inflicted upon them in life. The others endured Neil's behavior with silent sideways disgust. It was easier than trying to reattach one's limbs to their bodies.

Methodically, in their psychotic and haphazard way, they had covered their tracks, stumbling back into the trailer and the pickup that towed it, five grim, haggard vagabonds pale as the moonlight reflecting off of the snow-covered bows of the pines above. Eyes glowing with jaguar phosphorescence they hissed and growled at one another with the familial feral distaste of those thrown together in violence. Tristan watched the others clamber through the open metal door as he stood in the snow. An image of a deer running through the forest raced through his mind, its hooves puncturing the shimmering pristine new powder, its heart thundering against its ribs as white plumes of breath exploded from its flaring nostrils. He moved his toes within his duct-tape-mended boots, his calf muscles twitching. Swallowing hard he cast a glance down the road the way they had come, tracing the swerving curves of their tracks like a frozen river. The needling sensation of being stalked soured in the pit of his stomach. The road was empty and dark.

Would it always be this way? Though he fought to keep the white noise of apathy from electrocuting what was left of his humanity, such thoughts still struck hard and cold against his psyche from time to time like hail against a tin roof. The depth of the quicksand was unknowable, the

## *The Lineage*

cold murk rising a little higher with each futile resistance, pressing down on his chest until he could not breathe. Silent and still he remained, a shade of his former person, existing without existence, living without life, an inscrutable observer unmoved by the inarticulate madness that danced the same sad dance each night like a derelict dollar theater. Broken and disjointed, together they were hollow marionettes whose collective conscience had been dislocated and left to dangle at awkward, painful angles.

This was not the life he had envisioned, nor the one promised by Dorian, the pack leader. No coffers of gold secreted away from mortal detection. No glamorous jet-setting brimming with exotic experiences had by those that apologies no longer held hostage at knifepoint. This world of theirs, now his for over twenty years, was tragic and harsh, a hemorrhaging bruise of madness that was utterly inescapable. To be lifted out of the gutters of his mortal existence and tossed into the mouth of Hell seemed a cruel fate even for an undesirable such as Tristan whose contribution to the world since his transformation had been the murder of his abusive father, a series of epic bank robberies even Billy the Kid would have been proud of, and hundreds of innocent lives drained away in unspeakable ways he had not ever thought himself capable of.

He no longer felt in control of his own life, following blindly without even a ghost of hope for the evil he had stood witness to, though it was through his own eyes he watched himself perpetrate actions that surpassed the mere term of “crime.” Then and again, his human life was a wasted two decades of jaded malaise in which control was something he, again, had left to those around him—friends, employers, faculty, family. Whatever had fueled him as a human had been incinerated, the gray ash blowing away in the cold wind of

realization that this state of being was permanent, eternal—he only understood now that one’s mortal darkness was sealed within their bodies upon the moment of transformation.

He could not tell if Dorian, Neil, or Diana desired to change, to be anything other than these entities of twisted merciless carnage. They were content to covet the madness, worshiping at the feet of their predatory instincts until little of their human nature remained. Tristan wondered if one day they would become so feral that they might take to all fours, disappearing into the woods like wolves to hunt each other as much as the warm-blooded mammals they pursued? In a way he looked forward to such a time when the last of his humanity faded for only then could he perhaps be at peace with what he had become.

Tristan was uncertain where they were headed. Dorian rarely revealed his plans, remaining secretive as if he feared a betrayal by his own blood-kin if their final destination was made public knowledge. It might have been a residual echo of his own internal paranoia, but Tristan swore Dorian’s manic suspicion of the world had been increasing steadily over the course of the past week. Ever since they left New York City after a particularly violent slaughter of three punks in the alley behind a Brooklyn club, they had all been shaken to their blackened cores. The incident, which none within the remaining tribe could yet speak aloud of, had cost them the life of their youngest, a tragic waif of a teenage girl that had gone by the name of Blind Mouse. The image of her eviscerated corpse crucified over the exit sign was permanently branded into Tristan’s gore-streaked mind. There was nothing he could think or do to scour clean the residue of that memory that burned like acid through the layers of his remaining sanity.

It had been a hunting trip that began like any of the

## *The Lineage*

countless others as they identified an establishment where their psychotic gutterpunk appearance, cultivated to disguise the preternatural glow of their snow-white skin and give them an air of forgettable wasted youth, would not be scrutinized. A place where the years of cigarette smoke coated the walls of graffiti and ancient photocopied band fliers like an acrid lacquer that seeped through your clothes and into your skin if you leaned against it too long. A dive where the locals roosted like starving, diseased carrion vultures waiting to pick one another off in the red haze of directionless aggression and counterculture boredom.

The doorman had never even noticed their entrance, slipping past him in a blur of patchwork apparel and piercings to slither about the perimeter of the tiny club to the sideways glances of the regulars marking the sudden unwanted appearance of fresh meat. In silence they had singled out three rough-riden souls already on the brink of self-destruction, Neil making sure to note the heroin tracks on one girl's arms to his utter delight for the orgasmic indulgence of feeding would be far more intense for him if she were high. With a single collective subconscious suggestion their trio of prey uprooted themselves from their barstools with expressions of curiosity to follow the vagabond strangers out into the sinister shadows of the alley.

Upon hindsight Tristan was sure he had been the only one to notice the fourth figure, a mere shadow separating from between two of the other bar patrons like a billowing plume of toxic smoke from an oil fire. He remembered now the twinge of unexplainable anxiety that had flooded his body, adrenaline electrocuting his nervous system as if he had been doused from head to toe in ice water. But he had shaken it off, convinced it was merely another sign of his degenerating ability to separate reality from hallucination for

so much of his own reality surpassed the human definition of surreal to the point of nightmare.

The sound of his duct tape-wrapped combat boots striking the black asphalt, oil slicks of refuse and runoff glistening in the slanted dull orange light of a distant streetlamp, echoed as the hollow metal click of the door closing behind him launched the alleyway into instantaneous anarchy. The sight of his tribe leaping towards their victims like lions upon hapless fawn cast a red haze over the world like a black and white noir film colorized brutally by the hand of a whiskey-drunk painter. His instinct grabbed hold of his resistance, throttling it until it fell unconscious, sinking down deep into the bruised shadows of his soul. He joined the fray, but not before taking note of the shadow he had seen within the bar slip past him with an arctic breeze to expand, as if evaporating, within the center of them all.

Tristan struggled to recount the next few moments, his only memories that of the taste of salty skin and blood as he ripped into the jugular of the man nearest to him, clutching him by the nape of the neck so tightly that he could hear the vertabrae splinter and pop, the man's right wrist snapping as he fought. The instance of pure unadulterated carnal bliss erupted into chaos as the splitting screams of his tribe ripped him from his prey. Dazed and drunk he lifted his head to see their eyes cast upwards to where Blind Mouse hung.

Her execution had been silent—there had been no warning of the attack and no sound at the moment she had been thrown up against the wall and crucified with barbed wire. The sight of her massacred belly, a vacuous black cavern exposing her spine without a trace of entrails bespoke a force greater than the sum total of anything they had encountered. Staggering backwards, their eyes wide with pure horror, they had broken into a run before the full impact of their

## *The Lineage*

fallen comrade could be processed. They knew all too well that their unearthly shrieks would quickly gather unwanted attention from those closest to the exit.

Blood-smearred and catatonic they had thrown themselves into the trailer and truck parked beneath the Washington Bridge and peeled out of town. From the City they headed southwest through Pennsylvania into Ohio before steering north again towards Michigan. Neil gibbered to himself of Death coming to claim them, to harvest them as they had done so many before. He ranted for hours, his face pressed against the back window as the residual heroin from his victim's veins raced through his until Tristan had finally struck him hard across the base of his skull in hopes of sending him into unconsciousness. The opposite ensued as Neil turned on Tristan with a crazed blindness eager to direct his delirious terror upon anyone besides his own mind. Like two starved hyenas they had tackled one another, tossing each other into the walls of the silver trailer with such a force that, fifty miles outside of town Dorian was forced to pull over and pry the two apart before either could rip a vital organ from one another's chests. With iron fists of relentless rage Dorian had subdued Tristan and Neil until they both crawled on their bellies back to the trailer, blood seeping from their broken jaws into the freshly fallen snow on the shoulder of the old country road. Their bodies would heal and quickly from the fresh blood, but only to seal in the newly spawned demons.

As he watched the two young vampires struggling to haul themselves upright Dorian had growled down at them that they would not speak of the happenings of that night ever again. There was terror beneath his anger, as if the mere mental replaying of the night might summon forth whatever creature had eviscerated Blind Mouse. All the while, Diana sat in the cab of the pickup, staring blankly ahead, her mouth

slightly agape, her eyes seeing nothing but the black of night.

Now, Tristan curled up in the back corner of the Airstream on the bed of assorted quilts and comforters stolen from a small town department store. The year previous, a strange desire for “creature comforts” had motivated them to rifle for odds and ends such as soft bedding, books and a few strands of multicolored Christmas lights, which Neil had put to use on a victim or two. Tristan wondered if the others had blocked Blind Mouse’s death out of their minds completely. It was impossible to tell with Neil for he was always one shade darker than crazy, while Dorian and Diana were surrounded by walls of impenetrable slate steel through which Tristan could sense nothing of their internal states. In a time when he felt they needed to band together more closely than ever, they were greater strangers to one another than ever before. The loneliness was overwhelming, the hissing of the tires through the snow along the dark forest road lending more comfort than any of his brooding blood-kin would extend.

He dared not voice the worrisome whine that bored into the base of his skull like a drill bit. They had not left New York without a trail, tracers of energy dark forces could taste with forked tongues like the exhaust of electrified pheromones. From time to time he unfurled himself, pulling his arms out from under the quilt to push aside the small, heavy curtain over the back window. The battery-operated Christmas lights strung around the edge of the ceiling above the window created a colorful euphoric distortion about the portal of metal and glass causing the winter night to appear like a child’s snow globe.

A fresh drift had begun, small white flakes floating sideways in the wind to cover the frozen black earth beneath their freshly plowed tracks. He wanted to be free, to turn

## *The Lineage*

feral and take to the forest after the deer he had sensed a few miles back, even if it were actually he who was truly the hunted.

## CHAPTER 2



The truck sputtered into the Shell station just after midnight. They coasted the remaining yards of oil-stained asphalt towards the beacon of flickering neon light that glowed like the sun against the freezing black night. As they came to a halt next to the gas pump on the edge of the station nearest the highway, Tristan opened the trailer door and eagerly leapt out in his desperation for fresh air and a moment of silence. For the past twenty miles Neil had begun to mumble to himself, or perhaps to Tristan in a skewed way that neither wanted nor expected response, about Blind Mouse's crucifixion. Rubbing his arms as if to ward off the chill, Neil rocked agitatedly back and forth, his eyes wide and unblinking as if in the beginning stages of a detox. His lips wove a warped wyrding of gristle from his memories painting the picture all too vividly again and again while he fetched for the faintest of justifications and explanations.

It was obvious to Tristan that seeing their kin eviscerated was gnawing away at the edges of Neil's remaining sanity.

## *The Lineage*

He didn't want to know what would happen if Neil finally slipped over the edge into the oblivion he fought against night after night, a brutal battle the likes of which was mastered by demons Tristan dared not even begin to envision. His own internal nightmare was enough for him to embrace, his soul sliced to ribbons so many times that they fluttered in the hot winds of his apathy until it became a desert he no longer desired to cross.

Tristan left the door ajar expecting Neil to follow suit, but he remained inside the trailer. Tristan walked towards the front of the battered old blue Ford pickup, the sound of Neil's voice carried away by the snow-flecked wind and the whoosh of gas pouring into the gas tank. The pungent chemical scent tainted the night air, the sound of the engine popping and creaking as it cooled suddenly in the frost mournful as if it begged to be released from its indentured servitude.

Diana had crawled out of the cab of the truck and stood leaning against the rusting silver deer grill bolted to the front of the vehicle. Her long brown hair whipped about her gaunt face investigating the multiple silver piercings through her right eyebrow, nose and bottom lip. Dark blue circles smudged beneath her hard brown eyes, glassine and cold in the harsh artificial light. Shadows to seem to run and hide from the physical world that sought to create them. She pulled her thick green army jacket tighter over her tall thin frame as if to fend off the cold. Between her index and forefinger she lifted a lit cigarette to her lips repeatedly.

"You know you shouldn't smoke that near the gas pumps. We could all be blown to shit," Tristan growled as he passed her.

"That would probably be a good thing," Diana replied in a flatline of emotion.

Without further comment, he rounded the front end of

the truck where he spied Dorian leaning up against the bed watching the digital numbers on the pump click over in rapid fire succession. He did not look away as Tristan approached, his icy blue stare miles away from the gas station. Dorian was an imposing figure—tall and sinewy like a jungle cat, a creature that seemed born and bred for a life amongst the undead. His jet black hair fell from beneath his dirty black cowboy hat nearly to his waist, woven into neat narrow dreads decorated with various charms found along his travels. A thin line of closely trimmed black beard edged down the bottom of his jaw to meet a short, braided goatee. It was nearly impossible now to tell how old Dorian had been when he had been turned, though Tristan gauged beneath the preternatural perfection of his skin he had been in his late thirties by the lines around his eyes even the Blood could not fully erase.

“We need to talk about Blind Mouse,” Tristan said quietly, not wanting to draw the attention of Neil or Diana just yet.

“What is there to talk about? She’s dead.” Dorian kept his gaze trained on the gas pump.

“Yes. But how she died?” Tristan’s voice trailed off as his words were consumed by his dwindling courage. “What if whatever killed her is still out there?”

The pump clicked loudly and shut off as the gas tank reached maximum capacity. Dorian dislodged the nozzle and replaced it in its holster before turning to face Tristan. Staring down at the young vampire, his voice was dangerously calm. “It is. And there’s nothing any amount of ‘talking’ about it can do to change that. We have to keep moving.” Dorian stepped around Tristan as he headed towards the filling station.

A flood of panic filled Tristan compelling him to chase

## *The Lineage*

after Dorian. “Then we need to figure out how to stay away from it so it doesn’t happen again. And...Neil...”

Dorian halted a few feet from the front entrance. Tristan nearly collided with his leader as he skidded to a stop. “We stay away from it by never going back to New York City. Neil is a crazy motherfucker and always has been.” Dorian drew a sharp breath as he cast an almost spiteful glance at the trailer, which Neil had still failed to emerge from. “It’s a pity. We’ll have to do something about that eventually,” he mumbled to himself. His eyes returned to Tristan, pinning him to the asphalt. “He’s beyond talking to. You of all people should know that by now.”

Dorian turned back towards the convenience store, flinging the door dramatically open as he stormed inside. There was no point in attempting to disguise oneself in such a garishly lit establishment knowing all too well how many digital eyes were trained on them from all angles. There were few moral codes amongst the tribe when it came to the sanctity of human life. However, their savage butchery was to never be caught on film. Tristan bowed his head, pulling the collar of his dirty black leather jacket, studded with tarnished silver embellishments like armor along the shoulders and lapels, up to partially shield his features. With a quick backwards glance towards the truck and trailer he followed Dorian into the hellish white illumination of the tiny store.

He kept his gaze trained on a point just between Dorian’s shoulder blades, refusing to shoot a sharp feral glare towards the middle-aged woman with badly dyed red hair sizing them up behind the counter. He knew better than to challenge locals whose lives revolved around the dark desire to see outsiders persecuted if for no other reason than to tame their personal boredom.

Over the stale, repugnant aroma of expired cheese snacks, candy and dirty mop water mixed with bleach, the woman's dime-store perfume wafted like smoke from a refinery. The sour notes of commercial formaldehyde caused Tristan's stomach to turn. Despite the rough clothing they donned, their bodies no longer emitted odors that caused them to douse themselves in oils or perfumes to disguise mortal decay. Their sense of smell was too acute to endure most cultivated commercial human scents; mortal sensory perception was a dull stone compared to their preternatural predatory abilities. He swallowed bile, lifting his arm to press the back of his hand instinctually against his nose as he regretted following Dorian.

"What are we doing in here?" Tristan asked quietly knowing Dorian had no intention of actually paying for the gas.

Dorian wandered to the small automotive section where he grabbed a set of wiper blades, a gallon of antifreeze, three bottles of motor oil and a couple of cans of Fix-a-Flat. "Supplies," he muttered. "That damned truck is going to give up the ghost soon, I'm afraid. We're going to have find a trade in the next big town we come to."

By "trade" Tristan knew Dorian meant "steal." He looked around the store, his hand dropping away from his face as he surveyed the aisles for possible items of use. There was little he cared for—the standard small town filling station trinkets: cozies, gimme-caps, lighters, junk food and beer. He fished a couple of lighters, one decorated with a panther tattoo design and the other in green camo, out of a plastic rack next to the potato chips. Lighters seemed to always come in handy when you least expected it.

Making his way up to the front of the store Dorian dropped the items on the counter before the clerk. "Bag

## *The Lineage*

this stuff up darlin', would ya?" He glanced at her nametag, "Gladis?" Dorian smiled as he leaned on the counter and played to her small town expectations of male chauvinism. "Mighty quiet night tonight, eh?"

She eyed him suspiciously for a moment, unsure whether to trust her gut instinct to hit the silent alarm button even though neither he, nor Tristan had shown any evidence of violent intent. Tristan stood just behind Dorian, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jacket wondering what his leader was up to with the small talk instead of simply glamoring the woman and walking out the door as he always did.

"You going to pay for that lighter?" she transferred her annoyed expression to Tristan.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he pulled one of them out of his pocket and slowly laid it down on the counter next to the antifreeze with an intentionally loud click. The woman began bagging the items, ringing them up one at a time with a methodical laziness as if this encounter would be her only entertainment for the evening. Dorian folded his arms on the counter and leaned forward towards the clerk. A devilish smile crept across his wide mouth, curling it cruelly at the corners.

"Gladis, you're an attractive woman. Anyone ever tell you that?" he purred.

Caught off guard, a flush rose to Gladis's cheeks beneath the harsh streaks of garish cosmetic blush over her sallow complexion. Nervously, she looked up and met Dorian's piercing gaze. Tristan made not the slightest of movements as he watched the effects of her hypnotization take hold, eyes glossing over as her expression softened to a faraway state as if she had suddenly fallen asleep.

"Gladis, can you do me a favor, honey?" Dorian continued to coo. "Can you empty the money from the register into that

bag, as well?"

Gladis turned and opened the register, quickly removing the cash from the drawer and placing the decent sized stack into the white plastic bag. Tristan's mind began to race as he considered the security cameras recording the event in its entirety. Dorian appeared completely unconcerned.

"What about the safe below?" he asked quietly.

Gladis stared at him, slowly shaking her head. "I don't have the combination."

Dorian clicked his tongue and pursed his lips as he thought for a moment. "We'll take all of the scratch-off lotto tickets then."

A movement outside in the parking lot caught Tristan's attention, a flash of black darting sideways towards the truck as if a portion of the night itself had liquefied and been blown by the winter wind. Tristan blinked, frowning and turned to walk towards the front windows. Diana was no longer in sight, neither within the cab of the truck or standing to either side. Nor was Neil visible, though the door to the trailer still stood open. Tristan assumed Diana had wandered for a bit to clear her head as she often did when tensions ran high. The arctic wind howled around the building, buffeting against the large plate-glass windows like a pack of encroaching wolves. Tristan scanned the parking lot again, from one end to the other. It was empty.

Beneath his clothes his body twitched as a kick of adrenaline surged through him. He rolled his neck as he shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes, grimacing as bile suddenly rose in the back of his throat. His stomach clenched, a stabbing pain shooting through his abdomen as if he had been shot. With a grunt he placed one hand flat against his stomach as he turned back around towards Dorian who was collecting his plastic bags of loot from the hypnotized

## *The Lineage*

cashier.

“I don’t feel so good.” Tristan shook his head, trying to banish the unexpected onset of vertigo that caused his vision to tunnel inwards on his leader.

Dorian’s attention was anchored on a point far past Tristan however, his eyes wide and disbelieving. “Holy fuck!” he whispered before dropping the bags as he raced past Tristan in a cold dark blur.

Tristan whirled around, his physical discomfort forgotten in the wake of Dorian’s panic. “Dear god! What...?”

He could not even finish the question before his feet were moving, dragging him outside until he broke into a run across the oil-stained cement. Dorian’s screams were deafening, piercing the howling winter wind that had increased to a deafening blizzard, the snow slashing sideways until the edges of the gas station could barely be seen.

Suspended in midair in front of the truck’s deer guard Diana hovered, her arms outstretched and trembling, her feet kicking defiantly as she fought against the invisible force binding her. About her waist and neck the hose from the gas pump coiled like a deadly black rat snake, the silver metal nozzle forced between her teeth and deep within her throat.

Dorian shrieked as he pulled in vain at the unyielding hose, his desperate hands clawing at Diana’s legs as he used his full strength in an attempt to drag her to the ground. High above him the sound of Diana’s choking attempts to draw breath morphed into sickening gurgles as the scent of gas filled the air. Fuel trickled out of the corners of her mouth as her eyes rolled back in her head, her body quaking as the poison filled her stomach and lungs. A few feet away Neil dropped to his knees, having finally emerged from the trailer at the sound of Dorian’s screams—his mouth moved in a recital of prayer as he stared up at the horror before him.

Tristan raced past Dorian towards the gas pump and slammed his hand repeatedly against the large red emergency shut-off button, to no avail. The numbers on the pump continued to turn like a stopwatch. Jumping up onto the hood of the truck he grasped hold of the nozzle yanking with all of his strength. Try as he might to focus on her rescue he could not help but find himself staring at her face, now turning a pale blue from asphyxiation as blood seeped from her nose, ears and eyes. The terror the sight induced within him was nearly paralyzing, his hands dropping away for a moment as he stood on the edge of the hood until Dorian's shrieks snapped him out of his stupor.

Reaching forward he yanked hard on the nozzle again. This time he felt the resistance slacken as, at the same time, his feet slipped on the icy metal sending him backwards into the windshield with a crack. Tristan barely noticed the sharp pain that shot through his arm as his elbow collided with the glass sending a spider web fracture across its surface.

Slowly the nozzle withdrew from Diana's throat by itself, its marred silver surface slick with blood. Fuel continued to pour from its tip, drenching her face and hair as it poured over her like baptismal water. Below her suspended body Dorian staggered back as the gas began to seep down her clothing, pooling beneath her. His screams had died away as the realization that she was beyond rescuing sank into him. Animal instinct for survival suddenly gripped Tristan like a vise, yanking him to his feet again as it screamed that this execution was far from over. Leaping from the hood of the car he ducked under the hovering black hose, grabbing Dorian by the front of his jacket and dragging him, stumbling, towards Neil.

"Come on! We have to get out of here!" Tristan screamed over the roar of the storm. Reaching down with his free hand

## *The Lineage*

he grabbed Neil by his shirt collar, yanking him backwards onto his feet.

“Wait!” Neil shouted, struggling against Tristan’s terrified pull. “Look!”

Unable to draw breath, Tristan hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Diana’s body where it hung wrapped in the death grip of the black hose. A single blue flame had suddenly appeared just before the mouth of the nozzle like a blossoming pilot light. The flame hovered for a moment before disappearing between Diana’s parted purple lips. Tristan barely remembered screaming *Run!* at the top of his lungs as they turned in unison and fled into the snow covered field beyond the gas station. Behind them the fire quickly consumed Diana before leaping to the mouth of the nozzle where it raced back down the line to the underground fuel tanks.

The explosion was deafening as the gas station erupted, the pumps blown high into the black sky as the fire spread from one tank to the other. The convenience store imploded, the windows shattering inwards as the metal framing to the doorway melted beneath the searing wall of heat. Tristan was certain he could hear the dying screams of Gladis beneath the roar of the fire.

The ground shook as the final tank exploded causing the parking lot to crack open and crumble beneath the twisted heap of melted metal that had once been the three rows of pumps and the illuminated overhead awning. The force caused them to stumble. Losing his footing in the calf-deep snow Tristan sank to his knees, falling forward onto his hands as sobs wracked his body. Beside him Neil fell onto his side, turning over onto his back to stare up into the thick bank of storm clouds obscuring the heavens.

Tristan eyed him for a moment as he fought to slow his

galloping heart. He was uncertain if Neil were still alive until his Blood-brother slowly raised one hand as if grasping at an unseen offering from the gods, his fingers closing into a trembling fist. Behind them a few paces Dorian still stood, silently staring back at the burning carnage. Somewhere in the distance the sad wail of sirens pierced the dying howl of the storm stirring the dogs within a nearby farmhouse into a frenzy of baying.

“We’re cursed!” Neil whispered.

Tristan pushed himself back onto his haunches, hanging his head as he breathed in the freezing air, his exhales creating small plumes of mist before his lips. “We’re not cursed.”

Neil’s hand dropped down into the snow. The strange momentary blizzard had passed, the snow ceasing as the wind settled back into a sleepy rhythm of occasional meandering gusts. “All of the bad things we’ve done. All of the people we’ve killed. We’re all going to die.”

Tristan’s restraint snapped like a drought-starved twig. With a growl he pounced on Neil, driving him deep into the snow as his hands closed around his neck. “Damn you, shut up! Why don’t you ever SHUT UP?”

Beneath his death pallor-white claws Neil struggled, flailing at first until he found solidity in a moment of clarity and the viciousness of his feral nature. With a howl he thrust upwards with his right fist knocking Tristan sideways into the field to land a few feet away. He scrambled to his feet in the snow, bearing his elongated fangs as he charged towards Tristan.

“Enough!” Dorian’s voice boomed through the night, cutting through the wafting clouds of white gasoline smoke and encroaching sirens.

Neil and Tristan instantly ceased their struggle. Slowly Dorian turned to face them, his features pulled tight and

## *The Lineage*

stricken with tears that froze like flecks of red crystal against his white skin.

“Enough,” he repeated the word, this time as barely more than a whisper.

Tristan pulled himself out from under Neil, scrambling back a few feet. Neil was transfixed by the sight of Dorian, forgetting his maniacal rage in the wake of his leader’s misery. Never had either witnessed such suffering in the cavalier warrior that had led them through one urban minefield after another. Tristan had always understood the bond between Dorian and Diana to be one of significance, yet the brutal brevity of their nightly existence had served to obscure the fundamental emotional bond the two immortals had shared. Now the heartbreak etched itself into Dorian’s features like train tracks hot from recent passage.

“We are not cursed.” Dorian removed his cowboy hat and stared into its depths for a moment before reaching up with his free hand to wipe the blood tears from his cheeks. “But we may very well be damned.”

Tristan slowly worked his way to his feet. Dorian’s silhouette was stark against the backdrop of the burning gas station. “Damned?”

Dorian’s head snapped up, glancing quickly to his right and left before placing his hat back upon his head. His attention anchored on the warm golden panes of a nearby farmhouse, its simple structure hauntingly black against the sparkling white blanket of snow that covered the fields surrounding it. The front door stood open, yellow light carving a slice of humanity out of the blue shadows just beyond the wide front porch. Three figures stood at the edge, huddled together as they watched the remains of the Shell station burn to the ground. No doubt they had seen Dorian, Neil and Tristan backlit against the carnage and now reached for their phones

to notify the authorities.

“We have to leave,” Tristan said quietly as his nerves bristled with fear.

“How? Everything we had is gone.” Neil’s strangled whine sounded as if he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“We’ll walk.” Dorian’s whisper was brooding as he continued to stare with a strange feral hatred at the family still watching from the supposed safety of their front porch light. “I would ask this kind family for ‘help’ but I have had my fill of death tonight.” He reached down and grabbed Neil by the lapel of his army jacket and hauled him to his feet.

Neil wavered as if he might drop to his knees again, wrapping his right arm around his gut as his left took hold of Dorian’s wrist. “We’re all going to die, aren’t we?”

Dorian wrenched his wrist out of Neil’s bone-white grip. “If I could predict the future do you think we’d be standing in this field watching Diana’s corpse burn?”

Tristan swallowed hard, drawing a staggered breath of icy air. He turned in a full circle taking in the lonesome stretch of highway they had only moments before been traveling on. A green city limits sign noted the approach of Springfield, Illinois in twenty miles. Just beyond the sign, set far back within a patchwork of dormant fields, another house stood, dark and silent.

“There.” He pointed to the old Jeep on the right side of the home.

Without waiting for Dorian’s approval Tristan marched across the field to frontage road. Crawling over the guardrail he picked up his pace at the sight of flashing red lights heading north on the highway towards them. Darting like deer over the frozen asphalt they made their way along the outskirts of the property, edging towards the side of the house where

## *The Lineage*

the vehicle was parked. The house appeared to be devoid of human life, though the high-pitched yapping of a small dog could be heard from somewhere within. Tristan ducked inside the garage in search of a piece of metal that could be used as a slim-jim.

Beside a dusty, cluttered workbench a man's blue work shirt hung on a metal coat hanger from a nail protruding from the rickety wall. Collecting the hanger, Tristan pulled it apart, reworking the wire into the tool he needed. The Jeep was of a rough and sturdy build, made before the era of power locks and alarm systems making easy work for the car thieves. Hotwiring a vehicle was child's play for Dorian, having been around since the invention of the very first Model-T with its wooden wheels and crankshaft, though the recent technological advances had begun to impede their ability to abscond with any form of transportation at whim.

"Where are we going?" Neil whined from the back seat between chattering teeth.

"Salt Lake City," Dorian said as the wail of the second fire engine flew past them on the highway in the opposite direction. "I have friends there who might be able to help us. Dawn will be here soon. We'll ditch this truck in Springfield since more than a few coppers saw us tear out of there just now." His piercing blue eyes darted from the road before him to the rearview mirror and back again.

"No one can help us," Neil whispered. "No one..."

"If you're so convinced of that, I'd be happy to leave you here!" Dorian growled.

Neil fell silent, shaking uncontrollably until he leaned forward to place his head in his hands. Tristan stared into the side mirror, watching as the light from the fire grew smaller until it was nothing more brilliant than a single match flame upon the horizon.

*Gabrielle Faust*

They were not followed. At least, not by anything they could see.

## CHAPTER 3



Bryn pulled the mail out of the rusting black metal mailbox to the right of her front door with a mixture of distain and apathy. Mail brought neither insight nor furtherance to her evolution these days. The energy the paper carried was sour and restless, smudged imprints of the disgruntled and jaded entities through whose palms it had passed embedded within the very pulp and ink. The arrival of the mail only signaled the passing of another day and *dejavú*, for each was now a remarkable twin of the previous. There was no significance in her routine that she could define: the adopted white cat still yowled at the same hour, her belly rumbled occasionally at the same bell toll in late afternoon and her clients came and went, shuffling in on apprehensive semi-disbelieving legs at the appropriate wayward fall of the clock's second hand. Her feelings toward the predictability of her existence cycled incessantly from depression to anger to indifference and back again.

She riffled through the abysmally thin pile: two bills, from her cell phone and home insurance, and a credit card offer promising the glory of excess with a simple signature and a seventy-five dollar-a-month fee. Again, *dejavú*.

*Savages, the lot of them*, she thought as she tossed the offer into the pale gray trashcan in the corner. She sighed and stared at the antique German clock sitting atop the Chicago Cottage organ in the corner of her living room. 11am. Her first client would not arrive for another two hours.

Pushing past the colorful curtain of painted beads Bryn wandered down the narrow dark hallway with its walls of framed photos and odd bits of collected artwork and ephemera to the tiny 1940's styled kitchen. Even in the awkward directionless gray early spring light the cheerful sunshine yellow walls and white cabinets with their white porcelain pulls instantly lifted her spirits, somewhat. Placing the teakettle on the stove, she retrieved her favorite blue mug and box of English Breakfast tea and leaned back against the tiled counter as she waited for the water to boil. The sound of the gas pilot light hissing softly beneath the old metal kettle was hypnotic, blending in with the occasional dog's bark or mockingbird's song, muted through the closed window above the sink.

Bryn crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the pile of photos spread over the kitchen table on the far side of the room. The image closest to her was a Polaroid taken some twenty-five years ago. Happier than she could ever remember being in her lifetime, she sat in a red vinyl booth dressed in a long black lace dress, her hair, then a deep red, pouring over her shoulders. Beside her, with his arms wrapped tightly around her waist and his chin resting upon her shoulder sat Tristan Faust, a man she had loved intensely as the little brother she had never had, in the beginning, and

## *The Lineage*

perhaps more, in the end.

Bryn had not thought about Tristan for several years. She had mourned his sudden and mysterious disappearance, but once the detectives had officially exhausted all of their leads and the trail had grown cold she had forced herself to make peace with the tragedy, lest it consume her. The rage she had felt towards the unknown itself and towards Tristan for abandoning her had been paralyzing, impeding her capability to tap into her own abilities as a medium. Letting go of that grief had taken countless cleansings and meditation sessions, but in the end, when she had awoken one day to its seeming absence it had been a relief.

The discovery of a box of Tristan's things in her storage shed threatened that peace. Now the creeping kudzu vines of those buried emotions slithered out from the crypt where they had once lain, mercifully dormant, to wrap about her heart and drag her down. She felt far older than her fifty years as she stared at the photos, each a perfectly preserved moment in Tristan's life that eerily did not translate the harsh reality of his final days when the smiles had faded from the face of the beautiful shy boy she had known.

Pouring water into her mug from the kettle she approached the table with a degree of apprehension, as if she might find the one clue that had evaded her and the authorities alike. She found herself wondering if she even wanted to discover such an insight into his fate as she lowered herself into the metal and vinyl kitchen chair. The memory of her grief caused her jaw muscles to ache as if she had bitten into aluminum foil. Setting the cup aside she allowed her fingers to gravitate to the Polaroid, gingerly picking it up to study it closely. Their youth shone in the image, their eyes bright behind their darkly dramatic makeup, their faces mercifully unlined as they leaned into one another in a moment of intoxicated

mirth.

“What happened to you, Tristan?” Bryn whispered aloud to the ghost in her hands.

She ran her thumb over his face as if to wipe away the years of questions that blurred the edges of the photo ever so slightly. To have another chance, to turn back the clock to the moment that strange band of gypsies had wandered into his life, she would give anything. How quickly they had separated him from her, their leader’s Jim Jones-like manipulations causing him to withdraw from his friends and family and retreat into their toxic razorblade embrace. Bryn knew in her heart those vagabonds were related to Tristan’s disappearance, but in the same fashion they too had seemingly vaporized leaving not a single trace of their existence behind. She sometimes questioned if they had been real at all or if they had simply been a figment of her imagination cultivated to personify what she could not accept rising to the surface of her best friend. Yet, as their image roared to life once more Bryn knew they were all too real.

“Something tells me you’re still out there somewhere.” She put the photo down and took a sip from the steaming mug of tea as she drummed the fingers of her other hand on the tabletop. The coincidence of discovering the box tucked away in her storage unit on the eve of the anniversary of his disappearance was simply one “coincidence” she could not ignore. “Well, I suppose there’s one way to find out.”

Placing the mug down she rose from the table, a strange sense of urgency causing her chest to tighten and her pulse to rise. Picking up the photo again she walked to the back bedroom which she had converted into her private sanctuary. The strange gray light filtered submissively through the red lace curtains overlaying slightly thicker white muslin drapes causing the room to become simultaneously absent

## *The Lineage*

of shadow and enveloped by them. Bryn shivered, pulling the lapels of her long gray sweater together at her collarbone with one hand. She placed Tristan's photo on the edge of the old oak coffee table that sat long-ways at an angle from the far corner towards the doorway, in the center of the room before the north-facing altar.

The necessity for light was an itch just beneath the surface of her skin that spread like the after effects of morphine until she found herself absently clawing at the back of her neck and arms. Quickly, she retrieved the box of matches from the base of the elaborately artistic altar of clay figurines, dolls of fabric, bone and twine, metal sigils, years of melted wax and the holy earthen remnants of a decade of dedicated ritual. One by one she lit the candles about the room: two at the base of the altar, a large white pillar upon a ceramic tray within the center of the coffee table and three thin yellow tapers set aside on a corner table that served as a home for a large shard of amethyst crystal. Light blossomed into the room chasing away the morose ambiguity of the late morning apathy.

Bryn turned from the last candle, lifting the match to extinguish the flame with a single soft breath and gazed about the sanctuary letting herself settle into the sacred space as if laying within the arms of a protective lover. The shiver came again, lacing her body, beginning at her tailbone and arcing upwards to her jaw. Bryn grimaced—there was something wrong with the way the hand would play out. The portent screamed at her, threatening to shatter her from within. She stared down at the image of Tristan, demurely smiling from the center of the Polaroid. The mere thought of him now soured her stomach with dread. Yet, with the same fascination a bystander beside a crime scene, she could not deny the resurfacing of this image.

Cautiously, she approached the table as if it were a wild

animal. Kneeling down upon a large red pillow at the far end, she retrieved the well-loved deck of Rider-Smith tarot cards in their bright yellow box. Her attention never strayed from the photo of Tristan, her eyes locking with those of the two-dimensional memory as if it were a portal into his world. With two fingers she slid the Polaroid up to the center of the table beside the pillar candle. Drawing a deep breath she closed her eyes, pressing the deck between her palms until she felt the glossy cards become warm.

Behind her lowered lids she unlocked the carefully denied vault of Tristan's memory allowing flickering flashes of his life, as it had crossed hers, to explode into reality with the power of a passing freight train. She felt the tears she had repressed for so very long begin to well up again, beyond her control, dampening her eyelashes as she drew another deep breath to focus. After several long moments the initial shock subsided, settling down like whipping branches in the wake of a storm. Bowing her head she grasped hold of a single memory that was still bright and vivid, tethering it tightly to her mind's eye as she asked of the universe her dreaded question.

*What became of my beloved Tristan? Where is he?*

She shivered and opened her eyes. The room had grown noticeably colder, the shadows that clustered beyond the reach of the candlelight suddenly menacing in their depth. Attempting to ignore the ominous transition she focused on the cards as she shuffled them once, twice, three times before fanning them in a straight line across the table. Holding only the image of Tristan in her mind and her question within her heart she let her intuition guide her hand to the first card. Holding her breath she slid the card towards her and turned it over. The 9 of Cups. This was the first card, representing Tristan himself as she remembered him: soft spoken and

## *The Lineage*

reserved, yet kind, and not yet fully embracing his potential or the romantic side to his nature he had almost no awareness of yet in his youth. The card made the corners of her mouth twitch a bit in a failed attempt at a smile. She leaned forward and set the card above the row.

Bryn placed her fingers upon the back of the next card and felt her heart flutter unnaturally. The card felt strangely cold as if left in a snow bank overnight. She hesitated, but a will that seemed not of her own caused her to pull the card and flip it over. Her breath caught in her throat at the representation of what covered him now, his current state of being: the 7 of Wands, reversed. Though still too early in the hand for her to understand its full meaning, Tristan appeared to be under siege, battling a great force that was perhaps beyond his ability to defend against. Bryn stared at the card. If he were “under siege”, so to speak, he could still yet be alive, unless this spoke of the state of his soul on the other side.

*Hold steady, she told herself. If this is true you need to follow through with this hand.*

The house creaked around her as a strong gust of wind buffeted the east face, rattling the windows in their old frames. Somewhere in the distance the delicate song of metal wind chimes wove in and out of ambulance sirens. The hand continued to unfold itself like a nightmare of garish color and black ink lines. The Paige of Swords crossed him, a portent of violent change. The King of Swords, reversed, lay beneath him signifying leadership or possible dominance by a corrupt king.

*Dorian!* The name roared across Bryn’s mind with a reignited furnace of hatred.

She remembered him well—the vagabond nightmare that had rolled into town one night to take up residence

along with his tiny tribe and their battered silver trailer in an abandoned factory's parking lot on the edge of downtown. Their dangerous air of brazenly poetic hedonism had seduced Tristan for it was a world he had never dared to dally in, the fringe of the underworld far away from the cozy dark booths and strong liquor pours of their local haunts. Dorian's world was one absent of decorum or chivalry, pure chaos guided only by his wrought iron command, which he swore was the only reason any of them survived at all. Bryn had begged and pleaded for Tristan to stay his distance from such characters, but his curiosity had bested his instinct.

Bryn's fervor mounted, her heart racing as she laid out the next two cards, slowly but steadily. The 2 of Pentacles lay to the left of him, a symbol of his abandonment of any sense of control leaving him feeling unable to balance the dichotomy of his divided influence. The Tower, reversed, was placed above him as a possible outcome of the battle Tristan now fought. Bryn choked slightly, drawing a shuddering breath. This card, as it was drawn and laid, represented knowledge gained at a great cost.

*What is it you are seeking now that could put your life in danger?* Bryn shook her head as her wide eyes darted over the unfolding throw. She forced herself to continue.

The Four of Wands she placed to the right of him—a fighting card, a symbol of a mental exercise to understand what was happening around him. She paused. The next card she drew would represent Tristan as he now saw himself.

The Devil.

It was not necessarily a bad card in and of itself, though it signified now a definite unhappiness with whatever he had become. There was an imbalance between two sides of his nature, though what exactly those two sides were was still a mystery. Bryn frowned, perplexed and agitated as she

## *The Lineage*

felt her protective instinct to run to his aide and shield him rise with a feral snarl. It was useless, though, for while the cards revealed his strife and struggle, they did not pinpoint his location. She looked down at the row of unturned cards as she wondered if she had the strength and courage to continue with the throw? The last three cards would unveil the nature of the people around him, his hopes and fears, and his ultimate fate. She could only pray that the final card would reveal him to be victorious above such darkness, both within himself and without.

The 7 of Cups. The Hanged Man, reversed. The 10 of Swords.

The tears that Bryn had managed to suppress through the throw broke free as she gasped aloud, her hands flying to her mouth at the horror that lay before her. Those that surrounded him now worked to obscure his true perception of reality leaving all seen, but impossible to understand. Events had occurred that were beyond Tristan's comprehension leaving him fighting for his very life and the life of those he felt were now his family. That battle would lead to his own self-sacrifice, one that would be devoid of meaning and the mark of a martyr.

There was no doubt in Bryn's mind now that Tristan still lived. However, his remaining time was to be brief and embroiled in a bizarre and bloody war. She hung her head, burying her face in her hands as she cursed herself for her curiosity. She knew herself well enough to know that she would not be able to simply turn her back on the knowledge that he needed help.

"I can't do this again," she wailed into the chilly depths of the small room. "Why now, after all of these years? Why did you wait so long to show me this?"

The universe answered her with silence. Too many

questions had already been asked of this day.

A knock came at the door, echoing like a shotgun through the silent house. Her first appointment was early. Or, perhaps she had stayed longer with Tristan's throw than she had realized. Staggering to her feet she hurried down the hall, wiping tears from her blotchy cheeks with the back of her sleeve. Opening the front door she forced a smile across her pale lips knowing what a fright she must look to the middle-aged woman standing across the threshold.

"Sally, I'm so sorry. I think I'm coming down with the flu." Bryn forced a cough and clutched at her belly, which actually did feel as if it were being filled with hot coals. "I'd hate to get you sick."

"Oh, honey! You do look horrible!" Sally stared at her with genuine concern. "Absolutely, we can reschedule. Do you need anything? Medicine, soup, orange juice?"

"No, no. I just need to lie down." Bryn leaned her temple against the edge of the door.

"Okay. Call me if you need anything. Rest." Sally turned and walked down the narrow cement sidewalk to her car.

Bryn waited until Sally had driven off to slowly close the door. Slipping the chain in its cradle and turning the deadbolt, she turned her back to the door and slid to the ground, pulling her knees up to her chest to wrap her arms tightly about them.

"I'll find you this time. I promise. If it's the last thing I do," she whispered.

When she returned to her sanctuary the candles had extinguished themselves and Tristan's photo had vanished.

## CHAPTER 4



His straight and narrow southern Baptist family had bestowed upon him the name Joseph David Rutherford, but those he hunted and hunted with called him Skeeter-Hawk for the merciless way he slaughtered his prey.

His unusual height was magnified by the unnatural lines of his wired frame, the hard etching of his high cheekbones and stone jaw, cross-hatched with indelicate raised scars a shade paler than his darkly-tanned skin, extending down with a craven fierceness from beneath the wide brim of his brown leather hat. If it were not for the white plumes of condensation that froze before his lips he might have been mistaken for a creature carved of sandstone and weathered by a desert wind. Dressed in mended blue jeans three decades old, army-green alligator cowboy boots and a filthy black duster to conceal the multitude of weapons he carried at all times, Skeeter-Hawk's presence could be felt for miles. His mere exhale of Swisher Sweet smoke into the icy winter

morning sunrise sent shivers up the spines of locals as they stirred from the slumbers, rising to rub their necks and eye their companions warily wondering from where such troublesome concerns could arise. Hidden within the nooks and crannies of humanity's cluttered wardrobe those dark creatures of Hell's heart that took care to conceal themselves in the garb of their own prey turned their heads in unison towards Salt Lake City, panic heavy on their putrid breath before scurrying further away. The long years he had spent walking the fine lines in between the worlds of mortal and demon had imprinted his aura with a strong magic all its own, a perpetual residual haunting none could deny.

Skeeter-Hawk hadn't meant to linger for so long within the city, but a string of unforeseen incidents, including an impromptu exorcism of a minor demon from the local bookstore owner's son and several major repairs to his van had delayed his departure for over two weeks. He sniffed the cold wind outside of the mechanic's shop on the edge of town as he removed the small cigar from his lips with a hand wrapped in a black fingerless motorcycle glove.

Narrowing his slate gray eyes against the sideways sleet he peered into the horizon across the stretch of snow-heavy highway as the sun fought a valiant, yet vain effort against the bank of steely clouds. Though he barely felt it anymore he wearied of this harsh winter. The idle over-coffee banter of the locals seemed to cause the snow to fall more viciously and the ice to pierce more precisely, their naiveté despite their proclivity towards godly devotion obscuring their intuitive sense of a shifting from the summer of their souls into perpetual winter. He could no longer stand to take his meals in the local diner. He could barely sip his watered-down liquor in the basement dive bar he had stumbled upon, for even the soft-shelled regulars that frequented its smoke-

## *The Lineage*

oiled leather seats and wood-paneled walls embodied the sort of blindness that drove Skeeter-Hawk to fits of rage.

How could those that spoke so fervently of an afterlife be so ill-attuned to the rhythms of the world in which they dwelled? It sickened him and, yet, these were just such a folk as he was sworn to protect.

At times the weight of his vows felt like a barbed whip embedded between his shoulder blades, tugging mercilessly forward toward the unknown. At age fifteen he had found himself orphaned and homeless, wandering the streets of southern California, a derelict societal nuisance fighting other vagabonds over scraps of simple survival. He had somehow resisted the siren lure of drugs and gangs, but those seemingly wise decisions had not sheltered him from a life of violence and by the age of sixteen, the then J.D. had found himself in a liquor store holding the clerk at gunpoint.

The memory of that night had never left Skeeter-Hawk, stark and outlined in neon and florescent white in a haze of red. In the distance sirens had begun to wail sending his heart into a maddening thunder. His palms sweaty on the warm metal, his finger shaking over the trigger he knew he did not want to pull, he remembered screaming at the clerk, "Damn it! What the hell is wrong with you? You wanna die or somethin'? Just give me the fuckin' money!"

The elderly Iranian man behind the counter had simply stared at him, defiant and unmovable and utterly unafraid of death. He had glanced over his shoulder towards the direction of the siren only to see a man standing on the other side of the black bars and smudged plate glass. The stranger opened the door, the gold bells overhead chiming with an uncanny cheerfulness at his entrance.

J.D. had swung the gun back and forth between the clerk and the stranger, an olive-skinned man with jet-black hair

streaked with silver and eyes the color of amber. Fearlessly the man had approached and disarmed J.D. with one swift move. Catching J.D.'s wrist in the midst of a blow to the man's face he halted the youth in his tracks with a strength that seemed impossible for his slight frame.

"Do you want to stay free?" The stranger's question struck J.D. to his core as the sound of sirens began to encroach from the distance. "Or do you want to become another statistic?" Holding J.D.'s gaze for a moment longer, he released him, slipped the .45 in the pocket of his trench coat and made his way through the store to the rear exit.

J.D. had followed blindly, compelled instinctually by the man's tone and driven by a primal fear he had denied himself for so very long as he doused his soul with smelted steel to temper and toughen it. In the course of a single night J.D.'s life was transformed, plucked from the bloody tar of the streets by Douglas Marsh for recruitment by the Order of Dioscuri and thrown into a brutal boot camp of paranormal warfare. Why he had not turned tail and fled in those first few weeks he could not now recollect. Whether it was the fear of returning to the bleak prospects of his sure to be short-lived former life or an indebtedness to Douglas for his swift intervention, the thought of abandoning what was quickly becoming his calling and the harsh, strange new "family" surrounding it made him ill.

Nothing he had experienced in the streets had prepared him for the ungodly horrors that entered his life night after night, each more vicious than the last. A creature of iron-willed adaptation J.D. digested each nightmare slain by his own hand like bitter medicine until he began to feel the familiar numbness once again. It was a hollow lonely sensation he recognized all too intimately like being dipped slowly into a freezing lake, his extremities falling asleep

## *The Lineage*

until only the slow thunder of his heart reminded him that he had not finally become what he fought.

As J.D. became Skeeter-Hawk and the members of his original Order were slain or took to the road in search of their own destinies, he had found his path the sordid sort whispered by the shadows. But he preferred it that way. He was too far removed from his own conscience now—if his humanity were a home it was one he could no longer return to.

The haggard middle-aged mechanic, dressed in blue coveralls and a navy blue fleece jacket soiled with motor oil, sidled out the door leading to the main garage hanger. Wiping his calloused, thick fingers on a dirty shop rag he cast a sidelong glance at Skeeter-Hawk before following his customer's line of sight out into the bleak horizon.

"I hate to say it but I think it's going to be another couple of days." The mechanic coughed and cleared his throat, sniffing at the cold.

"You said that two days ago." Skeeter-Hawk flicked the remainder of his cigar into the sleet and watched its ember die in the bank of snow beside the road.

"There's another part I have to order. A shop a couple of towns over has it in stock. I'll have Billy drive out in the morning and fetch it. After that, you should be on the road." There was a tension in the mechanic's voice as if he secretly wished he could have sent Skeeter-Hawk, whom he knew only as J.D., away days ago.

Skeeter-Hawk stuffed his right hand, now naked without his cigar, into the pocket of his coat. Through the thin polyester lining his fingers brushed against the butt of the pistol anchored at his waist by a tooled leather hip holster. Idly he caressed the carbonite, noting the crosshatching along its sides. "There's no amount of money that will make

it happen sooner?”

The mechanic’s eyebrow jutted up sharply as his gaze swiveled back towards Skeeter’s profile. His brow furrowed as he studied the stranger, unused to such direct bribery. Clearing his throat he looked down the road as if someone might possibly be spying on them in the snow-capped mountains.

“Look, I wish I could make a better deal with you, but they said on the news that a bad storm, the worst so far this year, is on the way. It’s a long drive to the shop where the part is and I have a family I have to get home to tonight,” he said with a strange tremor Skeeter-Hawk knew was fear.

“What about Billy?” Skeeter’s eyes sliced sideways towards the antsy mechanic.

“Billy’s sixteen. He’s in school. Then he’ll be home doing his homework. Where he should be,” he said with the subtle indignant irritation of a man whose tolerance of outsiders ran thin after a time.

Skeeter felt the corner of his mouth pull in a sideways grin. He still found humanity curious even though he felt so incredibly removed from it. “Of course he is.” He pushed away from the wall on the foot he’d held bent against it. “I think I’ve been pretty patient so far?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “But if it’s not fixed by tomorrow afternoon, I’m going to think you’re keeping me here for all the wrong reasons.”

“Mr. Rutherford—”

“J.D.”

“J.D., I don’t know who you’re used to, but around here we don’t conduct ourselves that way.” The mechanic watched Skeeter-Hawk warily. “We’re honest, God-fearing folk.”

Skeeter-Hawk coughed a short staccato laugh of skepticism. “I’m sure you are, Howard. I’m sure you are.”

## *The Lineage*

He turned and began to walk back towards the pickup Howard had loaned him out of the “goodness” of his heart. “Tomorrow afternoon. You better get Billy up bright and early. Otherwise, there’s hell to pay.”

A half-hour later Skeeter-Hawk made his way through the icy back roads towards the Sidewinder Inn. He parked the loaner truck in the parking space in front of room 12 at the end of the short stretch of dirty red doors framed by grungy gray brick. As his boots touched the pavement a shiver that was not born of the arctic gale shot down his spine causing his stomach muscles to tighten and his jaw to clench. The car door still ajar, his hand instinctively retrieved the gun at his hip, his thumb releasing the safety, though he kept the barrel pointed solidly at the ground beside him.

With careful precision he turned in a full circle. The sleet had turned to an unrelenting slanting snow. The fine white powder dusted the lonely parking lot with its two mournful cars, a forlorn blue 1980’s station wagon and a battered white Honda Civic. The obscure morning light barely contained enough fight left to puncture the storm sending the outer edges of Salt Lake City into a haunting milieu of gray-blue shadows. On the far end of the motel the dull canary light from the office window slashed through the storm carving a comic book swath of falsetto warmth across the sidewalk. A bitterness formed on the back of Skeeter’s tongue setting his teeth on edge as a shadow moved across the light to the office, a shadow that was not on the inside of the building.

At first he thought it was a trick of the erratic gusts of lamenting snow that hurled against the physical world. However, he knew his own keen senses well enough to be assured that his eyes had not betrayed him. Something had blocked out the light for a split second as it moved down the sidewalk in his direction. The icy weight of the gun in

his hand felt lifeless except for the places where his palm kept the metal warm. Every nerve in his body vibrated with alarm—it was as if he had become the nervous teenager again staring down the overwhelming realization that his nightmares were indeed all real.

Drawing a slow, deliberate breath he beat back the residual memories as he sought his familiar stoic control. Carefully he closed the door to the truck with a rusting metallic whine and soft click as he made another survey of the parking lot. Instinctively he touched the collection of silver protection charms where they hung concealed beneath his shirt as he silently recited the spell that came to him as naturally as breathing now, before reaching into the inside breast pocket of his coat for the newly blessed flask of holy water.

For the first time it all felt useless—thirty years of accumulated prayers, wards and sigils gathered from the arcane corners of knowledge and cobbled together like a shield of scrap metal from a World War II war bunker. It now felt as flimsy as the roof of a trailer home in the wake of a violent twister. His heart fluttered and the instantaneous questioning of his entire belief system, derived from pure survival and the facts of what he had witnessed with his own eyes, quaked with a nauseating shift that allowed the winter storm to somehow permeate the crevices of his being.

*It's here...* The thought breezed through his mind like quicksilver. The realization was harrowing and thrilling in the same instance, reality and his own awareness of life and living suddenly tasting both bitter and sweet in his mouth.

What “it” was he held a duplicity to hasten and hesitate to contemplate even as he bolted for the door with its scuffed gold “12” nailed just above the peephole. He jammed his key into the lock as if the hounds of Hell itself were on his

## *The Lineage*

heels. Frostbitten fingers of night wove tight around the edges of the old door even as he slammed it shut, barring it instinctually with the useless mortal barricades of bolts and chains. His lips moved in the usual recitals of spells as he grabbed a canister of rock salt from his bedside table and poured steady practiced lines across the threshold and window seals. Backing away from the door, his breath coming hard and labored as he steadied himself against the unaccustomed sense of fear, he found himself strangely, desperately wanting for solace in a way he could not remember ever desiring, at least not since he was a small child.

In a flash, he drew the sacrificial dagger from its leg sheath, the one he'd "borrowed" from the altar of one of the powerful Santeria priestesses he'd saved in Louisiana in the early years when he was still too green to understand the repercussions of such thievery. He still kept it close to him though at all times, paying it tribute with chicken's blood and other talismans to satisfy the spirits that clustered to its blade even now. They knew him after thirty years. They understood him, as he did them. He felt them close now against the metal, scared and angry feral wolves with their teeth bared against an encroaching poacher. The shadows scampered along walls as the flurries of snow buffeted the building, flakes swarming around the intermittent walkway lights and parking lot posts like gnats above a forgotten corpse.

Despite all of his seals, sigils and ceremonial precautions, he still felt vulnerable. The sacred sacrificial knife in his left hand felt like a child's plaything, the gun in his right as meaningless as a rolled newspaper meant to swat a disobedient puppy. After turning in a circle he backed up to the nearest wall and stood like a wooden soldier with both dagger and pistol drawn, pointing in opposite directions towards the

window and door as if those were the only entrances through which such entities might enter.

He'd been on the trail of something mighty. He had known this for some time, an entity that had toyed with him like a cat and left him almost sinfully desiring for more upon each sideways breathless breeze of influence he found laced over the other "cases" he'd addressed along the way. After two years it had engulfed him, become his quest, which he could not deviate from despite the prolific admissions of his peers or insidious, yet strangely protective insights from substantially less corporeal allies. It was here now, undeniable and fierce as the very fires that brimmed the bowels of Hell.

Yet, there was no fire, no brimstone, no acquisition of souls that he could sense around him. Only a harrowing silence punctured by the hallowed howl of the winter wind, such that most would find themselves gathering their significant close if significant were close to hold.

The hideous burnt orange ceramic lamp on the side table flickered. The bulb fizzed and popped as its harsh illumination swelled behind the dusty oversized wicker shade. Skeeter shielded his eyes with his fist and gun as he took a step back into the center of the room. The electric feedback transformed into the drone of insects, angrily deafening in the tiny confines of the cheap room. A hollow hard thump against the wall beside the lamp caused him to flinch. He could not tell if the sound was within the room or on the other side of the wall. A tear opened in the mottled brown wallpaper, slicing upwards, swift as if a knife had been drawn across its surface. The paper curled back, the edges darkening as if burning though no smoke or fire could be seen. The gash opened further, slowly and precisely drawing up to the ceiling before turning abruptly towards the front door. A thick dark liquid began to trickle from the

## *The Lineage*

tear, seeping out from beneath the tragic paper to drip down the wall like molasses.

As the wound spread further, reaching over and out towards the door frame, the dark lines of liquid began to veer towards each other, merging like slow tributaries into rivers where images swelled with a siren silence, beckoning him closer to investigate their mysteries. Faces and limbs emerged, expressions of agony stretched and drawn into harrowing caricatures of suffering like muslin being ripped asunder. The small flecks of silver in the dull herringbone pattern of the wallpaper shifted, flickering like feral feline eyes towards him from all angles. Skeeter took another step back and felt his foot make contact with something just as the bulb in the lamp exploded. His heart thundering in his ears he whirled around and fired point-blank into whatever it was behind him.

Silence filled the room, muffled and full of wicked temptation in the brief moment of darkness before the light from the bathroom snapped on and the other lamp on the far side of the room warmed to a dull gold. Skeeter held his breath as he leveled his gun, ready to fire again. In his other hand he gripped his knife tight, ready to thrust upwards into the bowls of anything that dared threaten him further.

His eyes rapidly adjusted with a blink. A young man stood before him dressed in the ragged clothing of a traveler. His black hair hung partially over his dark eyes that glinted with a strange mischievous facsimile of youth. His lips curled in a knowing smile as he held Skeeter's gaze with calculated practiced ease.

Before Skeeter could even draw breath a sharp pain speared him through the left side of his chest. His jaw trembled as his grip on his gun and knife became slack, the weapons clattering unceremoniously to the floor. His eyes traced the

man's arm towards where his hand now disappeared beneath Skeeter's shirt and into the flesh of his torso. Ice wrapped about his heart, barbed vines of an exquisite agony that paralyzed him as his mind fought to process a single thought. It was all he could do to stare back at the man before him whose mouth still twisted in a sickeningly knowing pleasure at the sight of Skeeter's distress.

"You've walked many a bloody mile, haven't you? So many children slain," the man said quietly. "Did you enjoy it, watching their deaths, their agony?" With his hand still firmly secured within Skeeter, he took a step forward to peer deeper into Skeeter's eyes. "Such a hardened soul. Your remorse is so buried within you that you can't even remember its name. Sad. I have more compassion for souls who have a conscience left than the likes of you. You, I have no use for."

The man clicked his tongue and sighed. Shaking his head with a strange disappointment he continued, "I am not your keeper, though. Mortality will claim you soon enough." His fingers tightened ever so slightly around Skeeter's heart. "Leave this one for me, though. This one you gaze upon now. Do not cross me."

The pain vanished from Skeeter's chest, the lights within the room blinking out in an instant, casting the world into a cold cloak of shadows. Skeeter fell to his knees with a gasp, lurching forward onto all fours as he wretched onto the dingy gray carpet. Clutching his chest with his right hand, he struggled to find a center within the howling vertigo that sought to overwhelm him. Outside, the storm battered the walls of the motel with a renewed vengeance.

The taste of fear was bitter and cold.

## CHAPTER 5



Tristan drew the pocketknife's dull blade across his wrist again and watched the veins beneath his skin separate. Blood poured from the wound down into his palm to slowly drip off of his fingertips, each line of his life newly outlined in the wash of red. Like a movie clip played in reverse the wound begrudgingly pulled itself together, the crudely sliced edges of flesh reaching for one another, the veins mending seamlessly as the injury smoothed over without a single flaw. Only blood was left behind to indict Tristan for his self-mutilation.

For over an hour he had sat on the back porch of the tiny wood-framed house watching the snowdrifts build in the yard burying the world of the living in a pristine frosting of ice and moonlight. From time to time a flurry would scamper across the sun-bleached porch to cover the blood between Tristan's boots leaving a fresh canvas for the next silent scream. As the frost bit down so hard it pierced his shell to

make his ribs feel made of fiberglass, he wondered if those he'd left behind had finally buried him and what, if anything, they had said over his grave.

The ghostly images of his daddy long-legs cluster of friends pulsed darkly behind his mind's eye. The two decades that had passed since the night Dorian turned him had allowed the restless silent anger that accompanied his mortal youth to dissipate, stretching thin and transparent like abandoned webs in the eaves of an old barn. After the torrent of blood-soaked nights accompanied by the hauntingly dystopian diatribes of Dorian and Neil's macabre occult rants he could barely remember now what had incited such abstract rage within him.

Even his father's verbal threats seemed inadequate now, emasculated and demoted from their reign of terror to court jester. Remotely, the unsettlingly faded impression of the ire crawled beneath his skin with tiny razorblade writhing. Like a radiation blast, it passed over, around and then through him, seeping through flesh, muscle and bone, scouring him as it burnt away the world he had once cherished and believed impermeable. Those he had gathered close in the old days had loved him unconditionally, except for those along the way whose intentions were manifest of pure conditions and conditions alone, strangers that passed through his life like sand through an hourglass.

He had not felt deserving of their sheltering arc of loyalty as if the life he had reported to have had before their acquaintance had been a lie. Unlike those he gravitated towards whose pain was the mortar of their foundations, their tragedy the sweat that nightly stained their sheets and heightened their tolerance for indulgence and depravity, he had nothing to rebel against except the disappointments of a middle-aged construction worker and his alcoholic wife.

## *The Lineage*

Two parents, virulently dissatisfied with each other, but content to strive for naught more, followed by the beginnings of an average and uninteresting college education. It had not been until he had returned home to retrieve a few personal possessions and found himself in a lethal confrontation with his father that the reality of his own demons was drudged up to the surface. He had been a blank slate until that time, void of identity and checkered with remote impressions absorbed vicariously through others as he buried his pain.

“How very Columbine!” Dorian had remarked at the news of Tristan’s act of violence. At that time Tristan had not understood what his Maker had meant—now he did and bitterly.

Before Dorian’s tribe had crossed Tristan’s path, Bryn had been the beginning of his awakening, he now realized. The beautiful belly-dancing medium had swept him into her world and the flock of crows that called to one another through the shadows of night. She had said she had sensed a light in him, an untapped potential cradled by an innocence she adored. Overnight the willowy gypsy with her long red hair, enormous brown eyes and extravagant layers of silk scarves and black velvet had become the older sister he had never known he secretly craved, a worldly magical creature whose maternal instinct to care for those she called “family” spilled over the edges of her being like the walls of an infinity pool.

He had only known her a year when Dorian’s tribe crawled on their bellies into town, a year that felt like a lifetime, but still was not enough to stay him from wandering from Bryn’s protective embrace. He could still hear their fevered warnings—Bryn, Thomas and Mica as they had trapped Tristan in Sean’s tiny flat and attempted in vain to save their beloved friend from the evil they sensed salivating

at the door.

How convinced he had been that the tales Dorian wove with such romantic conviction were true, that the road was where he would discover his own untapped power. Tristan was deaf to their tears and torrents of loving outrage—unbeknownst to his friends he had already taken the irreversible oath and drank from the fount of Dorian's own veins. Arrogant and ignorant, a false sense of superiority had caused him to pity his former family and without a single true "goodbye" he left, slamming the heavy metal door behind him.

If there had been search parties or news bulletins after his disappearance he had not known. An existence of raw survival, absent of a connection to the happenings of the mainstream modern world, isolated him for months at a time. When he had happened upon a random news broadcast in the background static of an outskirts dive bar or neon-lit gas station he had never once heard his name mentioned by reporters or distraught friends. In his mind he had disappeared, vanished without a trace.

In the early nights he had sometimes wondered if any of their pleas had been genuine or merely a dramatic display to sate their own collective conscience. He had convinced himself that he had made the right decision—Dorian, Neil, Blind Mouse and Diana had been the true "family" he needed and not the mortal one he had abandoned. He cursed himself now.

Tristan sliced into his wrist again, wincing slightly as the blade made contact with bone this time.

"You know, you're going to bleed to death if you keep doing that." Neil's awkward staccato voice punctured the steady moan of winter wind from the doorway beside Tristan.

## *The Lineage*

“If only it was that easy,” Tristan muttered as he watched the wound close again. He wouldn’t die, but he would need to feed again soon, which was possibly just as dangerous a proposition; he was already starting to feel the anxiety and restlessness that preceded his bloodlust. He folded the pocketknife closed and sat with his forearms resting on his knees, staring down at the fresh spattering of blood between his toes. “What’s going on inside?”

Neil hesitated, his hard gaze boring into the back of Tristan’s skull like a dull drill bit. “Formalities. Dorian and Guymon are catching up on old times, I suppose you could say.”

“Suppose you could say?” Tristan coughed a hoarse laugh beneath his breath at Neil’s twitchy response.

Dorian had brought them to this house in silence and introduced them to a man named Guymon, a medium whose visions Dorian claimed saved his life at one time. It was a grand statement that threw Neil into a state of fawning awe and Tristan into a bitter cold silence. While what he had witnessed happen to his family had been far removed from anything even remotely resembling explainable, he craved a concrete explanation and not more esoteric mumbo-jumbo from a Midwestern seer that looked like he just walked out of a heavy metal music video.

Tristan was struggling to breathe in his life station, clawing his way up through the murk and debris to find a sliver of untainted air for his starved soul. For years he had followed Dorian’s word without question as if in a walking slumber. Diana and Blind Mouse’s deaths had thrown a lightning bolt through the veil. His skin felt too tight, his soul grating against its husk like steel wool. Every muscle tensed to the point of snapping, his teeth grating until his jaw felt as if it might shatter.

He had yet to discover his voice. It seemed buried deepest of all. He questioned why Dorian had chosen him to join their tribe—at one time he had said it was because of the wild passion he sensed in Tristan, an untapped fount of savage strength. After twenty years Tristan had begun to wonder if Dorian had simply needed a willing follower for his crusade? The sound of Neil shifting his weight on the old wooden planks screeched across Tristan's nerves as it sawed through the icy moans of the night.

Neil lifted his hand and rubbed the back of his head, dragging his fingernails across his scalp as he messed up his already unkempt hair. “Um, yeah, you know I don't know anything about that stuff. Don't listen too close. Too much shit in my own head. Yeah... It all seems pointless. Small talk is just creepy to me. It makes my skin crawl.”

Despite the vast labyrinths of perverse horrors they had manifested with their own hands and stood rapt witness to a simple human frivolity, a pantomime of antiquated hospitality that allowed them a glimpse into their past civility was enough to set Neil to pacing like a wolf. Tristan raised his head and turned to stare at Neil over his shoulder.

“What?” Neil stopped his fidgeting and met Tristan's gaze as if it were a gauntlet thrown down.

Tristan said nothing, watching his Blood-brother with veiled pity—while Tristan had learned quickly to shield his true nature from the world, wrapping himself in iron and jade, Neil's scattered psyche thundered haphazardly upon his sleeve, raw and ready to shatter into irreconcilable shards at any moment. He was a violent and vicious beast, but one whose own madness made him as vulnerable as he was feared.

Neil plucked at his clothing nervously, taking a step back into the kitchen before storming forward again to the edge

## *The Lineage*

of the steps leading down into the backyard. “They’ll be calling on you soon after they’re done with all of that social bullshit.” He waved spastically back towards the house.

Tristan nodded, strangely not surprised. He drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. His lips felt numb from the frost.

“You shouldn’t play with fucking knives!” Neil spat as if he was cursing Tristan for an insult and stormed down the stairs into the blanket of deep snow.

Tristan watched as Neil trudged along awkwardly until he found a place at the base of a skeletal gray tree. There he sat down cross-legged and began to draw symbols in the snow while he muttered to himself. He was too far away for Tristan to hear his words or truly make out what he wrote amidst the steady flurries, but for that Tristan was thankful. He had heard too many of Neil’s rants and could only imagine what kind of useless arcane conjuring his traveling companion was attempting.

*One of these days he’s going to open a doorway to something wicked when he’s really trying to save himself.* Tristan thought as he placed the pocketknife in his jacket. *God help us all when that day comes.*

Shaking his head he rose, entered the house and began to close the door behind him, leaving Neil to his own devices. As his foot touched the welcome rug on the interior of the kitchen winter seemed to turn like a rabid hound, howling towards him with a gale force that slammed into his back, nearly knocking him off of his feet. What began as the whistle of the wind quickly wound up into a horrifying moan as it raced around him carrying with it the sound of Neil’s psychotic chanting until it droned in Tristan’s ears like a swarm of hornets. Tristan’s heart thundered in his chest, his mouth filling with the sour metallic taste of fear, as he stared

forward through the shadows of the grungy 1970's kitchen to the hazy glow of the empty, silent living room just beyond the threshold.

Gripping tight to the doorknob, the flesh of his palm feeling as if it were freezing to the metal, he turned slightly to peer through the panes of glass set into the backdoor. The breath was stolen from his lungs, his body shaking uncontrollably, though his hand held fast to the knob as if of its own volition. There, pressed against the back door like a broken bird against the windshield of a car was Neil's mangled corpse.

Strips of flesh dangled from his exposed cheekbone where three long gashes stretched from his eye socket down his to his neck, ending abruptly at his collarbone. Through the wounds severed tendons, muscles and arteries overlapped in an irreparable Esher maze of frostbitten gore. The snow flurries morphed into a blizzard that separated into tendrils behind Neil's corpse, spreading wide at a singular base and rushing forward to wrap around Neil like fingers to press him harder against the door.

Tristan fought desperately to keep the door closed. Neil's eyes rolled down from within his skull to focus hard and fast on Tristan. His blue lips began to form words, words which Tristan could barely make out through the haze of his terror.

*You...are...the...end...*

Tristan's own mouth formed the word "What?" in his confusion, but had not the time to even consider the implications as the northern fist that imprisoned Neil punched forward sending Tristan flying backwards across the kitchen to collide into the brown laminate cabinets above the army-green electric stove. Falling face-first into the peeling vinyl floor tiles with a deafening crash, amongst the shards of the

## *The Lineage*

broken cabinet doors and scattered pans, Tristan scrambled to his feet.

As he steadied himself and looked up at the backdoor the intensity of the silence that suffocated the room settled around him with a high-pitched whine within his ears. The hot breath from the heater vent in the ceiling above pressed down upon the back of his neck. All was as it had been minutes before, a disturbingly still portrait of faded Americana, empty of evil except for himself. The backdoor stood slightly ajar, the soft purr of the winter wind occasionally slipping over the threshold like scampering mice. Tristan glanced behind him fully expecting Guymon and Dorian to be standing there ready for battle. The room was empty and the kitchen unmarred.

With heavy breaths he slowly approached the door and gingerly pulled it open. Outside, the night appeared peaceful, the porch with its rusting, rotten swing, snow-covered ice chest and row of empty clay planters still as if forgotten in time. Beneath the bare branches of the cherry tree, rocking slightly back and forth as the snow attempted to bury him, Neil continued to mutter to himself and gesticulate towards the universe as if demanding it to answer.

“You saw something.” Guymon’s words formed a statement, not a question.

Tristan whirled around with a gasp ready to rend, limb from limb, anything or anyone who dare touch him. He looked Guymon up and down ensuring he wasn’t merely another figment of his imagination.

Guymon, dressed in a black long-sleeved thermal shirt and black yoga pants, only continued to watch Tristan knowingly with piercingly dark eyes from beneath his tangle of side-swept, chin-length black mohawk. Tristan struggled for a moment as he questioned his own sanity. Bile rose in

the back of his throat as the mysterious scent of burning paper filled his sinuses causing him to gag for a moment and cough. He felt like crying suddenly and buckled to his knees, the chesty coughs wracking him as if he might succumb to pneumonia. He wanted to pray, but realized he had forgotten how to or to whom, at least with any real conviction. The concept that he now resided outside the jurisdiction of menial mortal begging for salvation seared his heart like a branding iron. The only true prayer he could muster was that he would open his eyes one day to find it had all just been one long bad dream.

Barefoot, Guymon crossed the room like a shadow separating from the whole of night to close the backdoor with a soft metal click. He waited patiently for Tristan to recover, his hands buried in the pockets of his pants. "I don't think he will come near here."

Tristan's throat was raw, his voice rasping as he finally found it to reply. "He? It's a he? You know who's following us?" He stared up at Guymon from where he knelt.

The harsh bare porch light glinted off of the ends of the short silver rod through Guymon's right eyebrow as he tilted his head slightly. "I believe so. But, if I'm correct, it's not good news. Right now, it's just a theory, but it's the only one I've got." He offered his left hand, wrapped in strips of black cloth like a kick-boxer and decorated with several silver rings.

Tristan ignored Guymon's hand. For the moment he did not trust the reality around him and touching palms with the stranger felt like he would somehow cement a fate he was not yet aware of. For two decades Dorian had riveted shut their entire existence with fiery sermons about the danger of allowing the outside world in. Just because Dorian had shockingly thwarted his own iron governance did not mean

## *The Lineage*

that Tristan was ready to prostrate his secrets for anyone. With a grunt, he stood. Nervously he cast one final glance out the backdoor.

“Don’t worry about him,” Guymon said as he returned his hand to his pocket and began to leave the room. “I don’t need his fucked up energy in the house at the moment.”

Hostility bristled along Tristan’s neck—he stared at the back of Guymon’s head as he disappeared into the living room and then turned the corner at the far end. Wrapping his arms around his chest to try to still the trembling, he swallowed hard and forced his feet to move forward. Though his reptilian fight-or-flight instinct hissed in favor of fleeing, an oil slick of intuition pooled beneath the surface of his skin with the knowledge that whatever hunted them would follow him to the ends of the Earth. There was a certain freedom in the idea, but also a resignation that threatened to pull him under the riptide of loneliness.

The house was small. However, the word “cozy” could most definitely not be applied. Though it contained rough, scavenged, second-hand furniture the walls were, for the most part, bare and tinged with the yellow residue of years of cigarette smoke. The structure seemed to hold its breath while simultaneously slowly exhaling one long morbid sigh of exhaustion. The brown carpet beneath Tristan’s boots was threadbare and stained, the wooden coffee table etched deep with crude knife engravings as if it were the trunk of a lover’s tree, and covered with ashtrays and newspapers. In the corners of the room musical instruments, a towering stack of amplifiers and treacherously high piles of books leaned together like old hunting dogs. When Dorian had mentioned he had friends who could help them, this was not what Tristan had envisioned. A bunker lined with guns or a sanctuary emblazoned with wards and seals of protection

would have been preferable. Anything other than this threadbare space would have helped to dissipate the sense of vulnerability that snaked around him growing tighter and tighter with each passing minute.

“Take a seat,” Guymon instructed as Tristan entered the room.

His back was to the door as he rummaged through one of the two bookshelves next to his unmade bed. His fingers dug through an impressive collection of lined leather-bound texts, journals and various arcane metal figurines and ritualistic instruments that felt out of place as if they belonged in a medieval mansion. Through the tight black thermal fabric Tristan could see the impression of four sets of metal rings piercing the flesh to either side of Guymon’s spine. He had seen a few suspension artists in clubs back home, lifted high above the heads of the awe-struck celebration below like darkly angelic marionettes. However, something told Tristan that Guymon’s practice of the art form was not for entertainment.

He tore his gaze nervously away and glanced about the room, which felt far more cave-like than the rest of the house. In the corner near the window, Dorian slouched in a low, crushed-orange velvet armchair. Dorian’s long legs were drawn up, his arms folded across his knees before his face. He watched Tristan with a strange mixture of intrigue and suspicion as if he was suddenly dangerously wary of the man he had chosen to become part of his tribe.

Tristan’s throat became dry as desert sand as the wave of hostility rolled through him. Carefully he sidestepped the pile of books and papers at the end of the bed and found an exposed corner of a black leather storage chest to perch upon between the nearest bookcase and a tall wooden dresser. As he passed he caught a sideways reflection of himself in the

## *The Lineage*

mottled, dusty mirror attached to the top—his paler than white skin amidst the cracking lead enamel caused his eyes to glow with a feral ferocity, his mouth drawn in a hard line that seemed unnatural and terrifying in its permanence.

“Your last name is Faust?” Guymon pulled several volumes from the shelf and sat on the edge of the bed where he began to studiously thumb through the texts.

“Yeah. What of it?” Tristan said, rather more defensively than he had intended.

Guymon looked up over the top of the book he was holding and pinned Tristan with a hard moment of silence before returning to his research with one eyebrow slightly cocked. “Have you ever heard of the legend of Dr. Faust?”

“Wasn’t that a play by some German guy?” Tristan asked, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he stared at the floor between his feet. He remembered the play from his senior high school English class, though the details were foggy. “Yeah. What does that have to do with anything?”

Guymon did not look up. “Patience, grasshopper.” The light from a passing vehicle sliced through the closed mini-blinds next to Dorian casting a long searchlight through the dusty low-lit room. “Do you remember the tale?”

Tristan frowned and cast a glance back and forth between Dorian and Guymon. “Some guy named Dr. Faust sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for immortality.”

“Not exactly.” Dorian leaned back in his chair, removing his hat and placing it over his right knee. “He was a fifteenth-century scholar and alchemist who committed his soul to eternal damnation in exchange for limitless power and knowledge during his mortal life.”

“Okay, but it’s a work of fiction,” Tristan replied.

“Yes and no,” Guymon said. “All fiction is based on

some element of truth.”

“So, what part is real?” Tristan scoffed. “The scholar part, or the Devil? If you tell me the Devil is real, I’m out of here.”

Guymon laid the book open on his lap and stared at Tristan as if he were an impetuous little boy. A small wry smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. The light from the bedside lamp cast a strange yellow tint to the whites of his eyes, rimmed with thick dark lashes, lending to them an unnerving feline quality. “You jump to some mighty conclusions on your own. Then again, who am I to dismiss them? I’m only here to offer my insight on your situation. But I need you to be open to hearing me out.”

Tristan drew a shaky breath and sat back, straightening his shoulders as he struggled to settle the snarling pit of unrest at the center of his soul. He rubbed his wrists where the knife had cut deep, though no physical ache could be felt. He nodded slowly. “My apologies. It has been a long road to here.”

Guymon nodded. “No doubt. From what Dorian has told me, it has been an outright nightmare.”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” Tristan muttered. “I’m listening.” He gestured for Guymon to continue.

Guymon nodded. “As I was saying, all fiction is based on some element of reality. In the case of Faust the original tale was based on an actual magician and alchemist by the name of Dr. Johann Georg Faust who resided in northern Germany. Not only was he exceedingly intelligent, he was also mad, going from town to town with his potions to con people out of their money with fake cures. In the 1500’s he was expelled from Ehrfut by the Franciscan monk Dr. Klinge because he supposedly told the monk that he had made a

## *The Lineage*

pact with the Devil, citing that he trusted the Devil more than God.”

Guymon picked up the open book in his lap and handed it to Tristan, tapping the yellowed left page where an engraving of Faust stared ominously at the reader through faded black lines.

Guymon continued, “He wandered throughout Europe where stories of his ability to conjure spirits and manifest objects out of thin air continued to grow, as did the number of cities he was forced out of for his claims about the Devil. Supposedly, he met his fate in 1541 in Wittenberg where locals reported that the Devil ripped him apart and scattered his remains on a dung heap with his eyes glued to a nearby wall.”

“My money is on one of the guys he conned getting even.” Tristan snorted in a failed attempt to lighten the oppressive atmosphere.

Neither Guymon nor Dorian laughed, though Guymon’s strange smile continued to tweak the corners of his mouth, the mark of practiced patience. “Perhaps. We’ll never know for certain. That’s why they call them ‘legends’,” he replied.

“I still don’t see what this has to do with my last name or the murder of our friends?” Tristan closed the book and handed it back to Guymon.

“Honestly, I’m not quite sure either, yet, but I know I saw Blind Mouse and Diana in visions, dreams. They started a few weeks ago, right before the time Dorian says Blind Mouse was murdered. The first dream was so incredibly vivid, so gruesome, that of a white mouse racing through a field, hunted by a great black hawk. Just a couple of nights ago another dream of the Lady of the Lake rising from a burning pool and melting like a candle. I wish I could have understood the meaning of those visions sooner.” Guymon

shook his head sadly.

“I had yet another dream in which the man you saw in that etching came to me. He said ‘The end was not the end. So many souls until there was but one. He comes.’ I woke up in a cold sweat and was unable to go back to sleep.” Guymon shivered. “I didn’t know who the man was, but something made me look for this book on the Faust legend. The next thing I knew Dorian arrives with you in tow and the tragic news of your tribe—”

“Me?” Tristan cut Guymon short. His eyes, wide with disbelief, shot back and forth between Guymon and Dorian. “Just because my last name is Faust doesn’t mean I’m connected to some crazy legend about an alchemist! Or the Devil, for that matter!”

“Are you certain?” Guymon raised an eyebrow. “Do you know your family lineage?”

“Uh, well, no, not exactly,” Tristan stuttered. In honesty he could only trace his roots back to his great grandfather who had supposedly owned a shoe store in Pennsylvania. The rest of his lineage was a complete mystery—he had never taken the time to investigate it.

“It might be worth taking a look at, if you have the time to stay here for a few more nights.” Guymon directed the question to Dorian. “From what you’ve told me, something terrible is stalking you and I don’t think it’s found what it’s looking for just yet.” He turned back to Tristan. “I don’t believe in coincidence. Do you?”

Adrenaline raced through Tristan’s veins making it hard to process what Guymon was insinuating. “You...you really think the Devil is after us? That’s what you meant by ‘he’, ‘he won’t come near here’? And you think I’m to blame?” His words shook like the walls of an old boxcar barreling down a forgotten rail line.

## *The Lineage*

The subtle smile faded from the corners of Guymon's mouth. "Blame is a harsh word. It's not like anyone would ask for such a thing. It is the worse-case scenario. Let's pray I'm wrong."

Tristan stared at Guymon in silence, too shocked and terrified suddenly to form words. *But I didn't make a deal with the Devil*, he thought.

He stared at Dorian searching for answers in his leader's face and finding none. There was a strange tension in Dorian's posture, as if he was biting back on words he dared not speak aloud. Icy dread slithered through Tristan's chest—a dark secret lay secreted behind Dorian's pale eyes.

*Or did I?*

"We'll stay," Dorian said. "You've helped me in the past. I trust you can again. Besides, running hasn't seemed to help us so far."

Guymon nodded. "I'll move you all to a safe house just outside of town until I finish the research. It shouldn't take me more than a day or two at most, hopefully."

Tristan finally found his voice again, though it was barely more than a befuddled whisper. "You...you really believe this stuff is real, don't you?"

"Ask yourself this—if your kind is real, who's to say everything else isn't?"

"But, even if I am somehow connected to this...legend... and the Devil really is after us, what exactly can we do about it?" Tristan shook his head in disbelief.

Dark sympathy shadowed Guymon's features. "You start praying, praying to whatever force you believe in and ready yourself to fight back."

## CHAPTER 6



They had gathered Neil from his frozen nest beneath the bare branches of the tree, their boots breaking the misguided magic written in the snow around him. In a silence that could have disturbed Death itself they left. Neil curled into a fetal position on the backseat and flung his arms over his head whimpering while claiming to have lost use of his legs. Dorian and Tristan left him to nurse his imaginary wounds and climbed into the front seats of their stolen vehicle. With Guymon leading the way in his tiny silver hatchback ahead of them, they wound out of the suburban neighborhood and inched out onto the highway.

“What the hell is going on?” Tristan stared forward through the rhythmic thumping of the useless windshield wipers. “There’s something you’re not telling me. I can feel it.”

“I know as much as you do,” Dorian replied quietly as he watched Guymon’s taillights as if in a trance.

## *The Lineage*

Tristan turned to study the side of Dorian's face. It was exactly the same as it had been when Tristan first met him, not a single line etched or hair grown gray. "I didn't do anything to make this happen." Inside, however, Tristan's inner voice followed through with, *Did you? No, no. He wouldn't...he wouldn't. He's sworn to protect us. He's our Maker. Then again, he was ready to leave Neil at the gas station and he hasn't shed a single tear for Blind Mouse. He doesn't even seem that disturbed by Diana's death...*

Dorian was more stoic and withdrawn than Tristan had ever known him to be, a faint echo of the epitome of dangerous charisma that had seduced Tristan away from his safe little world. He missed Blind Mouse suddenly with a raw wave of sorrow as if her death had been only yesterday. She had always had a way of finding the obscured pinpoint of light in any dark night and when she had sensed that dark night was within Tristan himself she had wrapped her skinny arms about his chest and squeezed until he was forced to exhale or break ribs.

"There!" She would exclaim, grinning up at him with her freckled impish features and perfectly rolled auburn dreads. "I forced the demon out!" Taking him by the hand, she would then declare, "Now, we celebrate!"

He never questioned what they were celebrating or why, but their childish laughter would rile Neil into pulling out the old fiddle he kept in the trailer and Dorian would pay a kind visit to the liquor store to "purchase" wine and whiskey. Those early years had been painted with a surreal serenity that seemed unbecoming of the savages they were. The magical moments around the campfire purged their sins allowing them to awaken the following night renewed and whole. Now it seemed that the luster had faded exposing the rusted out body beneath. Dorian's profile was a harsh outline

in the halo of the truck's headlights.

He neither blinked nor breathed beneath Tristan's unwavering scrutiny, his mind a million miles away. After a long moment of silence punctured only by the sound of snow chains crunching through the highway slush, Tristan finally relented, dropping his gaze to the glove compartment box. Neil moaned from the back seat. Tristan glanced up into the rearview mirror. For a moment he thought he saw a dark stain across the front of Neil's army jacket, but then the Jeep hit a pothole jarring them all and the illusion vanished.

Dorian turned the radio on. "All the colors I can take are burning in your eyes..." The trembling deep voice of the male singer ricocheted through the vehicle pierced by the lament of a violin and single amp electric guitar, an anthem for the back road gypsy of tomorrow. Tristan replayed the deaths of Blind Mouse and Diana in his mind in visceral detail, forcing himself to relive every single second to see if he could remember any tiny detail that might submit evidence for his guilt. As the jeep rumbled to a stop outside the Salt Lake City border the only note of distinction that came to his mind was the shadow mass he had noticed in the bar in New York City. No one else had seen the shadow or, if they had, not testified so.

Tristan lifted his eyes at the sound of the killed engine rumbling to a slumber. As the radiator hissed and the metal cooled with barely audible clicks and moans, the winter wind buffeting the car like a rude older brother boxing its ears, Dorian turned the headlights off sending the eerie landscape beyond into a prison of black and blue bruises. Fifty feet or so ahead, a two-story farmhouse hunkered like an old gray barn cat against the night, a single light burning in a downstairs window. For a moment they sat in silence as Guymon exited the car ahead and gestured for them to stay

## *The Lineage*

for a moment until he had approached the door of the safe house.

“If I’m somehow responsible, I’m on my own? Aren’t I?” Tristan whispered, suddenly feeling incredibly young and fragile.

Dorian detached his right hand that had appeared welded to the steering wheel for the past twenty minutes. One by one he unwrapped his long fingers until he flexed his hand, cracking the joints in unison where they met his palm. He looked at Tristan. “I will always do whatever I can to protect you. I need you to realize that what’s happening would have happened regardless of whether or not I had made you a member of this family.”

Ahead, through the blizzard, Guymon, bundled in a long black wool coat and a thick red scarf wrapped multiple times around his neck and covering the lower half of his face, spoke to a balding older man in a blue parka on the front porch of the house. Occasionally the man would cast pensive, worried glances in the direction of the truck. Finally, he nodded and turned back towards the front door, but not before Tristan saw him cross himself and lift the crucifix around his neck to kiss it. Guymon trudged back through the snow. As he neared the driver’s side of the Jeep Dorian rolled the window down half way.

“Bishop Knob is ready for you,” Guymon said.

“Bishop?” Dorian sneered. “I thought you worked with more alternative powers?”

Guymon stared with hard black eyes over the edge of the red scarf. “Metaphysics can only help a bastard like you so much. Sometimes religion has its place.” When Dorian did not respond he pointed back down the road where they had traveled and then towards the house. “You may have noticed the DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS signs every few feet.

Obey them. If you don't you'll end up in a million pieces and then there isn't a magic I know of that will be bringing you back. This place is rigged with more explosives than an Iraq desert."

"What the hell are you guys expecting out here?" Tristan balked as he glanced over his shoulder and then out the passenger window, trying to pick out the markers for the dynamite through the shadows and snow.

"Anything and everything that walks, crawls or slithers. The house itself has enough wards and seals to keep out anything incorporeal." Guymon's tone was dark, absent of jest.

Dorian stared at him, unmoved. "Are you sure about that?"

"Do you want my help or not? You came to me! Where is this attitude coming from?" Guymon's anger was starting to edge through his voice.

"Sorry. I'm just not taking any chances right now. We've lost two in a matter of weeks and there's never been a warning of any sort. I'm on edge." Dorian rolled up the window. "Wake Neil up," he ordered Tristan gruffly and opened the door, slamming it shut behind him.

Tristan watched Guymon and Dorian walk towards the house in silence. For a split second he thought about darting through the woods to see how quickly he could find a landmine. His soul felt like an ice cube lodged in his throat, every muscle in his body tensing painfully. On creaking vinyl he turned and stared at Neil's inert form. He was curled up with his back to Tristan, his right arm clamped over his ear as if awaiting a falling bomb.

"I know you're awake," Tristan muttered.

"Fuck you," Neil said into the back seat.

"Did you hear what Guymon said about the

## *The Lineage*

explosives?”

“Yeah. Fuck him too,” Neil grumbled.

Tristan sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Well you have to get out of the car. You can stay here but I think you’ll be safer inside. Plus, there’s that little thing called ‘dawn’ I think you’d rather avoid?”

Neil responded by uncurling like a statue coming to life on cracked, stained vinyl in a back draft of road-stale rags. Without a word, he opened the door and stumbled out into the night. Tristan watched him for a moment, unsure if what he felt was fear, pity or resentment. Without the hot dry breath of the heater blowing on his face and feet he suddenly realized just how cold he was. Not “cold” in the sense that he was disturbed by the elements, but more that he was an element himself, slicing a thin line between the worlds of the living and dead like a blade of regret. He rubbed his hands together, blowing on them in an instinctual human pantomime that brought little comfort, and exited the vehicle.

He trudged through the snow towards the house. As he stepped up onto the front porch the door opened. He froze with one foot still in the snow and looked up.

“Welcome.” Bishop Knob’s voice was deep and warm and absent of judgment. “Let’s get you inside where it’s safe.” Knob stared warily out over Tristan’s head with gray eyes deep set in a crow’s nest of wrinkles beneath dark gray eyebrows.

Tristan’s gaze dropped from the Bishop’s face to the 12-gauge shotgun gripped in his left hand. It had the looks of a weapon that had served its time in the worst of trenches. He nodded and continued onto the porch. Guymon stood in the shadows just to the right of the door, his black hair and shoulders dusted with snow.

“I will contact you tomorrow night to let you know

where I am with the research. I will try to make it as quick a process as possible.” He stepped closer to Tristan, lowering his voice slightly. His eyes glittered in the light from the open doorway. “Trust your instincts. It is all you have right now. Something tells me you haven’t been really listening. It’s time to open your senses. I don’t believe there haven’t been signs before now,” he said with a raised eyebrow.

“What am I listening for?” Tristan felt embarrassed, as if these were things he should have learned how to do before now, skills that Dorian should have taught him.

“If I knew that you wouldn’t have to stay in a safe house,” Guymon replied bluntly. “But if there is a warning, and you’re connected to all of this somehow, you might be the only one who can hear it.” He turned and trudged back towards his car without another word.

It was not the answer Tristan had wanted, but if there was anything Tristan was good at, it was being quiet and observing his surroundings. Bishop Knob stepped aside to allow Tristan to pass behind him. He paused a moment longer, listening to the howls of the wind assaulting the house before following suit.

Inside, Bishop Knob leaned the shotgun up against the wall and commenced a series of intimidating steel locks set into the door. Where windows had once been to either side of the door were large sheets of the same silver metal. Each panel was etched with a wheel consisting of thirteen spokes of arcane symbols of which Tristan only recognized a few.

He took a step back and slowly turned in a circle—apart from the formidable metal shutters and door the house was quaintly furnished with a cozy worn plaid couch, armchair and polished oak coffee table. It held the air of nostalgia for a family that had once been quite content with the quiet daily routines of simple country life. Upon the walls were several

## *The Lineage*

family photos in sturdy unpretentious wood frames beside crosses and cross-stitch revealing an older woman's touch, though Tristan could distinctly sense there was no female present in the house, nor had there been for some time.

He approached an oil painting of a little girl hanging above the red brick fireplace, now also sealed shut by a panel of engraved metal. No more than perhaps ten, the girl depicted was dressed in a frilly yellow sundress, her red hair pulled up into a ponytail with a cheerful yellow ribbon. The painting radiated joy and warmth, a moment on a sunny spring day captured forever in time, yet behind it, in the distance between the limbs of the carefully placed trees was a darkness Tristan could swear writhed as his eyes moved over the canvas.

"My wife did that painting about fifteen years ago," Bishop Knob said behind Tristan.

Tristan glanced sheepishly over his shoulder at the Bishop as if he had been caught spying on something forbidden. "It's beautiful. She is very talented."

"Was," replied Bishop Knob. "She *was* very talented. So was Jessica, our daughter. Quite the pianist."

Tristan turned around. "What happened to them?"

The Bishop picked up his gun and placed it in the rack on the wall beside the couch where three other shotguns hung. "Demonic possession," he said quietly as he removed his coat, tossing it over the back of the armchair. He crossed himself before turning to face Tristan and Dorian again. "My wife, despite all of my protests, insisted on pursuing her passion for paranormal investigation. Something followed her home one night. I tried to save her, but I wasn't strong enough. She killed Jessica and then came for me." He fell silent for a moment, his gaze traveling up to the portrait of his daughter. "I think you can fill in the rest."

“Jesus!” Neil hissed under his breath and stared at the ground between his feet where he stood, just behind Dorian.

“My condolences,” Dorian said quietly, his left arm instinctually snaking backwards to grip tight to Neil’s forearm to still his fidgeting.

Bishop Knob looked back and forth between Tristan and Dorian, a strange suspicion flickering over the bloodshot surfaces of his eyes. “Where are you boys from?”

“All over,” Dorian replied as he watched the Bishop with a feral calmness.

“All over.” Bishop Knob walked the narrow passage between the coffee table, Neil and Dorian to the stairs just beyond. “I’ve heard that one before.” He paused at the railing, his hand lingering on the wood. “You boys better follow me. We have a few things to discuss to make sure your time here is safe.” He gestured for the trio to follow suit as he ducked beneath the overhang of the stairwell and opened a small door that led to the cellar.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” Neil hissed at Dorian, his eyes wide until the whites shown.

“I trust Guymon,” Dorian said and disappeared through the entrance of the cellar.

Tristan’s insides slithered and coiled as his boots struck the old wooden stairs with a dull, echoing thud as he descended into the bare bulb illuminated depths of the basement. Two steep staircases zigzagged to an unnatural depth for a cellar, leading to another door of the same heavy steel as used on the main entrance. The door stood ajar, another shaft of harsh yellow-white light streaming out in an angular swath across the cold cement floor. Tristan could hear Neil’s frantic hummingbird heartbeat just behind him, his shallow shaky breath rank and diseased through the dank

## *The Lineage*

perfume of dust and winter hibernation.

*I belong down here, in the earth.* The thought skipped across Tristan's mind, hollow and unbidden. He shivered, his stomach tightening as if a sorrowful spirit had passed through his center in a sudden gust. *I don't know how to pray. I've never wanted to. I don't think I deserve to. I wonder if the Bishop believes I do?*

He tried to shake off the stream of doubts as he entered beneath the questioning gaze of Bishop Knob. The room resembled a wartime bomb shelter complete with shelves of canned food, ammunition and candles on one side and an army cot on the other. A toilet sat in one corner next to a simple white sink affixed to the cement wall like a prison cell. A bare bulb hung from the center of the low ceiling suspended from a ratty old brown cord while over the sink another blinding light was trapped behind a metal cage fixture. Along the edges of the walls near the ceiling and floor lines of Latin were written in black paint. Tristan frowned as he read the script attempting in vain to decipher even a small bit of the text. Failing, he dropped his gaze and stepped aside to allow Neil to enter.

Heat singed his sleeve. Yanking his arm away instinctively he turned to find a large altar to his left. Stepping further into the room he turned to face it, his lips parting in awe and a soft exhale of breath.

A memory flashed through his mind, transporting him briefly to a sunny afternoon after his seventeenth birthday when he had slipped into the strange little red prayer chapel outside of the church on the corner near his house. Fiery warm light from a line of red glass votives on the altar at the end enveloped the tiny sanctuary that held three narrow rows of pews, enough for twelve people at most. The scent of the old, oiled wood and candle wax had erased the world

of humming SUVs, chirping birds and his own trivial adolescent concerns. Transfixed and humbled he had spent the afternoon sitting quietly in the back pew among the shadows watching the candlelight play off of the old wood crucifix in the center of the far wall. He had never been religious, nor had his family ever even discussed religion unless it was in regards to current political debates. Yet, he recognized the significance of such devout symbolism. It registered deep within him and its power was undeniable if merely for the energy others had poured into it with their conviction and their fear.

The altar before him now evoked just such a fear, its mammoth crucifix a horrific portrait of the mangled and twisted suffering of Christ upon the cross, painted blood running down the lengths of his arms and legs to drip onto the magenta velvet wrapped about its base. To either side four rows of white candles blazed with still uniform flames.

A touch upon his shoulder caused Tristan to jump.

Dorian stood beside him staring up at the altar. “Well, we didn’t burst into flames, now did we?” It felt like a question that should have been delivered with a wink and chuckle, but neither followed.

“This is my sanctuary from evil. It hasn’t failed me, yet. I don’t know what you’re up against and I have a feeling you don’t either, from what Guymon has told me. But, you boys are welcome to stay here until he returns,” Bishop Knob said as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Neil sidled up to the altar and knocked twice on its wooden base. The Bishop frowned.

“Sorry.” Neil shrugged his shoulders and wandered away. “Force of habit. With that ‘never failed me yet’ stuff I like to not tempt Fate.”

A moment of awkward silence followed.

## *The Lineage*

“I don’t believe in Fate anymore. She’s too fickle a beast to be trusted,” Knob replied with a cold, hard stare at the side of Neil’s down-turned face. “I am still a man of God, but I’ve seen too much to trust in anything except that which I have tried and tested by my own hands. I’ve spent the last fifteen years fortifying myself against the unseen. Knock all you like if it helps you sleep at night.”

*We don’t*, Tristan thought. *That’s the problem.*

“Anyways, you’re welcome to this place, but let me explain a few things to you.” He pointed two fingers like a cocked gun at them. “I’m watching you.” He pointed to the camera in the corner of the room. “Just because you’re friends with Guymon doesn’t mean you have a free pass in my home. Especially if you have some sort of hell on your heels. But I will give you the room I usually sleep in because you are travelers in need.”

Guilt soured Tristan’s stomach. “We’re so very sorry,” he whispered.

Dorian’s grip on his shoulder tightened painfully. Tristan fought to not wince under the pressure. Through the fabric of his coat he could feel Dorian’s rising bloodlust like an arc of electricity jumping from one live wire to another. None of them had taken the time in their haste to feed and Knob’s forthrightness was beginning to saw at the edges of Dorian’s restraint.

“We are thankful to you for your generosity,” Dorian said.

The Bishop nodded, his eyes flickering from one of them to another like a lightning bug. “Guymon told me you were old friends that he’d had some unexplainable visions about. He said he was worried about you and that you needed spiritual protection, as well as shelter, the best I could offer. He didn’t tell me anything more than that.” He paused. “I’m

giving you this opportunity to elaborate.”

“We are what he says we are,” Dorian responded calmly.

Knob tilted his head slightly as he fixed his attention on Dorian. He was blatantly unmoved by Dorian’s prowess. His lips twitched in an attempt at a wry smile. “I can’t help you unless I know the details.”

“The fact is,” Tristan pried his shoulder from beneath Dorian’s grip as subtly as he could, “we don’t know what’s happening. That’s why we are here, in Salt Lake City. Two of our family members have been murdered, but we don’t know by what.” He shrugged, casting an uneasy sidelong glance at the menacing altar. “Guymon seems to think the Devil is somehow involved...” His voice trailed off as his eyes traced the lines of glistening red blood down the legs of Christ to the polished brass base of the crucifix. “That’s all we know.”

“Obviously or you wouldn’t be here,” Knob said with a derisive snort. He took a step towards Tristan. “The Devil is in everything on Earth.”

A wave of energy washed over Tristan causing every muscle in his body to tense beneath the scrutiny of the Bishop. He stared wide-eyed into Knob’s own steady gaze like a schoolboy caught stealing.

“I know you’re not human,” Knob said quietly. It was not a threat—there was no malice in the holy man’s words, but it was a warning nonetheless. “Of that I am quite certain. Why Guymon has chosen to help you and entrust you to me, of all people, when I have made it my quest to destroy creatures like you for over a decade... Who knows?” He turned to face Dorian. “But if I am your last resort you’d best start praying. This space is consecrated, the walls embedded with talismans and amulets to ward off the most formidable

## *The Lineage*

forces. Every inch of this room is blessed. But nothing is perfect.”

He pulled a key from his pocket. “The room locks from the inside. This is the only key. Once you’re in here, if something gets through I won’t be able to help you unless you let me in.” He started to hand the key to Dorian, but pulled back, a strange flicker of distrust narrowing his eyes slightly. He turned instead to Tristan and placed the gold key in his upturned palm. “I’ll monitor the activity via the camera and keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary.”

“Where will you sleep?” Tristan asked quietly as his fingers curled over the key. The metal felt strangely warm against his icy skin after being in Knob’s pocket.

“I don’t sleep that much these days,” Knob replied. “And when I do, it’s with my eyes wide open.” Walking towards the open door, he paused at the threshold. His demeanor changed, his shoulders slumping slightly as he shoved his hands in the pockets of his blue jeans. “I’m sorry about your friends. I do hope Guymon can figure out what’s after you. I know what it’s like to be hunted.” He shook his head and grimaced. “There’s absolutely no worse feeling.”

## CHAPTER 7



They watched in silence as Bishop Knob left without another word. The sound of his heavy footsteps climbing the wooden stairs echoed sadly through the darkness beyond the sanctuary. Dorian walked past Tristan and closed the door. Taking the key from Tristan he locked it and stepped away. Neil wandered over to the shelves where he began to methodically inspect each item, lifting the cans one at a time to read the labels like a scientist evaluating the results of his latest experiment. He reached the end of the shelf and opened a large red metal toolbox.

“So we just wait?” Tristan asked Dorian, trying to quell the surge of panic causing his lungs to feel as if they were on fire. “Here? In this...sanctuary?”

Dorian sat down on the edge of the cot and stared at the cement floor. “Do you have a better plan?” His eyes cut upwards, accusatory and angry.

Tristan glanced at the locked door and then up at the

## *The Lineage*

Latin inscription on the wall above. “Do you really believe what Guymon said about that legend? He can’t be serious, could he?” He met Dorian’s gaze again. “It’s just a writer’s twisting of the facts. It’s not real. Dr. Faust was just a conman and a crazy one at that. And that’s if he existed at all!”

Dorian was silent for a long moment before relinquishing the staring match. He sighed, reaching up to rub his face in an all-too-human gesture of weariness. “I don’t know. How do you define ‘real’?”

Tristan took a step towards Dorian. “You never told us how you met or why he’s so fucking important to you? I’ve been with this tribe for two decades and never once has his name come up. Guymon couldn’t be more than thirty years old. The math isn’t adding up.”

“He’s far older than he appears.” Dorian stared at the ground.

“What? He’s one of us? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” Tristan was aghast. “That’s impossible! I would have sensed it!”

“No, not one of us. He’s—”

“Holy shit! Guys, look at this!” Neil was staring into the contents of the toolbox. He whirled around. In his right hand he held a long-barreled handgun while in his left was a silver flask engraved with a cross. “Is this what I think it is?”

Dorian held out his hand. Neil nervously turned over the gun to his Maker. Dorian inspected the weapon, opening the chamber to withdraw one of the bullets. “Well, well. The Bishop is prepared for anything.”

“What is it?” Neil asked in a neurotically quavering whisper.

“Silver bullets,” Dorian said and grinned. His fangs had elongated slightly in his need to feed. He placed the bullet back into the chamber and slammed it shut.

“As in werewolves?” Neil scoffed with a nervous laugh that fell short as Dorian raised the gun and leveled it at his chest.

“Exactly.” Dorian cocked the gun, staring down the site at Neil.

Neil swallowed hard, his hands shaking until he was forced to hold the flask with two hands to keep from dropping it. “Why...why are you pointing that thing at me? I’m not a werewolf.”

“No, but I’ve always wondered what silver bullets would do to us,” Dorian said calmly.

“Dorian. The cameras,” Tristan hissed, glancing nervously up at the tiny digital eye in the corner of the ceiling. “He already suspects us. Please...”

Dorian’s smile faded. He returned the safety on the gun and lowered it for a moment before raising it again, pointing it this time at Tristan.

“You hate us, don’t you?” The question came to Tristan from the abyss of his own doubt. He had never wanted to believe such a sentiment could be wagered against those Dorian had hand-selected to be part of the tribe, but now he suddenly questioned every word Dorian had ever uttered.

“Why would you say such a thing?” Dorian asked, the gun still steadily pointed at Tristan.

“You’re pointing a gun at us,” Tristan said quietly. “And not just any gun.” Briefly the desire for the bullet in the chamber aimed at him would truly end his existence crossed his mind.

“That doesn’t mean I hate you. Besides, this won’t hurt us.” Dorian lowered the weapon, stroking it like a docile cat. “It takes so much more.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Neil tucked himself into a fetal ball in the corner of the room with his

## *The Lineage*

arms tightly wrapped over his head. Dorian stretched out on the cot and stared up at the ceiling, the gun resting on his chest, while Tristan sat cross-legged before the altar watching the slowly melting white wax beneath the yellow flames. His jaw ached as if from clenching his teeth, his fangs elongated from his Thirst as his mind made real the painted blood on Christ's limbs. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, listening to the slow thunder of his heart in an attempt to steady his racing thoughts.

*Please*, he begged silently, but unsure to what entity he attempted to pray. *I'm so very tired. I just want to go home. Please let me go home.*

The sound of something metal being drawn slowly across the concrete above him caused his pulse to skip time. Opening his eyes he cautiously lifted his gaze to the ceiling. "Did you hear that?" he asked quietly.

"Hear what?" Dorian replied.

Scurrying like tiny claws slipped about the perimeter of the room before dropping to the floor just beneath the cot where Dorian was lying. Tristan stared in mute terror at the clustered darkness beneath the bed, his breath caught in his throat. Dorian sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the cot.

"What the hell did you hear? Tristan?" Dorian waved his hand in front of Tristan's face to break his attention.

Tristan started, drawing a ragged breath as he scrambled to his feet. "Nothing," he breathed. "My nerves are just shot." He rose and walked to the far side of the room and slid down with his back pressed against the wall.

Dorian stared hard at Tristan, the gun still gripped loosely in his right hand. "You're going to have to pull it together. We already have one that is falling apart." He waved the gun in Neil's direction. "We can't afford to have you unravel as

well or we'll never survive this."

Tristan stared back at Dorian. "How can you be so matter-of-fact about all of this? This is our family, our tribe. Blind Mouse and Diana are gone. They're never coming back. Anyone one of us in this room could be next."

"What have I always told you?" He stood up, tucked the gun into the back of his pants beneath his coat and crossed the room. He squatted down in front of Tristan. "Our true strength lies within our unbreakable connection to one another. We must help each other to survive. This world was not built for free spirits such as ourselves. Blind Mouse and Diana were examples of how perilous our condition is. We let our guards down and the universe demonstrated its might."

"Its might? That wasn't a tornado or tsunami that killed them! That was evil, whatever it was! And now we're relying on humans for protection from something we can neither see nor sense. Our powers are useless. Look at Neil, for Christ's sake! Do you really think he can fight off anything? Look at him!" The sound of dry brittle bone splintering echoed through Tristan's mind as the tempered shell around his soul fractured under the weight of his fear. All of Dorian's words seemed to ring hollow to Tristan now, as useless as a broken light bulb.

From beneath his arms, now furiously shaking as if from shock, Neil's cracking voice muttered, "I will not argue with that."

Tristan stared at Dorian pleadingly, though what he sought in his begging he did not even know himself. "Do you see, Dorian? Do you see? If our survival is based on only you and I, I hate to say it, but I don't think we have a chance. You're the only one here with any true power and even you could not save them."

## *The Lineage*

Before Tristan could flinch, the back of Dorian's fist collided with Tristan's cheekbone slamming the back of his skull into the cement wall behind him. Tristan slumped against the cold cement, the palm of his right hand pressed against the wall to steady himself until the darkness faded from the periphery of his sight. Slowly he pushed himself upright with a grunt as he felt his cheekbone setting itself again, the bruise already fading from his porcelain skin.

"We're not free anymore. I'm beginning to think that we never really were," he said quietly. He looked up at Dorian, wiping the trace of blood from the corner of his mouth.

Silence slithered into the room, spreading itself low and thick through the air with a suffocating deliberateness. Tristan waited for that familiar heavy tug at the center of his chest indicating the approach of dawn, but instead, what seemed like hours passed without the slow sinking tide of Sleep. His face felt numb where Dorian had struck him, his breath shallow and icy when he breathed at all. He closed his eyes and tried to force a dream to manifest, anything to transport him to a place far from the world he was now trapped in, even though he had not dreamed in decades. Fickle sorrow supplemented the oblivion between waking and a state all too like death for him to dwell upon it for long. Yet even that would have been a welcome reprieve from the sound of Neil's nails scratching his own arms until he drew blood beneath his clothes and the sight of Dorian's back facing him as he lay upon the cot across the room. They were a broken shell of the fierce band they had been—an image of extinction.

Behind his mind's eye the image of a white rat scurried forth out of the darkness towards him. It paused and sat back on its haunches to stare at Tristan with beady red eyes. Around its neck, suspended from a red string, dangled a heavy iron

key like those used in old prisons. The rat clawed frantically at the key, its whiskers twitching as it bared its tiny white teeth, its mouth opening, eerily absent of squeaks or squeals. The string appeared to be tightening, slowly drawing the key upwards as it cut deep into the rat's flesh. Blood seeped from the wound, staining its pristine white coat a deep crimson.

Tristan struggled to open his eyes, but it felt as if they had been stitched shut. The string finally sliced through, severing the rat's head from its jerking body as the key clattered to the floor beside the corpse. A wave of heat collided with Tristan's body forcing him back to full consciousness. The scent of blood was thick in his nostrils causing his jaw to ache and mouth to salivate. He swallowed hard, his heart beating high in his throat. His eyes flickered to his right. Neil sat still and quiet in the corner, his knees still drawn up to his chest, his head bowed with his forehead resting against his kneecaps.

"Neil?" Tristan whispered. "Neil, did you feel that?"

His question was answered with silence. Shakily, Tristan crawled over to Neil. His palm landed in something warm and wet on the floor. He jerked back and stared down at his hand, now covered in blood. Around Neil's body a fresh pool had formed, the deepest crimson against the gray concrete. Tristan noticed that Neil's frantic clawing at his own arms had ceased; his heartbeat was silent, his fearful labored breath still.

"Neil?" Tristan whispered again, his voice cracking as he reached forward to touch him.

He pressed his trembling fingers against the side of Neil's skull, just above his ear, in an attempt to stir him. His skin was cold, but that was not unusual. The energy surrounding Neil's body however, was dark and toxic as an oil spill. The light touch was enough to cause Neil's head to turn,

## *The Lineage*

separating from his neck and sliding slightly downwards toward his lap with a wet separation of the remaining tissue exposing the muscles and vertebrae within. Tristan could only stare in mute shock.

It was here. The unnamable evil had found them and slipped past the walls that had held at bay so many supernatural threats for Bishop Knob. Had their mere presence been enough to taint the aura of the room and destroy the sanctity of this place? It seemed irrational and impossible and, yet, here was the proof and neither Tristan, nor Dorian had been able to interfere—there was no power in their mutual presence. Of this Tristan was now resolute. Even Bishop Knob had yet to notice anything for he had not come to check on them. That was, if Knob still lived?

Tristan's heart raced, his body trembling as a fine icy sweat prickled along his body like a fever suddenly breaking. Never before had he experienced a true and utter fear, the purest definition of confrontation with not just mortality, but the abyss of non-existence and existence beyond. His mind was void of thought, his own shallow breath like hissing steam screaming in his ears.

He slowly stood as if afraid a sudden movement might reanimate the decapitated corpse before him. Another wave of heat passed through the room like a scorching back-draft. Tristan gasped, throwing one arm up in front of his face as he stumbled back into the wall. He fumbled in his pocket for the key to the room with his other hand, but found it had vanished. As the heat dissipated the scent of sulfur filled his nostrils, burning and acrid, causing him to choke. Coughing, he stumbled blindly towards the door and grabbed hold of the knob. Before he could process the pain, the searing hot metal had branded his palm, ripping a large patch of skin from his hand as he jerked it back. A furious howl broke free

of his chest, a scream that felt oddly good amidst the torrent of pain and fear encompassing him. Suddenly, the sensation of eyes upon his back, calculating and ancient as a sphinx, caused his blood to turn to ice in his veins. Gripping his mending hand with his other, he swallowed hard and forced himself to turn back to face the room.

A foot from the cot where Dorian appeared to still be sleeping stood a tall slender man dressed in a finely tailored suit of a deep, iridescent blue like raw silk over a perfectly pressed black shirt. The fabric shifted colors in the harsh overhead light with hints of green and purple like an oil slick. Carved ivory buttons trimmed in gold held the coat closed, a neatly folded gold handkerchief sprouting from the left breast pocket like a flame. Tristan's eyes traveled from the man's gleaming wingtip shoes to the ashen, long-fingered hands casually clasped before him, to the features of his face. A portrait too beautifully rendered to be of the physical plane, it was surreally equally exquisitely delicate with the incorporation of the epitome of feline feminine grace while the high cheekbones, an aquiline nose and a strong jaw wrought a harsh masculine strength as if he was chiseled from stone. Large piercing eyes of jade stared back at Tristan beneath long dark lashes and perfectly arched black brows to compliment the thick obsidian sheen of his hair that seemed almost too carefully playful with a single lock falling neatly just to one side of his right eye.

"You don't look anything like Johann," the man said quietly, as if afraid to wake Dorian. "Then again, none of his predecessors have resembled him entirely. At least, since the early years." In the blink of an eye the man was within inches of Tristan with his fingers poised just below Tristan's left eye. "Except around the eyes. Such misery. Such tribulation. Yes, I suppose I can see it there, in a fashion."

## *The Lineage*

Another blink and the man had retreated to the far side of the room leaving Tristan breathless and pressed against the cold hard cement wall, a fine layer of unnatural sweat forming on his body beneath the road-soiled layers of clothing. The man turned, his hands still clasped before him and sat down delicately on the edge of the cot.

“I know I should feel something right now,” the man said with a hint of wistful sadness. “I should feel glee or righteousness or some such abstract ‘emotion’, as I believe would be an appropriate gesture towards your ancestry—a justification, a final testament. You are, after all, the last in a vast legacy. Sadly, though, I feel nothing.” He raised his brilliant green eyes, glowing from within like a foxfire. “You do, though.”

Before Tristan could flinch the man was before him again, pressing his scalding palm into his forehead. Tristan’s fight-or-flight response ignited, the feral beast within roaring to the surface as his survival instinct engaged. With a snarl he grabbed tight to the stranger’s wrist with both hands, his feet leaving the ground to lodge both boots into the ribcage of his assailant. The man stood stalk still, unmovable as if Tristan’s defiance was merely the passing of a simple breeze. Tristan clawed at the man’s arm, certain that his nails, tempered and sharpened by the Blood, would quickly rip flesh and muscle from the man’s limb, yet his assault was invisible.

Time suspended itself upside down, drawn and quartered like a broken mirror until Tristan had trouble discerning reality from dream. The man closed his eyes, his lips twitching in a failed effort at a smile as he listened to the torrent of Tristan’s emotions—rage, fear, sorrow, humiliation, desperation, until the countless flashes of lightning across the surface of his being caused the man before him to shiver, the atmosphere around him quavering like a heat wave. He released Tristan,

turning his back to cross the room once again and take a seat upon the cot. Tristan slid to the floor with a cry of agony, clutching his forehead where the mark of the man's palm still burned furiously.

"Yes. *That* is emotion," the man said with quiet contemplation. "I remember it well, now. How quickly I forget after these many millennia that I must occasionally drink from your species. It is refreshing." He watched Tristan as if watching a peaceful sunset. "It has taken some time to track you all down. Your ancestor was quite prolific for a madman."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tristan crawled to his knees and tried to reach for the doorknob again, willing to sacrifice his entire hand against the burning metal if only he could force it open. He could only reach within an inch of it—grunting, he shoved his hand against the invisible force-field guarding the knob.

The man clicked his tongue and chuckled. "Oh, Tristan, dear boy. Yes you do. You're just not opening your eyes. Your friends, they already knew. That's why they chose you in the first place."

Tristan turned to stare at the man with wild confusion. For a long moment he was silent before finding the courage to voice his confusion. "What do you mean? What did they know already?"

"That little thing Dorian's friend, Guymon, suggested." The man arched one jet-black eyebrow. "Now, of course Goethe took a little, let's say 'artistic license' with history, as have every other writer who has included Johann in their works, but the core is still based on truth. I think you already know that. Your friends... Well, what's left of them—they were watching you for a very long time before they made their presence in your world known to you."

## *The Lineage*

Tristan's gaze flickered to Neil's corpse before sliding to Dorian's back. The taste of deceit was ripe on his tongue, clawing his throat with tiny razor-sharp nails. "They wouldn't?" he whispered.

"Wouldn't they?"

"But, why? What use could they have with me? I was no one before I met them. I was nothing." Tristan could not pry his eyes away from Dorian's slumbering form.

*You know whom you're talking to right now. Don't you? This isn't a hallucination. This is real.* His thoughts were cut short as the stranger answered for his inner dialogue.

"Yes, you're right. My apologies. Perhaps a formal introduction is worth its weight in souls?" The room flickered for a moment. The man reappeared, standing in the middle of the room just inches from Neil's pool of death blood. He curtly half-bowed with a wave of his hand before him. "My name is Lucifer."

Tristan stared at him with his mouth slightly agape, his breath shallow and cold in his lungs. *Close your eyes. Just close your eyes and this will cease to exist.*

Reality flickered and Lucifer was squatting before him again, his head cocked slightly to one side as he considered Tristan. "I'm afraid not. This is reality. Outside of myself and, perhaps, a handful of others, though to a lesser degree, there are few that can truly permanently manipulate it," he paused and sighed, "as I know you are so longing to do right now. You should have listened to Bryn." He reached out and patted Tristan's cheek like a pitying uncle.

His touch felt like an electric shock as his power coursed through his construct and into Tristan's flesh. Tears began to form at the corners of Tristan's eyes that ached as he tried to restrain the show of weakness. The air in the room felt as if it was sucked backwards as every muscle in his

body clenched in a moment of remembered regret, the lump in his throat painful as a shard of granite. The name was synonymous with home—she had been the center of his world, his grounding point and that from which all of his true life had begun to spring forth as he had felt himself awaken into the possibility of a unique identity. The longing for her company was overwhelming, yet he fought against the urge to buckle beneath its weight, holding himself taught and straight against the door behind him as he drew short, shallow breaths exhaled with vehemence. He had taken it all and thrown it in her face as if it had been a lie meant to enslave him.

“I know the shock is beyond description. Don’t try to voice it. You may not be human, but your capabilities are still not within the means to deal with this. I understand. Trust in me, my child. You are beautifully flawed. So much so, that I would have paid you a special visit needless of your significant lineage. Do not worry. I haven’t come to drag you down by your pinky toe into the bowls of Hell. Well, not yet, at least. For now, you have a purpose and I have a proposal for you.” Lucifer paused, pulling back slightly to observe Tristan as a whole, his eyes wandering up and down the shivering vampiric lifeforce before him.

Tristan’s eyes snapped open, a fine sheen of icy sweat breaking out over his body. “A proposal? You mean, a deal?”

Lucifer smirked. “Call it whatever you like. I call it a business proposal. Humans enter into similar arrangements hundreds of times every day.”

Tristan began to shake his head in refusal but Lucifer stopped him with the raising of one finger and an arched eyebrow. “Not so fast. I make no show that my contracts at times cannot lead to, well, questionable decisions on the

## *The Lineage*

part of their human signee. But, really I must, with all due respect, refuse some of that responsibility as, when given what they have asked for, prayed for even, it is then up to that person to manage it and all of the trappings that come with power or money or fame or even the smaller things such as a loved one returned from the grave. For Dorian, it was immortality and influence.” Lucifer chuckled. “Poor wretch. I sometimes think because of his namesake he thought he’d become Oscar Wilde himself. Apparently he didn’t read the ending of either the tale or Oscar’s biography.”

“He wanted to be Dorian Gray?” Tristan was aghast. “But why ever would someone want that?”

“Perhaps he thought he could wield such a gift in a manner that would not lead to the utter desiccation of his soul in the face of eternal youth and popularity? Who knows?” Lucifer replied with a shrug. “The problem is that, when people make these little deals with me they forget about the fine print. You see, the universe and I do not deal in ‘generalities.’ We prefer specifics. A plethora of specifics. He came to me with a general request. I asked if he had really thought it through and he swore nine ways to Sunday that he had. Obviously,” Lucifer gestured at Dorian, “he didn’t.”

“You’re the one who made him into a vampire?” Tristan stared up at Lucifer. “So, he was wrong. We’re not part of nature. We are children of the Devil!” Tristan’s trembling was becoming visible. He wrapped his arms around his chest and held tight to try to keep his limbs from shaking.

Lucifer loosed a deep laugh that echoed through the small room. He shook his head. “No. I didn’t. But, thank you for the compliment. I simply set into motion the series of events that would eventually place him in the path of one, one that took a very special liking to him.”

“Alvaro,” Tristan muttered, remembering the name from

one of the very first conversations he had had with Dorian, shortly after he had been turned.

“Bingo! The one and only. Alvaro owed me a favor, as well.” Lucifer grinned exposing a full mouth of feral white teeth. “Are you starting to see how this system works?”

“But, I don’t owe you a favor. I never made a deal with you.”

“Yes. That is unfortunate. But your ancestor did and part of the fine print that he didn’t read before signing the contract was that I get to collect on your bloodline until there are no more Faustus of the original descendant left. I do believe it is one of my finer contracts that I’ve written,” Lucifer said, smugly. “I would duplicate it again, but where would be the challenge in that?” He watched Tristan carefully as if debating whether or not Tristan would be up for the task.

“I don’t have a choice, do I?” Tristan asked quietly. The stench of Neil’s dead, coagulating blood was beginning to make him slightly queasy—the absence of hot, adrenaline-infused life force behind the fluid was haunting.

“Afraid not. But I’ll give you the opportunity to decide what you want to do with your remaining years here on Earth. I’ll even throw in an extra wish for you,” he said like a used car salesman offering a new spare tire with the junker beside him. “It doesn’t have to be like this.” He waved a dismissive hand in Neil’s direction.

A wish and time on Earth spent as he desired. Even if it were simply a year it might be worth it. His only other option appeared to be damnation, either as a vampire under Dorian’s wing or in Hell itself. “You never told me why Dorian was using me?”

“As a bartering chip,” Lucifer replied. “He thought if he delivered you to me then that would excuse his debts. Perhaps even give him back the life he had before he made

## *The Lineage*

the deal in the first place. He'd even convinced Diana, Blind Mouse and Neil of this and they were ready and willing to do anything for their beloved Maker. But, I'm not interested in his gesture. Your soul is already a done deal."

Dorian's betrayal stung deep. Blind Mouse's embraces felt like death shrouds. Tristan hung his head for a moment, squeezing his eyes shut as his skull ached as if it might shatter. Focusing on his breathing he tried to find his center amidst the madness swirling around him, searching for the eye of the storm. Drawing a long shaky breath he sighed like a machine gun.

Without looking up he asked, "What are you expecting of me?" There was a pause. Tristan could feel Lucifer's smile from across the room.

"The 'fine print' I mentioned that is contained in every contract I pen. Dorian found a way to alter it. Or, at least this is what I believe to have taken place." Anger began to creep into Lucifer's voice like black ink dripping from a quill. "It is unprecedented and, for all intents and purposes, impossible. Yet, somehow, with someone's aide, he found a loophole. I am not proud of this. It is downright disrespectful to dishonor a contract in this way. My hands are tied, though. I can't touch a hair on his head. You are going to find out how he did it. I will not be made a fool of any longer." Lucifer stood. "Think, and carefully, about what you would like in return."

The room plunged into a darkness shades deeper than black, the temperature dropping to freezing. Tristan dared not move a muscle even as he felt his lips and fingertips ache from frostbite, his mind blank from prayer or rambling reasoning as the seconds ticked past in agonizing scrutiny until the bare bulb above flickered begrudgingly back into existence like a drunken firefly.

Gradually the room began to warm. Lucifer had vanished, yet Tristan continued to stare, unblinking at the place where the Devil had last stood, gazing down at him, smug and cruel in his position of eternal unquestionable power. Distantly he became aware of Dorian finally stirring from his unnatural slumber with a groan like an old man, pushing himself upright on the cot with a muttered wondering curse.

“What the fuck?!” Dorian barked.

Tristan remained silent and paralyzed until the force of Dorian’s hands wrapped around his upper arms jerking him to his feet brutally snapped him out of his catatonia.

“What the fuck did you do?” Dorian screamed into Tristan’s face, fangs bared like a wolf ready to rip Tristan’s windpipe from his throat in his rage.

Tristan gasped, his eyes darting from Dorian’s contorted, snarling features to Neil’s desiccated cold corpse in the corner. “I didn’t! It wasn’t me. It was...” He stopped himself, unable to voice the name aloud in good conscience that he had not completely lost his mind.

A fist collided with the door behind him with a deafening bang. Tristan gasped and darted forward, slipping out of Dorian’s suddenly slackened grasp—there was nowhere to go but the far wall.

Bishop Knob’s voice boomed through the steel door. “Open the door! For God’s sake!”

Dorian whirled around and charged toward Tristan, intent on murder.

“No! You know damned well who it was!” Tristan cried out. “He’s found you. He’s found both of us.”

Dorian halted in mid-stride, hand curled into a deathblow claw just behind his head.

“Damn it! I can hear you!” Knob’s voice echoed again through the metal divide, followed by the sound of his futile

## *The Lineage*

efforts to open the very boundary he had made impermeable for his own safety.

“He couldn’t have crossed over this threshold.” Dorian shook his head in disbelief.

“He’s the Devil,” Tristan replied, suddenly pitying his Maker as he envisioned his downfall. “He can do whatever he damn well pleases.” *Except take your soul*, he thought. *That, I think, I will happily help him do.*

Dorian’s hands fell slowly to his side. He cast another sidelong glance at Neil’s decapitated body before returning his gaze to Tristan, his eyes wary and strangely fearful in a way Tristan had never witnessed before.

“He’s come for both of us?” Dorian asked quietly against the sound of metal grating against metal behind him.

“Apparently he’s been coming for both of us for quite some time now,” Tristan said, feeling his strength slowly returning to him. A ghost flitted across the surface of Dorian’s eyes like a crow across a moonlit lake and Tristan knew in that moment he was unmistakably upon even ground with his Maker for the first time. Tristan watched as Dorian straightened and took a step, almost drunkenly, backwards.

Slowly, Tristan reached into his pocket and retrieved the key, relieved to find it had been returned. Like an olive branch of arsenic he extended his hand, offering the key to Dorian who took it with the numb white fingers of a dead man walking and turned to open the door. As the key clicked into place the frantic metallic grinding ceased on the far side of the door with a haunting finality followed by the soft whining of hinges as the door swung open. On the far side of the threshold Bishop Knob stood a few paces away with his shotgun cocked and ready.

Knob approached the doorway with intense caution, his eyes trained on Tristan who remained pressed against

the far wall like moth praying for the deliverance of the Bishop's bullets. The sound of Knob's slow footsteps upon the concrete echoed in Tristan's ears, the scuffing of rubber soles over cold cement hissing deep within his bones as he watched the lines of Knob's features transform with the transfer of attention to Neil's corpse.

"You didn't do this," Knob said after a sorrowful moment. "Dorian didn't, either."

Tristan released the breath he had been holding in a shuddering exhale. "No," he breathed and slunk toward the cot. "You saw it happen?"

"I don't know what the hell I saw on that camera." Bishop Knob shook his head. "What have you boys gotten yourselves into?" Knob's eyes darted around the room in wonder, his gun lowering as if he realized its futility. "I thought I could protect you. But whatever's after you is beyond my abilities. And you aren't fessing up. I'm giving you one last chance. Come clean with me." His tone was beginning to verge on frantic, but he steadied himself.

*Then he didn't see Lucifer?* Tristan looked down at the floor as if half expecting it to rupture and split revealing the Hell he was damned to in all of its fiery glory.

Dorian stood now beside Neil's cold corpse staring down at it, a mourner paying his final respects. What was there to say to this mortal that could be comprehended, even by a man who had obviously held his own personal warfare with the supernatural for far too long. A deal with the Devil himself? An appearance of Lucifer? How could Tristan even begin to articulate these instances of existence, let alone twist them in a sweet bowtie of diplomatic geniality so that he would remain anonymous for the time being of his apparent new integral participation. The room was cold, colder than a preservation chamber for the embalmed—desolation and

## *The Lineage*

isolation, an absence of all that was and ever could become that which was beautiful. It stuck icy iron claws through Tristan's center, closing tight and close against his heart with a vindictive pursuit for truth wrapped in the bargains of the damned.

*I am cursed*, he thought. *There is absolutely nothing I can do to get out of this. He has me by the balls. Fuck!*

"You boys have to leave." Knob's voice was hard and sharp as steel.

"I know," Tristan whispered.

"Now," Knob replied.

"Yes." Tristan stood. He looked at Knob whose line of sight blazed past Tristan to the corpse on the floor. "Trust me, I know."

Dawn came like a hurricane across the mountains that left Tristan breathless both in longing and fear of its beauty. They raced on foot like wolverines back to town desperate in their search for safety. It was instinct that drove Tristan. Each time he glanced upwards towards the heavens where they peeked through the barren branches with a stark glittering wisdom, with the void of bruised infinity where the clouds parted, he longed for the rays of the coming day to bid him adieu. He could care less in those moments, his boots grazing the softly packed snow never enough to even leave traces of tracks that they had passed this way or that, of that which lay after the instance of incineration. All he could think of was the brilliance of instantaneous deliverance to whatever fate might befall him.

He longed to be free of free will, of the aspect of human existence that forced him to choose despite the decades of seemingly having had his life chosen for him. He wanted to fall to his knees in the snow, draw a long deep breath and feel the sunlight kiss his back. He wanted the sensation

of his flesh igniting beneath his clothing as his body turned to dust, the winter gusts blowing forth his ashes to coat the snow and be forgotten beneath the next storm. But each time he thought to fall to his knees Lucifer's eyes burned bright and spiteful before him steadying his gait and forcing him forward with a will that was not entirely his own.

Dorian's pace was unmatched, quickly leaving Tristan behind though he would pause at times in a hummingbird's heartbeat to ensure his kin was somewhere in the distance. His realization of the implications of his keeper's appearance had left him on the edge of reason staring down into the boiling pit of his inescapable fate. Dorian had not even given Tristan a chance to convey what all had occurred while Dorian lay unconscious beneath Lucifer's spell—his fear consumed him leaving him caring naught for the details or why he and Tristan had been left alive and free.

"It's all a game to him," he had growled as he leapt from Bishop Knob's front porch and bolted down the road towards town.

Tristan could not agree more. Though Lucifer had spoken of anger and frustration at Dorian's clever, yet disrespectful deceit, there had been a gleam in his eye—he took perverse pleasure in such a challenge, a deviation from the norm that was an anomaly in the history of humanity. It was perhaps more terrifying to Tristan than the threat of damnation itself for it meant that these deals were not ones Lucifer would eventually weary of in boredom and allow to slip below his radar. He would, if he had not already, make the acquisition of Dorian's soul and the manipulation of Tristan's one of his top priorities.

As they entered town Dorian slowed his pace slightly, his eyes darting through the navy and violet shadows of the slumbering pre-dawn world as if expecting Lucifer to

## *The Lineage*

reappear at any moment.

Tristan finally caught up to him. “Where are we going?” he asked, struggling to suppress the anger tingeing his voice black. He needed a moment to process the night and weigh his options. Instead, he followed his Maker knowing instinctually that Lucifer would force him to remain at Dorian’s side until it was finished, one way or another.

“We need to find Guymon,” Dorian said, listening to the stirring world as he sifted through the psychic frequencies of the human population.

“Why? His help hasn’t done us much good so far!” Tristan snarled. “And, besides, I think I have all of the answers I need. There’s nothing Guymon can tell me that he didn’t confirm himself.” Tristan’s heart beat in his throat as he searched the world for the nearest human from which to feed.

Dorian froze and turned, charging towards Tristan who stood, hands gripping the sides of his head in frustration, a few feet away. “He spoke to you?”

Tristan retreated out of Dorian’s reach until his back collided with the red brick wall of the bank they stood in front of. The rage and bloodlust in Dorian’s pale eyes caused Tristan’s throat to go dry. “Yes.” The word slipped out in a whisper.

Dorian slammed one palm flat against the wall beside Tristan’s head. His teeth clenched, lips twitching as he fought against the tidal force of his anger, he asked, “Pray tell, exactly what did you two talk about?”

Tristan slammed the steel shutters shut around his psyche, barring his racing thoughts against the weight of Dorian’s mind striking his like a battering ram in search of the truth. “He said...he’s coming for you. He said...he’ll take your soul, one way or another.” Tristan paused as he struggled to

find the twist of the truth he needed for survival. Nervously he licked his lips as he held Dorian's gaze. "He also said that the deliverance of my soul was not enough to save you. I'm a done deal."

It was just enough truth to sate Dorian's curiosity. He stepped back from Tristan, continuing to hold his gaze as reality settled into him like a silent flock of crows. "You know," he said.

Tristan dropped his gaze to the snow-covered gray sidewalk. "Yes."

"Yet you still followed me," Dorian said with a mixture of suspicion and wonder.

Tristan looked up again. "Where am I supposed to go? He's after both of us. Remember?"

"Why didn't he kill you? Why Neil?" Dorian narrowed his eyes slightly.

"He said it wasn't my time yet." The lies were beginning to congeal more quickly as Tristan sensed a shift in power. "You're his top priority. Neil and the others are just his way of tormenting you, letting you know he's close."

"He can't touch me," Dorian whispered to himself, not knowing Tristan understood exactly the meaning of those words. "He knows it." He drew a deep breath and looked down the street in both directions before his glancing up at the gradually lightening heavens above. "We need to get moving."

"We need to feed," Tristan said. "I'm getting weak."

Dorian surveyed him icily. "You'll live. We'll hunt tomorrow."

Tristan did not argue—he was simply too tired. Darting through the city streets in the last moments before dawn as if they were merely shadows, they made their way back to Guymon's house. Dorian hesitated at the end of the sidewalk

## *The Lineage*

leading to the front porch.

“He’s not here,” Dorian said as he stared at the house as if it were a sleeping dragon he dared not awaken.

“His car is here.” Tristan noted. “Cold morning for a human to be out walking around.

Dorian did not answer, but slowly approached the house. He tried the door and found it unlocked. “Something isn’t right. He paused. “We’ll sleep here today and search for him tomorrow night.”

“Wouldn’t taking shelter in a church or something be a better bet?” Tristan asked as he stared up at Dorian from the bottom step of the porch.

“If he was able to break through all of Knob’s wards and seals, trust me, a church would give us even less protection,” Dorian said as he walked inside. “But feel free to try to make it to one without getting incinerated. It doesn’t seem to matter anymore if we stick together.”

There was sadness beneath Dorian’s anger, a bitter resignation and weariness that tugged at the remaining part of Tristan that still longed for Dorian to be the wise teacher he had hoped for in the beginning, before all of the darkness and blood. He watched as Dorian passed through the threshold leaving the door open behind him. His body was cold beneath his clothes, a bone-deep frost that bit deeper than any winter storm, crystals forming in the center of his chest like shards of obsidian aimed for his heart.

Glancing up at the sky he watched its gradual transformation. Along the ridge of mountains that surrounded the town clouds had begun to creep in, heavy and dark and boding more snow — winter had not had its last joust with the mortal world. He shivered. What left was there to do but find a dark and, hopefully, safe alcove to squeeze his limbs into and wait for the Earth to turn its face away from the sun once

*Gabrielle Faust*

again? As he entered the house he paused with his hand on the doorknob. Even if he were to give himself up to the sun this morning his soul would be sucked down into the bowls of Hell. There was no escape.

*I deserve it, he thought. Every single instance of eternal torment. But not just yet. Not today.*

## CHAPTER 8



Two and a half cigarettes later Bryn's hands had finally stopped shaking enough for her to find her phone and take a photo of Tristan's tarot throw. Turning away from the table she returned to the living room, half-smoked cigarette trembling precariously between the index and forefinger of her right hand, she stared at another photo of him as if the answer would be revealed in the glossy image. Her heart continued to pound inside her chest as if threatening to shatter her ribs, her pulse aching in her temples no matter how she attempted to calm herself. Her panic froze her thoughts suspending them in cloudy amber like terrifying prehistoric insects. She needed guidance in her next moves—of that at least, she was sure. Though her network within the occult world was vast there was only one she trusted as much, if not more, than her own intuition. Without a second thought she texted the photo to Maxine and sank into the sofa. Within seconds a reply chimed back in a cloyingly inappropriate chirp.

*Gabrielle Faust*

*Is this what I think it is? Dear gods! Who is this for? Where are you?* Maxine replied.

Bryn felt tears beginning to brim in the corners of her eyes distorting the image of the phone lying loosely in her palm. Maxine's initial response was enough to confirm her worst fears.

*I'm at home. The throw was for Tristan. I need to see you...* She typed.

*Of course! Come over right away.*

Even through the digital correspondence Bryn could feel the warm wave of genuine concern and generosity that radiated from the tiny psychic at all times as if mead and moonlight coursed through her veins instead of blood.

Sipping the last of the scotch in her crystal tumbler Bryn drew a deep breath and put out her cigarette in the black ceramic ashtray on the coffee table before her. Digging her carry-on suitcase and a large duffle bag out of the back of her bedroom closet she frantically packed, unsure of how long she might be gone, but knowing there was no time to contemplate the details. The necessity to find Tristan clawed at the center of her being with a renewed frenzy.

From her nightstand she grabbed her day planner in order to cancel all of her appointments for the foreseeable future and threw it into her purse. She would make other imperative phone calls when she reached a point where she could focus. After racing about the house to double check that appliances were off and any candles and incense were extinguished, Bryn darted out the front door and down the sidewalk to her dilapidated gold Plymouth, a relic from her grandmother's recent passing.

The short drive to Maxine's proved to be infuriatingly congested with traffic from road construction and a resulting car collision that had police redirecting traffic from the main

## *The Lineage*

thoroughfare through the winding back roads of a nearby neighborhood. By the time she arrived at Maxine's red brick townhome Bryn could barely hold back her tears. She turned the ignition off and gripped the steering wheel with both hands, staring down the peaceful tree-lined street. At the corner squealing school children exited a large yellow school bus and instantly began to throw snowballs as they chased each other about the closest yard, dropping their backpacks as they ran. The sun had emerged from the clouds encouraging birds to perch upon the winter-barren branches and sing. At least on the surface life here appeared peaceful, oblivious and slumbering in its cocoon of content normalcy. She breathed deeply as if she could draw the peace into her lungs along with the frosty air.

You're going to need to be stronger than this, she thought. Much stronger. Grabbing her purse she exited the car and trudged up the freshly shoveled sidewalk to Maxine's door. Before she could begin to reach for the large brass knocker the door flung open and Maxine ushered Bryn inside. Fifteen years her junior, Maxine had always instinctually acted like Maxine's eccentric overprotective aunt in a comforting way that made Bryn feel like an innocent child again.

"Dear gods!" Maxine threw her arms around Bryn and hugged her until she thought her ribs might break. She pulled back a bit, letting her hands rest on Bryn's upper arms. Her large brown eyes were wide with concern beneath black eyebrows dyed to match her wild mane of hair, pulled back from her face by a lime green and yellow scarf. "You must be freaking out right now?"

"That's the understatement of the century," Bryn replied with a grimace. "I don't know what to do or even where to start. I don't even know why I decided to do that throw at all." She shook her head.

Maxine sighed and guided Bryn into the kitchen where a fresh pot of coffee was percolating quietly on the white tiled counter. “Well that’s what we need to figure out.” She pulled a plate of cold-cuts and cheese from the refrigerator and placed it on the table along with a bowl of crackers. “Here, sit.” She directed Bryn. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Maxine set a steaming blue ceramic mug in front of Bryn. “Cream and sugar are on the table there.” She took a seat across from Bryn.

“Thanks.” Bryn doctored her coffee and stared down into its depths for a minute before lifting the cup to her lips. “Yesterday I went to my storage unit for something entirely unrelated. While I was digging through the shed I found a box of Tristan’s things that I had completely forgotten was in there. Something compelled me to take it home and go through it. It was full of photos, books, letters and even rings and necklaces he used to wear. This morning I was looking at all of the photos and started thinking about him and how there was never any real resolution to his disappearance. There was one photo in particular, of us, that I felt drawn to. I couldn’t stop looking at it and felt compelled to do another reading for him, even though, after all of this time, I had finally come to some sort of semblance of resignation that he was most likely dead.”

“Do you have the photo with you?” Maxine asked.

“It vanished.” Bryn shook her head. “After the reading I returned to the room and it was gone. I looked everywhere. It’s so strange. But I brought you another one.”

Maxine took the photo from Bryn’s shaking hands and stared at it. “He was a looker, wasn’t he? Damn. When was this taken?”

“About a year before he left with Dorian.” Bryn used

## *The Lineage*

the heat from the cup as it moved through the palms of her hands to anchor herself as if it were a poultice to draw the adrenaline from her veins. “I never in a million years thought for one moment the tarot would even remotely suggest that he is still alive. It’s just not possible. Is it?”

“Anything is possible, hun. The idea that he’s alive is fairly reasonable. People disappear without a trace all of the time. We just don’t hear about it as often because most folks don’t have people like you who care so much about them,” Maxine replied and placed the photo back on the table between them. “It’s obvious that you’re still connected to him. Deeply connected.”

Bryn bit her lower lip and turned her head to look out the window beside the kitchen table. “How can I not be? He was my best friend. Or, at least, I thought he was.”

Maxine reached across the table and placed her hand over Bryn’s. “Now, don’t start that again or I’ll have to smack you!” She waggled her finger at Bryn. “You know good and well that he left because he was enamored with the mysterious and dangerous life of adventure Dorian promised. He was just a kid experimenting with life and trying to find his identity. You told me that yourself! He had to go down this path, it was his destiny and anything you might have done to stop him would have only made matters worse.”

“I know,” Bryn said in a small voice unbecoming her. “It’s just that, now that there might be hope to think he’s alive. And if he is in this kind of terrible trouble, why wouldn’t he try to find me?”

“Fear? Shame? Maybe he doesn’t think you’d help him because he’s been gone so long without even a good-bye? Who knows? Perhaps he can’t contact you. By the looks of that throw he’s still under the thumb of someone powerful, someone he’s becoming disillusioned by, but still hopes to

be his guide.” Maxine got up and retrieved her laptop from the other room. “I transferred the photo of the throw to my computer so I could look at it better.”

She placed the open computer on the table and sat down in the chair closest to Bryn. “Not to add fuel to the fire, but this is one of the most disturbing throws I’ve ever seen. There are forces at work in Tristan’s life that are beyond comprehension. I never met him, but he must have either gotten involved in some sort of arcane dark magic or he was cursed from the get-go.” She shook her head as she studied the cards on the screen. “Whatever it is, he’s fighting for not only his life, but his soul.”

“I have to find him,” Bryn said. “But I don’t know where to even start looking. There was never a trail to follow.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Maxine turned her attention back to Bryn with a look of troubled concern. “I know he was your friend and you obviously still care for him but,” her eyes flickered to the screen and back again, “I don’t know if you’re up for this kind of battle. You’re one of the most intuitive and skilled psychics I know but, if we’re reading into this correctly, you’ll be walking into an all-out war, possibly physical and most definitely metaphysical.”

“I have to go. Immediately. You know that, Maxine.” Bryn stared back, unblinking as a twinge of anger plucked at her center. “If I don’t the guilt will consume me.”

Maxine nodded. “I understand. You know I’ll support you, but I just wish you would give yourself more time to prepare.” She sighed again and shut the laptop with a strange resignation. “Wait here.” Maxine rose and left the room, padding through the living room on bare feet.

A moment later she returned. In her right hand she held a teardrop-shaped crystal suspended at one end of a long gold chain. In her other hand she clutched a stack of folded

## *The Lineage*

paper maps. “I suppose we should at least give you a starting point?”

Bryn looked up and forced a half-hearted twitch of a smile.

Clearing the table of coffee mugs and food, Maxine unfolded the first map of North America. “We’ll start here. If nothing turns up, we’ll move on to other countries.” She took the photo of Tristan and placed it in the center of the map. Taking the crystal by the end of the long chain she dangled it a few inches above the image holding it perfectly still. “Concentrate on Tristan and only Tristan.”

Several long moments passed to the sound of the kitchen wall clock ticking quietly through its black and white plastic seconds. Bryn tried to keep her heart from thundering, worried that her echoing pulse might cause her to breathe too hard upon the divining crystal and produce a false reading. In her mind Tristan’s face burned like a wraith through a ghostly fog. She could feel him, the way he’d throw his arms around her waist when they were sitting close to one another and place his head upon her shoulder, his chin-length black hair soft against the skin of her throat. The memory of the sharp sweetness of the oils he wore caused her to inhale sharply, her lips parting as a shiver ran its teasing hand down her spine—in her focus she felt more intimately connected to her old friend than she had perhaps ever been in the past. She wondered silently to herself why she had never had such a reaction in all of the meditations she had done in her own search for him or why she had not thought to ask another medium such as Maxine to help her before.

*All things in their own time. We cannot question why things happen when they do. They simply are.* She recited to herself as her own natural impatience threatened to disrupt the flow of energy.

Suddenly the crystal began to sway slightly, back and forth, horizontally across the map. Bryn resisted moving closer, afraid that any interference might disrupt the energy encompassing the crystal at that moment. The crystal stopped as abruptly as it had begun and Bryn felt her heart sink to the pit of her stomach. However, before her lips could form the word “No!” it began to swing clockwise in a circle around the perimeter of the image, slowly at first and then with increasing speed until it yanked free of Maxine’s fingers with enough force to cause her to gasp with surprise. The crystal landed loudly on the wooden tabletop, its point driving clean through the map before falling to one side. Maxine and Bryn exchanged a nervous glance before leaning over the map in unison.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Looks like you’re taking a trip to Salt Lake City,” Maxine said, raising her eyebrows.

“I can’t believe it. Do you really think he’s there?” Bryn sat back. She folded her hands together and pressed her mouth against her knuckles as she continued to stare at the point on the map.

“I’ve never seen a crystal do that before. Have you?” Maxine asked.

“No,” Bryn replied in barely more than a whisper.

“I think you owe it to yourself to at least check it out.” Maxine pulled her computer towards her. “So, let’s get that ticket booked.”

An hour later Bryn found herself boarding a flight from Portland to Salt Lake City. As she settled into her seat she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the window against a backdrop of snow-covered tarmac. Tendrils of her long hair had unraveled from the hastily constructed bun she had pulled back earlier that day, framing her face in a way that seemed to emphasize the dark circles under her eyes. She

## *The Lineage*

frowned at the lines no amount of makeup ever seemed to completely erase.

*When did I get old?* She wondered as she pulled the tie from her hair and let it fall around her shoulders. *I swear I didn't look like this when I woke up today.* She sighed and focused on a point far beyond her reflection. *Tristan, I swear! You'll be the death of me one day.*

## CHAPTER 9



Skeeter Hawk drew on the end of his lit Swisher Sweet as he leaned forward in his chair. “I thought you were working for me?”

“I am!” Guymon exclaimed with a raspy panic, his eyes wide and wild with sleep deprivation and fear.

“Doesn’t look like it. You know I’ve been on the Tristan’s trail for months and I find you helping the bastard?” Skeeter narrowed his eyes. “That leaves a bitter taste in the back of my mouth.”

“I know, but Dorian is a loyal friend of mine. You can’t expect me to just sit back and watch the Devil himself drag him down to Hell!” Guymon shook his head muttering to himself. “Of course you could. You’d strap him in the shackles yourself.” Snapping out of his outward-inward dialogue he stared at Skeeter imploringly. “I didn’t know Tristan was Dorian’s until they showed up on my doorstep, but they’re connected now by Dorian’s blood and vice versa.”

*I should have told Dorian to run. Skeeter will never let*

## *The Lineage*

*him leave town alive. Guymon drew a ragged breath and hung his head. He had stopped struggling against the ropes binding his arms behind the back of the chair hours ago. Now he wanted nothing more than to shut his eyes and sleep despite the cost. "You have to let me figure out a way to help them break the bond before Lucifer kills them both. Please..."*

"I don't give a rat's ass if Dorian dies. He murdered the one thing I ever truly loved in this world. He deserves every last torture the Devil can dream up!" Skeeter spat.

His heart was hard and blackened by too much dark history now, but in his youth he had loved briefly a woman named Karadee with such intensity that it had all but consumed him. Dorian had seen it was to be a short-lived romance when he made a viciously carved four-course meal of her lovely charms.

"I get it. I do. But they are tied together. From what I can tell Lucifer is after Dorian, not Tristan. At least, not at the moment. But their blood has bound their souls together. If Lucifer can't take Dorian first, he'll most likely just take the two of them and if Lucifer kills Tristan you'll never be able to resurrect Karadee." Guymon looked up at Skeeter through the curtain of his black hair falling over one eye. "You said it yourself. The blood of the last Faust is the key to the summoning ceremony."

Skeeter had made a foolish vow after Karadee's death to find a way to bring her back. In a reckless haze of devastation he had made a pact with himself and sealed it in blood. It is thought impossible to be more beholden to oneself than simple human conviction, but Skeeter Hawk was determined to make his pact one that he would never be able to shirk and with a powerful necromancer's indebted assistance he had engraved his promise in stone and blood.

It is believed that the human skull is the doorway to the spirit world—it is the most powerful tool a witch or warlock can possess. According to the necromancer in Skeeter’s employment the ritual to retrieve Karadee from the spirit plane would require a very special and specific skull carrying a powerful resonance. Through his scrying mirror he had seen an image of Tristan Faust, the last remaining descendant of the legendary Dr. Johann Faust.

Skeeter had nearly had Tristan in his site two decades before when, yet again, Dorian, as if smelling the wretched sorrow on Skeeter’s breath, emerged to lure Tristan into dark folds of his vampiric world. In the blink of an eye they vanished into the night leaving not a trace of a trail to follow. Skeeter was not about to let that happen again.

“You said you haven’t figured out how to separate them. But really, do we need to?” Skeeter drew hard on his cigar and blew a stream of cloyingly sweet smoke into Guymon’s face. “What if we simply beat the Devil to it.”

Guymon coughed, his brows furrowing as he looked up at Skeeter. “I’m not following.”

“Dorian is dead, one way or another, in my eyes. So here’s what you’re going to tell them: There is a ceremony that will create a cloak of invisibility about them, shielding them from the Devil’s prying eyes. You’ll tell them that this will give you enough time to complete your research and devise a way to break the pact Tristan’s ancestor made. What they won’t realize is that the ritual will actually be the one to bring Karadee back.” Skeeter grinned fiendishly at his own clever plan. “Dorian’s blood will simply add to the power of the ceremony. Two vamps for the price of one.”

Guymon’s mouth opened, but no sound came forth. He swallowed hard as the reality of the resurrection actually taking place in his presence sank in and the horror of the

## *The Lineage*

violence he would witness wrapped about his heart like frost-bitten vines. There was no stopping Skeeter from seeking vengeance on Dorian—Guymon, despite his prowess as a medium, lacked the psychosis and training to take on a seasoned hunter like Skeeter Hawk. He could see the smug satisfaction in Skeeter’s face as he stared back at Guymon with cold, hard eyes. There would be no more begging. Negotiations were futile.

Guymon seemed uncertain when he finally found his voice. “What if the Devil decides to intervene?”

“Why would he?” A twinge of something like apprehension flicked his heart. There was no denying who or what the apparition he had seen the other night had been, its words still ringing painfully in his ears, but Skeeter Hawk’s obsession with his own vow was a force he submitted to without question. “If he wants Tristan’s soul, it doesn’t matter who kills him. Dead is dead. He might as well serve my purpose in the process.”

“I...I’m really not comfortable with this,” Guymon stuttered, his heart thundering in his ears.

“Comfortable? Who the hell cares if you’re comfortable? I know I don’t! Look, I own your fucking ass and you’re not going to fuck this up. Do you understand? If you do, it will be your skull on that altar alongside Tristan’s.” Skeeter leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

He considered Guymon for a long moment wondering if he could truly trust the medium with such a delicate matter after he had already proven that his conscience was still tethered to the idea of a friendship with Dorian. Skeeter pitied Guymon’s naivety; Dorian could no more have the emotional selflessness to befriend a human than he could resist his own vampire nature. He was a conscienceless sociopath and a cold-blooded killer. Nothing more.

Skeeter stood and drew the bowie knife from leather sheath attached to his belt. Guymon's head snapped up, his eyes wide with fear as Skeeter crossed the room toward him. Grabbing a fist-full of hair, Skeeter yanked Guymon's head back and pressed the icy steel blade against his windpipe. He stared down into Guymon's terrified eyes as he stammered an affirmation of his commitment to follow through with the ceremony. Skeeter remained silent as he took in Guymon's oath and pressed the blade slightly harder against the medium's windpipe until the bound man fell silent and a drop of blood began to snake down his throat to the collar of his shirt. Letting go of Guymon's hair he quickly sliced through the ropes tethering his wrists and ankles before re-sheathing the knife. Guymon's hands flew to his throat as he drew a rattling breath and shakily released it as he hung his head.

"Go back to your house and wait for them," Skeeter instructed. "Bring them to the basement of the Oak Knoll Lodge in two nights, at dusk. The moon will be full then. It will be perfect."

It was all Guymon could do to swallow hard and nod. Skeeter walked to the door of the dark musty motel room and opened it. Outside the dusk had begun to creep in, casting the world into a hard-edged wonderland of shades of blue distorting one's perspective through the continuing drifts of snow. Somewhere nearby the sound of a snowplow grumbled as it cleared the way for those returning home from a long day's work.

"Come on," Skeeter said. "I'll give you a ride back to your house."

The car ride back through the white-banked deserted streets wrapped Guymon's heart in a mantle like a frozen waterfall, the skeletal gray branches of cherry trees piercing

## *The Lineage*

the storm like fingers reaching for a heaven that did not exist. For years Guymon had lived here in anonymity from the mainstream masses of Salt Lake City, weaving in and out of the scant underground like a snake of dark smoke and mysticism. It had been peaceful. He had become content, his debt to Skeeter nearly a thing of memory. Deep within him a small reserve of fight still flailed against circumstance like a sparrow beating itself to death against a windowpane. Each frantic flutter ached as the voice inside his head shouted above the din of apathy.

*You can't let this happen! You have to stop this cycle of madness!*

But as the voice that seemed vaguely his own shrieked he shuddered and sighed, pressing his forehead against the cold window and watching the houses crawl by, windows warm and inviting and oblivious.

Skeeter stopped the pickup truck two blocks away from Guymon's house. "Get out. I don't want to chance them sensing my presence."

Guymon exited the car without even a nod in Skeeter's general direction. He slammed the door shut and pulled his coat tight around his frame even though he could barely feel the cold. He kept his eyes trained on the ground in front of him as he trudged down the sidewalk. The wind whipped his hair about his face, stinging his eyes as the snow shifted and slanted in a ballet of death. He could feel Skeeter's flinty gaze boring into his back like beetles until he thought he might reach beneath his coat and claw the flesh from his shoulder blades. His mind spun, an infinity of wicked symbols and incantations he had plucked from the multiplicity of tomes he had read.

He was acutely aware of his wiry pale frame as it flexed against the frost and the weaknesses that he had let lapse in

the sight of the superficial abscesses of modern existence. His years of self-mandated isolation, locked away and buried beneath his studies and meditations, had left him vulnerable in a way he could never have foreseen—his misanthropic skepticism about humanity coupled with his obsession to expand his own psychic abilities should have sealed his trust behind iron doors heightening his suspicion in all motives and intentions of others. Instead he found himself bound to promises made in the guise of lies and pacts sealed with entities far more conscienceless than the Devil himself. In his coat pockets he curled his hands into fists until he felt them shake. His hands would be forever stained with blood after tomorrow night.

He turned up the sidewalk and trudged through the ankle-deep undisturbed powder.

*They're here, waiting for me? Oh dear gods! Why aren't they at the safe house? I told them I would come for them.* His stomach soured at the idea of laying eyes upon their trusting faces or hearing whatever horror caused them to return. Fishing his keys out of the inside breast pocket of his coat, he drew a deep breath.

The front door opened suddenly. Tristan stood on the other side, his hand still resting on the doorknob. For a long awkward moment Guymon stared at Tristan, his mouth slightly agape as he wondered if Tristan had heard his inner dialogue. He could feel the blood draining from his face, his lips becoming numb as frost formed on the tip of his tongue.

Tristan narrowed his eyes slightly, cocking his head to one side. “You going to stand there all night?” He finally broke the silence.

“What are you doing here? Are you guys okay?” Guymon remained still as if his boots had frozen to the doormat that

## *The Lineage*

read “Go Away!” beneath three unread newspapers.

Tristan’s eyes dropped, his gaze cutting to the side as he shook his head in response.

“No... It can’t be. Nothing’s ever gotten through—”

“Inside.” Tristan looked up and over Guymon’s head, surveying the neighborhood that was gradually settling into its drowsy evening routine. “We can’t have this conversation out here.”

Guymon wanted to retaliate with, “Does it really matter where we talk about the Devil? I’m pretty sure secrecy at this point doesn’t matter.” But instead he sighed and stepped into the living room. Inside, Dorian sat on the couch staring at the blank wall across the room. Guymon stood in the entranceway as Tristan took a seat in the battered old black leather armchair near the doorway to the kitchen.

“What happened?” Guymon’s voice was barely a whisper. “Is the Bishop okay?”

The question seemed to snap Dorian out of his fixation. He blinked twice and dropped his gaze to the cluttered coffee table. “He was alive when we left him. I can’t say the same for Neil.”

“Shit!” Guymon hissed under his breath. “It’s just you two now?”

Dorian nodded. “Yes, we are all that remains.” He looked up at Guymon. “Where were you?”

Guymon was taken aback. “What do you mean? Where do you think I was?”

“Your car was here when we returned. The storm has been awfully brutal to travel anywhere on foot.” Tristan pinned Guymon where he stood with his gaze.

“The battery on the car died.” Guymon quickly pulled out a lie. “When did you guys get here?”

“Just before dawn. And you were gone already.” Dorian’s

expression was unreadable.

“Yes, I was. Is there a problem with that? I came home after I dropped you off, caught a couple of hours of shut-eye and then was up and out the door before first light. Time is not exactly our friend here.” Guymon’s patience was wearing thin. Exhaustion pulled at the corners of his being making him feel weightless and transparent. He wondered how long he could keep up the mask before he cracked—the interrogation had barely even commenced.

Tristan and Dorian remained silent for a moment before Tristan spoke again. “You look like hell.”

Guymon nodded, prying his eyes away from Dorian’s predatory stare. “Yes, and you don’t exactly look like a runway model yourself.”

Guymon reached up and rubbed his face with both hands as if he could wipe away his very features. His nerves were frayed beyond reckoning, his extremities beginning to numb from exhaustion and hunger. Without taking his coat off he sat down cross-legged on the floor and hunched forward, resting his forehead on the palms of his hands.

“There’s something we think you should know.”

Tristan’s tone made Guymon’s blood run cold. Slowly he looked up and peered at Tristan over his upturned hands. “Nothing good ever begins that way.”

Tristan shook his head and looked at Dorian. The two exchanged a long tense stare—if a silent exchange occurred it was too heavily veiled for Guymon to listen in.

“It’s not just Tristan he’s after.” Dorian forced the words from his throat as if they were mired in tar.

“Who’s the other person?” Guymon could have sworn his heart had stopped beating.

Dorian looked up, his eyes full of fear and darkness. “Me.”

## *The Lineage*

“What did you do?” Guymon wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer for whatever it was had to be worse than anything Dorian had done as a vampire.

“What haven’t I done?” Dorian scoffed and shook his head. “Sadly it’s not my murderous cruelty that has damned me.” He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees and interlacing his fingers together. “I’m afraid I made the same mistake as Tristan’s ancestor, many years ago. I was simply cleverer when it came to reading the ‘fine print.’ It is a long story, but suffice to say I did not become immortal because I wanted to be a vampire. I became a vampire because I wanted to be immortal. This,” he gestured to his physical shell, “is how he answered my prayer.”

“So your time is up now? And he’s come to collect on his end of the deal?” Guymon wanted to get up and flee. He was nothing more than bait sitting cross-legged there in the midst of two of Hell’s most-wanted.

“Yes and no.” The corner of Dorian’s mouth twitched in a wry smile as he coughed the kind of a short dry laugh preceding a mental break. “You see, I found the proverbial loophole in my original contract, a minor little detail that was basically the equivalent of forgetting to initial a page. However, that one detail forfeited the deal and made my undead ass untouchable by ye ole Luci.”

“What changed? Why is he after you now?” Guymon replied quietly.

“Just because the contract is in limbo doesn’t mean he’ll ever stop trying. He’s pissed. As you can imagine, the Devil doesn’t take well to the humiliation of being beaten at his own game. No, he left me alone for a while. Went off to vent his rage on the rest of humanity. Started a few wars. Invented a few new diseases. Killed off a few endangered species. But he always warned me that he would be coming one day.

He didn't say when or how." Dorian drew a deep breath and paused.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Guymon's eyes darted between Tristan and Dorian as he processed the news. *Why didn't I see this when I first met Dorian?* He tried not to be too hard on himself for he had been barely more than a teenager and just beginning to develop his true potential as a medium, but the fact that he had not been able to sense the Devil himself or such a vast lie from Dorian was troublesome.

"What you did back then, when I first came to you for help placed us on the right road to finding Tristan. That is all that matters now." Dorian watched Guymon closely. "Even I, at the time, did not know our paths would become so entangled—back then I never would have imagined Tristan would become part of our family, or that I would one day need your help again."

Guymon stood suddenly as his heart began to thunder dangerously in his chest. Wrapping his arms tightly around himself he tried to keep the world from spinning. "I can't. This is bigger than me, so much bigger than anything I can help with. I don't think the ceremony will help either of you," he said under his breath.

"Ceremony?" Tristan repeated and stood. "What ceremony?"

Guymon stared at Tristan. His mouth turned dry, his lips feeling as if they would crack as his ragged breath escaped through them. He swallowed hard as he tried to remember what Skeeter had told him to recite. "Yes. But I don't know if it will do any good, now that I know just how determined the Devil must be to retrieve you. And Tristan, you're linked to Dorian by your vampiric blood, a bond that is inseparable. I don't know if there's a way to—"

## *The Lineage*

“To save me?” Tristan finished Guymon’s sentence with a hint of sad wistfulness as if the hope of such an idea was fruitless. “I wouldn’t worry about that anymore...” His voice trailed off.

Dorian tore his gaze away from Guymon and stared at Tristan. “You may not be worried about this anymore, but I am. If you don’t want to save your own ass, I’d at least like to still try and get out of this alive.”

“Such sincerity. I’m touched.” Tristan hissed and sat down again.

Guymon frowned in confusion at the cryptic tension between the Maker and his Son.

Dorian looked back at Guymon. “Tell us what you’ve discovered. What is this ‘ceremony’ you mentioned? What does it do?”

A trilling synthesized rendition of Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 9” sliced through the dusty stale heat pouring from the wall vents. Guymon’s heart nearly leapt from his chest, his hands going numb from the sudden surge of adrenaline. The same three bars played repeatedly as the seconds ticked by, echoing from deep within the right pocket of Guymon’s coat.

“Are you going to answer that?” Tristan asked, narrowing his eyes as he leaned back in his chair and raised a foot to place it on the edge of the coffee table.

Even after he spoke it took Guymon a moment to process the question. Silently he lowered his eyes and fumbled in his pocket for the phone. He entered his security code and stared down at the blinking screen that read “Bryn Hallister” in prim white letters against a black screen. He pressed the red button on the lower right of the screen, raising it upward toward her name and the phone went silent as he sent the call to voicemail.

They had not spoken in years—ten to be exact, since Bryn had finally begun the slow process of letting go of her obsession with finding Tristan. An image file illuminated as her call ended. With a flash of his thumb he opened the file exposing what appeared to be a tarot throw. He quickly closed the image and locked his phone. Guymon attempted to swallow and nearly choked as his throat closed from too many ill-kept secrets jousting to be the first one to be freed.

“Who is it?” Dorian asked.

Guymon shook his head, stuffing the phone back into the silk-lined depths of his coat pocket, his hand gripped around the device until he thought he might shatter the plastic casing. “No one of importance.”

## CHAPTER 10



“Damn it, Guymon! Pick up!” Bryn hissed in a plume of white mist.

*You’ve reached the voicemail of Guymon McDermont. As you’ve noticed, the world is not currently ending. So sit down, breathe, pour yourself a drink and leave me a message.*

“Guymon, it’s Bryn. Bryn Hallister. Hey, I know it’s been a really long time since we last spoke. I do hope everything is well with you,” she paused uncertain as to how to continue. “I, um, uh... I’m in Salt Lake City. I can’t really explain it here on the phone, and I know this is going to sound crazy, but I have reason to believe Tristan is alive and may be here. Or was here, at some point. I know you said not to call you again, but I guess that really doesn’t matter right now. There’s been signs, signs I know you would understand that have told me to come here. I’ll forward you the picture I sent Maxine of the last throw I did for him.” Bryn took a stiff drag off of the cigarette clutched between her right fingers and exhaled heavily. “It’s been ten years. For God’s sake,

please call me back.”

She stared at the screen as it went black and a moment of self-doubt filled her with the icy torment of the past. She looked up and traced the cold white walls and slowly circling carousels carrying unclaimed baggage. The travelers all appeared weary as they waited for their luggage to slide down the mysterious shoot, their clothes stale from recycled air conditioning and the sweat of racing through echoing terminals.

*Are you delusional?* She thought to herself. *What the hell are you doing here? He's dead. Just give it up already! You'll never have any peace until you just accept the fact that some people die and we never find them.*

All of the ancient artifacts of doubt resurfaced at once like driftwood after a dam demolition floating downstream. If Maxine had told her to stay put she would have tossed the cards aside. But she hadn't. She had booked the flight for Bryn and ushered her out the front door.

*Maybe she was trying to get rid of me too? Maybe she's just as sick of hearing about Tristan as everyone else is?* Bryn's heart sank, a cold harsh tightening in the center of her chest that caused her drawn breath to shudder as she fought back tears.

*No, no she wouldn't do that.* She shook her head and squared her shoulders, but the doubts still clustered at the base of her skull like a nest of vibrating daddy long-leg spiders. Repositioning her bag on her shoulder she made her way to the cab stand.

“Where you heading, hun?” The woman looked up at Bryn through a nest of deep crow's feet, her long silver hair pulled back in a loose bun.

Bryn froze. She couldn't remember Guymon's address, or at least the address he had occupied a decade prior. Even

## *The Lineage*

if she could she was fairly certain her unexpected arrival on his front steps would be more than unwelcome.

“The Radisson?” She plucked the first hotel chain name from her mind.

“Downtown?” The woman replied with a raised eyebrow.

“Sure.” Bryn replied a bit too cheerfully. “I mean, yes, that’s the one. Sorry. It’s been a very long day.”

“Yes, it has.” The woman nodded with a sigh. “Go wait over there.” She pointed to where several other travelers sat in a row of connecting plastic chairs on the far end of the room. “There’s a shuttle that runs to the hotel. They’ll come get you when it arrives.”

Bryn nodded. A half an hour later she arrived at the hotel and was quietly checked in by a demure young redheaded man in a plain gray suit. Tossing her bags on the crisply made bed she glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. Seven o’clock. A restless wild animal clawed relentlessly at the center of her being with the anticipation of the unknown—she was uncertain as to where she should even begin looking for Tristan, if Tristan was even in Salt Lake City.

Flipping on the bathroom light she pulled her hair back without glancing in the mirror and splashed cold water over her face. With a weary sigh she sat down on the edge of the tub and closed her eyes attempting to center herself and block out the angry hiss of white noise that was her rambling fear. Pulling herself down from the ethers of anxiety she forced herself to become aware of her body again, fingers, toes, arms, legs, chest, head, the sensation of her weight on the porcelain beneath her buttocks, the sound of her breath being drawn slowly in and out through her nose, the features of her face where they sat upon her skull. She allowed her mind to drift out beyond the concrete and steel confines of

the hotel, sifting like tendrils of mist through the air vents and into the steady snowfall. Upwards over the city she soared, the image of the area as seen from her airplane window sprawling below her as her consciousness searched for an impression of Tristan's aura.

The storm's violent energy seemed to increase with each second, though the snowfall remained consistent. She frowned as she fought to remain elevated as dread crept into the periphery of her being like strangling kudzu vines pulling her down towards the earth once again with a frightening speed. Darkness encroached, enveloping her in its vast black wings as its talons drove her away from the stars and into the concrete of the city streets below.

She gasped, her eyes fluttering open—for a moment Bryn was disoriented by the blinding light above the sink and its caustic reflections off of the mirror below. Sharp pain shot up from her elbow to her shoulder and she realized, as she clutched her arm, that she had flung herself backwards into the tub striking the back wall and faucet. Pulling her legs over the edge of the tub she tucked her knees up beneath her chin and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands until the starbursts behind her eyes became more real than the vision she had just experienced.

A jarring electronic pop song exploded from her jacket pocket and she barely stifled a terrified shriek. Fumbling, she pulled the phone out.

The number read "Unknown." Swallowing hard, she forced herself to answer it. "Hello?"

"Bryn?" Guymon whispered into the phone.

"Guymon!" Relief washed over her followed by hesitant fear that he would hang up on her. "You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Why are you here, Bryn?" Guymon sounded

exhausted.

Bryn paused. Her throat went dry, aching painfully at the top of her windpipe. “I left you a message. Did you get it?”

“Look, you have to leave.”

“Excuse me?” Bryn pushed herself out of the tub as a surge of adrenaline filled her limbs.

“It’s not safe here for you,” Guymon replied in a caustic hiss.

“Who the fuck are you to say that to me after all of these years?” Her demons rallied like a charging medieval army through the charred remains of her past. Silence deafened the world above the sound of the hotel residents next door flushing commodes and slamming doors—time stopped for the flippant fleeting millisecond it took for reality to cinch shut the inconvenient aspect of itself.

“Bryn, please. There’s no time for pleasantries. Please under—”

“Like there ever was! You obviously know where he is. Just tell me and I’ll leave you out of this entirely.” She gripped the edge of the sink, staring down into the silver drain.

“Bryn, I don’t... FUCK!” Guymon exhaled loudly. “Where are you?”

Bryn whirled around, leaning against the marble counter. Her gut tightened, the reheated stale air passing for poison suddenly as she inhaled the fresh exhale from the air vent above. Her hands began to go numb, her legs filled with lead aching to support her wearied weight. She could hear Guymon breathing on the other end of the line.

“Bryn? Are you still there? Tell me where you are.” Guymon repeated.

Bryn swallowed hard. There was something about Guymon’s tone that caused the fine hairs on the back of her

arms to bristle, but she answered in spite of her instinctual caution. “The Radisson. Downtown.”

“I’ll be there in a little while. Meet me in the bar. I need a drink,” he replied and hung up.

For a moment Bryn simply stared at the tiled white floor, the phone still pressed against her ear as if she expected the conversation to continue. He had not denied Tristan’s presence in Salt Lake City. Tristan was alive—this she felt with certainty. She wanted to smile.

In a daze she took the elevator to the main floor and found a seat at one of the small dark wood tables far from the other patrons. Her phone clutched between both hands like a gun, she stared at the entrance to the bar, barely acknowledging the young waitress that approached with a menu. The woman looked her up and down when Bryn did not respond to her inquiry about beverages, her brows furrowed with concern before she wandered away to check on her other customers.

Behind the bar, the colorful backlit shelves of liquor bottles cast a seductive false warmth across the interior of the dimly lit establishment, coating the inebriated conversations of hotel patrons with a lacquer of civility. Bryn instantly recognized Guymon’s silhouette as he entered from the brightly lit marble lobby, snow still clinging to his dark hair and dusting the shoulders of his coat. He approached her table, stopping a foot away to stare at her in silence. A fierce tension radiated from him causing her caution to turn to fear. Her lips parted as if to speak, but before her words could form he cut her short.

“You shouldn’t have come here.” His nostrils flared slightly, his jaw tensing.

Bryn closed her eyes for a moment, placing her phone down on the table, her hands flat against the wood as she forced herself to remain calm. She caught his stare and held

## *The Lineage*

it steadily. “I’m here now. I didn’t bother getting a return ticket because I wasn’t sure when I would need one. If he’s here, I want to see him.”

Guymon broke away from her gaze and looked about the bar nervously. He stared at the bartender, his eyes darting up to the flat screen television anchored on the wall in the middle above the cash register. Lowering himself into the chair to Bryn’s left he positioned himself so he could keep an eye on the entrance to the bar while they spoke. The waitress approached again, standing with one hip cocked slightly, her pen poised above her ordering pad.

Guymon glanced up at her with a look of mild annoyance mixed with gratitude. “Jack. On the rocks.”

“That’s it?” The waitress replied with a hint of disdain.

“Yes.” He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes to instruct her to leave them be.

As the waitress turned away Guymon leaned in close to Bryn, lowering her voice. “You don’t want to see him. Trust me.”

She studied the lines of his face, the deep crow’s feet around his eyes and furrows between his thick dark brows, the dark goatee and long sideburns now peppered with hints of gray. It was strange how, despite the etchings of the years his face had really changed very little—grief encompassed her heart for the lost friendship of the passionate medium she had studied with in her youth. She longed for their metaphysical explorations, their long conversations about their personal discoveries of their innate abilities, their shared excitement for the limitless possibilities. Or, so it had seemed back before life stole the unadulterated joy of existence from their smiles. At least, it had stolen it from hers.

It was difficult for her to gauge, behind the impregnable

defense surrounding his psyche that slammed against her own like icy iron, whether Guymon's own desire for life had been dampened for she knew he had continued with his studies long after he had left town, heading south for Salt Lake City. Her sorrow-fueled obsession had driven him away, as it had so many of the other friends, until only a handful remained that held her at an arm's distance with pitying stares and whispered sympathies.

"You have to tell me why, why I must leave? After all of this time, to come so close—Guymon, I need closure." Bryn tried to keep her voice from shaking.

Guymon shook his head. "Not like this. He's not the sweet little goth boy you remember. He's...a monster. There's no other way to describe what he's become."

"Monster? What do you mean? Was he hideously injured? I can handle that. It may break my heart to see him like that, but I can handle it as long as he's alive and happy." Bryn's heart pounded against her ribs, her lower jaw trembling as she struggled to keep her voice from raising in panic.

The waitress returned and set the whiskey in front of Guymon. The glass had barely made contact with the table before he retrieved it, slamming back the amber liquor in a single shot. He grimaced slightly and stared at the ice in the tumbler as if searching for the answers to a madness only he was privy to.

"He's done things Bryn. Terrible things. Actions only a psychopath would understand. Things that are wholly unforgivable." He shook his head again. "I shouldn't even be telling you this. I'm placing you in harm's way just being here." He began to rise from his seat. "I have to go and so do you. Leave town. Tonight."

Bryn grabbed his arm. "There's something I need to show you." She stared up at him imploringly. "Please. Just

## *The Lineage*

give me five more minutes.”

Guymon sank back into his seat, sighing as if the weight of the universe nested between his shoulder blades. Bryn picked up her phone and unlocked it. Quickly she pulled up the image of Tristan’s tarot throw and handed the phone to Guymon.

“This morning I did a reading for him. I hadn’t thought about him in weeks, months even, but I found some of his things yesterday in my storage unit and something compelled me to pull the cards. I know he’s in trouble. Something truly wretched is after him. His world is falling apart. Everything you’re telling me only confirms that.” She watched his face as he studied the cards.

What little color touched Guymon’s pale cheeks faded like the sun passing behind a cloud. “We can’t save him,” he whispered. He set Bryn’s phone down. “There’s nothing either of us can do now. What debts there are will be settled. All of them.” He rose from the table without meeting her eyes and turned to leave.

Bryn’s chair nearly toppled backwards as she stood suddenly.

The waitress stepped between them as she saw Guymon leaving. “Hey, you didn’t pay your tab.”

In a haze he reached into his pocket, pulled a ten out of his wallet and handed it to the girl. “Keep the change.” He turned and began to walk away. “Don’t follow me.”

“Excuse me?” The waitress replied with confusion.

“I think he was talking to me,” Bryn muttered as she sidled past the girl.

“Guymon! Guymon, wait!” Bryn chased him through the lobby and the sliding front doors to the icy gray sidewalk.

Without her heavy winter coat the wind bit ferociously down to the bone, attacking her from all sides. Her stomach

clenched, her teeth shattering as she raced out from beneath the overhang into the parking lot. Snow obscured her vision—she raised her hand and squinted through the drifts.

*How did I lose him so quickly?* She thought as her heart raced with anguish.

The sound of a car door clicking shut caused her to whirl around. There in the corner of the tiny parking lot the red tail lights on an old blue hatchback flickered on, piercing the night with a feral demonic glare. White vapor streamed from the tailpipe, snaking upwards only to be beaten away by the snow. Bryn ran to the passenger-side of the car as it began to pull out and grabbed the door handle only to find it locked.

“Guymon! You have to tell me where he is! Guymon!” She pounded on the window with her palm as she held fast to the door handle with the other.

Guymon did not acknowledge her presence. He stared up at the rearview mirror as he turned the car around. Placing it in drive, his gaze fell to the road over the steering wheel, his expression unreadable through the frayed gauze of exhaustion. Bryn ran alongside the car until she could not keep up any longer, the tears streaming down her face freezing along her chin. Standing in the middle of the road a block from the hotel she watched his tail lights disappear around the corner of a building far in the distance.

“No!” She sobbed as she doubled over and slammed her fists into her thighs.

She wanted to drop to her knees and howl, but all she could do was shake from the bitterness that was not only born of the winter winds. Her bare hands ached as she clenched them, her nails digging into her palms until she was certain blood pooled in the dark crevices beneath her knuckles. Drawing a ragged breath she exhaled a plume of white condensation and watched as the snow sliced through

## *The Lineage*

the vapor, dispersing it like a nest of white doves. Wrapping her arms about her shivering frame she turned and staggered back down the empty city street to the hotel.

“Mam! Mam, are you okay?” The ginger clerk raced towards her as she stumbled through the entrance of the hotel.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I know I must look a fright. I just need to get some sleep.”

“Were you out there without a coat?” The young man walked beside her to the elevators. “It’s deathly cold out there. It’s like it’s the end of the world or something.”

She nodded. *Could very well be*, she thought.

“What room are you in?” he asked politely.

“189,” she replied through lips that felt as if they were on fire as the blood returned to them.

“I’ll have some hot cocoa sent up right away.” The clerk turned and hurried back to his station.

The last thing she wanted was to be disturbed. “That’s very sweet, but I don’t need—”

“You should accept the generosity. Such displays are rare these days.”

The elevator tolled like a medieval church bell as it arrived drowning out the soft meanderings of the lobby. Bryn’s stomach tightened, her flesh prickling between her shoulder blades down to the small of her back as if a feather had been drawn slowly across her skin. Feebly attempting to control the shivering she looked back over her right shoulder at the man who had addressed her. Her vision blurred, the illumination from the single overhead can-light falling too bluntly, or perhaps too softly to diffuse evenly against the granite and steel of the elevator hallway. She closed her eyes shaking her head as she slowly turned to face the stranger.

When she opened them again she gasped at a vision of

Tristan standing not three feet from her dressed in tight black jeans, a faded black Cure T-shirt, and scuffed combat boots. When she blinked the hallucination vanished replaced by an elegant waif of a man in a dapper tailoring that bespoke wealth that needed no calling card. He carried no briefcase or luggage, his arms crossed at the wrists like a hit man or bodyguard. The elevator doors opened in a conspiratorial whisper and the man stepped forward into the bay. He extended one long ashen hand as he moved, placing it gently against the edges of the door to keep it from closing. Lifting his deep jade eyes to meet hers he waited in silence.

Bryn's heart beat against her ribcage with a fury that made her jaw ache. The open elevator was an invitation to revelation she was sure, but one she was certain only prophecies of the dead could manifest with true intention. Was she ready to receive such a deliverance from the other side?

The elevator began to chime as the door was held too long. She started with a sharp inhale of breath and stepped inside. The doors softly slid closed shutting out the sleepy murmurs of the lobby.

"Have we met?" she asked quietly, staring forward at the polished faux brass finish that distorted their reflections, so aptly haunting.

"What floor?" the stranger asked, his skeletal fingers poised over the buttons that glowed a dull white gold in her peripheral vision.

"Two," she mumbled and watched the reflection of his fingers dancing over the buttons.

The short ride up was entombed by the silence only reaped by the dying and when the doors parted she finally exhaled a stale breath as she stumbled forth into the dingy swirling deco design of the carpet. The scent of cleaning

## *The Lineage*

products layered over the synthetic perfume of wallpaper and bleached sheets crawled over her skin like a millipede, the strange echoes of hushed conversations and lovemaking seeping through the walls. Frowning, her breath staggered and heavy, she pressed the heel of her right hand against her ear to block out the sound, but her motion only served to amplify the multitude of stagnant society. Her legs felt leaden, filled with the blackened wrought iron conceit of two decades dismay that she instantly registered as her own desperate need.

*Need.* That was not an emotion she ever had admitted to. She needed nothing except her own skin and soul to provide whatever was necessary for survival, or so she had previously allowed herself to believe. She swallowed hard, her tongue thick and dry in her throat sticking to the roof of her mouth. She glanced both ways, down the hall, suddenly confused as to which direction her room was.

“I do believe it is this way?” the stranger called out to her from where he stood at the closed mouth of the elevator behind her.

*RUN!* Her intuition screamed to her like a freight train roaring through the center of her being holding her still hostage to the dingy carpet beneath her feet and the muffled sound of the denizens of the hotel around her.

“What?” Her eyesight shifted, blurring and skewing sideways before congealing again. She somehow knew that this reality was not the one she had previously existed within.

“Your room?” The man’s mouth twitched in a strange, almost pitying smile, his brow furrowing quizzically. He laughed under his breath, shaking his head a little as he walked towards her. “Come, my dear. Your travels have made you weary.”

She flinched at first as his arm wrapped about her shoulders, but found herself sinking into the cradle of his arm as a warm soothing energy drew her magnetically to him amplifying her exhaustion both mentally and physically. Her voice was lost, her cognitive reason stifled as he led her down the tunnel of the dimly lit hallway.

“You know Bryn, you’ve been quite the stalwart sentinel for your beloved Tristan all these long years.” The man’s voice rumbled like distant thunder, purring like a cat lying across her chest.

The key card mysteriously appeared in his right hand, his long white fingers gracefully inserting the white plastic into the lock that whirred with soft approval. He let his statement linger, sinking into the pores of her skin like a fine mist of acid rain as he directed her gently over the threshold into the room, past the dark bathroom to the nearest double bed. There he turned and with both hands upon her shoulders suggested she take a seat.

She watched as he walked toward the window where he pulled the drapes open to expose the view of the sleeping city below against the horizon of white-capped black mountains. She sank down to sit on the edge of the bed. The false amber warmth of the bedside table lamp traced his outline against the plate glass, a thin silhouette that faded to translucence when she tried to focus on anything other than the ominous black mountain range. Her body felt cemented to the corner of the bed.

“Why...why do you care?” Bryn drew a heavy, staggered breath. “I think you should leave.” She felt herself sinking to the right and braced herself from falling off of the bed with her hand. She blinked, a slow lethargic fluttering of her eyelids. As she raised them again he appeared sitting properly on the edge of the adjacent bed, his hands folded in

## *The Lineage*

his lap as he watched her.

“I would leave, my dear,” he cocked his head to the side, narrowing his eyes as he listened to some unheard call, “but I am neither here, nor there, nor anywhere, really.” He returned his gaze to settle upon her like cold chainmail. “I’m worried about you.”

She shook her head, raising a hand to rub her eyes. “Why would a stranger be worried about me? No one worries about me.”

“He used to. All those long years ago he used to worry himself to exhaustion over you.” The stranger leaned forward to rest his elbow on his knees.

She could not tell if he were genuine or mocking in his tone, but the idea that Tristan had cared for her more than she knew made her heart flutter, a lump of sorrow lodging itself in her windpipe, bitter and cold. “How would you know that? You’re too young to remember us back then.”

The man sighed. “I’m far older than I appear. Just as you appear far older than you are. It is equally an unfortunate result of our choices and our circumstance. Tristan is of special importance to me, just as he is to you.”

The man’s voice washed over her making her skin vibrate, seductively lulling her into a false sense of the sublime. Bryn blinked again and he was beside her, his arm wrapping about her slumped shoulders and pulling her into the crook of his where she could not resist the urge to rest her cheek against his collarbone.

“Who are you?” she whispered through the curtain of her hair.

“One who weaves riddles by day and gambles at night.”

“That sounds lonely.”

The man answered her with a strange, taught smile.

“You’re the one who made me cast those cards.”

His silence had told her all she needed to know. Strangely she felt more comfortable with the truth than she had in the moments of uncertainty that had stumbled towards her before. *The Devil. Of course.* She sighed and wanted to weep, though not from sorrow any longer, but at the tragic dark comedy of her existence.

“I do not make anyone do anything that is not already in their own minds and hearts. That is a misunderstanding of my power. I simply make suggestions. You found the box of photos. I knew you were looking for him, though you swore you would never reopen that case again. It was you who decided to read further into it and in that you saw the truth.”

“Then he is in great danger. I didn’t read the throw wrong. People weren’t just appeasing my madness.” Bryn sat up, clarity suddenly scattering the fog from her mind like a flock of geese taking flight over a pond.

The Devil sat still beside her, the arm that was wrapped about her shoulder gracefully returning to clasp hands with his other upon his lap. “He is. But he was born that way. There’s nothing you could have done or can do, really, to alter his destiny.”

“What do you mean?” Bryn stared at the reflection of the elegant stranger in the plate glass across the window. His gaze was focused on a point she felt sure was far beyond even the night sky behind the mountains.

“You cannot change destiny.” The Devil’s eyes refocused, shifting to watch her reflection as she watched his. “But you can alter his path towards his end.”

“I don’t understand. You mean he’s cursed? Why? How?” Bryn stood, the debilitating exhaustion expelled as adrenaline surged through her veins. The Devil took her by

## *The Lineage*

the forearm and gently guided her back beside him.

“Let’s just call it ‘blood poisoning’, on more than one level. At the end of the road he’ll come with me. It was part of an agreement made many lifetimes before either of you were born,” he replied quietly, a sad small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Bryn said, regretting how simplistic and naive her words sounded as soon as they escaped her lips.

The Devil laughed, a short exhale of breath through lips that twitched at the corners, sardonically. “Fairness, my lady, is not a business I deal in. Nothing in existence is ‘fair.’ It is simply a balancing act between light and dark.”

“And you’re the dark.” Bryn shivered as if from a sudden cold. Was she losing her mind, having this conversation with a hallucination carved from her own sorrow? It felt real, excruciatingly solid as the knot between her shoulder blades or the nail broken past the quick on her right hand.

“Judgmental? That doesn’t seem like you, Bryn.” The Devil cocked his head slightly to the side as he considered her reflection. “You know, I’ve always liked you.”

“You have?” She snorted derisively and looked at the floor. *Please just wake up*, she begged herself.

“You are awake. It’s okay.” He placed his hand over her left where it rested over her knee. “You’re attuned to things most mortals aren’t able to comprehend.” The Devil moved to face her, taking his place upon the edge of the other bed and leaning forward like a father addressing his daughter. “This matter with Tristan, it doesn’t concern you, but I knew you would be unable to resist the temptation to submit to your own desires. You’re only human.”

“Desires?” She stared at him, hatred suddenly welling up from the center of her being for this creature before her in

a mask too perfect to be human or otherwise. “My concern for his wellbeing is not due to my *desires!*” She stood. “What do you want with me? With him? Why are you here?” Her voice began to rise to hysteria with the last question.

The Devil raised his hand to ask her be still and hung his head, hand poised in midair like a painting of a saint blessing a peasant. Bryn wavered, casting an uneasy glance at the door and back out at the sleeping city beyond the hotel before slowly sitting again.

He raised his eyes to her, more human than human as if illuminated by a candle from within for a brief moment. “I need your help. And before you ask why, I will answer you. I have always needed your help, the help of humanity. You are my children. You are my true followers. You believe in me more than He does. Without you I cease to exist. He does too, but He is just arrogant enough to deny that fact.”

Bryn frowned. “Children? Followers? You condemn us to inconceivable eternal tortures. You play with our lives like little plastic toys pulled from some fucking cosmic Cracker Jack box. I don’t even know if I believe in a ‘Devil’ or a ‘God.’ For all I know you’re just a product of my exhaustion, my grief.”

He smiled a knowing sideways grin. “You believe, Bryn. If you didn’t we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“I doubt that,” Bryn said under her breath, staring at the floor between her feet. “I talk to myself all of the time.”

“Humanity conceived Hell. Not I. Granted, I had my cause to be vindictive and filled with hatred in those early years. But you, my wandering untended flock, are the ones who wove tales of the tortures you would endure. Your belief created a reality and that reality was fed the blood of centuries of wars in the name of Him, blood that seeped down into the marrow of this world and fed into rivers that

## *The Lineage*

became other worlds. Indeed, I created large portions of it in the beginning, but you made me King and your suffering, you rage and your grief are what expanded my empire.” His smile faded, but he continued to hold her gaze. “I didn’t ask for this responsibility. But it is mine and if anything I will continue to honor it for all eternity and keep the balance that is good and evil in check.”

“Unfortunately, from time to time I do require the assistance of humanity to help keep that balance. Not all creatures in the universe understand the ultimate necessity in a level playing field and place their own desires, their own ambitions ahead of that of the cosmic whole, knowingly or unknowingly. That is why I am here.” The Devil paused, allowing his words to sink into Bryn’s consciousness like wine through a linen cloth.

“I don’t understand. What did I do?” Bryn asked quietly, fear causing her voice to tremble.

“Oh, you haven’t done anything my dear. But there is quite a bit you *can* do to help me, as well as your friend. I just need one little favor. One that will ease your sorrow and help Tristan to at least live the best life he can until the time comes when he must walk with me.”

*Walk with me...* There was an irrefutable finality to his tone that shook her to her very core as if to insinuate she would have Tristan by the hand when he took those final steps. Yet, the promise of an ease of the debilitating ache that hunched her shoulders and numbed her hands was a prescription she wanted willingly to take. She was so very tired.

“A favor? For Tristan?” she asked quietly. “What do you want with him?”

The Devil drew a quiet, slow breath, exhaling contemplatively through his nose. “He is—how shall I put

it?—the last chapter in a story centuries in the making. He knows this and is coming to terms with it. It is difficult for any creature to accept this finality of their own fate, especially when I have asked for his assistance, as well, but for a slightly different purpose. This is where you come in, Bryn. I need you to urge him to accept my offer to improve upon his current situation in exchange.”

Bryn shook her head, rubbing the spot between her eyebrows as if it could deliver her clarity. “If this has anything to do with what I saw in his throw, why wouldn’t he want help? Even if it is from you?”

“Like I said, he’s coming to terms with it. This is a rather peculiar situation and one I believe might be best negotiated through the voice of someone close to him, someone he trusts,” Lucifer replied. He smiled as he saw the recognition of a trade settle into her, past the reptilian part of her brain that longed to flee the danger before her. “I can, in effect, turn back time for you both. Set things back to the moment before Dorian and his brood ever drove into your town.”

“What good would that do? Dorian will still come as he did before,” she challenged.

“Dorian won’t be there,” Lucifer continued. “In the new reality I can create for you, he won’t exist at all. But in order to make this happen I need you to help me secure Dorian in this reality. He is the source of a little complication that has begun to annoy me greatly. I believe Tristan just might be the one to help me figure out the solution to this complication. However, while I know he longs to punish his Maker, there is always that unfortunate coil you physical creatures submit to in the faces of those that made them what they are today. I would not have bothered to find Tristan until his dying days. What is a mortal lifetime to me but a wink and a glance? But that was before he decided to become a vampire. His Maker,

## *The Lineage*

the Dorian you so love to hate, crossed me and is using your beloved Tristan as a sort of bargaining chip to save his own soul.”

Bryn’s heart thudded in her ears. The heating unit beneath the window clicked on and began to whirl with a deep methodical pulsation of stale warmth. Vertigo seized her, spinning the room to the left and then to the right as adrenaline surged through her veins. Her face and hands went numb—when she found her voice to speak she could barely remember how to use her tongue or lips.

“Vampire?” Bryn managed. “Vampires...exist?”

The Devil chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re sitting in a hotel room in Salt Lake City chatting with the Devil and you have a hard time believing in the existence of vampires?”

Images from films flickered through her head as she tried to imagine what Tristan might look like as a vampire. *Please don’t let him be like the ones in “30 Days of Night”*, the random thought skittered across her mind. “You’re serious, aren’t you? That is, if I haven’t completely lost it and am actually talking to my own reflection in the window right now.”

“I know. It’s a lot to take in,” he said almost gently.

*Just play along*, she told herself. *If it’s a hallucination let’s see what it is that your subconscious has in mind.*

Drawing a deep breath, she began slowly. “What did you ask of Tristan?”

The Devil pressed the tips of his long fingers together. “I gave your friend a choice, similar to what I have proposed to you. Well, not exactly. I asked for him to help me figure out just how Dorian placed his contract on hold, making him untouchable to me, and in return he can have any wish he wants, within reason, of course.”

“He didn’t accept that offer?” Bryn asked cautiously.

“He’s considering it. He’s a wise man. I need you to help sway his decision. You know what’s best for him. You have always had his best intentions at heart. Accepting my offer is the best thing he can possibly do for his situation.” He watched her with eyes that shifted color from sentence to sentence like a cat’s caught in candlelight.

“And if I do this, you’ll turn back time and set things to the way they were? What will I end up owing you?” She watched him suspiciously.

He sat back and splayed his hands wide, smiling. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” She raised an eyebrow.

“No. You didn’t come to me asking for anything. This is an offer I place before you,” he replied. “And I would be deeply indebted for your assistance in this matter.”

“Indebted,” she repeated. She liked the ring of that word. “Out of the *goodness* of your heart.”

“You act like the Devil never had a heart?” As he spoke his image rippled and faded, shimmering backwards into the black glass panes beyond.

Bryn found herself alone again, facing the emptiness of a winter blizzard night.

## CHAPTER 11



The sound of the front door opening had echoed like a shotgun blast through Tristan's ears in the last hour before sunset. With an electrocuted twitch of his head against the wall beside where he curled at the back of Guymon's walk-in closet he had become aware of the world again with an infuriating immediacy. These were the moments when his reality and reality collided with a brute force that left him screaming against the walls of his own psyche like an inmate begging for reprieve or death. Trapped within his own body he struggled against the blood that stayed him like a docile mule until the heavenly body that turned the tides had seen fit to rest for a time and turn its dominance over to the otherkin that rule in its absence.

Dorian no longer felt this dominance so exquisitely. Tristan had sensed him rise and stretch in the moments when sunset became night, when shadows lost their meanings against the plagues of indecent sideways cast remembrance

of the day that had lost so much and gained so little. But there was nothing he could do in his unwaking youth to breach the caul that kept him from investigating the indecencies of his Maker, whatever they might be. He could feel the impulse of his adrenaline, the faint preoccupations of his psyche fluttering like suicidal moths against the fog that surrounded him, trying to console him like the calloused-handed attempts of an abusive mother. Day would hold him until it saw fit to release and not a moment sooner.

Limbs creaking like dry wood bending against a storm he uncurled himself and clawed his way to the closet door. Leaning against the molding he waited for a moment before opening it, listening to the house as it settled into the arctic cold without the feeble sunlight to whisper its false promises of warmth. Guymon was still absent again.

Shaking the cobwebs free of his mind as he pressed his forehead against the painted wood he wondered where Dorian's strange little friend was off to now. Tristan could not put his finger on it, but a restless itch of doubt teased his center making his skin feel too tight against his bones when he pondered it for too long. The psychic was guarded and in a way that bespoke of self-preservation and paranoia rather than a simple desire for privacy. If it concerned Dorian he kept his doubts concealed, seemingly oblivious to Guymon's secretive behavior. Fixated on the promise of severing ties with Lucifer, he could speak of nothing else when approached.

Tristan slowly opened the closet door, peering cautiously outside—while the only other presence he could sense in the home was Dorian's, on the back porch, he had begun to doubt his own radar now that the ultimate supernatural power had revealed just how useless it was in the detection of the Devil himself.

## *The Lineage*

The bedroom was empty and dark, dim orange light from the streetlamp outside barely slicing through the mini-blinds on the far side of the bed. With silent steps he returned to the chest where he had sat and listened to Guymon's theory. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands together, staring blankly into the evening shadows as he replayed his meeting with Lucifer. In one respect, the memory was cut in such crystal clarity that it was painful to reimagine, the truth of its existence nearly too bitterly beyond the concept of "real" too much for the human psyche to accept. Luckily, he was not human.

However, on the other hand, it felt heavy and ethereal like a palm of hourglass sand slowly leaking through the spaces between his fingers. Each time he attempted to focus on a detail, it vanished, descending down into darkness, lost forever. It felt as if it had taken him a lifetime to simply accept the fact that he was a vampire. Now, he faced eternal damnation, but not solely for the atrocities he had committed on Earth, but because of a fabled contract signed by a relative he had not thought to even be a real historical figure. He wanted desperately to scoff at the idea, to dismiss it and simply move on with whatever semblance of an existence he could carve out of the rest of his time, but he knew that there simply was no denying his new destiny.

He was going to have to either make a new deal with the Devil to alter his ancestor's and, in turn, destroy his Maker, or he was going to have to find his own "loophole" and trick Lucifer as Dorian had.

"No!" he hissed to himself under his breath. "That is ridiculous." He checked himself and continued, his thoughts tucked behind his mind's walls. *We see how well that's turned out for Dorian. If I follow in his footsteps then I'll just be hunted like him. The Devil will only find someone else*

*to manipulate into delivering me. But... Perhaps?*

He shook his head and exhaled sharply, leaning back against the wall. The temptation of turning Dorian over to Lucifer and watching him be dragged down into Hell was alluring. He fought against the spite and rage that had stifled him since the night of his very first kill, forcing its chitterling madness back down, attempting to turn a deaf ear to its fevered whisperings about revenge. He reminded himself that even if his contract could be altered, it would come with strings, razor-thin and barbed. And what would he ask for? He could not even begin to fathom what could be worth such a trade.

There was also the aspect of his own self-loathing that felt perhaps returning to Hell with Lucifer might be a just end for him. Perhaps he would aide Lucifer in the delivery of Dorian, but not ask for anything in return? Would not the Devil then owe him?

“I’m stepping out for a little while.”

Dorian’s voice jarred Tristan out of his contemplation, causing him to jump slightly. It was still unnerving how he possessed the ability to simply appear beside Tristan without the slightest whisper of sound. Tristan drew a deep breath and turned to face his Maker. Dorian stood a foot inside the bedroom, his attention was focused on some point beyond the doorway in the living room. His hand lingered on the doorframe, his expression distant and preoccupied.

“Out? Where?” Tristan asked quietly.

“I need to feed. As do you,” Dorian replied. “I won’t be gone long. Suburbia will provide.”

“Do you think it’s wise for us to split up right now? We’re the last—”

Tristan’s question was cut short as Dorian vanished, followed by the sound of the front door opening and closing

in a soft hiss and click.

“Fuck!” Tristan hissed.

He slouched forward and cupped his hands around the back of his neck, another old mortal gesture of weariness he maintained for its creature comforts. He too felt the hunger clawing at him. While he knew Guymon’s home held not even a degree of the intense protection of the Bishop’s safe-house, which had failed even then, he could not shake the fear of being out in the open elements. Some false sense of security remained regarding four walls and a roof which he craved after years of nomadic roaming, huddled in the back of the beat up trailer with rotting corpses and the undead. He knew that there was no form of physical or, perhaps, magical barrier that could keep away the one force that stalked him now, but he could pretend—in his mind the simple, cheap house became a fortress of slate and steel, blessed by priests and priestesses of every religion and sealed by wards unimaginable by the armies of Heaven or Hell. He knew, however, that he must feed or risk becoming too weak to fight at all.

Tristan pulled hard at the back of his neck, feeling the muscles stretch between his shoulder blades until he lost track of time. A metallic hiss and click of keys in the back door snapped him out of his meditation. He released the hold on his neck and slowly raised his head, listening carefully.

Guymon had returned. Tristan frowned, tilting his head to the side to hear a loud crack echo from his vertebrae before standing. Silently, he stepped into the living room. Guymon stood in the kitchen, his back to Tristan. His head bent, he stared at something in his hands. Tristan approached, narrowing his eyes as he scanned Guymon’s aura—the man simply had too many secrets to make Tristan comfortable in his presence.

He halted a few feet from Guymon and waited in silence for the psychic to become aware of his presence. The scent of his blood and the nervous pulse that vibrated through his skin caused Tristan to swallow hard, his fangs aching as he instinctually tested their tips with his tongue until his own blood coated the inside of his mouth. Guymon placed his phone in his right jacket pocket and looked up. His eyes widened as he spied Tristan's reflection in the glass of the back door's small window.

"What mischief have you been up to this evening?" Tristan asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched Guymon's facial expression in the glass.

"Tristan! How long have you been standing there?" Guymon asked, slowly turning to face him.

"My question first."

"I met a friend for drinks." Guymon sidled past Tristan into the living room, shrugging out of his coat and throwing it on the couch. "Just catching up on old times."

"Strange time to be drinking, don't you think? I mean, with the Devil on our tail and everything." He stepped toward Guymon. "Might want to keep your wits about you until it's all over. Plus, what about all of that 'research' you needed to do?"

There was a peculiar energy surrounding Guymon, a residual aura of another that he knew intimately. He took another step towards him as he strived to decipher the identity of the pattern that draped over Guymon's limbs like tattered lace. An image flashed through his mind, his skin growing unnaturally warm at the hollow echo of time and place that skipped about the periphery of his senses like a subway train racing over tracks high above. He sniffed the air like a wolf—a perfume of amber and Egyptian musk, candle wax and black hair dye, scotch and crystals. Bryn.

## *The Lineage*

His heart began to race, his eyes widening as he tried to convince himself that he was deceived. *Why is she here, in Salt Lake City?*

“Why—why are you looking at me like that?” Guymon stuttered, backing up until he pressed against the front door.

“What is she doing here?” Tristan struggled to remain calm, his voice gravelly in its urgency.

“Who?” Guymon replied dumbly.

Tristan was on him in a flash, the long cold fingers of his right hand wrapped tightly around Guymon’s throat threatening to crush his windpipe at the slightest provocation. “Don’t fuck with me. You know who, now tell me why she’s in town right now and why the hell you’re meeting with her?”

His rage was born of fear. Bryn was the essence of the good of his past, the one memory he had captured and pinned down like a butterfly in a wooden box for safekeeping. She could not be in such close proximity to the epitome of evil—he could not bear the idea of her harmed because of him. He had taken such care to vanish without a trace once he had been turned, leaving the world of his mortal past behind in the middle of the night with his new family. No note, no solemn tear-stained goodbye. He had wronged her in his departure, but he had been barely more than a child and terrified at the darkness that had claimed his soul.

Guymon clawed at Tristan’s wrist, trying desperately to wrestle free. “Calm down!” he croaked. “She’s looking for you. I don’t know how she found out you were in town, but I told her that she should go home. Okay?”

“Why does she want to see me?” Tristan growled as he released Guymon and turned away to pace the length of the living room with heavy steps.

“Fuck if I know! She’s still carrying a torch for you or

something. The woman can't let go of the past. Were you guys lovers or something?" Guymon slowly lowered his hands halfway, trembling visibly.

"No. Friends. Very good friends," Tristan said, more to himself than Guymon. "I had hoped she would think me dead after all of these years."

"Well, maybe she'll come to her senses in the morning and get on the next plane back to wherever home is? She doesn't know where I live and I'm not listed in the directory." Guymon shakily drew his crumpled soft-pack of cigarettes and lighter from the side pocket of his cargo pants. Lighting one, he inhaled deeply and let smoke trail from his nostrils.

"That doesn't matter. I know she's here now and that puts her in danger." Tristan sat down on the edge of the coffee table. "Anyone connected to me is in danger. Including you." He looked up at Guymon.

Guymon coughed a short strangled laugh. "You have no fucking idea," he muttered under his breath. "Look." He pushed away from the door and cautiously took a seat in the armchair. "After tomorrow night, things should be settled."

Tristan narrowed his eyes as he watched Guymon nervously smoke his cigarette. "Settled?"

Guymon's eyes widened slightly as they met Tristan's. "Cosmically. The ties between you and the Devil."

"Right..." Tristan wondered how long Dorian would be gone. *A lot can happen in twenty-four hours. I need to find her, he thought. I have to get her out of this city.*

Guymon carefully flicked ash into the ceramic ashtray behind him on the coffee table. "You look horrible. Maybe you should do, um, whatever you guys do?"

"Where is she?" Tristan asked quietly, staring at the door, studying the grime and scuffmarks around the edges.

Guymon hesitated, drawing long and hard on the

## *The Lineage*

remainder of his cigarette. “Are you sure you want to know? Just let her leave town.”

“But she won’t. You know that as well as I. She knows I’m here. I can feel it.” Slowly he turned to face Guymon.

Guymon bit the inside of his cheek nervously and ran his hand through his hair. “Fuck,” he whispered under his breath, his eyes dropping to the carpet between his boots. “The Radisson, downtown.”

Tristan began to leave.

“You have to be back here by tomorrow night. Otherwise, there’s nothing I can do to help you guys.” Guymon’s gaze was wild as he met Tristan’s.

There was a strange desperation in the psychic’s eyes. He tilted his head slightly to one side as he pried at the hardened shell of defenses around Guymon’s mind.

“It’s not your soul that’s on the line,” Tristan said. “Try to stop acting like it is.”

\* \* \*

He worked his way through the fibers of being. He was looking for something elegant. He was looking for something profound. He wondered why no one had ever thought of this before. It was a simple circumstance that ached of prostituted repetition and stank of wasted humility on humanity.

Why did he continue making these deals? Deals with simple souls to feed some abstract beast he had created in an act of rage, rage that he was ashamed to admit was now all too human in its weakness. At times he felt it was perhaps because he pitied humanity and their delusions of free will. He and his minions could just take what they wanted but that seemed too cruel, even for the Devil. A deal at least gave the illusion of power for them and, in the end, they did get their

dreams fulfilled, even if it was but for a short time. It was more than God was willing to give.

He paced. There was little point except to exacerbate his desire to avenge his wounded pride. These were the little things that kept him tethered to the underworld he had created; ambition, pride, arrogance. All of these were miniscule in the face of one or more of his past sins, or so he thought, but all of them combined wove the fabric of his being into a cocoon that threatened to suffocate him now. All because of one solitary being—it shouldn't have been worth his time. He should have been able to find the loophole within the loophole that Dorian had spotted, that tiny overlooked phrase that could easily be left open for interpretation.

He halted his pacing, his iron steps having engraved the soiled shag carpet of Skeeter-Hawk's dingy little hotel room like a brushfire as he waited for the scoundrel to return. The ichor in his veins became frostbitten as a strange dread crept up his spine, spreading out to the scars he maintained where he had severed his angel's wings with rage and hatred in order for his new black leather ones to emerge. The scars now itched, burning as if his old wings of white feathers would pry themselves out of his hardened shell once again. He listened to the universe, frozen by this emotion he had almost forgotten.

What if others could find the way out of their contracts? What if those souls that he had claimed that had not fully been broken and dissected and reborn into the image of their internal darkness managed to spy the one phrase or action needed to twist into his heart? What if Tristan himself found a way out of the contract used to claim so many souls, one Faust after another throughout the centuries since Johann's ill-fated decision?

The Devil shivered. It could not come to pass. Otherwise,

## *The Lineage*

his world might unravel.

\* \* \*

Bryn stared out over the city as the sun slowly set behind the mountains. So serene it seemed, so unassuming and innocent upon the surface. In the distance loomed the massive Mormon church, grey and strangely ominous as if its face were merely a reflection off still waters. She felt alone, more so than she had in years as her mind worked to process the events of the previous evening. She glanced over at the nightstand and traced the glowing red outline of the numbers on the alarm clock's face. 12:45 A.M.

Had she fallen asleep for a time? She couldn't remember having laid down though her body felt strangely at ease as if the burdens of her soul had shifted to a deeper darker place within her where they no longer toyed with the surface strings, frayed and useless as they were. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps they were cowering in that darkness, praying that they might be shielded from whatever it was that she had witnessed.

*But it had been a dream, she chided herself gently. The Devil wasn't here. Why would he be here? I'm not that important.*

Her eyes roamed the room, coming to rest on her bags in the corner, still unpacked and ready for her return trip home. What had she been thinking, chasing the ghost of a friend who may or may not even remember her? Maxine had been the only person to encourage her obsession. Now Bryn wondered if perhaps Maxine's motivational words had been born out of a need for distance from her friend and her maddening sorrow. The idea of the lonely cab ride to the airport, the stale scent of the recycled airplane air and

the icy devastation of failure as she turned the knob on her own front door made her sick to her stomach. She needed closure—she could not rest until she had laid eyes once more on Tristan, be it his living face or his buried bones.

Slowly, dreamlike, she rose from the edge of the bed with leaden legs and knees that creaked with age and the immobility of hours staring into the night. She turned full circle, scanning the room, her mind blank, but knowing something should be done, to her, to the world...something.

Her stomach growled painfully—Bryn couldn't remember when she'd eaten last. The past two days blurred from one minute to the next. Shuffling to the desk beneath the flat-screen TV on the wall facing the beds she flipped through the room service dinner menu and picked the first item on the list. Through a hoarse whisper she placed her order and returned the phone to its white plastic cradle with an uncomfortably audible click.

A soft knock at the door startled her. With a gasp she looked at the clock—for nearly twenty minutes she had been standing in the same spot, fingers resting idly on the phone, staring down at an image of the Utah mountains serenely depicted with the sun peeking over their summit on the cover of the Services binder. Her heart thundered in her chest, her limbs quaking with adrenaline and exhaustion.

"It's just room service," she stuttered. She stared at the door—it seemed a million miles away. Slowly, she shuffled one foot in front of the other toward the door. She grasped the knob—something caused her to pause. Her breath felt cold as it slipped past her trembling lips.

"Bryn?" The voice that passed muffled through the wood and paint was deep and familiar. "I can smell you through the door. The same perfume you always used to wear."

He paused and drew a deep breath, sighing heavily. She

## *The Lineage*

felt him lean against the door. Part of her wanted to press against it as well, to peek through the peephole to confirm it was not simply a dream, or if it were, it were the one she had hoped for. The other aspect of her backed away unable to handle the idea of a true confrontation with the ghost she had chased for so many years, so many years wasted on the memory of someone that may only serve to devastate her now.

“Bryn? I know you’re still there.”

She started at his voice and looked down at her hand still clutching the doorknob, knuckles white, wrist shaking until the metal rattled softly. Her voice creaked as it clawed its way to the back of her throat.

She coughed softly. “T-Tristan?”

“You remember my voice.” There was a smile in his tone, though it vanished like a crack of lightning. “Are we going to talk through the door for the rest of the night?”

It was Bryn’s turn to draw a deep breath, but she held it as if it could tether the remaining threads of her sanity to her physical body as she watched herself turn the tarnished brass knob and slowly open the door. Her mind fought to comprehend what she witnessed leaning against the white lacquered doorframe. The strange ambient hallway light surrounded him like a blunt force trauma halo, harsh and unforgiving in its merciless definition of what was and what simply could not possibly be. But it was.

Tristan raised his eyes to her. He had not aged a single day in twenty years, his skin unmarred by time. Yet, there was a bitter hardness to his features, to the ghost that controlled the flicker of false humanity glinting off the surface of his eyes. It reminded Bryn of the wax figures she had seen in Las Vegas at a museum—too perfect, too damned perfect.

*I didn’t make a deal. Or did I?* She staggered backwards

a pace and gripped the edge of the bathroom entrance to steady herself. There were no words, nor were there any explanations that any rational human being could cobble—there was no plastic surgeon on Earth that could render a person so perfectly preserved.

He uprooted himself, peeling away from the doorframe like a chameleon shifting from one plane of camouflage to another. As he straightened, the same lanky twenty-year-old frame, he offered the tray of hotel food she had ordered with a cocked eyebrow.

“Where...where did you get that?” she stuttered.

He stared at her for a long moment before a stifled snort of a laugh escaped his pursed lips. His eyes shifted to the floor as he composed himself before returning to her wild stare. “You’re kidding, right?” He waited for her response. “I gave him a substantial tip.”

“I wasn’t—”

“May I come in?” Tristan asked.

Bryn staggered backward. “Of course,” she mumbled. “Give me a second.” She stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door shut harder than she had hoped, cringing at the way the wood and metal echoed off one another in the tiny space. She began to hyperventilate and sank down on the edge of the tub.

“Get it together Bryn. Get it together!” she hissed through clenched teeth.

Standing, she gripped the sink and stared at her own reflection—deranged and old. That was what was the first impression he had had of her after twenty years. She wanted to weep.

*Is this what I have become? Is this what the world sees? Oh dear gods!* She wiped furiously at her face, smearing away smudged day-old eyeliner and grabbing for whatever

## *The Lineage*

concealer she could find to hide the crows feet at the edges of her eyes.

“We’re not twenty anymore. I don’t care what you look like,” Tristan whispered through the door. “I can honestly say that that kind of superficial thing finally doesn’t matter to me. Not after all I have seen.”

She took one last look in the mirror, swallowed hard and shut the light off. Slowly she opened the door.

“I’m in here.”

\* \* \*

Bryn settled cross-legged at the foot of the bed, pulling the short, white hotel robe closed over her breasts. Running her fingers through the ends of her damp hair to pull free the remaining tangles she watched Tristan in silence for a long moment where he lay, naked on his back amidst the nest of twisted white sheets. His hands folded over his chest, he stared up at the ceiling, a slight furrow etched between his dark brows. A question had risen to her mind while she had showered, the hot water rinsing the evidence of their lovemaking and all of the trials of her journey, or so it seemed, down the drain. Now the question burned hot and painful in the center of her chest making it hard to breathe.

At last she found the strength to voice the words aloud. “What would you wish for?”

“What?” Tristan snapped out of his contemplation at her soft whisper. “What do you mean?”

She moved closer to him so that she could stare down into his face, a face that contained a portal to the better years of her life, a reminder that she had once been truly happy. “What would you wish for? If you accepted the deal?”

Tristan looked away, his face growing dark. “Lost faith

in me that fast, have you?" There was sadness in his voice that was heartbreaking.

She shook her head as she reached out and gently turned his face back towards her. "After two decades? Some may have, but I haven't. I was just curious. As humans we all have things we might barter for this or that if given the chance. Even if we aren't aware of it," she paused. "Would you wish to be human again?"

"I don't know." Tristan pushed himself up and back to lean against the headboard. "When the Devil first appeared, it did cross my mind, to rewind and have a 'normal life.' But I don't know if I want to be human now, knowing what I know. I'm not the same person I was back then. Not even in the remotest sense of the term 'human.' There's nothing that can erase the memories of the horrible things I've done. You can't even fucking imagine what I've seen."

"Ships burning off the coasts of Orion?" She quoted from a movie they had both loved.

He stared at her, his mouth twitching in a fleeting smile. "Something like that."

"What if you could go back? Start over again? Erase the past. You don't have to remember or stand witness to anything." She stopped herself, trying to restrain the tidal wave of her rush of excitement. "If he really could reset everything to the time before you met Dorian?"

He watched her as if trying to calculate her true intentions. "I wasn't happy back then, either," he said at last.

Tristan could feel the hope at the center of Bryn's soul sour and sharpen. She could feel Tristan's defenses rising in a wall of harsh rejection of her suggestion and resignation to his state of existence. He quaked silently knowing that this was the way of things that could not be reversed. No god, no devil, no entity of any plane could undo the scarring done to

## *The Lineage*

a soul. It was permanent.

“You weren’t?” she asked quietly. “No. You weren’t,” she answered her own question when met with silence. “I guess I knew that already.” She sat back, wrapping her arms around her stomach as she turned, dropping her legs over the edge of the bed as she stared at the floor. “I just never wanted to admit it. I guess none of us really were.”

Tristan sighed. “That’s not true. You all were so full of passion and joy. You awakened my soul, you showed me who I really was. Or, at least, what I wanted to be. I was so full of anger and I don’t even really know why? But no matter how much love you all showed me I felt like a wolf ready to gnaw its own paw off.”

He saw the grief coming over Bryn and broke through his own defenses to lean forward and wrap his arms around her shoulders. He whispered into her hair as the guilt of his confessions tugged hard at the heart that had finally begun to warm in her presence. “There’s nothing you could have done differently. There’s nothing that any of our friends could have done. This was my path, my destiny. I’m not sure why and I’ll spend the rest of whatever life I have left figuring that out. But I do know that if I have him reset time it would do absolutely no good for either one of us.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” she whispered.

“No.” He pulled back, leaving one hand on her shoulder as he studied the side of her face in the ambient parking lot light filtering through the hotel curtains. It would be dawn soon.

He had taken time to feed just before arriving—the hotel bellhop escorting Bryn’s dinner upstairs had provided the necessary sustenance he would need to carry him through the next couple of nights. Now, he knew he needed to leave before both the sun and the authorities came searching for

him once the body was discovered in the supply closet on the second floor. "Believe me, it's on my mind too. I have to make a decision and soon and when I do I must be prepared to make my requests." He sighed and fell back into the pillows. "I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't. Literally."

"Don't say such things," Bryn replied and reached up to rub her eyes with one hand to keep the tears from falling.

"Honestly, I don't think I would ask him for anything except that he leave me alone until he came calling again," Tristan mused quietly. "After what he told me about the 'fine print' that goes into these sorts of deals and all of the aspects of whatever wish I might present that I need to consider in order to keep him from twisting it into something rotten I don't think I want that kind of responsibility. I would be disgustingly egotistical to think I could outwit the Devil."

Bryn remained silent and still.

"I'm oddly not scared." Tristan stared across the room. "I know I should be, but if you've lived as I have you'd probably realize that there are terrors on Earth equal to that in Hell. I am one of those terrors. I am a monster." He lifted his hands before his face and studied the lines of his palms.

"You're not a monster. I refuse to believe that. You've been a prisoner in Dorian's little web. Your actions were not of your own choosing." Bryn shook her head, turning to stare at Tristan.

Tristan closed his eyes and dropped his hands to his stomach. "Everything is a choice. If there is one lesson I've learned it is that I made a choice to follow this path and I made a decision to stay with this tribe. It may have been misguided and steeped in fear and longing but I made the decision. I can't lie and coddle myself with the idea that it was not of my own will because I know now that Dorian's power was really just a lie. He never held any true power

over any of us.”

“But he must have some sort of power.” Bryn drew a deep breath and stood. She walked to her bags and fished out the pack of cigarettes she reserved for times like these when she felt as if her soul would come unhinged from her flesh. “He managed to trick Lucifer. You can’t say he doesn’t have power.”

“Power and trickery are two very different things. Power is inherent. It is undeniable. Trickery is cunning. It’s learned, like a pick-pocket,” Tristan said with a faraway look in his eyes.

Bryn was struck by his words, a reminder of the fact that, in some respects he was older than her and yet, by years, the same age despite his pristine shell. “Call it what you like but he managed to find a way out of his contract. Couldn’t the same be said of your own?”

Tristan’s eyes cut towards Bryn. “I didn’t sign the original contract. My ancestor did. I never had a say in it.” Anger tinged his words despite how he tried to restrain himself. Johann signed away his soul and damned us all. I cringe to think what all of the others before me have suffered, not given even a choice like me. I killed my own father. I took care of that one for Lucifer.”

“You killed Dale?” Bryn could barely breathe. She remembered the gruesome details of the story about his father’s murder that had splashed grotesquely across local headlines—he had been found decapitated and quartered, his head mounted on the front end of the sixteen-wheeler truck he drove across the country. “You did that?”

Tristan stared at her—he didn’t know how to react. It seemed a lifetime ago and so very justified in his mind. Yet, he could somehow, on the periphery of his being understand the horror in her eyes.

“I don’t ask for forgiveness,” he said. “I may have been a bit dramatic, but he got what was coming to him. There’s only so long until someone breaks. If I hadn’t been a vampire, it only would have been a matter of time until I took a gun to him.”

“I always thought Dale was just a nice guy. He was always so pleasant to me. I had no idea.” Bryn hated herself for not seeing the signs of abuse, for not being the friend he could confide in all those years ago.

Tristan refused to acknowledge her pain. “If it wasn’t for Dorian I’d be dead right now.” Tristan cut off her self-indulgent self-hatred as if he could taste it on the stale hotel air. “With or without the new life he gave me. Whether I like it or not, if he hadn’t deceived Lucifer I’d be burning in Hell right now no matter what kind of life I had lived as a mortal. When you knew me I was ‘this’ close to offing myself— THIS CLOSE! Yeah, I was a stupid kid with what the rest of the world chalks up to ‘useless’ issues, but, you know what... I was in serious pain.” He sat forward meeting Bryn’s gaze steadily. “Dorian walked in right at a time when I was ready to off myself. It wasn’t that I felt I’d done anyone wrong. I just didn’t see how this world was any better with me in it. My dreams were so beautiful, so vivid and my life so dull—I figured death was one long dream... Dorian looked at me one night, after I told him that, and begged me not to kill myself. Whatever his motives, he’s the reason I’m still here. Don’t you think I owe him something for that?”

What could she say? Dorian had postponed Tristan’s suicide through his desire to save his own soul. He had in his own strange way offered Tristan the opportunity to postpone his own damnation through the deliverance of Dorian’s own soul. Yet it still needled at the edge of her human conscience that there needed to be some way to unravel this equation, to

## *The Lineage*

unmake the maker of this wretched circumstance. And, in a way, she didn't know if he meant Dorian or Lucifer.

"You're right." She admitted. "But you can't save him. You know that, don't you?"

"I have no intention of doing any such thing," Tristan replied and rose from the bed. He walked to the window and stared down at the parking lot through the thin linen curtains. "His bed is his to lie in, but I don't know if I can live with the knowledge I facilitated his damnation either."

"So, where does that leave you? If you say no to the Devil he may just take you now." Bryn bit her lower lip.

Tristan was silent for a long painful moment as he studied the way the shadows from the trees cast darkly upon the newly fallen snow beneath the onslaught of stark white lamppost light. He reached up and loosely took one of the thicker blackout drapes in his hand. "There's something I'm not seeing about this entire ordeal. Why is he keeping me here? Why am I the only one who can help him out of the billions of people on this planet?" He sighed and turned back to face her. "There has to be a way out, some other option besides making another deal?"

"If Dorian found one, you can too," she breathed with renewed excitement. "You don't have to wish for anything. You don't have to turn back time or become mortal. You just need another option."

"Yes." He nodded, his dark eyes black in the shadows within his icy white features. "I need to read the fine print my forefather didn't." His eyes found hers. A wicked toothy grin divided his face making him appear mad and feral. "The Devil is in the details, isn't it?"

She could not help but smile herself, though now it was with a tinge of uncertainty. "Indeed it is."

## CHAPTER 12



Ice collected on the ends of his long dark lashes. He blinked—the warmth of his lids was a harsh contrast to the frozen surface of his eyes. Tristan tilted his neck to the side anxiously and heard the vertebrae crack. Dorian cast a damning sideways glance in his direction at the sound. Tristan held his gaze before Dorian relented and turned back to stare at the weathered building across the street where Guymon had told them to meet him at sundown—it was now an hour past.

The building resembled a church in its arched eaves, cold gray stonework and vacancy of resolution, like an old man in need of warmth and comfort, but was too stubborn to allow love in. He shivered. Guymon had said it was a lodge used by locals for game nights and other social functions including a membership-only bar. Tristan had always had a strange fascination with lodges since his first experience as a child with the one his father attended. He remembered the smoke-

## *The Lineage*

stained, yellowed wallpaper and 1970's wood paneling that lined the halls and rooms—the old red vinyl booths in the dining area that seemed more suited for a pool hall, and the life-weary neighborhood locals that frequented it in between awkwardly scheduled “family days” around the motel-esque pool that never felt safe or moral to Tristan, even as a child. The ceilings had been too low. There had been too many small locked rooms he was never allowed into.

He shivered again. “You sure this is the right place?”

Dorian stared straight ahead. “As I said, yes. If you hadn't shielded yourself so well last night I could have contacted you sooner,” he growled. “I could have given you more details. Now, I guess you'll just have to trust me.”

Tristan's internal response was a derisive snort as he resisted a sarcastic response. Across the street a light turned on in a basement window casting a liquid gold smoke across the snow that it was nearly buried behind. Shadows moved to and fro in front of the light, blocking it out from time to time. The play did little to ease Tristan's suspicion. A car drove by, its headlights two long cones of white against the pale blue of winter night, tires crunching packed snow, bone dust beneath rubber and steel.

As the vehicle passed Dorian stepped off of the curb and hurried across the street. Tristan hesitated, an icy painful lump lodged in his throat.

“She's on your side.”

Tristan jumped at the voice in his ear, leaping back several feet to collide with the lamppost. The Devil stood stark still and immaculate in his elegant threads, a foot from Tristan's boot prints in the snow. Tristan's eyes darted between the Devil and Dorian, who seemed oblivious that Tristan had not followed, as he made his way to the back entrance of the building. A mixture of relief and indignant desertion needed

at Tristan.

“That’s a good feeling to have. Embrace it.” The Devil nodded in approval with a small smile. “We’ll take care of him tonight. Won’t we?”

Tristan pried his eyes away from the lodge to find the Devil’s mischievous, yet weary gaze. He pieced together the Devil’s two statements, shaking his head in disbelief. Drawing a deep breath, he regained his composure and stepped away from the light post.

“You brought her here, didn’t you?” he asked.

The Devil shrugged, a tiny, unaffected movement. “Not that I can recollect. But, then again, it sounds like something I would do. I lose track sometimes.”

“Really? Do you just sit up at night thinking up ways to torment me?” Tristan spat.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” There was a dangerous darkness behind the Devil’s words, though the corners of his mouth continued to curl, without warmth. “You are only one of billions of humans annoying the fuck out of me these days. Albeit that you are definitely one of the more interesting cases, due to your lineage.”

The Devil shrugged again, tugging at the cuffs of his jacket as he settled himself and squared his shoulders. “Never mind all of that.” He waved a dismissive hand. “She has your best interest at heart. You should listen to her.”

“Advice from the Devil. That’s never been a bad thing to listen to,” Tristan mumbled, half under his breath.

“There could be far worse advice to take. Trust me.” The Devil took a step closer to Tristan.

“I still don’t get it,” Tristan said before the Devil could continue. “You can have him. I don’t care if my Maker lives or dies. Honestly. Take him. I don’t give a flying fuck! But I don’t know how to help you if he screwed you out of a

## *The Lineage*

contract. I'm just a vampire! I was just a stupid, lonely kid and I thought Dorian could teach me about the world. And in exchange this is what I became. I have learned nothing! I am not important!"

The Devil remained silent, allowing Tristan to collect himself.

"I was just a kid." Tristan drew a deep breath, exhaling the weight of his existence through his nose. He was trembling. "In a lot of respects I still am," he said quietly.

"Do you know how many empires were founded by 'kids'? How many kingdoms ruled and wars led? The world used to be run by children because they had no other choice. It's only in the last few decades that suddenly people coddle human children until the ripe age of thirty, leaving the majority of them completely, utterly useless. Stop whining about being a 'kid' and start taking some fucking responsibility for once! Don't try to weasel out of this by acting weak. The only thing I despise more than weakness is purposelessly feigned weakness." The Devil, realizing he was losing his carefully constructed composure, drew a deep breath and ran his right hand along the side of his head, smoothing out the lock of hair that had fallen unsuitably out of place. "Tristan, children are far wiser than adults. They make mistakes. They, for the most part, know right from wrong. The world is black and white to them. I look to humanity's youngest now when I want wisdom. Not your pathetic human adults."

"I'm not human," Tristan muttered, casting an uneasy glance across the street as he wondered where Dorian had vanished.

Instantly the Devil was face to face with him, their noses mere inches from each other. Tristan tried to gasp, but could not find the strength to draw the smallest breath as his heart careened against his ribcage.

“If I didn’t need you for this I would break you in half for your petulance and feed you to my dogs!” the Devil spat. “I’ll say it again: Grow up! For Hell’s sake, take a little pride in the fact that I am asking YOU a favor. Ungrateful little brat, you know how many people would kill for such an anomaly?”

Tristan blinked and the Devil appeared a few paces away. “I’ll see you inside. Best figure out what your decision is,” he said and vanished.

Tristan stared at the empty space where the Devil had been standing and finally found the strength to breathe. Movement out of the corner of his eye snared his attention—Dorian stood on the far side of the street watching him from the shadows beneath the brim of his black cowboy hat. Tristan wondered just how much he had seen. Pulling his leather jacket closed over his chest with one hand, the other stuffed deep in his pocket, Tristan quickly crossed the silent street.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost?” Dorian asked.

“Huh? Ghost? No!” Tristan reeled back on his eagerness for denial. “No. I’m just, just nervous about this whole thing. I want to get it over with.”

Dorian looked back across the street at the pocket of lamplight and the gray-blue footprints in the white snow where they had been standing. There were just two sets of footprints, but Tristan kept imaging a third set engraved in the snow like winter’s verdict to remove the trash from the streets it laid its cleansing claim to.

“He’s here. Isn’t he?” Dorian asked quietly.

“Who?” Tristan asked, dumbly.

Dorian didn’t answer, but simply turned away and headed back down the small flight of stairs to the basement. Tristan wanted suddenly to grieve. He wanted to sigh. He wanted to

## *The Lineage*

feel for other than the superficial circumstance of his own past. Bryn's perfume lingered in his hair, whipped about by the winter wind with its accusations and its malevolent intentions. Tristan knew he couldn't linger for long outside—his future lay down those three icy steps. With a deep breath he followed after Dorian.

Whatever would be, would be.

\* \* \*

After the cleansing ice of the Utah winter night the musty warmth of the lodge basement felt oppressive, suffocating Tristan with a molesting indecency. The building had secrets, the kind that made young men sneer and old men avert their eyes in knowing shame. Tristan resisted the urge to reach out and touch the old wood-paneled walls to absorb some of those secrets through the smoke and oil—it was a darkness he was drawn to. It made him curious. It distracted him, like a shadow darting behind the darkness, taunting him to follow, perhaps to his own demise.

The linoleum tiles, stained a dark yellow no bleach could ever clean, creaked under his boots as they entered the dining area. To his right stretched a small bar lined with dull cracked red leather bar stools that looked as if they could barely bear the weight of a toddler. Mirrors on the wall behind the bar reflected the assortment of rather high-end spirits for such a shabby establishment.

*At least they invest their money wisely. Who cares about the décor,* thought Tristan.

He could not resist the desire for tactile interaction now and pulled his frozen hand from the safety of his jacket pocket. Walking the bar, he ran his fingertips along the frayed black vinyl top with its bruised and burnished copper

edging. With every bar stool a hundred stories were told. They rushed into him like lightning from his fingerprints to the base of his skull, residual hauntings eager to spin their reel one more time. He paused when he reached the end, staring out through the small short-order side window at the community pool. It sat empty and abandoned, a rectangle of pale painted blue concrete walls filled with snow. The snow would melt in summer to be replaced by the giggling of children and weary rehashed conversations of adults. Time would go on. Life would continue. It always did.

*Do I want to be a part of this world any longer?* Tristan questioned himself. The time of decisions was upon him. Yet, he still did not fully understand what choices were being presented to him.

He turned and stared at Dorian—his Maker was as good as dead to him now. He couldn't follow something or someone so self-serving and devoid of empathy or sympathy.

*You saw him cry when Diane died,* Tristan reminded himself. *But what were a few tears in a river of blood?*

A small part of him wanted to hold out for the hope that there was something else behind the darkness, behind the Machiavellian attitude towards life, towards him. He knew better though—he was too jaded now to believe in “hope” and all of its wayward falsified seductions. Better to simply let some things die.

He watched as Dorian approached a set of white double-doors between two sets of rounded dark green vinyl diner booths. Dorian paused for a moment, one hand pressed against the wood, his face turned to the side, eyes cast down toward the gray-green industrial carpet as he listened. When he lifted his head, a small knot of concern knitted itself between his brows. There was a twitch in his mouth as if he'd been stung—he was hesitating, his instinct telling him

to flee.

Tristan tilted his head to one side as he considered his Maker. This was a side of him he had never seen before: indecision. Tristan had to look away.

Creaking hinges forced Tristan to raise his eyes from the carpet where he dwelled in the reminiscent sadness of regret. Dorian had opened the door a few inches. He stared at Tristan with a dry mouth, lips parted, breath stuck in his lungs with carbonite barbs.

“You coming?” Dorian’s right eyebrow twitched slightly.

Tristan wished he could grab a bottle from the bar shelf and down it like the old days. It had been so easy to be numb back then when flesh was susceptible to poisons so much less complicated than blood. He uprooted himself and trudged forward, silently vowing he would rend Guymon limb from limb if something spectacular didn’t happen in the next few hours.

Dorian waited until Tristan was near before stepping over the threshold. Tristan caught the door with his left hand as it started to swing shut in his face. Slowly he pushed it back open and peered inside. Backlit by the dingy dim dining area lights, the room was cavernous with low ceilings of ventilated, paneled, once-white asbestos and round tables covered in rented white polyester tablecloths, ringed with cheap tradeshow-grade black chairs. Empty, the tables begged for company as if they were terrified to be alone in the stale air with the ghosts that haunted the shadows. They wanted for a wedding or birthday, something to scare away the darkness, anything except what was about to unfold.

Tristan stepped into the room and listened to the creak and groan of the old door closing behind him. The stench of decades of extinguished cigarettes permeated the facility.

He tried in vain to keep from analyzing the building, but it fascinated him, how tragic it was, stifled and craving affection. He himself understood the need, but no longer knew how to voice it. If Bryn hadn't found him he might never had known the loving touch of another living being again.

He forced himself to focus on the present. Towards the rear of the room stood a small, low stage. The tables had been pushed away from the front of the dias so that they crowded together unwillingly, scared little animals cowering from the torchlight that was but a few black pillar candles placed strategically about the stage. An altar had been created in the center, decorated with an assortment of occult items and draped in a black silk. Tristan leaned against the closed doors behind him, unable and unwilling to progress further into the room. It seemed cheap, shoddy, a display for something more seedy and unseemly—not the key to his or Dorian's freedom from the ultimate evil.

Dorian prowled about the perimeter of the room towards the stage where Guymon stood beside another man, a tall, gaunt figure in a long black robe, whose deeply lined face was hard as granite. A disturbing power radiated from the man, though he attempted to cloak his true nature. He stared at Tristan with a predatory intent and Tristan knew that this was not the first time he had laid eyes on Tristan. The sensation caused Tristan's pulse to falter and the hair on the backs of his arms to bristle.

Dorian stopped halfway to the platform, his feline stance ready to flee at the slightest sign of danger. "You didn't say anything about another person being involved," he said to Guymon.

"This is Joseph. He is a good friend of mine and a warlock." Guymon's voice was tight and strained. His eyes

## *The Lineage*

flashed nervously between Joseph and Dorian.

“You’ve never mentioned him before.” Dorian tilted his head to one side.

“I wasn’t sure if he could assist us or not, until tonight. I’m just a psychic. My abilities for conducting magical ceremonies of this magnitude are limited. We can’t do this without him,” Guymon replied.

There was a strangled plea, Tristan thought, tethering his words together like barbed wire. It made Tristan’s skin crawl.

“You’re expecting me to trust someone I’ve never met at a time like this?” Dorian scoffed. “You’re a fucking—”

“You trusted Bishop Knobb, didn’t you?” Joseph said quietly.

“Yeah, and look at the lot of good that did us?” Dorian growled.

“Yes, well, that is unfortunate, but from what I’ve heard, you have no choice now.” Joseph interrupted, prying his gaze away from Tristan to shift his focus to Dorian. “The longer you stall, the worse it will get.”

Tristan’s stomach soured—strangely he missed the Devil’s presence. His mind reeled as he tried desperately to unravel the riddle of Dorian’s contract. He was ready to be free of his Maker and as far from Utah as possible. His eyes darted over the stage, noting the pentagram that had been drawn on the platform beneath the altar in white chalk and the large dagger lying between two tall black pillar candles. It was not a sight that brought comfort—something inside Tristan screamed that this was not the setting of a ceremony to free one’s self from Hell’s taloned grasp, but rather the scene of a conjuring for something far darker. The air within the room pressed down on Tristan until he struggled to breathe.

*We don't have to do this*, he whispered silently to Dorian. *We can figure this out without their help. I have a bad feeling about this.*

*We're here already. And he knows too much. We either need to kill him or see if he really has any abilities. Hell, what other choice do I have?* Dorian continued to stare at Joseph.

*Maybe if you would let me in on exactly what you did to piss off the Devil I might be able to help you myself?* Tristan hissed.

Dorian turned around and strode back to where Tristan remained pressed against the door. He kept his voice low so that the mortals could not hear, but still his words sliced through Tristan angrily. "If I thought you could help do you think we'd be here? What do you think you can do, rewrite my contract? Maybe have me sign yet another one?"

*Fuck, two is enough...*

Tristan frowned as Dorian's thought slipped across his mind. "I just know I've seen this guy somewhere. I can't put my finger on it," he said warily. "Let's just get out of here. We got this. We can handle it on our own. Please. Trust me."

Dorian stared at Tristan for a long while with a strange, strangled sadness as if every regret he had ever suffered descended upon him now. He shook his head. "Tristan, I'm tired. I want this done with and over. I've been running for too long. And now I've lost everything I've ever built. It's just about survival now. If this ritual can shield us for a while, buy us some time, then I need it."

Tristan took a step back, opening the door slightly with his hands pressed against the dingy painted wood. The hinges creaked slightly and he halted. The air was caught in his chest, stagnating. "I don't want to keep living if that's all

## *The Lineage*

there is,” he said, more to himself than to Dorian. “Survival isn’t enough.”

“Don’t be a fool. There’s always more to life. But right now, it’s about survival. Without survival, there is no life to look forward to.”

There was a genuine quality to Dorian’s tone, one which Tristan hadn’t heard since the early days before he was turned, when Dorian would speak to him in earnest in the shadows of the clubs and coffee houses of the greatness that lay ahead beyond the city. Dorian began to head toward the altar.

Tristan grabbed him by the arm. “Do you want to live or die? Tell me now!” He struggled to keep his voice low.

Dorian bowed his head, refusing to look back and meet Tristan’s gaze as if insulted by the question. “Does anything or anyone really want to die? Or are we just looking to be saved, by something or someone?” He shrugged out of Tristan’s grasp. “I wouldn’t have become what I am today if I didn’t want to live.”

Tristan watched as Dorian walked toward the platform and slowly up the three short steps on the side. He turned and stared at Tristan, his face a blank perfection of immortality, though his eyes threatened to bleed blood tears if his Son did not make this journey with him.

Tristan couldn’t believe he was praying to the Devil. I think I have an idea of what he did to his contract, but we have to get through this night. Please help get us out of this trap.

His prayer was met with silence and a gust of musty heat from the overhead vents choking the air with burning dust mites and asbestos. On the platform Joseph lit incense in a brazier. The sweet perfume snaked over and under the recycled air with a seduction that compelled Tristan forward.

He let the door close behind him, noting the soft click of the hinges reaffixing themselves to their stalwart sentinel positions.

The old linoleum creaked beneath his weight as he skirted the unadorned tables and stepped up to meet the others on the stage. He lingered near the edge of the platform, his eyes darting between the magical instruments on the altar and the individuals gathered, trying to make sense of it all. He shared a desire to live, as well as a road-worn weariness for the events that had transpired over the past few weeks. He'd seen enough bloodshed in sickeningly grisly ways to endure for a lifetime. He made a silent vow to himself that, if he were to live he would find a way to exist in a more peaceful way.

Something dark twitched at his center, a pang of pain as exquisite as fear. He took a step backwards down the platform. "Dorian." He whispered. "Don't go near the altar. This isn't right."

Dorian paused and turned around. He appeared to be in a daze, his expression confused and far away. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I've seen this somewhere before, but not like this. This is wrong." Tristan began to step up onto the stage again to pull Dorian away when Joseph put his arm around Dorian's shoulders and drew him to the center.

"Don't listen to him Dorian. He is a child next to your experience and wisdom." He released Dorian, who stood beside him as if in a trance, and turned to face Tristan. "We need your help, though. You are the key to all of this. You are the link to the other side. Your bloodline runs directly back to the Devil himself. You're connection to Dorian makes it impossible for me to cloak one and not the other from the Devil's prying gaze." He extended his hand to Tristan.

## *The Lineage*

Light from the candles glinted off of something silver concealed just beneath the belled sleeve of his black robe—the deadly point of a knife blade. The spark of reflection bounced off of another silver surface on the ceiling above. Tristan looked up and felt his blood run colder than ice. Within a star drawn in red paint within a star and surrounded by a dizzying archive of archaic alchemical symbols was a hexagonal mirror etched with an ankh and edged with what appeared to be dried blood.

“Oh dear God...” He exhaled.

He had heard of such a trap, similar in its design as a devil’s trap used to confine demons to the physical plane for one purpose or another, but he had thought such things only superstitious legend. After all, it had been Neil and his mad ramblings that had told him about the vampire trap. He looked back at Dorian—his Maker now stared upwards with an expression of pure horror knowing he was locked into its center and unable to leave the stage. Tristan cringed inside knowing that if he too had entered beneath the trap, there would be no escape until the mirror was destroyed and the lines of the trap broken.

In a flash of fluid movement Dorian grabbed Guymon by the throat and drew him close until their noses nearly touched. “What is the meaning of this?”

Guymon could barely open his mouth, his voice lost under the crushing pressure of Dorian’s vise grip.

“Traitor! And to think I called you a friend?”

The sound of Guymon’s neck snapping as Dorian lifted him from the ground and hurled him across the room echoed through Tristan’s ears. Guymon’s lifeless form collided with one of the four support columns near the double-door entrance, issuing another sickening crack as his lower back broke. He slid to the floor, toppling the two closest chairs in

a thunder of metal upon metal upon flesh. Tristan saw the flash of silver again from the corner of his eye as Joseph brandished the concealed blade and leapt with an inhuman speed to plunge the dagger deep into Dorian's back, between his shoulder blades.

Dorian sank to his knees. He wavered, struggling to stay upright as he knelt, blood dripping from his lips as it welled up in his throat. Joseph took a step back, his gaze turning from Dorian to Guymon's corpse, and finally to Tristan with a cold calculation that seemed undisturbed by the violence he had perpetrated.

"Don't worry, he won't die from his wound. He's, shall we say, sedated at the moment. A little concoction of my own making, which I'm quite proud of." Joseph stepped around Dorian and began to walk towards Tristan. "Besides, Lucifer can't take him yet."

Tristan backed down the remaining step, halting a few paces away from the stage. "Wait. How do you know about that?"

Joseph paused, the dagger still gripped in his right hand. "I've been hunting both of you for a very long time. I know more about you than yourselves."

"Why don't you enlighten me?" Tristan spat. His fear was turning to rage.

Joseph smirked and wiped the blood from his blade on the front of his robe, though he did not return it to its sheath. "Dorian's soul is in stasis between two contracts—the Devil's original one and another. I'd like to tell you who that is, but unfortunately, thanks to your Maker here I lost the scent of the trail some time ago. Seems Dorian managed to make who or whatever it was just vanish. Impressive, I will give him that." Joseph shrugged. "It actually worked out in my favor."

## *The Lineage*

“How’s that?”

“Well, it definitely helped me find you.”

Tristan wanted desperately to flee, but the blood in his veins manipulated him to still care for his Maker’s survival.

“As I said, I’ve been hunting Dorian a very long time.” Joseph smiled, a cruel sandstone replica of joy. “I want his head on a pike, for personal reasons. I could give a rat’s ass who or what gets his soul.”

“Why do you want me? I’ve never seen you before.” Tristan backed further away. He halted, a sudden calm coming over him like a tidal wave. “Wait. I’m some sort of ‘bargaining chip.’ Aren’t I? I seem to remember someone telling me that I was supposed to be the same for Dorian.” He stared at Joseph, his eyes growing cruel and calculating as the realization of his own worth enveloped him.

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” Joseph said quietly.

“The Devil is already on my side. He owns my ass. There’s nothing I can do about it. So what exactly do you think you’re going to get out of trading me?” Tristan squared his shoulders as surge of energy rippled through him making him feel self-assured in a way he had never quite experienced before. He tilted his head to the side as he watched Joseph closely.

Behind the tall, thin stranger Dorian trembled, struggling to remain upright on his knees as his body fought to repair itself around the poison blade, to no avail. Tristan realized suddenly that he pitied Dorian—he had sold his soul thinking he could cheat Death itself, only to turn around and try to slip out of the jurisdiction of his new bondsman and find himself hunted, regardless. Tristan had made one deal only and that was with Dorian, but that deal was frayed around the edges to the point of becoming transparent. Though Dorian would never willingly accept it, the only peace he would ever find

would be in the acceptance of his fate. It would be a peace short-lived before the hellhounds came for his flesh, but at least it would be a moment, in and of its self.

Tristan tilted his head to the side—he could have sworn he had heard footsteps outside on the sidewalk, but they were interrupted by the sound of rubber crunching through the snow over the icy black road. Headlights sliced across the drawn white blinds of the back windows to either side of the stage.

“Aren’t you afraid?” he asked quietly.

Joseph’s mouth twitched on one side. He turned away from Tristan and walked back up the stairs to the stage. “Of what?” he asked.

“The Devil has killed everyone else we know, anyone in the path between ourselves and him. It’s only a matter of time before he shows up.”

“What? To kill me? Drag my soul to Hell? Unlikely.” Joseph snorted.

“Really? What makes you so special?” Tristan’s senses were on high as he searched the ethers for signs of Lucifer in any form. Though it still disturbed him that he prayed now for the dark angel’s appearance, he could not help but to feel that in some ways the Devil was one of the few he could actually trust now.

“If he wanted me dead, he would have done so years ago. Threaten, warn—yes. That he’s done in so many ways, I’ve lost count. But for some reason he keeps me around.” Joseph laughed under his breath. “Maybe he just likes seeing Dorian on the run. He’s never seen me until today, but he knows he’s been a wanted man for decades.”

Dorian’s eyes darted back and forth, blinking rapidly. He struggled to find his breath through the pain. Tristan could see his Maker’s lips trembling, attempting to form words.

## *The Lineage*

Tristan spoke for his Maker. “Just who are you?”

“Oh, Dorian knows.” Joseph grabbed a fistful of Dorian’s hair at the back of his head, knocking his cowboy hat off as he yanked him back. He forced Dorian to stare up into his face. “Remember a pretty little woman named Karadee, Dorian?”

Dorian’s hands flew up to try weakly to pry Joseph’s grip from his hair and the blade from his back, but he had grown too weak from blood loss and the paralyzing power of the vampire trap. His lips formed the word “no” before his hands weakly slipped back to hang limply to his sides.

“Pity, I do.”

Before Tristan could react, Joseph pulled another blade from a sheathe on the belt at his waist and sliced through Dorian’s windpipe. A crimson arterial spray landed across the stage like a gleaming Jackson Pollock painting. Joseph held onto the back of Dorian’s head for a moment until the spray subsided before releasing him. Dorian collapsed forward onto the stage like a broken marionette. He stood over Dorian’s body for a long moment, his face a cast of cruel revenge that chilled Tristan to the bone.

Joseph twitched as if coming out of a trance and looked up to meet Tristan’s gaze perfectly. “Don’t worry. He’s not dead. Remember, he can’t die. He’s made damn certain of that. My revenge would have been so very easy if he hadn’t fucked things up by being such a shift little weasle. But, then again, if he hadn’t made all of those deals, he wouldn’t have led me to you. And you’re what I need to bring Karadee back.”

“Who was she?” Tristan backed up a pace further—he wanted to flee, but the Blood compelled him to stand his ground. Suddenly he felt a hand land firmly on his right shoulder.

“Be careful where you step.” A familiar lyrical male voice whispered in his ear.

Tristan looked up. There above him, only steps away, lay another trap for the undead. Tristan’s gaze snapped back toward Joseph as he felt the Devil’s hand drop from his shoulder.

“What the hell kind of game are you playing Joseph?” Tristan demanded with a hiss.

Joseph’s face had grown pale beneath its weathered tan, though his expression remained hard as flint. “Lucifer. How nice of you to join us.”

Tristan’s mind galloped frantically around the parameters of the room as he tried to piece everything together in a nice, neat black package. “He knows you,” Tristan said quietly.

“Joseph and I go way back. Don’t we J.D? Or should I call you Skeeter-Hawk?” The Devil smirked wryly. “What an awkward nickname. I will never understand why you accepted it so willingly.”

“There’s nothing you can do to get to Dorian now,” Joseph sneered, a sick glint of glee reflecting like flint in his eyes. “I’m not about to hand over Dorian to you. Not that it would make any difference. He’s still got the upper hand in your little game.”

He laughed under his breath and slammed his palm down on Dorian’s shoulder. Dorian winced and coughed slightly as he gasped with struggling lungs around the blade buried in his chest. Blood seeped over his lips, dripping down his chin.

“You ain’t going anywhere, are you Dorian?” Joseph said. “Though I bet you’re wishing you could right about now? In fact,” Joseph wrapped his other hand around the hilt of the dagger between Dorian’s shoulders and twisted the blade slowly, savoring the way Dorian shook from the

## *The Lineage*

excruciating pain, “I bet you would even tell the dear old Devil just how you did it. Wouldn’t you?”

Blood tears slipped from the corners of Dorian’s eyes. Tristan felt the pull of his Maker, a desperate attempt to draw him forth and save him from the torture at hand. He took a step towards the stage, but found himself blocked by Lucifer’s tall, regal frame.

“What do you want, Joseph?” Tristan asked, staring at a point between the Devil’s shoulder blades.

“Nothing much—I just need your skull, that’s all. You give me your head on a platter. Lucifer gets your soul, as is promised to him anyways. Dorian lives to see another night.” Joseph stood, staring down his nose with a smug vanity, as if he controlled the fate of the world itself.

“What is he talking about?” Tristan asked the Devil carefully.

“Necromancy,” The Devil replied quietly. “He thinks he can bring his long lost love back from the grave. Being of your lineage, your skull would make a powerful gateway tool to converse with the other side.”

“Well, you tell him I’m rather attached to it,” Tristan muttered.

“No need.” Lucifer walked toward the dais, and paused a couple of feet from the edge as he stared up at Joseph with a look of utter contempt. “I warned you, Joseph, about meddling in my affairs. I told you to stay away from them. Your desire for revenge and your twisted broken heart are truly starting to annoy me.” He tilted his head to the side slightly. Outside, the winter storm began to howl, a baying like mournful wolves as the wind whipped about the building, searching to invade its walls. “Did you think I wouldn’t come tonight? That I would let you bring that precious little whore of yours back using these two creatures? They are my

property. And you are currently trespassing.”

He turned and met Tristan’s gaze. His eyes glinted with a terrible mischief that caused Tristan’s blood to run colder than ice. “Besides, Tristan and I have already made a little deal of our own. Haven’t we?” He cocked one fine black eyebrow as he waited for an answer.

Tristan swallowed hard. The moment of truth. While he had not said, out loud, the words “I accept” to the Devil, he knew in his heart that his choice had already been made. He also knew that the Devil had somehow heard that unvoiced statement and now stood before him with his acknowledgement. Still, his heart careened against his ribs, his fangs aching as adrenaline made his body screech its brutal song of fight or flight.

He drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Yes,” he replied softly, more to himself than to the Devil.

Tristan also realized that Dorian had most likely heard him as well—he did not savor the tangled web of deceit he would have to weave if they escaped.

Lucifer lifted from the ground, rising slowly towards the ceiling as he turned back towards the stage. Below him, Joseph’s expression tightened, his eyes growing wide with caution. Tristan could smell his fear, sour beneath his guise of calculated control. Dorian trembled where he knelt, his eyes trained on the Devil as he floated near the edge of the vampire trap. With one long, pale hand he reached out and placed the tips of his index and middle fingers on the outer ring of red paint.

“What are you doing?” Joseph hissed.

Lucifer raked his nails through the paint, leaving two deep gouges in the dull white panels. “Releasing my property.” He slammed his fist into the mirror, causing it to shatter and rain shards of glinting silver down over Joseph

and Dorian.

What had moments before faltered like a rusted death rattle from his colorless lips rushed into his lungs with a shocking sharp gasp as the binding was severed and the trap broken. In a flurry of ghostly movement Dorian reached up and grasped the hilt of the dagger, ripping it upwards and out of his back. The Devil gazed down with amused fascination as Dorian whirled around, taking hold of Joseph by the back of his neck before he could flee. Joseph flailed with panicked fear, reaching desperately for something concealed beneath his robes even as Dorian drug him close. Without a word, before Joseph could retrieve his weapon, Dorian plunged the dagger up to its hilt within Joseph's stomach. With a sharp, sickening ripping of flesh and soft separation of bone, he yanked the blade upwards. Shock contorted Joseph's face as the blood drained from his abdomen. Still clutched in Dorian's grasp, his feet dangling mere inches above the ground, he placed his trembling hands over his stomach in a feeble attempt to keep his entrails from escaping the wound as Dorian sank his fangs into his neck, draining him of the remaining blood.

"Nicely played, again, Dorian." Lucifer chuckled. "But it's not like I didn't let you have that one."

Dorian gradually let go of Joseph as his rage began to subside, the light leaving Joseph's eyes as he crumpled to the floor at Dorian's feet amidst a pool of glistening crimson and black robes. His shoulders heaving with heavy breaths to steady himself as he realized his proximity to his arch adversary, he looked up as Lucifer lowered himself to the stage on the opposite side of the altar.

"Let me have this one?" Behind Dorian's eyes, something snapped like a dry twig in a brush fire. He began to chuckle as he dropped the dagger and backed away toward the stairs.

“You’re just torturing me. Or, should I say, letting others torture me now?” He pointed at Tristan, his gaze still locked with Lucifer’s. “He’s the only one left, the only one that has any connection to me. I brought him to you. He was my ‘get out of jail free card.’ Remember?”

“Why would I barter for something I already own? He’s a done deal.” Lucifer cocked an eyebrow, the corners of his mouth twisting in a tiny malicious grin. “Aren’t you, Tristan?”

Tristan remained silent and still as if turned to stone.

“He’s a done deal,” Dorian repeated. He tapped his temple with his index finger. “I’m smarter than you. Or have you forgotten? It doesn’t matter what you do to me or anyone else—you can’t drag me to Hell! I made sure of that.”

Lucifer sighed. “Really Dorian? You do realize your choices now are a life of torment on Earth or in Hell? It’s just the difference of a fleshly shell.” He began to walk slowly towards Dorian. The wood creaked beneath his weight in a way that seemed eerily augmented. “This little blue planet is crawling with my servants and soldiers. It’s their playground. I honestly don’t have time to personally torment you for eternity. But they do.”

He reached Dorian and stopped a foot away. Tristan was both surprised and impressed to see his Maker stand his ground. Whether it was true courage, abject terror, or a complete loss of sanity that held him in his place, he faced his assassin without flinching.

“One night, perhaps centuries from now, one of them will break you. They’ll find that one little soft part of what’s left of your soul and they will rip it from you, that one part that makes you fight so very hard to stay here in your cruelty and loneliness. You’ll beg them to stop. Then, you will be mine.” Lucifer’s smile faded. “You can’t run forever, Dorian.

No one can.”

Before Tristan could blink, Dorian vanished from sight. Tristan gasped as the sound of the double-door entrance to the room flew open with a violent crash as Dorian fled.

“Don’t worry.” Lucifer walked down the stairs and crossed the room to where Tristan stood. He crossed his arms and stared at the doors as they settled back into place on their creaking hinges. “You’ll find him. I don’t doubt you for a moment.”

“Right,” Tristan breathed, more to himself than to the Devil. “That makes one of us.”

“Have a little faith in yourself Tristan. You’re far more resourceful and clever than you give yourself credit for.” Lucifer wrapped a long, thin arm about his shoulders. “You’re a Faust, after all.”

Tristan’s heart faltered, tripping uneasily over itself in its rhythm. He swallowed hard. “Joseph said something about two contracts. I got the feeling that one somehow cancelled out the other. I heard Dorian’s thoughts at one point, as well. Something about two deals being enough?”

“Two contracts?” The Devil’s arm dropped from Tristan’s shoulders. He stepped in front of Tristan and leaned in close, staring into his eyes. Abruptly he turned away and began pacing the length of the room between Tristan and the double doors.

Tristan tried to force a laugh, though it came out a small cough instead. “I don’t know anything about contracts, at all. I tried to buy a car one time and—”

“Hush child.” Lucifer continued his pacing, staring at the floor, his black brows knit in concentration. “If there was a demon foolish enough to offer Dorian a contract, knowing damn well he’d already signed mine, it would, theoretically, place the two in limbo.”

“The plane? Where dead babies go?” Tristan was half-joking, but regretted the ill attempt at wit the moment it slipped past his lips.

“No. In stasis. The two contracts would not necessarily cancel each other out, but Dorian’s soul would metaphorically speaking be in a state of eternal renegotiation. I should have known about this.” Lucifer halted his pacing. He tilted his head to one side, his gaze becoming remote as he stared upwards as if listening to a distant sound. “No one has been foolish enough to try, though.”

“How could something like that happen and you not know?” Tristan asked, honestly seeking understanding. Instead he was met with wrath as Lucifer suddenly pinned him against the back wall with one hand about his throat.

Tristan gasped for breath as he felt his windpipe begin to collapse beneath the Devil’s palm.

Lucifer hissed, his eyes turning a molten yellow with his rage. He released his grip suddenly—Tristan collapsed on the ground at his feet, wheezing even as his windpipe began to reconstruct itself. Tristan crawled to his knees and pushed himself upright, sitting back on his heels. He stared up at Lucifer, not daring to utter another word.

Lucifer stared down at Tristan. “What? Nothing witty this time?” He waited a moment—the sound of the winter storm outside crawled about the perimeter of the building as if it stalked the the warmth inside. “If the demon who bargained with Dorian was lured into a devil’s trap before the time the deal was sealed, it would have been, in a way, cloaked from the rest of the world. He or she would also be forever trapped there and unable to reap the reward of their end of the deal until Dorian, or some other creature, freed them.”

“So, somewhere—and who knows where—there’s a

## *The Lineage*

demon trapped holding a similar contract for Dorian's soul?" Tristan prayed the Devil would not see sarcasm in his honest question.

"Bingo!" Lucifer grinned. "When we find the demon, we'll free it. Then we'll kill it. Once it's dead, the contract will be null and void and mine, oh my precious little contract, will be valid once again. Oh, how my hellhounds are already salivating at the thought."

"Okay." Tristan staggered to his feet. He pushed the hair out of his eyes as he steadied himself. "Sounds easy enough. So, I helped you figure out the riddle. Can I go now?"

"What?" Lucifer chuckled, raising his eyebrows in mock wonderment. "Oh, no, dear boy. You really think it would be that easy for you? No, you still have work to do to earn our little agreement." He placed both of his hands on Tristan's shoulders as he faced him. "You have to do the dirty work. I've wasted enough time on this matter."

"Of course." Tristan shook his head as he grimaced. "I have to track this son of a bitch down, don't I?"

"Make me proud?"

"I don't think I have a choice."

"Aw. Don't be so negative. Of course you have choice. All of us always have a choice. We just have to weigh the weight of the consequences of each decision we make. Don't think I'm not subject to it as well."

Tristan found no comfort in this concept, but before he could object Lucifer was gone. Alone in the basement of the lodge, Tristan found himself cursing his heritage and wondering just what he should ask for in return.

## CHAPTER 13



Tristan exhaled into his palms. Slouched in the icy dark corner of a closed restaurant doorway, he cradled his head and cried. He couldn't remember the last time he had truly let go. Once the tears began, there was no stopping them, the darkness of the past two decades rushing forth through his fingers and down his cheeks like a bitter red rain. For over an hour he buckled beneath the weight as the fracture in his immortal demeanor finally split wide open to reveal the scared scarred boy beneath.

He opened his eyes and peered through his fingers, pressed against his face as if to keep the flesh from falling, at the snow between his feet. It was red, stained and wet with his tears like a fresh murder scene. He drew a shaking breath and lowered his hands as he leaned back against the plate glass and concrete corner behind him. The metaphor wasn't lost on him—he wanted to smirk at the irony, but found the emptiness in his chest stole even sarcasm from his lips. This

## *The Lineage*

wasn't how he had envisioned his life.

Then, again, how had he envisioned it?

Tristan tilted his head back and stared up at the blackened florescent lights above, dully layered with dingy cobwebs speckled with drained insect carcasses. He turned his face toward the store, peering through the smudged glass at the rows of food products that would still be “fresh” even when he turned a century in age. He read the brand names down the center isle—with each one a different childhood memory sparked before his mind's eye. Twizzlers—elementary school weekends taking his lunch money he'd saved to the corner pharmacy. Slim Jim—his first roadtrip in highschool to Danabue Springs with girlfriend Shana Taradon. Milky Way—Christmas mornings at his mother's even when he felt he was too old to get a stocking full of candy. These mundane memories of his former mortal life suddenly seemed more precious to him than living another day on Earth as the creature he had become. He exhaled and watched the condensation from his breath crystalize on the glass inches from his lips—he didn't know where to begin.

The Devil had vanished, leaving him alone without direction, but only a decision to make. Lucifer's cryptic riddle of a suggestion had done little to settle Tristan's already frayed nerves.

*But, remember, choices have consequences...*

He didn't want to pursue Dorian any further—anger surged through him at the thought that he must carry out his capture. He had fulfilled his side of the deal, as far as Tristan was concerned. However, as with all deals pertaining to the Devil, he had, as his ancestor had once done centuries before him, forgotten to examine the “fine print” before signing. He wondered just how many contracts lay in Lucifer's possession? And just how many of them were agreed upon

in moments of haste and hopelessness? If he chose not to track his Maker's second devil down he would be facing instant damnation, if not worse. Tristan hesitated to dwell on what Lucifer might mean by "consequences."

He wiped his face on the back of his sleeve and forced himself to let go of the childlike resentment anchoring him to the frozen sidewalk. "Just get it over with," he said aloud to himself. "Just find him and be done with it." He pushed himself to his feet and glanced up and down the deserted street.

Tristan still hadn't even decided what it was that he wanted in return for his efforts. The entire experience had been a traumatic blur of carnage and when the Devil had illuminated the extent of his interaction with Tristan earlier that evening, Tristan had reacted out of startled fear—in truth he might have agreed to anything with anyone in that moment, staggering over his words in an effort to define the ground he stood on. Bryn wanted him to turn back the clock, to reset everything and give them some likeness of the life they *might* have had if Dorian had never walked into his world. Tristan couldn't stomach the concept of erasing the past two decades and starting over.

He stared up at the dome of the night sky above the city. The stars seemed bioluminescent in their extraterrestrial glory as they peered at him through wisps of winter clouds pulled apart by the wind like cobwebs. He shivered and wondered if they had always been so uncomfortably omniscient?

*Maybe I really don't want anything at all?* The thought made him smile. He looked back down at the snow between his feet, then closed his eyes, letting the winter wind snake beneath his coat, sniffing his skin like a curious dog. *I'll be the first person to do a favor for the Devil au gratis.*

He laughed out loud, a strangled maniacal burst of sound

## *The Lineage*

somewhere between a wail and a hyena shriek. The sound scattered like a flock of crows, bouncing from building to building without rhyme or reason. The idea was absurd—everyone always wanted something. No good deed was ever truly unconditional, certainly no deed done for the Devil, good or bad.

*I do miss a good sushi dinner...* Something whispered to him, however, that the Devil would twist even a fine last meal into something perverse for his own amusement. He turned to the west and began his trek back to Guymon's house, the only place he could think of to return and regroup in a city he knew so little of.

His legs felt filled with poisonous lead as he trudged up the front steps. The door was slightly ajar revealing bruised blue shadows beyond. Dorian had been here only moments before his arrival. He could still smell the acrid fear seeping through his Maker's pores, the desperation in the wake of his cracking sanity.

Tristan grimaced as he pushed the door the rest of the way open, pausing in the threshold until the whine of its old painted hinges came to a deafening silence. Inside, the house pressed into reality with a crushing sadness, the dilapidated second-hand furniture staring back at him like an abandoned bulldog. Tristan didn't want to stay there for long, lest the sorrow drag him down—he knew the power of old buildings over the people who reside in them, taking on a life and will of their own that often grew inescapable as the years progressed.

Shutting the door as a fierce gust howled around the perimeter of the house, he turned and walked to the bookcase beside Guymon's bed. His fingers instinctively found the old leather-bound book about Dr. Faust and flipped through the yellowed, musty pages until they lighted upon the black

wood engraving of his ancestor. There was a strangled malice in the image as if Johann bit back on his own tongue to keep his secrets from clawing their way up and out of the Abyss.

He started to shut the book, his eyes roaming over the shelves of archaic rare tomes that felt so out of place beside the unmade bed with its inexpensive maroon plaid comforter and faded black pillowcases. The sound of paper slipping against paper snared his attention—a small folded note had landed near the toe of his right boot.

Tristan retrieved the paper and sat down on the edge of the bed. Placing the book he held in his left hand beside him, he unfolded the sheet. The ink scrawling was barely legible, though the energy that still resonated within the fibers of the paper told him it had been held by Guymon rather recently.

*Scott Hayden. Born March 12, 1952.*

*Author. Overnight success?*

*Nyles Bey. Publisher. Nybbas?*

*Dallas, Texas*

Tristan stared at the page, his eyes tracing over the scratches of each word in search of some sort of insight into his own predicament. Tristan didn't believe in coincidence—he had found this slip of paper for a reason, of this he was certain. There had to be a connection—why else was the note filed in the book about his ancestor?

He wandered out into the claustrophobic living room. He did not feel the need to illuminate the room with the tarnished age of lamp light. On the coffee table lay Guymon's laptop. Lowering himself onto the edge of couch, he retrieved the computer and flipped it open. The device felt strange in Tristan's hands, impersonal and metallic and humming against his knees in a way that made him crave the distressed confines of the old trailer they used to travel in. He had seen these devices utilized by people in bars and coffee shops as

## *The Lineage*

he watched through windows or secluded booths, scouting for viable prey, but he had yet to actually lay his fingers upon one. For all of his preternatural abilities he still stared at the keyboard and screen as if it might steal what was left of his soul.

*After everything you've been through, you're seriously scared of a little machine?* He chided himself. *It can't hurt you.*

He touched the pad in the center of the keyboard and watched a tiny arrow float about the screen. After a moment of wonder and experimentally clicking on various parts of the screen, which brought no results, he navigated to the bottom row of icons. The first felt to Tristan like pure luck as a screen emerged with the words “search” next to a blank field beneath an artistically rendered version of the word GOOGLE. He typed in the name he had discovered in Guymon’s notes and was instantly met with pages devoted, mostly by the fans that worshipped his work, to the legendary literary prowess of this one-hit-wonder.

As Tristan read through the pages he felt Guymon’s perplexity rippling through the fabric of the house, the scarred leather of the couch on which he sat, the walls speaking in a dialect that was now becoming far more intimate than Tristan was prepared to receive. It was a riddle Guymon had been working on for months that stemmed from one of his strange visions.

The author’s bio read like a *Twilight Zone* episode, an unknown indie genre author suddenly catapulted to the top of the *New York Times* Best-Seller’s List with a book previously thought unpublishable, only to fall into utter obscurity a year later. The publisher responsible for Hayden’s miraculous success, Nyles Bey, had also vanished without a trace that year leaving behind a catastrophic fallout of hundreds of

breached contracts and unpaid royalties.

A chill chased up Tristan's spine causing the fine hairs on his arms to bristle—the entire story wreaked of an unnatural deal gone awry. However, it was the dates that snared Tristan's attention the most. Scott's deal had been signed six months before Tristan had met Dorian and Nyles Bey had vanished only a month before Tristan was turned.

“Two deals,” Tristan whispered aloud. “Could it be...?”

He stared at the slick corporate photo of Nyles Bey on the Wikipedia page for The Bey Agency. “The question is, just what did Dorian do with you?”

He closed the computer, grabbed its powercord and an old black backpack laying on Guymon's floor. Dallas was a good enough a place to start than any.

\* \* \*

Without hesitation, Tristan had made his way to the Salt Lake City airport and taken the next available flight to Dallas. Arriving just before dawn, he sought refuge in the one of the custodial closets, tucking himself onto the bottom shelf of cleaning supplies where he covered himself with one of the complimentary blankets the stewardess had handed out to the first-class customers. Tristan had never utilized his power of persuasion before to gain more than the basic necessities of survival—he was pleasantly surprised, if somewhat unnerved when the TSA officers had bent over backwards to expedite his last minute travel plans as if he were a movie star.

The following sunset Tristan set out to find Scott Hayden, which turned out to be a harder prospect than he had anticipated. The book that had catapulted Scott to literary stardom, *Earthbound Enigma*, had been out of print

## *The Lineage*

for over fifteen years and, while bookstore employees could only gush praise for his monumental contribution to the world of science fiction, none could tell Tristan where to find a copy of the novel. Even less was their knowledge of Hayden's whereabouts. Tristan was beginning to doubt his decision to pursue Guymon's cryptic ramblings. After three hours of fruitless visits and phone calls, he finally managed to track down a dog-eared paperback edition in a tiny used bookstore squirreled away on the edge of town.

Tristan stood in the "Sci-Fi" aisle and stared at the cover—the classic illustration of an astronaut standing at the edge of a cliff overlooking some sort of alternate Earth where dragons circled towers of gleaming metal and glass.

"You a fan?"

Tristan looked up to see a teenaged boy standing at the edge of the row with a large stack of books in his arms. He nodded at the novel in Tristan's hands.

"Scott Hayden, he's amazing!" The boy tried to toss the long purple bangs out of his face and smiled awkwardly, revealing braces.

"So I've been told," Tristan replied. "I've heard he still lives around these parts."

"Oh, yeah. He does. Shame he doesn't do the cons anymore. Or even write," the boy said and shook his head. "Probably wouldn't matter to his fans, though. We'd just be happy to see him at all."

"So, you know where he lives?" Tristan took a step toward the boy, but, sensing him tense instinctually, he turned and began to casually peruse the other titles on the shelf to his right.

The boy swallowed. "Well, no. Not where he lives. But I hear he hangs out at a dive bar off I-35 near downtown. Something like Mckinney's or Mickey's or something."

The boy shrugged. "I don't know. Not really into stalking my heroes." He tried to laugh, but it came out squeaky and nervous. Backing up he turned and walked to the counter to make his purchase. "Um, good luck finding him?"

"Thanks," Tristan said under his breath and slipped the paperback into the inside pocket of his jacket. He waited until the teenager had left to approach the cashier, an aging hippie with long gray hair tied back with a bit of leather. "You ever heard of a place by the name of Mckinney's or Mickey's, a dive bar off I-35?"

"Yeah. It's been around a while. Good place for cheap drinks and pool." The man gave Tristan a suspicious once-over as if he was trying to place where he'd seen him before.

"Maybe the kind of place a writer would hang out?" Tristan caught and held the man's gaze, peeling back the uncomplicated layers of his psyche to find an image map of the establishment in question.

"Maybe. Someone you're looking for?"

"I think I've found him."

\* \* \*

Tristan slowly walked up the wooden ramp that led to the front door. To his right was a spartanly populated patio adorned with weather-beaten wood furniture covered with umbrellas emblazoned with bold liquor logos. White Christmas lights lined the edge of the fence and wood railing of the entrance. Above the creaking of the wood beneath his boots, the muted conversations of the patrons echoed around his head like a flock of seagulls as he listened for a lead to the author. There was an air of peace and contentment here, nothing restless and dark as he might have expected.

## *The Lineage*

He glanced up at the neon sign over the front door and for a moment—he almost felt like smiling.

“Hey. I need your ID.”

Tristan looked back at the doorman, perched on an old metal barstool next to the entrance. Dressed in a zipped-up leather jacket and jeans, a thick gray scarf wrapped about his neck, he had the face of a man slightly bored with everyday life.

“You don’t need my ID,” Tristan said quietly. “I come here all of the time. I’m a downright regular.”

The fleeting moment of confusion danced across the man’s dark brown eyes before the spark of newfound illumination caused the corners of his mouth to twitch in a semblance of a smile. “Oh, man! I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you. Welcome back.” He reached over and opened the front door. “Have a good night.”

“You too.” Tristan nodded and walked inside.

The small group of people gathered around the pool table glanced up momentarily, eyeing him from beneath the harsh light of the single lamp above their game before returning to their evening. 1980’s pop-punk music streamed from an old jukebox in the corner filling the empty spaces with a strangely pleasant and invigorating aggression. Past the bathrooms and down a small flight of stairs, Tristan found himself in the main bar—a classic dimly-lit wood-paneled room that reverberated with the impressed energies of the hundreds that had played patron to its well-oiled wood tables and brass-edged bar top.

In the far corner Tristan spied his author. Stout, with a thick mane of gray hair and a full beard to match, Scott Hayden leaned back in his chair as he studied the latest edition of the *New York Times*. Dressed in a long-sleeved plaid flannel shirt and blue jeans, he peered at the inside spread through

smudged glasses with a look of mild skepticism. Tristan made his way through the maze of tables.

“Can I help you?” Scott lowered his newspaper and stared up at him.

“Are you Scott Hayden, the author?” Tristan asked.

“Once upon a time, yes. Why?” Scott folded the paper and set it down next to his empty glass.

Tristan tried to smile, an action he realized he was bitterly in need of practice, and reached inside his coat to retrieve the copy of *Earthside Enigma*. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but, would you mind signing this? It would mean the world to me.”

Scott stared at the worn paperback as if it were an undesirable injection he was about to receive. “Where’d you get that?”

“Oh. Um, I got this at Ralph’s Book Stand. It’s surprisingly hard to find. I lost my copy years ago.”

“It’s hard to find because it’s been out of print for nearly fifteen years.” Scott sighed. “But I’m always happy to hear I have at least one fan left.” He smiled. “Make you a deal? Buy me a drink and I’ll sign your book. Jamieson on the rocks.”

Tristan nodded. “You got it.”

When he returned with the beverage in hand Scott looked up at him. “You must have some sort of mojo.”

Tristan froze as he was lowering the drink back into its home upon the paper promotional coaster. “What do you mean?”

Scott gestured for Tristan to take a seat across from him. “The bartender. She never gives me free drinks and I’m in here nearly every night.”

Tristan chuckled as he sat down. “Oh, she and I go way back. Old friends.”

## The Lineage

“Right.” Scott winked and shook his head. “Got a pen?”

“A writer with no pen?” Tristan was, for some reason, truly surprised.

“Well, I don’t have the hordes chasing after me now like in the old days. Those tools of the trade are often forgotten at home unfortunately.” There was a sad wistfulness in the intonation of Scott’s voice as if every statement or quip was a heavy sigh.

Tristan reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved the pen he had taken from the hotel room and placed it on top of the book. “I looked for other titles by you, but couldn’t find any. Why did you stop writing?”

“Before *Earthbound Enigma* I had a couple of small press titles. When I was lucky, I’d make enough on those to fill up my gas tank once every few months. This,” he tapped the cover of the book, “was my big break. But, not everything lasts forever, I guess.”

“What do you mean? Didn’t you ever want to write another book? I know your fans have wanted it for a long time.”

Scott shook his head and took a sip of his drink. “I don’t know where it all went.” He paused, staring down at the whiskey and ice. “Guess it’s another case of an author screwed over by the publishing industry. Then I just sort lost my inspiration. Been looking for it ever since.” He glanced at Tristan. “Just haven’t found it yet.”

Scott’s melancholy was palpable, a second skin that he wore that now draped off of him like Spanish moss. Tristan leaned forward, resting his arms on the table as he studied Scott. “I’ve always wondered about that. I’m a writer. I’m working on my first novel. I’ve heard such nightmares about the publishing world that, frankly, I’m a bit nervous.”

“You should be. Keep your wits about you and always read the fine print. Even when you have what looks like a solid contract, they can sometimes find a way to weasel out of it,” Scott scoffed.

“Weasel out of it?” Tristan was intrigued—his pulse quickened with adrenaline.

“I was with one of the biggest agencies in the world. I had a contract for ten books. But after the first one, they disappeared.” Scott took another swig and smirked. “Guess when something is too good to be true, it really is.” He shrugged. “At least I got one hit out of it.”

“The last time I checked, a demon couldn’t walk away from a deal.” Tristan leaned back in his seat. “It’s the one thing that makes them better than all of us.”

Beneath his beard, Scott’s face paled, the sarcastic smile fading from the corners of his mouth as he lifted his gaze to meet Tristan’s. A long moment of heavy silence settled between them, pierced only by muffled conversations and jukebox music.

“Who are you, kid?” Scott asked quietly, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“Just a fan, with a special understanding of your particular circumstance,” Tristan replied. “My name is Tristan Faust. I believe we’re searching for the same person. Does the name Nybbas ring a bell? You might know him as Nyles Bey?”

Scott’s eyes widened. His mouth struggled to form words, but none made their way past his lips.

Tristan leaned forward again and picked up the book. He held it up for Scott to see the cover as he spoke. “You made a deal, didn’t you? For this. But something went wrong?”

Scott looked away and down at the floor as if in shame.

“It’s okay,” Tristan said quietly. “People have made deals for far less. Trust me, I know. If you made the deal,

## *The Lineage*

then it's done. There's no going back. The least Nybbas can do, however, is fulfill his end. Fair is fair. Am I not right?"

Scott raised his eyes to meet Tristan's and swallowed hard. "I really thought it was a publishing contract. Just that, nothing else. I didn't realize what I'd done until later..."

Tristan did not speak, but allowed Scott to gather his thoughts in silence. He placed the book back upon the table and folded his hands over it.

"This was about twenty years ago. I had a couple of books out, one dark fantasy, one sci-fi. Small press stuff, like I mentioned earlier. I was doing the convention circuit, like we all do, to self-promote and try to sell a few more copies than we would through actual bookstores. I was at this tiny little convention in Topeka, Kansas, of all places. But it was a good convention, all in all. That Saturday I was sitting at my table in the dealers' room hocking my wares when I noticed, across the room, a man sitting cross-legged on one of the tables. He was dressed in a midnight-blue robe with long black hair and this amazing, what I thought were prosthetic black ram's horns spiraling out of his temples. He was staring straight at me in a rather peculiar and unnerving way." Scott shivered a bit and took a sip of his drink.

"If you've never been to one of these conventions, people are always dressed in crazy costumes so it's not like you question what someone's appearance is. In fact, the more realistic and the more they act the part, the more they're accepted." Scott chuckled nervously. He shook his head and drew a deep breath. "The guy sat there staring at me for a long time. When I looked back again, he was gone. Then I noticed him later that day sitting at one of the book dealers' booths. So I figured maybe he worked there. But he was just sitting in one of the chairs, again, staring at me. And no one in the booth seemed to notice he was there. But, I just

chalked it up to ‘method acting’ or some such shit. These guys get really into their characters sometimes.”

Scott continued, “After the dealers’ room closed, I wandered out to the hotel bar where everyone was convening before dinner. Most of the people in costume had gone to their rooms and changed into their normal civilian clothes. Not this guy. He comes up to me, sits down at the table where I was, pulls a business card out of his robe and hands it to me. He says, ‘Hello, I’m Nyles Bey. I’m a huge fan of your work. I admire your dedication. I think there’s great promise that your next book could be a best-seller.’ I was flabbergasted when I saw the name of the firm on his card. He tells me to send him my latest manuscript that night so he can read it over the weekend. Before I could say anything, he got up and walked to the elevators.”

Scott smiled as if remembering the thrill of those moments. “I emailed him that night. Monday morning, I got a call saying he wanted to meet with me in his New York office. I jumped on the next flight out there. It was a blur. I didn’t think it was real, what was happening, but I didn’t question it. Nyles Bey was the president of one of the biggest agencies in the world and he had chosen my book! He looked me dead in the eyes and said, ‘If I could give you ten award-winning novels, what would you give for that?’ Without even flinching I said, ‘Anything! I’d give anything.’ Nyles laughed and said, ‘Even your soul?’ I thought he was joking, so I laughed along with him and replied, ‘Isn’t hell where all of the interesting people are?’ And that was it. I signed on the dotted line and a month later my book hit the stands, the one you’re holding now. Two weeks after that, a million copies had sold.”

“Let me guess—and then Nyles disappeared?” Tristan asked.

## *The Lineage*

Scott stared at Tristan again with uncomfortable suspicion. “Yeah. I went to turn in my next manuscript a few weeks later and he didn’t respond. I called, emailed, etc.—nothing. So I flew up there. The office was closed. I tracked down his secretary and she said he’d disappeared without a trace. She’d filed a police report, but there are no records for him—no birth certificate, no finger prints, no social security number. He owned property, but all of it was paid for by overseas bank accounts that made automatic payments so they could never be repossessed. It’s like he didn’t exist. I spent the next year trying to find him and finally just gave up. I figured I got one book out of the deal and that was more than most authors get in a lifetime.”

“But why didn’t you find another publishing company after that?”

Scott shrugged. “I don’t know. I just woke up one morning and the impulse to write was gone. I struggled for months after that—I would sit at my desk for days on end begging the universe for just one iota of inspiration, but it was gone. All of the voices in my head, my characters, were quiet. I know it sounds crazy but, it’s as if you walked into a house where people had just resided, but moved out all of a sudden leaving scraps of their lives behind. Maybe I was just tired of fighting to make sure those voices were heard by others? Or maybe I just ran out of things to say.”

“Do you miss them?” Tristan asked, fascinated by the exhaustion and raw emotion Scott struggled to subdue as he was forced to face the past.

Scott gave a sad echo of a laugh and finished his drink. “Yeah, I guess I do miss those crazy motherfuckers sometimes.” He sighed. “It gets pretty quiet around here these days without them.”

“What if I could help you get them back? What if I could

help you find Nyles Bey?"

Scott stared at Tristan for a long silent moment. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned forward. "Just who are you, kid? Some sort of P.I.? Who are you working for?"

"You wouldn't want to know," Tristan replied.

Something in the darkness that scurried across Tristan's tone caused Scott to lean back in his chair again—it was obvious Scott sensed the danger in a quest for such answers.

"But I think you deserve some closure. As do I." Tristan picked up the book and handed it to Scott, along with the pen. "What do you say?"

Scott took the book and opened it to the title page. Quickly he scrawled his signature beneath his typecast name. "Damn, that felt oddly good." Closing the book he cast a glance around the bar as if it were the last time he might see the place. Raising his eyebrows he said, "Well, I suppose I could use a change of scenery."

Adrenaline surged through Tristan's veins. "Good. Barring you have no objections, we'll leave tonight?"

"None whatsoever."

## CHAPTER 14



New York City in winter. Tristan had heard the somber poetics of others' depictions while growing up, but he had never personally experienced the profound complexity of its beauty firsthand. Flakes of soft white falling between the towering monoliths of human architecture, grey concrete and black steel illuminated by rectangular jack-o-lantern windows and all of the multi-colored neon of capitalism to guide the wayward home. The city's temperament did not seem to change, the wet rush of rubber over snow and asphalt merely adding another layer to the complicated calls of survival, a mixture of man and machine and history. Tristan had been to New York twice and only as a child during the spring months when the sun fell like a mantle of warm marmalade over streets brimming with commerce and art and crime—Easter weekend in Chinatown trying to keep up with his uncle as he wove through the narrow streets in search of kung-fu shoes and dim sum.

Tristan and Scott had arrived at Lagaardia Airport at midnight. Tristan was astounded at how willingly Scott had agreed to race home, pack a few things and head off to the airport with him. He tried not to question the trust, or perhaps it was more simply a desire for something other than the monotony of his current existence.

He pried into Scott's mind, an easier feat than Tristan had expected, and found nothing but the desperate desire to reclaim his life as a writer. There was a sadness that coiled around Scott's soul that tugged at the center of Tristan's being. It was a poignant absence of purpose which resonated deeply with Tristan, a hunger that could not be quenched causing Scott confusion and misery which he dampened with liquor, night in and night out. He prepared himself, however, for the moment in which Scott would "snap out of it" and realize what he had done, as most humans would in such a situation. Impulse was both a virtue and a crux depending on the nature of the beast.

Utilizing his newfound powers, Tristan had booked two last-minute tickets on the next flight out of Dallas-Fort Worth to New York City, extending his influence to ensure Scott was treated with the same surreal respect as he as they made their way through the TSA line and into the terminal.

"You're not going to tell me who you really are, are you?" Scott asked as he purchased a copy of *Wired Magazine* and a bottle of water from the newsstand inside.

"I will. When we get to New York," Tristan replied, scanning the sparsely populated hallway outside the shop. There was no need to make Scott question the sanity of his decision before they had even stepped onto the plane.

"You're going to murder me in my sleep, aren't you?" Scott chuckled, but there was a nervousness suddenly in the back of his throat. "You're a trust-fund serial killer. I knew

## *The Lineage*

it! HA!”

“A killer, yes.” Tristan cast a sideways glance at Scott as they walked to their gate. “But I won’t kill you.” He smiled, trying to make the truth seem like a joke.

Scott’s grin faltered. “Heh, yeah...okay.”

Tristan could hear his thoughts race around the track in his mind: *Scott, you’ve finally lost it. What the hell have you gotten yourself into? Oh, well. Beats sitting in that bar one more night.*

While on the plane, Tristan had informed Scott that he had a rare allergy to the sun, which kept him bound to evening and night hours. After the serial killer comment, Scott seemed unaffected by the news remarking, without looking up from his magazine, that he had read about such a condition once upon a time.

“I sleep very little myself,” he said. “Even my dreams aren’t interesting anymore.”

*At least you can dream,* thought Tristan as he stared out the window at the thick cumulous clouds enveloping the plane like cotton. Now and then a sliver of pitch night sky would peek through, speckled with glittering white stars while miles below patches of illuminated grids marked towns and cities amidst the dark topography.

Winter seemed to be following Tristan, the snow becoming heavier as they arrived until severe storm advisory calls were made over the intercom with warnings of expected delays.

“Got here just in time!” Scott said as they rushed through the throngs of agitated travelers attempting to find out the fates of their travel plans.

“Guess so,” Tristan replied. “I’d hate to be stuck in this place for more than a few hours.” The one day spent hiding in a janitorial closet was enough to make him miss the cramped

quarters of the airstream trailer.

As the automated doors slid open a fierce gust of wind roared in a display of superiority threatening to knock them down—Tristan continued on to the cabstand uninterrupted while Scott staggered to keep his footing on the icy concrete. They slid into the backseat of a yellow taxi and slammed the door shut.

“Where to?” The olive-skinned cab driver eyed them from the rearview mirror beneath the shadows of his thick dark eyebrows.

Tristan looked at Scott—he hadn’t thought this far ahead, he realized. He had grown accustomed to sleeping wherever he could find shelter. “Hotel preference?” Even the word “hotel” felt thick and weird on the tip of his tongue. Too many new experiences too quickly caused his senses to overload with a panicked static electricity. He needed quiet and time to think.

“Seriously?” Scott looked out the window and then back at Tristan. “You’re not kidding.” He took a deep breath.

“Just roll with it, okay?” Tristan could feel Scott’s anxiety, his skepticism beginning to bubble to the surface slowly but surely. “Just name one.” The cabbie’s stare was beginning to sear into the side of his face where it reflected in the mirror. He turned his gaze to meet the driver’s. “We were in a rush. I forgot to make a reservation.”

The driver dropped his gaze immediately, training his line of sight on the yellow trunk of the taxi ahead of them.

“I’m assuming, like the plane tickets, it’s on you and there’s no budget?” Scott asked. “Because, you know, I’m sort of broke these days.”

Tristan continued to stare at the driver. The putrid odor of humanity that emanated from the interior of the car was overwhelming, a rotten concoction of stale sweat, cigarettes,

## *The Lineage*

and aging vinyl that stifled his senses. With his right hand he rolled down the window slightly to allow some “fresh” air in—ice and exhaust from idling motors slipped through the crack like serpents.

“Yes.” Tristan hissed, agitated.

“Millennium Broadway Hotel,” Scott said, his voice still uncertain.

“You heard the man,” Tristan barked at the driver. “Step on it. We need to get there as soon as possible.”

Tristan leaned back in the seat and gazed into his own reflection, ghostly in the window beside him. The ride into the heart of the city was blissfully absent of speech, the only conversation that of the city itself and the transference of energy between the car and the road. Phantoms of the past howled through the crack in the window, which neither Scott nor the driver dared to complain about, the horrific memories of Tristan’s last bloody visit to New York. Every time he blinked, Blind Mouse’s face flashed before his mind’s eye and with each darkened alley they passed an image of her eviscerated and crucified corpse roared out of the shadows like an angry eagle.

This was where it had begun, the first introduction to the depths of true evil. This was where Tristan had first glimpsed the Devil.

“Great. More silence,” Scott murmured, more to himself than to Tristan.

Tristan continued to wrestle with the demons that seemed to whisper from beneath the exhale of tainted heated air and worn tires as they crunched through fresh snow. “Driver, how much further to the hotel?”

“Not far. Just a few blocks,” the cabbie replied gruffly.

“Just a few blocks. There, satisfied? We’ve broken the silence.” Tristan instantly regretted his choice of words. He

knew he had failed to keep the sarcasm from invading his tone, but the oppressiveness of his own internal turmoil forced whatever niceties he was capable of from his conversational skills. “Sorry. This city just puts me on edge.”

“Yeah,” Scott said, fidgeting with his scarf to cover more of his neck. “You and me both.”

The taxi pulled up to the grand front entrance of the Manhattan hotel. *Expensive tastes*, Tristan thought as got out of the cab and stared up at the elegant high-rise of glistening glass above him. At the sound of Scott’s door clicking shut, he looked down to find the driver standing expectantly before him.

“Need a receipt?” The driver fished in his pocket for a pen.

Tristan placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “No, I don’t. And we were never here. You never picked us up from the airport. In fact, you can’t remember why you drove into town.”

The man stopped and looked up at Tristan with a calm questioning in his eyes.

“You’re going back to the airport. You will not remember us.”

The man nodded his understanding and turned away, rounding his car and climbing into the driver’s seat as if in a trance. Before he pulled away Scott raced to the passenger side, opened the front door and tossed a twenty dollar bill into the seat before slamming the door as the taxi pulled away.

Tristan stared after the car. “You didn’t need to pay him.”

“I know. Just feel bad for using all of that gas. Man’s probably got a family or something.” Scott pulled his coat closed at the throat as the snow billowed about them,

## *The Lineage*

investigating them like curious cats.

“Awfully contentious for a man who’s made pacts with demons before,” Tristan replied with a note of humor and turned to enter the hotel.

Scott smirked. “Someone has to be, I guess.”

\* \* \*

Tristan jumped at the sound of a knock at his hotel door. He had become entranced by the sight of the city from his 50<sup>th</sup> floor window, a jagged black staccato silhouette better suited to a Ginsberg poem than the dwelling of millions, a dichotomy of rectangular warmth and blue-black and gray towers curtained by the purity of white snowflakes in the hours between witching and dawn. At a second knock, he pried himself away from the scene and answered the door.

Scott stood in the hall dressed in jeans and a thick navy-blue sweater that reminded Tristan of the sort a fisherman in Maine might wear. “Well, if you are going to kill me, I might as well thank you now for indulging my whim to stay at this hotel. Always wanted to, but never did. Even when I had money.” Scott slipped past Tristan, a tumbler of whiskey and ice in his left hand, and headed toward the red leather armchair near the window. “This is absolutely amazing!”

“Yes it is,” Tristan replied quietly as he closed the door. He sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at the patch of carpet between his boots.

“Still not going to tell me who you are?” Scott asked quietly as he set his glass on the small table beside the chair. He folded his hands over his belly as he crossed one ankle over his knee.

“I’ve been trying to find a way to explain.” Tristan pressed his lips against his steepled fingertips.

“How about I go first?” Scott asked, tilting his head to one side as he watched Tristan like an old professor. “You’re probably wondering why I would go galavanting off with some stranger I just met on some outlandish quest to find my old publisher? That’s easy. I was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer about three weeks ago. Now, most people would be filling their systems with chemo and desperately searching for some sort of way to extend their life. Therein lies the rub—I’d given up long before that diagnosis. Then you pop in with this wild story about demon pacts and such. Call me crazy, and most would right now, but I figured ‘what the hell?’, this might be the last strange adventure I have in this lifetime!”

Scott laughed. “If you’re right, if you’re not insane and lying to me and Nyles is some sort of demon, then maybe he’ll give me the rest of my contract. I’ll live a few more years, write a few more books and end my life the way he promised. If not, and all of this is just one bizarre dead-end, pun entirely intended by the way, maybe even a hallucination from my disease, then my life will still end with a fascinating twist.” Scott shrugged. “Either way, this is better than sitting in a dive bar in Dallas drinking the last months of my life away. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Tristan tried to smile. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s what we’re all trained to say to a story like mine. I just told you, I have no regrets and I’m actually excited about this. I don’t have any family left. And my friends, well, they have just sort of given up on me. They don’t know about the cancer and I don’t care to tell them, either. Don’t weigh me down with your sympathies.” Scott sat forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees. “Now. Something tells me that, even though you’re dressed like a gutterpunk, you’re used to this.” He gestured at the room with one hand.

## The Lineage

“Rich parents? Trust fund baby?”

“Quite the opposite, actually.” Tristan did not look up. “And, no, I’m not used to this, at all.”

“Foreign embezzlement? Bounty hunter?” Scott seemed reinvigorated, as if he had slept for a fortnight. “One of those demon hunters like on *Supernatural*?”

“On what?” Tristan turned and stared at Scott. He wanted to feel the excitement that radiated from Scott, the same sort of unadulterated thrill for the coming hunt, but the regret of leaving Bryn, once again, without even a good-bye ached in the center of his chest, vicious and cold.

“It’s a TV show? Never mind.” Scott waved the comment away.

“Sorry, I haven’t watched television in twenty years,” Tristan replied.

“Twenty... How old are you kid?”

“How old do you think I am?”

Scott paused, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. He raised an eyebrow as he contemplated Tristan. “Nineteen or twenty? Definitely not old enough to drink.”

Tristan smiled a sad half-grin. “I’m forty-five. I always did look young for my age though, even back when I was human.”

The heaviness of his statement polluted the air between them making it hard to breathe. Tristan could hear the wheels of Scott’s mind cranking slowly, attempting to discern whether Tristan spoke in truth or jest. When Scott did not reply, Tristan continued.

“What I’m about to tell you, I don’t expect you to believe immediately, but if you need proof beyond my words, I will give it to you. If you choose to leave, I’ll understand, but I will ask that you allow me to make you forget that we ever met.” He paused—besides Bryn, Scott was the only other

human he had told his secret to, at least any other that hadn't been prey.

"Like that trick you pulled on the cabbie?" Scott asked cautiously. The adrenaline seemed to wane suddenly from his demeanor, his nervous finger-tapping ceasing as he sank further into the embrace of the chair.

Tristan nodded. He drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I know just how crazy this is all going to sound, but just try to stick with me. Okay?"

Scott nodded, but remained silent and still as if ready to bolt from the room at any given moment. His expression bespoke that the jokes he had made earlier about Tristan murdering him in his sleep suddenly didn't seem as funny.

"I am..." Tristan struggled with the words. He hated the very sound of the name itself. "I am a vampire."

The silence that fell between them was deafening. Tristan was aware of every fiber of the hotel bedspread beneath him, the sound of the other patrons in the rooms to either side of them, the crawling, screeching, creaking of the city around them.

"A vampire?" Scott finally asked, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

"Yes," Tristan said uncomfortably.

"So, let me get this straight, Nyles is a demon. You're a vampire. And I'm a fucking unicorn!" Scott stood and started for the door. "Well, like I said, thanks for indulging me in my hotel request. I'll be locked in my room for the rest of the night. I assume you won't be able to stop me from leaving in the morning."

Tristan stepped between Scott and the door. "Scott, please. I need your help in this."

"Help with what? What you need *is* help! Serious fucking psychiatric help." He shook his head. "What the fuck was I

## *The Lineage*

doing coming here?” he said to himself as he attempted to navigate around Tristan.

Tristan placed his hand on Scott’s shoulder. Instantly Scott found himself unable to move. Panic flooded his eyes as they widened his body beginning to tremble as the recognition of the unnatural seeped into his subconscious.

“What the hell are you doing to me?” He whispered frantically. “Let me go!”

His hand still on Scott’s shoulder, he walked him backwards and pushed him gently into the armchair. As he released him and turned toward the window he could hear Scott’s heartbeat thundering inside his chest, the purr of his blood rushing through his veins causing Tristan’s fangs to ache dangerously. He traced the outline of the buildings on the far side of the street, focusing himself as he allowed the energy to move through him and out into the night.

As the hunger subsided slightly, he returned to sit on the edge of the bed once again. “Please just hear me out. I have a theory about what happened to Nyles. If I’m correct, he is an ancient demon of writing and literature. He disguised himself as a New York publisher and set about making deals, such as yours.”

“Deals? Like old-school sell-your-soul contracts? I guess I really thought you were just being creative with your analogies back at McKinney’s.” The joviality had vanished from Scott’s tone, his hands gripping the ends of each of the arms of the chair until his close-clipped nails left deep impressions in the leather.

Tristan held Scott’s gaze steadily. “Remember when you said you’d give ‘anything’ to have that book deal? And he asked about your soul? You basically gave him free reign to take anything from you.” Tristan gave him a moment to absorb and process the information.

“Okay,” Scott began hesitantly. “Say I believe you, about any of this. Aren’t demons historically supposed to be bound to honor their end of the contract? Where the hell are the other nine books Nyles promised me?”

Tristan smirked. “That’s where I come in. Or, more so, where my Maker, Dorian, comes in. Dorian didn’t become a vampire on purpose or by accident. It was a sick twist of his original request in a deal he made with Lucifer himself. However, being the crafty creature he is, he somehow found a cosmic loophole in the contract where, by making a second deal with another demon for a similar request, he, in effect, put both contracts in an eternal state of ‘renegotiation.’ Neither Nybbas or the Devil can finish their contracts or collect their bounty: Dorian’s soul.”

Scott rubbed his face with both hands. Tristan could hear his thoughts now, loud and clear as a subway train. *This guy is fucking nuts! But what if he’s right? I mean, I’ve heard about weird shit like this. Just because I’ve never seen anything paranormal myself doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. And if he’s really crazy, well...shit... Just go with it. What else do you have to do with yourself right now? You’re kind of stuck here for the time being. And you don’t want to piss this guy off.*

He dropped his hands to his lap and stared at the floor between them. “So, like I said. Where’s the rest of my contract? I don’t have much time left on this planet. I’d at least like to get what’s owed to me. And I’d like to know what’s going to happen to my soul once I die if my own contract is on hold? Am I supposedly ‘immortal’ until then?”

“Immortal?” Tristan stared at Scott, confused.

“Well if the deal can’t be completed, that means he can’t collect on his end either. Right? So, as long as the contract is in stasis, so is my cancer?”

The raw emotion in Scott’s voice struck Tristan hard. “I

## *The Lineage*

don't know," he said softly, sensing the pain Scott was in, both physically and spiritually as he faced his mortality. Part of him suddenly worried that perhaps Scott might be swayed to keep Nybbas concealed if faced with the option of either death or the fulfillment of his deal? Tristan wasn't sure what he would choose if he were human again. "I just know I want to help you. And that I need your help, as well."

Scott looked up and met Tristan's gaze. "Now, *that* I believe." He dropped his eyes to his palms as if searching for the answers in the lines etched there by time. "I don't understand what Dorian's deal has to do with mine though. Why would that interfere with anything else Nyles ever did?"

"That is the strange part about all of this—"

"The only strange part?" Scott laughed, a tiny sliver of his previous survivalist's humor finding its way back into his tone.

"Point taken," Tristan agreed. "For me, the strange part about this situation is the fact that the Devil cannot seem to locate Nybbas either."

"How do you know—?" Scott stopped himself. "Don't tell me. You've been talking to Lucifer too these days?"

Tristan didn't acknowledge the sarcasm. "I won't go into all of the complicated family history, but he's asked me to step in and find Nybbas for him. Dorian did something to make it impossible for Lucifer to track Nybbas down. He's hiding his investment and I think I know how he's doing it. I just don't know where."

"Are you sure you're not on drugs?" Scott asked, though his words were absent of all seriousness. Weak and timid, they fell from his weathered lips like sand.

"Scott, you can help me find out where Dorian is keeping Nybbas."

“Nyles. Let’s call him Nyles. Okay? Let me wrap my brain around one thing at a time here.” Scott exhaled sharply through his nose. He appeared older suddenly, and utterly exhausted. “Dammit. Look, I need to sleep on this. I’m not going anywhere because, well, frankly I can’t afford to fly back right now. My next teaching check won’t hit my account for another three days.” He pushed himself out of the chair. “Can I go now or are you going to try more of that Jedi mind-over-matter shit with me again?”

“I’m not crazy,” Tristan said, feeling strangely defeated by the outlandishness of his own existence.

“Sadly, I’m pretty convinced, for whatever godforsaken reason, of that as well.” Scott shuffled past Tristan and opened the door. Pausing in the threshold, he looked back over his shoulder. “Promise me one thing?”

“What’s that?” Tristan replied.

“You don’t sparkle, do you?”

Tristan stared at Scott trying to decipher the meaning of his question.

Scott shook his head. “Never mind.” As the door began to shut after him Tristan heard him mutter to himself. “Maybe the kid isn’t lying after all?”

The sky outside was beginning to grow light, the deep navy blue fading to a velvety amethyst as the sun rose behind the skyline. Far below, nightshifts turned to day and the world of commerce and progress began another tireless dance about the bonfires of existence. The snow now seemed like poetry to Tristan, each flake an extinguished ember of ash falling from the heavens as they burned. He pressed his forehead against the cold glass of the window and stared down at the line of yellow lights inching their way through the white avenue.

The horrors the people of the city would experience

*The Lineage*

today would pale in comparison to his memories, of this he was certain.

## CHAPTER 15



Tristan opened his eyes at the sound of room service knocking at the room beside his. In the cold darkness he stared up at the ceiling and listened to the cheerful muffled exchange between the attendant and the guests. The door clicked shut. Footsteps shuffled down the hall to the elevators. A television clicked on. Life for the ordinary continued.

He rolled over on his side, pulling the down duvet over him in a cocoon of surreal softness. It was a comfort he had not experienced since childhood and he realized he did not want to leave the clean, ambiguous and nonjudgmental embrace of sheets claimed by so many other faceless patrons.

*Maybe I could stay here forever?* He thought. *I wonder just how long it would be before they realized I haven't paid for anything? Maybe that's what I'll do after this is all said and done.*

He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. The glowing red digital numbers read 7:00 PM. A strangling wave of

## *The Lineage*

loneliness washed over him as he realized part of him deeply missed the dysfunctional nightmare that had been his family. He had grown used to the chaos, the random unpredictability that caused him to wake with a start each night uncertain of what he would find upon opening his eyes. Every night a new city, a new victim, a new rush of adrenaline, a new battle of wills between his kin—there had been a method to the madness that cemented their bond over and over again. They had been closer than even the blood they shared in common. Now they were gone. Only his Maker remained and soon, he too, would be dragged down to Hell. Tristan was suddenly unsure he was ready to be an orphan.

He sat up and swung his legs off the edge of the bed. How would he survive? Were there others like him in the world? Would they accept him or challenge him?

Grabbing his backpack and key card he left and walked down the hall to Scott's room. Scott answered the door looking rested and content, dressed in a long black wool overcoat and red flannel scarf.

"If I haven't said it enough, thanks! That was the best night's sleep I've had in years." He finished tugging on his leather gloves as they made their way to the elevators. "So," he clapped his hands together, "what's for dinner?"

Tristan stared ahead at the polished brass doors. "This isn't a vacation."

"The last time I checked, eating wasn't exactly a 'vacation detail.' I still require sustenance, my undead friend," Scott quipped sarcastically. "Plus, before we go demon hunting we might want to get our ducks in a row. Maybe make some sort of plan of action?"

There was no debating Scott or his logic. Tristan had grown used to the "act now, think later" mentality implemented by his tribe. He followed Scott out of the

elevator and through the grand lobby to the hotel bar. Scott chose one of the small round tables near the window.

“For expediency’s sake.” He gestured for Tristan to join him as he eyed the appetizer menu, and then the row of illuminated bottles on the shelf behind the bar. “So, do your parlor tricks apply to all establishments?”

Tristan reached into his backpack and retrieved Guymon’s laptop. “Just put it on my tab.”

Scott waived the waitress over and placed an order of fried calamari and a vodka martini before settling back into his seat.

“And for you?” The waitress eyed Tristan suspiciously.

“He’s not eating these days. It’s research for a role. Method acting,” Scott said with a smile.

The concept seemed to put the waitress strangely at ease, her smile broadening as she nodded her understanding and left. Tristan did not look up as he waited for the computer to power on.

“Do you ever change clothes?” Scott asked Tristan.

“Do you remember where Nyles’s office was located?” Tristan replied, ignoring Scott’s observation as he pulled up the Wikipedia page for the Bey Publishing Group again.

“Yep, sixth floor of the Trump Tower.”

Scott thanked the waitress a few minutes later as she placed his order before him and took a long sip of his martini. He speared a few pieces of calamari with his fork and dipped them into the marinara sauce in a tiny metal cup on the edge of the plate. “I never asked why *you* care so much about finding Nyles?”

“Excuse me?” Tristan finally looked up from his research.

“Well, I get that this Dorian character is in bed with the Devil and all that. And I know you said Lucifer asked you

## *The Lineage*

to help him out,” Scott said with a raise of one skeptical eyebrow. “But, if I were you I’d stay out of it. Hell, I’d stay as far away from that fishbowl of bad news as possible. I mean, I guess it doesn’t matter to me as long as Nyles forks over the rest of his end of my deal. But, what’s in it for you?” Scott said between sips of vodka.

“Why do you ask?” Tristan stared at Scott. There was something in the casual nature of his demeanor this evening that unnerved Tristan.

Scott shrugged. “Just seems odd, the Devil asking you for a personal favor, and all that. Not that it’s any of my business.”

Tristan was at a loss for words. He closed the computer and slipped it back inside the backpack at his feet.

“You’re in some trouble, aren’t you?” Scott set his martini glass down carefully on the black napkin beside his plate. “Look, you don’t know me from Adam so just tell me to shut up at any time. I’m just curious. It’s part of being a writer, but you know the adage about curiosity.”

“I’m not trying to keep secrets from you. Especially not after all of the things I’ve already told you, and you have miraculously bought hook line and sinker, in the last twenty-four hours.” Tristan ran his hands through his hair and stared at the remainders of Scott’s meal. He wondered what fried calamari tasted like—he could barely remember anything except the taste of blood, booze and cigarettes. “I’m just trying to wrap my mind around all of it. I’m finding my way as I go. If I hadn’t lost so many people I care about in the last couple of weeks I too would think I was deranged. But, I guess, it really is happening. The Devil is real. Demons are real.”

Tristan laughed a little, softly to himself. “I don’t know why that’s so hard for me to believe. Hell, I’m real. And

if you had told me that twenty years ago I would have rolled my eyes and walked away.” He looked up at Scott. “I don’t know why this is happening, to either of us. I know I’ve committed atrocities in my life you would cringe to even imagine. I didn’t do them out of hate or cruelty, not intentionally, at least. I did them out of instinct, because of what I am. I probably deserve this. I know I deserve this, but right now, I just want to find some peace. If that means helping you find Nyles so the Devil will leave me alone for a little while longer, that’s what I’ll do.”

Scott’s expression was indecipherable, that strange mixture of respect and grief that comes with the recognition of when a person drops their guise and stands naked in their truth, no matter how horrible it may be. He lifted the cloth napkin from his lap and folded it, placing it over the remains of his dinner, his appetite apparently diminished. He nodded silently as he folded his hands over his stomach before looking up again at Tristan.

“Now I know you’re definitely not lying.”

\* \* \*

“Do you think his office is still here?” Tristan stared up at the black glass Trump Tower looming over them, piercing the night sky with the imposing confidence of sheltered celebrity and wealth.

An American and United Kingdom flag snapped in the wind where they were mounted to the illuminated grid of the first floor beside a massive plasma-screen monitor depicting an ad for the reality television show “Celebrity Apprentice” and Donald Trump proclaiming his catch phrase, *You’re fired!* The trees that decorated the staggered right side of the lower levels were dusted with snow, their ethereal skeletal limbs

## *The Lineage*

mirrored in the panes to either side of them. People hurried obliviously past Tristan and Scott on their way home from work and on to their evening plans. They walked bravely in spite of the relentless winter without even the slightest complaint, their bodies sheathed in thick, dark winter coats and faces concealed behind scarves like ninjas.

“Doubt it. I don’t know many landlords that would hold an office space for a tenant decades overdue in their rent.” Scott stamped his feet to get the circulation pumping in them again. “Then again, Donald certainly seems like the kind of guy who’s made a few deals in his time.”

The luxurious, pristine lobby startled Tristan’s senses with its flood of warmth and richly polished stone floors. He glanced up at the large holiday wreath suspended over the front door as they passed beneath it, its circumference illuminated by thousands of tiny white lights woven about the fantastical red bow. Evening customers came and went from the first floor boutiques making their last purchases before closing time. A painfully chic couple dressed in angular black and gray garments that seemed ill-equipped to combat the elements sauntered by, looking Tristan up and down with disdain as they passed. A twinge of uncomfortable shame stabbed the center of his chest with the realization of his appearance—it had never been called into question before when he roamed the back alleys and underground clubs with his family, his own disregard for physical perception stemming from his apathy and self-loathing. Now, beneath the inescapable persecution of the lobby light there was no hiding.

Tristan dropped his gaze to the floor and his reflection in the marble. The Thirst clawed at the base of his skull—he wanted to kill the couple for their arrogance. He knew he would need to feed and soon lest their investigation be

derailed by a random act of spontaneous violence he knew he was all too capable of. He scanned the lobby and spied the engraved directory of businesses off to his right near the elevators.

“Do you see it anywhere?” Tristan asked Scott as he ran his finger up and down the list. “I don’t.”

“No. I thought it would be unlikely.” Scott turned away from the directory and glanced around the lobby. “I’m wondering, though, if I could find someone who’s still working here that I know. It’s a long shot, but maybe they could tell us what happened to the firm?”

He turned and briskly walked back to the entrance where the doorman was standing. After a brief exchange the man retrieved his cellphone and made a call. Scott shook the man’s hand, neatly folding a twenty dollar bill into his gloved palm as he smiled broadly and pointed in the direction of where Tristan was standing. As he turned and walked back to join Tristan, his smile faded somewhat.

“What did you find out?” Tristan asked.

Scott shook his head. “The guy is young. He’s only been here three years. He doesn’t remember Nyles or his company. Luckily, the building manager is still here. Keep your fingers crossed.”

A short time later a tall, distinguished man with a finely trimmed gray mustache and beard, and elegantly tailored charcoal suit exited the elevators across the lobby. He approached them briskly.

“Scott Hayden! Well, well, well. If it isn’t the devil himself?” The man chuckled, a deep and warmly welcoming sound that spoke of a humbling sense of respect for his position in life.

Scott shook the man’s extended hand with vigor. “Roman. What a pleasure! I thought I’d never see you again,

for sure.”

“Indeed. You just disappeared from us after such a great run. My secretary still talks about the gifts you used to send us.” Roman smiled, wide and white beneath his mustache. “Generosity like yours is hard to come by these days.” He glanced at Tristan and did a slight double-take at the odd company Scott was keeping. “So, what brings you back to New York?”

“Well, I’m sort of opening up, on my own, the cold case of Nyles Bey’s disappearance. This here is Tristan,” Scott replied, dropping his voice a bit as if afraid to be overheard. He paused. “He’s looking for Nyles, as well, for a similar unpaid deal.”

Roman raised his eyebrows and nodded his head. “There are a lot of people who would wish you well on that, myself included.” He splayed his hands wide as he spoke. “The case ran colder than ice. Even his secretary was left high and dry. Poor thing had to find a new job—nearly lost everything she had.”

“June. Is she still living in New York?” Scott asked.

“I believe so. I’m not sure where she’s working now—that was a long time ago, but I could probably look up her last place of residence. Hopefully, she didn’t lose her home to Mr. Bey’s unscrupulous business tactics.” Roman turned on his heel and started toward the elevators again. “Follow me. I was just about to leave for the evening, but I think I can look this one thing up for an old friend.”

Scott and Roman chatted casually about their lives, keeping the conversation polite and charming as two old British gents. Tristan kept his eyes on the ground, raising a shield about himself to keep Roman from becoming suspicious about his true nature. He was unused to the glitz and glamor of the brightly-lit wealth Scott had introduced

him too—the world around him hurt his eyes, the polished brass and marble and perfectly vacuumed carpet making him acutely aware of every speck of grime and grit embedded into the fabric of his clothing and hair. As the elevator climbed the heights of the Tower he prayed the meeting would conclude quickly and they would be on their way. Scott, however, seemed to be enjoying himself immensely as if envisioning himself entering his old world again once Nyles was found.

Roman's office exuded an old-world understated wealth with dark mahogany furniture tailored with deep burgundy leather and brass tacks. He flicked on the green glass desk lamp beside his computer and took a seat—Tristan remained standing by the door as Scott sat on the edge of one of the two facing armchairs. After rebooting his computer and sifting through files for several minutes Roman made a contented sound of discovery and reached for a pen and pad of paper beside his phone.

“Here it is.” He handed the paper to Scott. “Again, it's the last place I have for her right before she left us, but it's a start.” He stood and turned the computer off again.

“Many thanks to you, Roman. We deeply appreciate your help,” Scott said earnestly.

“Like I said, there are a lot of people who hope you find him.” Roman smoothed the lapels of his jacket down and grabbed his long black overcoat from a coat stand behind his desk. “And if you do find him, please remind him of the \$100,000 he still owes us.”

## CHAPTER 16



A quick cab ride later Tristan and Scott arrived on the upper west side of Manhattan. It would seem that the Fates had chosen their corner for June Neuman was still in residence in the tiny, yet elegantly furnished apartment. She remembered Scott instantly and welcomed them in for coffee.

“I haven’t seen him since his disappearance.” June placed her coffee cup on the lacquered oak coffee table and crossed her long legs. “I even went up to his vacation home in Rhode Island looking for him, thinking he might be hiding out.” There was a sad note in her short, soft laugh and sideways smile.

“He had a vacation home?” Scott asked. “What did you find up there?”

She shrugged. “His car was there, parked in the garage. His suitcase was by the front door as if he had just arrived, but never unpacked.”

Tristan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees

as he studied the subtleties of her body language—she was a beautiful woman, the type that grew more seductive and profound with age. “Did you look in the basement or attic?”

June stared at Tristan, her finely manicured dark brown eyebrows knitting ever so slightly with intrigue. There was a hint of questioning familiarity in her eyes, as if her mind was searching for a connection between Tristan and her past.

After a moment of tense silence, she shook her head. “No, I didn’t think to,” she said quietly. She looked back at Scott. “I went down to the beach and checked the boathouse, though. Again, nothing—the boat was there. I just don’t get it. How can someone just vanish like that, without a trace?”

“Believe it or not, it happens every day.” Tristan glanced at Scott. “Shall we take a little trip up to Rhode Island?”

“What do you guys hope to find?” June’s eyes shifted between Scott and Tristan. “And why now, after all of these years?”

Scott smiled half-heartedly and glanced around at the expensive details of the living room. “June, you’ve done very well for yourself and I couldn’t be happier for you.” He sighed. “Unfortunately, for me, I wasn’t so lucky. I guess I just want some sort of closure.”

June nodded slowly, pressing her lips together as she searched for the appropriate words. “I see,” she said. “Well, for your sake, I hope that’s what you receive. I guess I made peace a long time ago when I realized that, if he is alive, wherever he is, he has to live with the knowledge of all of the people he’s hurt.”

“Unfortunately,” Tristan replied. “I don’t think he’s the kind of man who cares.”

\* \* \*

## *The Lineage*

Tristan and Scott stepped out of the front lobby of the apartment building and onto the snow-covered sidewalk. Scott glanced at his watch. “Well, it’s too late to rent a car. Guess we’ll have to wait until tomorrow to head upstate. What do you want to do?”

“How do you feel about stealing one?” Tristan glanced up and down the street at the cars parked along the curb.

“Seriously? Come on! Let’s go hit the town. I could use a drink.” Scott’s tone was jovial, though he stared at Tristan with a dark caution.

Tristan ignored his request and began walking quickly towards an older-model black Cadillac sedan a few feet away. He paused with his hand on the driver’s side door handle. “You coming?”

“Dude, you can’t just—”

Tristan tugged on the handle and heard the lock give way with a loud creak and snap. Before Scott could protest further he jumped inside and opened the passenger door. Scott’s mouth fell open. He looked around nervously and took a deep breath before quickly climbing inside. He watched in silence as Tristan ripped open the undercarriage of the steering wheel column and began to hot-wire the vehicle.

“How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Open the car?”

“It was unlocked.”

“No it wasn’t. No one leaves their car unlocked in New York.”

Tristan smiled as the car roared to life. Placing it in “drive”, he began to pull out of the parking space. “I already told you.”

“Right...right. Vampire. You’re a vampire.” Scott nodded, his eyes wide as his mind digested what he had just

witnessed. He started to ask another question, but stopped himself. Shaking his head, he retrieved his phone from his pocket. “Guess I’ll get directions.”

They arrived in Rhode Island shortly after midnight. Along the idyllic sleeping coastline the black cadillac crawled, a gently purring panther hunting the banks of newly fallen snow. Neither Scott, nor Tristan had spoken a word during the three hour journey north, the only sound to pierce the deathly silence that of the cellular GPS system guiding them. Past the dark faces of small town businesses and beautiful old homes lined with strands of twinkling holiday lights they held their breaths in anticipation of what might lay hidden within Nyles’s home.

Tristan dimmed the lights as he steered the car slowly into the paved circular driveway in front. The two story house appeared abandoned—the holly shrubs beneath the black lifeless windows to either side of the red door grew wild, unmanicured for decades, their dark green leaves dusted with a thick layer of pure white snow. The slate gray roof was missing several shingles, the eaves almost bowing beneath the weight of winter like an old man full of regret as the once-white paint on the wood siding peeled and flecked away, its beauty sanded down into history by the harsh kiss of the ocean air.

Tristan stepped out of the car, closing the door quietly as if fearful to disturb a hibernating bear. He glanced up at the second floor windows and then the small archer’s attic window in the center of the roof. There was something in the house, though what its exact nature was remained concealed.

“What is it?” Scott asked as he stood beside the passenger door, his gaze alternating between Tristan and the house.

Tristan shook his head. He rounded the car and walked

## *The Lineage*

cautiously up the five narrow front steps of the small porch. The wooden boards creaked under his weight, causing his nerves to prickle. The door was, as expected, locked, but with a little persuasion gave way easily under Tristan's push. The sound of the frame splintering and metal bending as the lock ripped free echoed like a gunshot through the stillness of the night causing him to halt for a moment until the last of its echo faded away. In the distance, the surf moaned to the shore, soft waves pulling sand back out to sea one grain at a time.

The rooms were cloaked in sweetly bruised shadows of blue and black, moonlight streaming through the windows from all sides to carve out the angles and planes of expensive furniture. Scott tried several of the light switches and confirmed the power was off. Tristan found the setting eerie, the world frozen in time and coated with a thick layer of pale gray dust like a forgotten movie set. On the coffee table in the living room a mug still sat next to an empty plate and a fork, the last meal of the demon who had lived there or his guest, and in the kitchen a cookbook lay open, a recipe for peach cobbler earmarked. It all seemed so quaint, so serene and unpretentious—it was the opposite of Tristan's expectations of what a demon's home would look like.

*The perfect setting to put mortals at ease,* Tristan thought. *Or, in Dorian's case, a vampire.*

Scott followed Tristan quietly through the first floor as he explored, running his fingers over the furniture and dragging lines through the dust. In the den Tristan spied a tall red pillar candle on the mantle of the white painted brick fireplace on the south-facing wall. He pulled a lighter from his jacket pocket and paused, feeling his heart ache for a moment—in his palm lay the camouflage lighter from the gas station where Diana had been slain. He closed the

lighter in his fist and said a small prayer that perhaps her soul had finally found peace. Lighting the candle he handed it to Scott.

“Dorian’s not here,” Tristan said quietly as he studied the oil painting above the fireplace of hunting dogs carrying dead fowl back through a marsh at sunrise.

“Is Nyles?” Scott asked, a nervous quake in his voice. It was obvious he was uneasy with breaking into Nyles’s home, but too fearful of Tristan to voice his concern.

“Something is,” Tristan replied. He turned and headed back toward the doorway that lead to the front receiving area.

At the base of the stairs he cocked his head to one side, listening to the subtleties of every vibration of the old house. A deep pulsing energy pulled at the center of his being like the heartbeat of a dying man, slow and barely perceptible. He quickly climbed the stairs, following the invisible footprints of the entity that lurked above as if they were his own.

At the top of the landing he paused, allowing the force within the house to guide him. He turned and walked into the master bedroom to his right. Simply furnished with an expensive oak set including a four poster bed, nightstands and dresser the space could have easily been featured in any number of mail-order catalogs down to the navy blue pinstriped wallpaper and white down duvet. Dust coated the surfaces of the nightstands and dresser, veiling the large mirror on the wall to Tristan’s right with an eerie otherworldly smoke. He walked to the dresser and drug his index finger through the dust on the surface of the mirror before dropping his gaze to the neatly organized array of gentlemanly accessories displayed there, all too human and perfect in their arrangement.

“Not the way I imagined his house, at all,” Scott said

## *The Lineage*

quietly as he turned in a full circle, taking in the room in its entirety.

“Things in life rarely are.” Tristan watched Scott in the mirror. The light from the single candle flame glinted off of the brass doorknob of the closet to the left of the bed.

He turned and walked slowly to the door and opened it. Pushing aside the clothes he traced the lines of the rough wood paneling behind.

“What are you looking for?” Scott asked as he walked quietly up behind Tristan.

Tristan pushed on one of the panels and felt it pop. With a soft creak and hiss of wood brushing against wood, a small doorway opened, swinging inwards into a velvety pitch. An icy gust of wind slipped through the opening, scurrying forth as if in jubilation at its newfound freedom. Tristan’s eyes adjusted quickly to the discovered depth of darkness—beyond lay a small set of narrow stairs leading to another narrow door and what he could only assume was the attic. Without further hesitation he quickly climbed upwards, shoving the small door at the top open as if fearful that whatever was contained within may try to flee.

Silence followed the slamming of the door back against the wall, echoing like a flock of crows scattering across the night. Tristan strode forward into the attic room, his fists balled at his side and ready to strike whatever assaulted him. His heart thundered in his chest, his eyes darting from one cluster of shadows to another down the galley run space to the far end.

There upon the floor, in front of an archer’s pane window sat a man cross-legged and leaning forward to rest his chin within his palms as if bored of boredom itself. His lanky, lean limbs were clothed in what once would have been an expensively tailored suit of black. Now the fibers grew thin

and faded from the sunlight that had streamed in from the window behind him for two decades. Buttons were missing from one of his cuffs and the red silk hankerchief in his left breast pocket was now a dull pink around the edges. He had removed his leather shoes, placing them to the side his long bare feet.

“You’re looking for Dorian?” the man said without moving as he watched Tristan and Scott with muted curiosity.

“You must be Nyles?” Tristan replied, his gaze traveling up to the ceiling where a devil’s trap was branded into the wood above Nyles.

Nyles drew a deep breath and finally sat up straight, stretching his arms out in front of him as he rolled his neck from left to right and back again. “I would say ‘at your service’, but unfortunately I’m a bit indisposed at the moment.”

“Where is Dorian?” Tristan asked, taking a hesitant step towards Nyles. “I can sense he was here and not all that long ago.”

Nyles uttered a weary, frustrated chuckle. “You vampires and your ‘sensing’ things.” He shook his head. “He’s in hiding.”

“From what?” Tristan asked, though he knew good and well the answer.

Nyles raised an eyebrow. “Obviously not me. Something tells me that he wasn’t exactly expecting you, the way he took off. He’s not exactly the calm, collected, conniving creature I met in the beginning,” Nyles said wistfully and shrugged. “I guess he came back to check on me, to make sure everything was still in place.” He gestured to the ceiling.

“Do you know why?” Tristan asked as Scott moved to stand beside him, the candle still gripped tightly in his

hand.

A dark storm cloud passed in front of Nyles's gray eyes. "I can only assume the worst."

Tristan turned and walked to the window behind him and stared out at the beach, ghostly pale against the liquid immensity of the sea. *Where are you Dorian? Let's get this over with.*

"Please don't play me for an imbecile," Nyles said. "There's only one reason why Dorian would have trapped me here and that's because he's scared. As he should be, but a deal is a deal. He knew full and well what he was getting into. You need to talk to him and emphasize that the longer he lets me sit here in this circle, the worse it will be for him. Before it was just going to be the run of the mill damnation. Now... Now it's personal."

"I know. Everything has gotten so *personal*," Tristan said quietly, more to himself than to Nyles. "I wonder what it's like to have so many devils after you? Then again, I suppose I do." He leaned his shoulder against the windowframe, pressing his forehead against the icy glass.

"So many devils'?" Nyles repeated.

Tristan continued to stare out at the surf. "Then you don't know." He felt suddenly a wave of pity for the demon trapped in the attic.

Nyles's gaze transferred to Scott. "Is this about our deal? You know my hands have been tied. I would have honored everything, and I still will!"

"I know that, now," Scott replied.

"Then let me out of here." Nyles stepped to the edge of the circle.

The acrid scent of the demon's confusion and fear pooled in the back of Tristan's throat. "This isn't about Scott," Tristan interrupted, turning away from the ocean view and back to

face Nyles. “Dorian tricked you into a double-deed.”

“What?” Nyles stared at Tristan.

“His soul wasn’t his to negotiate with at the time you made your transaction,” Tristan said quietly, crossing his arms over his chest as he walked towards Nyles, noting the expression of utter fear that contorted Nyles’s chiseled features. “And after all I’ve learned in the past few weeks, I’m beginning to think that trapping you here might have been merciful on Dorian’s part and not just self-serving. After all, I’m not sure what the price is for a demon that betrays the Devil himself?”

“Hold on!” Nyles took a staggered step back. His eyes darted around the room, desperately searching for a way out of his prison. “I didn’t know. There’s no way that I could have known—”

“How did you not know?” Scott interjected abruptly. “Seriously, isn’t that your job, to know when someone’s soul is up for bartering?”

“Hey!” Nyles pointed at Scott with a scowl. “Do you want those other nine books or not?”

“Those are non-negotiable,” Scott barked back.

“Stop!” Tristan shouted. The room plunged into a thick silence as Scott and Nyles continued to stare vehemently at one another. “Be thankful you’re in there right now.” He pointed at the trap above Nyles’s head.

“Why is that?”

“Because, due to your greed and resulting dealings with Dorian, you’ve pissed off Lucifer,” Tristan said bluntly. “As long as you’re in there, the Devil is going to have one hard time finding you. Or, at least, he couldn’t. Dorian never should have come back here. It’s just a matter of time now until Lucifer shows up.”

The carefully constructed tan vanished from Nyles’s

## *The Lineage*

face as his lips parted. He shook his head, unable to find words to express his confusion and fear. Tristan could see the gears grinding painfully behind Nyles's eyes as his mind tried to process the dire situation he was now amidst.

"Lucifer's main concern is Dorian, but I wouldn't go so far as to say you'll be able to talk your way out of this," Tristan said with a genuine sympathy for the demon before him. After all, he was just another business man at the end of the day, and one that Dorian had betrayed.

"What do you want?" Nyles asked, raising his eyes to meet Tristan's.

"From you? Absolutely nothing," Tristan replied with a hint of jaded sorrow that soured his tone.

"Ah! But there might be something he wants from me?" Scott's voice sliced through the shadows with a wicked joviality and strength.

Tristan whirled around, his limbs afire with a sudden surge of adrenaline. A few short feet away Scott stood, his shoulders squared, a smug pleasant grin stretching his mouth beneath his beard. His left hand gripped the back of Dorian's neck, at the base of his skull. With a malicious force he shoved Dorian forward—Tristan watched as his Maker stumbled, losing his footing and falling to his knees with a grunt. Scrambling to his feet again, Dorian darted into the corner behind Nyles where he pressed himself into the shadows as if their embrace would dissolve him into nothingness.

Scott set the candle in his other hand on the floor at his feet. "I found him cowering in the boathouse."

Tristan and Nyles stared at Scott in mute silence—both of them knew without a doubt just who stood before them housed in the shell of a tired old writer. Scott clapped his hands together as if shaking dust from his palms after a hard day's work, smiling as he wiped down his sleeves.

“Apologies, Tristan, for the deception. I’m sure you understand,” Lucifer said matter-of-factly as if acknowledging his tardiness for a dinner party. “But, now that you know just who I am,” Lucifer placed his hands in the pockets of his coat, “how would we like to go about wrapping this all up?”

“About wrapping what up, exactly?” Nyles asked cautiously—terror glazed his pale eyes, wide and unblinking in the ghostly light of the single candle.

Lucifer did not answer right away, but stared at Nyles as if contemplating the infinite ways to punish him. Slowly, he walked towards the devil’s trap, stopping just short of its edge. He glanced up at the ceiling with a mixture of pity and humor. “Nybbas, my little evil muse of a devil. You know, I really had you pegged for smarter than this. You’ve been around so very long—really one of my finer missionaries.” Lucifer sighed and shrugged. “But I suppose everyone slips up at least one time, no matter their perfection.”

A look of relief washed over Nybbas’s face, his shoulders slackening slightly as he let go of some of the tension they held. “You’re not mad?”

Lucifer looked at the demon before him, his lips slightly parted as one side of his mouth curled in a devious smile. “Mad? Oh no, not mad at all. Furious, perhaps, is the more accurate term. After all, you see I had to resort to renegotiating one of my most coveted long-term contracts with Mr. Faust over there,” he gestured to Tristan, “in order to get to the bottom of this little mess you’ve created with your oversight.”

Tristan could see Nybbas struggling to deny himself the groveling for forgiveness he longed to perform and the prostration of himself before his king. Instead, the demon remained upright, facing his judgment courageously—

## *The Lineage*

Tristan admired him at that moment and wondered if he would have the same fortitude of self when Lucifer turned his sites on him.

“Dorian, come here.” Lucifer held out his hand to Dorian and waited patiently as Dorian struggled against the compulsion to follow Lucifer’s demand, against his will.

Tristan felt himself drawn towards Lucifer and knew it was the bond he shared with his Maker, the blood that linked their souls like copper wire around a dead rose stem. He took a step forward like a zombie, heavy and faltering, and then another.

“Not you,” Lucifer said to Tristan without glancing back. “You need not interfere at this moment. For now your work is done.”

Tristan couldn’t breathe. Terror gripped him suddenly as the instinct born of his vampire nature thrust forward, beating itself against the surface of his being as if attempting to rip free of his flesh like a rabid dog and defend his Maker. He stood aside from himself, drawn and quartered by his conscience and his desire while in the back of his mind the image of Bryn asked him again just what he would request from the Devil when all was said and done.

Across the room, Dorian staggered forward, dragging his boots across the rough wood planks, his face contorted in a mask of desperate terror. His regret spiraled in and out of his rage and contempt for the beings that forced him now to face the consequences of his actions. As he neared Lucifer, coming to a sudden halt beside the Devil, his breathing became more labored, his mouth contorting in a vicious snarl like a dog behind a muzzle. Nybbas’s gaze flickered nervously between the two men before him as if uncertain being released from his prison was what he wanted now.

“Dorian I want you to look me in the eye.” Lucifer faced

Dorian. As Dorian angrily met Lucifer's gaze, the Devil continued. As he spoke his figure transformed, morphing back into the tall elegant creature that had visited Tristan in Bishop Knobb's safehouse. "Now, I do recognize that you may feel that you've paid rather dearly, as of late, for your crimes against me with the loss of your family. I do hope, one day, perhaps a millennia from now, you'll understand that you really left me with no choice. I'm the Devil. I mean, you didn't really expect me to take your deception lightly, did you? I have a reputation to uphold and legions that look to me for guidance as to how to deal with individuals such as yourself. I let you slide for years because I had just a few more pressing matters to deal with." He placed an almost fatherly hand gently on Dorian's right shoulder. "If you had just accepted your fate and been an honest business man we could have avoided all of this."

"We could have? Really?" Dorian growled through clenched teeth.

Lucifer sighed. "Tristan, will you back me up here?"

Tristan stammered, tripping over his own tongue. "Wh-what?"

Lucifer turned and stared at Tristan in silence.

Tristan fought against the urge to meet Lucifer's gaze and eventually broke free, his eyes flickering to a point on the floor between the Devil and Dorian. He swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut as he forced the world to recede if just for a moment so he could collect his thoughts.

"Tristan?" Lucifer asked again, quietly, suspiciously.

"I don't know what you want me to say." Tristan gasped.

"Just the truth," the Devil replied. "Is that so hard?" He paused. "Oh, wait. You're right. The truth is the hardest thing in the world to admit." He turned back to Dorian. "Never

## *The Lineage*

mind him. He's practically exhausted from the hard work of dragging you back to me. So, as to not waste a moment more, why don't you go ahead and break that wonderfully simple little devil's trap you have over Nybbas?"

Dorian gritted his teeth until Tristan swore he heard them beginning to crack beneath the strain. He watched his Maker's body tremble from the exertion of resisting the Devil's impulse—again, he found himself respecting Dorian's will power as it reminded him of the first days in which he had found himself enamored by the lure of the strength he sensed surrounding the man, the vampire he was destined to follow.

Lucifer stepped closer to Dorian and placed his hand over his forearm. "What are you waiting for? There is no time of renegotiation. There will be nothing more you can find in this or any reality that will allow you to find one more loophole to extended life." He leaned in and whispered into Dorian's ear. "It's time to come with me. Let go."

"NO!" Dorian howled and attempted to turn, but his feet appeared cemented to the spot in which he stood.

Without hesitation Lucifer gripped tight to Dorian's forearm and yanked the limb upwards and out. With a sharp crack and wet hiss, flesh separated from bone, sinew and veins snapping as Dorian's arm ripped free of the shoulder socket. Dorian screamed as a spray of blood erupted from the severed arteries consecrating the world around them in a fine veil of glistening red. Within the devil's trap Nybbas instinctually flung an arm up in front of his face until he realized it was only blood that drenched him for a fleeting moment. The visceral perfume of violence seemed to quicken the trapped demon, his human guise flickering as he struggled to keep it in tact in the face of such raw, uncivilized domination.

Lucifer watched calmly as Dorian flailed, clutching at his shoulder in a futile attempt to keep the blood from draining from his body, until he at last sank to his knees, his screams fading into a muted moan. Without a word Lucifer raised the limb to the ceiling and forced the hand to extend, ridged, until the fingers were hard as marble.

“You know I could do this myself, but seeing as how you’ve made all of this such a long-winded production, I figure a little flair is in order,” Lucifer said as the index and forefinger of Dorian’s hand made contact. Slowly, he drug the limb forward as if savoring the sound of the nails digging into the branded wood, severing the circle that had trapped Nybbas for so many years.

Dorian writhed on the floor beside Lucifer, blood pooling around his body to soak his clothes. Tristan grimaced in horror, the scent of the blood overwhelming him until he growled like a wolf caught in a trap. His mind reeled as he processed the fact that Dorian’s torture was his doing, the responsibility for whatever wretched fate he faced now to rest forever on Tristan’s head like a crown of thorns. Inside the circle Nybbas shrank back to the far side of the circle before bolting for the open doorway behind Tristan. In a flash too fast for even Tristan to see, Lucifer caught Nybbas by the arm, swinging him up off of his feet in an arc before hurling him across the room into the far wall.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” Lucifer asked Nybbas with a hiss.

Nybbas scrambled to his feet—through the thinned fibers of his old clothes, Tristan could see the demon trembling uncontrollably.

“I didn’t know about your contract with Dorian. I swear!” Nybbas held up his hands in a futile gesture of defense. “Please, you have to let me go. I was punished just as much

## *The Lineage*

for Dorian's betrayal as you, perhaps more so as I've been stuck here for two decades."

"I don't think your actions were malicious," Lucifer said quietly as he crossed the room. "However, I think you have lessons yet to be learned. Maybe you've gotten a little too comfortable in your role and a little refresher course in the basics is what is needed here?"

Nybbas tried to press himself back into the wall behind him as if he could fade into the rough wood like a chameleon. "Refresher course?"

"Tutelage, under one of our up and coming collectors, someone who is a little more current on their understanding of business etiquette." Lucifer smiled as he stared into Nybbas's wide eyes. "We'll let you do a few centuries time under their supervision and then see where we are."

Nybbas's stammered, "You're demoting me?"

"Would you like for me to just kill you? Perhaps feed you to the Abyss myself?" Lucifer raised an eyebrow.

Nybbas shook his head feverishly. "No! No, of course not."

"I do need for you to release your contract with Dorian, however." Lucifer cocked his head to one side as he considered the lesser demon before him. "I know it goes against standard practices, but let's just consider this another little technicality, one that no one outside of this room ever needs to know about."

"Of course," Nybbas agreed, though defeat tinged his voice heavy and bitter.

"Very well then," Lucifer said and snapped his fingers. Nybbas vanished as if blinking out of existence, leaving a cold void of blue-black shadows where he had stood.

Tristan's heart thundered in his chest—the fear was paralyzing as he stared past Lucifer at Dorian where he

had crawled towards the window at the far end beneath the devil's trap and was attempting to hoist himself weakly up by the sill with his one good arm. Lucifer turned and stared at Dorian, the vampire's arm still gripped in his right hand.

"Oh, Dorian," the Devil said almost sadly. "Looks like our time together is drawing to a close." Lucifer walked over to Dorian and crouched down beside him. "You know, I do want you to understand that I respect your commitment to self-preservation. I must say, I think you're one of the most selfish creatures I've had the honor of doing business with. I am going to have such a good time deciding what to do with you in Hell." He grabbed Dorian by the throat. "Tristan, come here."

Tristan struggled against the compulsion to walk, dragging his boots across the floor though it felt as if a dozen hands pushed against his back. Bile rose in the back of his throat as he stared down at Dorian and silently asked for forgiveness, though his soul still craved the sight of this malignant justice.

"Any last words for your son?" Lucifer asked quietly of Dorian.

Tristan swallowed hard as Dorian weakly turned his face towards Tristan, tears streaming down his face. His lips parted and struggled to form words through a mask of confusion and fear. "I'm sorry," he said weakly and dropped his gaze, unable to meet Tristan's any longer.

"Well, not as profound or moving as I was expecting from the likes of you. But, after the hell you've put this kid through, I guess it is better to keep it brief. After all, who would believe you?" Lucifer stood, dragging Dorian to his feet.

What little fight had remained in Dorian seemed to have drained away with the loss of blood—he sank into Lucifer's

## *The Lineage*

grip around his throat like a man attempting to hang himself, his eyes closed and face partially veiled behind the curtain of his black dreds.

Lucifer looked at Tristan. “I don’t say this very often—thank you. We’ll catch up later and you can tell me what it is that you’d like as your reward.”

Tristan blinked as if awaking from a dream and began to speak.

Lucifer shook his head with a small smile. “Don’t say that you want nothing in return. Only fools say such things.”

Tristan blinked again and found himself alone in the attic. With a gasp he turned in a full circle, nearly tripping over his own feet as he scanned the room in search of Dorian or the Devil. Moonlight poured in through the two windows illuminating the puddle of dark red blood, the single candle flame twitching softly in the small drafts of winter wind that stole around the panes. He wanted to cry, to howl, to feel something other than the immense nothingness that enveloped him as if a mortician had removed his insides and burned them.

He realized suddenly that he was alone for the first time in his life, truly utterly alone. His mind was as vast and bottomless as the ocean that crashed against the snow-covered beach outside. Staggering down the stairs he made his way through the dark house to the kitchen, through the back door and down the porch steps that led to the rickety wooden walkway to the shore. Above the heavens shown, a magnificent dome of obsidian flecked with diamonds as the last of the storm clouds crawled away into the distance. The snow had ceased to fall, the surf roaring its timeless song of creation and destruction as it reached for his boots where he stood, just beyond its grasp.

*What am I to do now?* He stared out at the moonlit waves.

*Where am I to go?*

His family was dead—his life no longer driven by the senseless anarchical structure the tribe had given it. He wanted to be angry. He wanted to hate something or someone, but all he felt was fear. There was but one person left in the world he knew would not pass judgment, who would accept him now in spite of his decisions—Bryn.

He wrapped his arms around his chest and shivered. With a final glance out into the ocean he turned and made his way back to the house. He was not ready, yet, to face Lucifer or Bryn and their expectations of him. For now he would sleep the days away in Nyles's abandoned house and hunt the sleepy streets of Rhode Island until the Devil came knocking once again. When he did, Tristan hoped he would have an answer.

*- The End -*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Acclaimed horror author, indie songwriter and owner of the Nightshade Vampire Boutique, Gabrielle Faust is best known for her vampire series *ETERNAL VIGILANCE*. Her previous work has also included three collections of poetry, *BEFORE ICARUS AFTER ACHILLES*, *CROSSROADS* and *THE BEGINNING OF NIGHTS*, the novella *REGRET* and the celebrated dark fantasy adventure novel *REVENGE*. She was also the chief editor and a contributor of the vampire anthology *HIGH STAKES*. Her work has appeared in the sites SciFi Wire, *Fatally Yours*, *Examiner*, *Doorways Magazine* and *Fear Zone*, as well as various anthologies and magazines. Faust will be celebrating the release of her ninth novel *THE LINEAGE* in January of 2014.

Faust was the Guest of Honor at the Queen of the Damned Vampire Ball in 2008. From 2009 to 2011 she was a Special Guest of the Endless Night Festival in New Orleans and was crowned “New Orleans Vampire Royalty” by the Vampire Lestat Fan Club at the *Tru Blood & Gold* vampire ball in 2010 alongside Charlain Harris. Faust was the primary graphic designer for the 2011 World Horror Convention and was the co-crew chief for the International Housing Program for the SXSW Music Festival from 1994 to 2010. In 2011

*Gabrielle Faust*

Faust was awarded the Texas Social Media Award by the Austin American Statesman.

She is currently a Staff Writer for Gothic Beauty Magazine, the owner of the Nightshade Vampire Boutique, and is working on the omnibus of the first ETERNAL VIGILANCE series. More information about Gabrielle Faust and her work can be found on her website [www.gabriellefaust.com](http://www.gabriellefaust.com).

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