

The Acolyte

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To my wife. For everything.

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

But, I'm drifting.

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

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

"Mom?"

"I'm in the kitchen."

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

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

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

"It wasn't going to--"

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

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

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

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

"Jesus Christ, Mom."

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

I open my eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not hungry," I said.

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

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

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

"He might as well be."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you," her mother says.

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

"You're welcome."

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

Chapter 2

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

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

"Uncle Dylan?"

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"Okay, sure."

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

"Where are we going?" I ask him.

"To Uncle's"

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

"Nyet. One hour."

"He lives an hour away?"

"Da."

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't be so sure."

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

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

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

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

"Follow me, please." he says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why would you do that?" I ask.

"Why do you care?"

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I--"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened?" I ask.

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

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

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

the same result.

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

"Good. Breakfast is ready."

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

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

"No time. We leave now."

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

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

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

"I will be here after. Da?"

"Yeah, whatever."

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

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

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

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

"Don't I know it."

"You must be Brian Prescott."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mr. Prescott?" the man asks.

"Yes."

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

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

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

"Okay," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wait--"

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

I am literally in shock. My brain is frozen.

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

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

"Afraid not."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Brian--"

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

"Really?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, no, but--"

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

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

"I don't understand," I say.

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

"And..."

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

"What's that?"

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

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

"Okay, so what does that mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Or you're stalking."

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

"Let's hope not."

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

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

"Nope. Sorry."

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

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

"Please follow the rules."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Have you had any trouble from Brian?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bumped the table. Sorry," Gregory says.

"Really?"

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

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

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

Chapter 6

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

"Da?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll see," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Coming to see you, of course."

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

"This is my friend Brian."

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

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

"Same old, same old."

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

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

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

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

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

"No," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure, yeah," I said.

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

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

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

"I told you."

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

"Yeah."

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

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

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

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

"I would beg to differ."

"Why? Because I'm a jock?"

"Well, that's part of it."

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

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

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

He has a point.

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

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

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

"I don't know."

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

"Yeah, I guess so."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 7

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

"Yes?"

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

"Now?"

He doesn't answer.

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

Still nothing.

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

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

"Have a seat," he says.

"Where are my parents?"

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

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

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

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

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