

Chapter One

The twilight hours conceal many sins, but anyone could see that the driver of the pale yellow pick-up truck swerving and zigzagging around the mall parking lot was drunk. It raced up a row of parked cars and came within a hair's breadth of taking out a fender on a red Mondeo at the end, tilting wildly as it took the corner at too fast a speed. A young woman wearing a black pencil skirt and white blouse came out of the main mall doors and was just about to step onto the asphalt, when the screeching tires alerted her to the danger just a few feet away, hurtling towards her. She ran back inside, then turned and glowered at the three men crowded into the seat of the cab of the truck as they sped by.

"Yeee-Haaaa!" a young, male voice shouted out the passenger side window. The wheels on his side had lifted slightly off the ground through the turn.

Three other young men lurked in the shadow of a clump of trees on the far corner of the parking lot, watched the spectacle with disgust. They were no more than teenagers, dressed in black jeans and matching long, black duster jackets that identified them as 'alternatives' or 'Goths'.

"Can't you make them flip over or something, Lucas?" A tall, muscular boy with ebony skin asked in a deadpan voice.

Lucas flipped his longish black hair out of his dark eyes and scowled.

"You know I don't like doing that stuff, Cassius. It plays into *His* hands."

"But they're going to hurt someone!" Cassius insisted. "You don't have to kill them, just take their toy away. Back me up, Skev."

Skevin, an average sized boy with reddish-brown hair curling around his ears, opened his mouth to speak, but his hazel eyes opened wide and no words came forth to express the horror he was about to witness unfolding.

Lucas and Cassius turned to see the source of Skevin's reaction and saw that the pick-up was gaining speed near the end of another row, wobbling side to side as though it was likely to flip over on its own through too much speed and the sheer idiocy of the driver's challenge to motion dynamics. The parked cars were too close to escape damage when the heavy vehicle inevitably went out of control.

A glint of red flickered in Lucas' eyes and a thunderous boom reverberated across the asphalt, followed by the metallic screech of wheel rims grating directly on the black top after all four tires exploded at once. The pick-up lost momentum quickly, but skidded sideways and eventually came to a stop against a lamp post that suffered nothing worse than paint scratches.

The driver and his friends got out of the car, all shouting and swearing at once. The driver kicked the truck once, then hopped on one foot, holding his damaged toes with both hands.

Skevin and Cassius held their stomachs in uncontrolled laughter, then both stopped suddenly when they noticed the serious look on their companion's face. Lucas looked back at them and shrugged.

"They don't belong on the road," was all he said, then he started to walk away from the mall parking lot,

leaving the drama behind him. His companions hurried a few steps to keep pace with him.

Nobody said anything or asked Lucas where they were going. It didn't matter. They were just hanging out after all. Like many other teenagers, what they chose to do was less important than who they did it with and where Lucas went, Skevin and Cassius followed.

It was getting full dark now, but the streetlights in the city illuminated the streets and sidewalks so that even older children or women alone felt relatively safe out walking. Lucas led his friends to the only place where they might find dark shadows to lurk in; the city park.

The rolling expanses of manicured lawn and sparsely placed trees around a man-made lake gave the park an open, friendly atmosphere, even in the darkness of night. But the city lights illuminated the grounds just enough to cast shadows from the trees and provided sufficient concealment for the three young men in their dark attire to walk unnoticed by anyone else who might choose to walk across the park at night.

Lucas noticed the scent of fresh mown grass as they walked across the lawn to the one clump of trees that grew in a circle near the lake edge. Despite the groundskeeper's best efforts, this one circle of trees continued to thrive in close proximity, always returning to the circle configuration during the night on the occasions that the city had arranged to have them separated and spread out. Lucas and his friends liked to sit within the circle of trees and watch the stars, the ducks and swans on the lake, or the people walking along the pavements outside of the park grounds from the camouflage of their natural clubhouse.

On this night, however, the boys could hear voices reverberating into the quiet evening air, emanating from within their private sanctuary. At a hand signal from Lucas, the small group changed the trajectory of their approach so that their shadows wouldn't fall into the openings between the trees. They crept up quietly, curious to hear what the interlopers might be saying in their singsong voices. They sounded as if they were performing some form of ritual.

When the boys drew close enough that Lucas could almost touch a large Alder tree that formed part of the circle, he noticed that the numbers 666 had been carved into the bark. He frowned. The boys remained silent, but Skevin looked wide-eyed between Lucas and the other group they could now see through the trees. Cassius examined a rowan in front of him and read, "I love Satan" also carved into the tree trunk. He looked at Lucas, who looked back at him and scowled as he too saw the mock-Satanic vandalism.

They could see the group inside their special place clearly now. Four younger boys, perhaps middle school students. One was bent over holding a duck down on a makeshift table altar by the neck. One of the other boys held a large knife up above his head, as if he were waiting for a signal to plunge it into the duck's throat. A third boy held a hanging brass censor, swaying it gently as fragranced incense smoke lent atmosphere to the improvised ritual. The fourth boy held his arms up to the sky and intoned words in a ritual cant;

"O Satan, take pity on my long misery!
You who console frail mankind in its sufferings
Taught us to mix sulphur and saltpeter,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!
You who put your mark, Oh subtle accomplice,
Upon the brow of Croesus, base and pitiless... "

Lucas recalled the words from a poem by William Aggeler, included in Baudelaire's *Le Fleur du mal*. The duck wrestled against its captor, who was struggling to keep it in place while his companion continued to orate the seemingly endless litany. Cassius and Skevin repeatedly looked between Lucas and the spectacle before them, waiting for some form of directive from Lucas.

Glory and praise to you, Oh Satan, in the heights
Of Heaven where you reigned and in the depths
Of Hell where vanquished you dream in silence !

Lucas recognized that the poem was nearing its end and stepped forward, into the circle. The four boys turned all at once, distracted by the sudden appearance of someone inside their ritual circle.

"You can't come in here!" the one holding the knife snarled. "This is a private ceremony!"

Lucas looked from one to another of the teenage Satanist group, showing no fear.

"When you invoke my father," he boomed, his voice reverberating. "You invoke me."

A sudden wind blew Lucas' jacket wide so that it looked as if he had sprouted wings. Cassius and Skevin emerged from the shadows, their duster jackets similarly flared in the unnatural breeze. Against these sinister silhouettes, Lucas' eyes glowed bright red in the

darkness, emanating a malice that the young, would-be Satanists could feel in their bones.

"I am Lucas. These are my associates, Cassius and Skevin. This place is ours!"

"It's that antichrist kid," the one with the censor croaked, falling to his knees. "Join us, My Lord, teach us how to serve your father!"

Cassius held his breath to stifle an urge to laugh. He had known Lucas since the third grade and could guess how impressed his friend would be with the enthralled kid's declaration. Meanwhile, the boy holding the knife and the captor of the duck also fell to their knees. Lucas could smell urine and guessed that it was the one who was struggling with the duck who had lost control. The duck squawked loudly, presumably getting its breath back after having nearly been strangled.

"Let us make our sacrifice to you, Lucas," the knife wielder entreated. "We've admired you from afar..."

"Let the duck go," Lucas commanded, cutting the boy's avowal of submission short.

The boy released the duck immediately. It walked a few steps, stumbled, then recovered itself and continued walking towards the lake, quacking repeatedly but otherwise apparently unconcerned by its ordeal.

"Sacrificing animals is for the weak," Lucas sneered. "And... come on. A duck?"

The reverb had stopped and Lucas sounded like the fifteen-year-old kid that he was.

The other boys looked around at each of their friends, suddenly embarrassed.

"We tried to get a squirrel but they were too fast!" The kid who had held the duck and wet himself seemed

to shrink further into himself as his companions glared at him.

Lucas glanced at him with his mouth twisted in an expression of contempt, but otherwise ignored him and spoke to the group as a whole.

"Also, this place belongs to *me*," he continued. "You've defaced my sacred trees, Hazel, Alder and Rowan. You are forbidden from this place forever more. Be gone."

Something in the self-assured tone of Lucas' voice brooked no argument. With slumped shoulders, the four boys picked up their ritual items and disappeared into the night without a word.

"You haven't heard the last from them," Skevin suggested.

"I know," Lucas acknowledged. "But at least they're gone for now." He touched the bark of the rowan gently, passing his hand over the carved letters in a gentle caress. When he took his hand away, the damage was gone. Cassius and Skevin relaxed and sat down on the grass inside the circle while Lucas moved to the Alder to make a similar repair.

"Man," Cassius began. "You must be even more tired of that crap than I am! I've been watching these baby Satanists fall at your feet since elementary school and it's almost embarrassing!"

Lucas shrugged.

"That's why I had to be born in California. Can you imagine what the Bible bashers in the South would do if they knew I lived and thrived among them?"

Cassius chuckled.

"I thought it was just part of your will to be weird. Like calling me Cassius and him Skevin." Cassius gestured to Skevin.

"Chris and Kevin are dull names," Lucas explained. "I like my version better."

"Just don't be thinkin' about me as no minion," Cassius insisted in a bad southern accent.

"Minions aren't friends," Lucas mused. "You guys are my friends because you never treated me like I was different. Even after you learned I really am the son of Lucifer."

"But it just seemed like magic when we were kids," Skevin interjected. "I wish I were a demon! Then I could do all sorts of wikkid stuff!"

"Be careful what you wish for," Lucas warned. "Demons don't have it so good."

As if called by mention of demons, a thin voice gurgled from the darkness.

"Quem deus vult perdere, prius dementat."

"Quoting Euripides now, Dhunshetto?"

A creature separated from shadow, showing itself to the small company of teenagers, though it addressed Lucas alone and took no notice of his companions. It was small, no more than half as tall as Skevin, the smaller of Lucas' companions. Its dark skin gleamed greenish in the filtered night time city light that penetrated between the trees. There was no hair anywhere on the creature, but two horns stuck out of its skull, balancing the incongruity of feet that appeared too large for its small frame. Bat-like wings stuck out of its shoulder blades, though the imp did not fly at that moment.

"Your father wishes for you to attend him," Dhunshetto rasped. His golden eyes glowed brightly as if

the intensity of the light emanating from them would convey his message more completely.

"What does he want now?" Lucas' usual honeyed voice grumbled with impatience.

"Compliance," the imp whispered in his brash, croaking voice.

Dhunshetto grinned, showing sharp, pointed teeth and a wicked gleam in his glowing eyes. Cassius and Skevin tried to ignore the little demon, only flicking brief, involuntary glances in its direction occasionally in their efforts to remain unnoticed.

"I have a midterm exam tomorrow afternoon," Lucas complained. "I have no free time."

"I am but a messenger, My Lord," the imp avowed, though with a sneer in its voice. "Shall I tell *Him* that you will not be coming?"

Lucas sighed.

"You may tell my father that I will attend him right after my exam tomorrow. That I need to focus for that. Then I will give him my full attention."

"As you will, My Lord." The imp bowed, then disappeared with a popping sound.

A moment passed during which nobody said anything, then it was Cassius who broke the silence.

"Gods, I thought *my* parents interfered too much in my life!"

Lucas chuckled.

"Better that I go to him than him coming to hassle me in the middle of school," Lucas admitted.

"What was that Latin he quoted?" Skevin asked.

"*Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad,*" Lucas translated.

"What did he mean by it?" Skevin looked over his shoulder as if the little demon might reappear any second.

"Demons don't always have a reason for throwing out nonsensical cryptic quotations. They're just amusing themselves, watching credulous humans try to work out profound meanings."

"Where's Glynda tonight?" Cassius asked in his naturally booming voice. "She's the one you want around when demons start coming out of the woodwork. Badass as an anteater sucking up fire ants!"

Lucas smiled broadly at the analogy.

"She went strait home from school to study for tomorrow's test," he replied. "She's got Biology a different period than me but it's the same exam."

Lucas glanced at the duck they had rescued, now swimming on the lake while the others of its kind gathered on shore to tuck their bills under their wings and sleep for the night.

"Come on, we'd better go do the same. I *really* don't want to have to tell *Him* that I failed a test after putting him off."

The boys all stood at once, slinking back into the shadows, secure in the knowledge that their private circle of trees was unlikely to be invaded again by any of the local antisocial kids.