

Chapter One

But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away. Psalm 37:20, KJV

“Where have they gone?” he muttered, watching the dusty town through the window.

The town had changed, for the worse, in the last decade. The remaining residents had allowed the town to fall to ruin. Everywhere he looked was a chaos of tall weeds, abandoned buildings and vehicles, and trash. Sometimes he wondered whether they had ignored the town’s upkeep as an act of defiance against him, making his internment more unpleasant with the view. Even with everything he had given them over the years, they acted as though they no longer wanted his gifts.

He had to concede that beauty was to be found there as well. Not everything he saw from his windows was dire or dismal. In the spring, gorgeous tulips bore their delicate heads from the hard soil. The budding lilacs in unattended yards producing their sweet aroma, followed by irises blooming in a multitude of velvet colors, and hollyhocks pushing their coarse flowered stalks up along walls and fences. In the dry plains, prickly pear cacti shot their pale yellow flowers toward the sky. At the end of the parched winter days, and these sights became present again, though, for a short time. No doubt, to be destroyed by the dry heat of summer. When people cared for the town as they had years before, the splendid sights would return.

Without removing his gaze from the bland sights, he took the crystal goblet sitting on the bureau, and sipped the crimson liquid, then said, “I miss the days when there were plenty to play with.” Still, he didn’t turn from the window to face Mark who stood at attention near the door. “Do you remember when this town was brimming with life?” Mark kept his silence as he held his bowels and bladder from humiliating him. “It saddened me when the one I shared myself with left, only to come back for barely a day. I made him special. No one has ever seen me the way he did. He was curious about me. Maybe...” He sipped his wine. “Had I introduced myself, he’d still be here. I want him to return home.”

The cerulean light burning from the man’s irises reflected in the window as he turned toward Mark, whose pasty face seemed paler than it ordinarily did. The hue of his skin mixed with his lanky build and shaved head gave Mark the appearance of a walking corpse. When the man at the window looked at him, Mark averted his gaze to the scratched and dinged hardwood floors. His mouth and throat became parched. Even nibbling his tongue didn’t bring any liquid for relief.

As his Master (Mr. Bel as everyone else called him, but even the shortened name gave him unease to say or even think for fear of saying the man’s full name) came closer, Mark’s pulse quickened and his breaths shorten. He hated his body for betraying him as his penis stiffened, saluting his Master. Standing nose to nose, there was no hiding the man’s features as the light from the window had done when he had stood there. Mark didn’t want to see the perfect being in front of him, so he squeezed his eyes shut.

It had been more than twenty years since he’d been called to his Master’s room, and Mark didn’t understand what the man was expecting of him now; did he wanted him to bring this boy he shared himself with to him? He preferred the normal methods of communication, like a note thrust into the bloated body of a dead prairie dog, or the splattering of bird droppings on his windshield.

“Why do I frighten you, Mark?” the man whispered. The heat of his breath causing blisters of perspiration to form on Mark’s forehead. “I shouldn’t.” He wiped the sweat from Mark’s brow with a handkerchief. “I’ve been misjudged for so long.” He stroked Mark’s cheek with the back of his hand holding the handkerchief. “Look at me.” Hesitantly, Mark opened and raised his vision to the man’s glowing gaze. “Much better.”

Children’s laughter carried on the breeze, caressing the world outside the room, caused his Master’s gaze to return to the window but not before Mark saw the beautiful man standing before him. His presence gave the impression of a gargantuan being, but he was only inches taller than Mark’s six foot six inches. Wonderful light emitted from his large eyes, filling the one submersed in the glow with a swirl of contradictory emotions, causing the flesh to pucker and flush, then turn cold to find in a moment the fever burning within had become a torrent. The body revolted against itself in rage it wasn’t as perfect as the man looking upon it. His full, pink lips, hiding perfect white teeth, made anyone want them upon their lips to take the pleasure, all the while knowing it lacked the power to return the favor with millions of kisses. Tussled blond hair framed his tanned face, running in front of his ears to touch the edge of his square jaw.

Relieved to have a reprieve from looking directly at his Master, Mark peeked at the plain items in the room, which once had been two, but the wall separating them had been removed to give his Master a larger space. Across from the door between the two windows stood a four-drawer dresser, the lacquer scuffed from the edges around the top of the oak—or was it pine—surface. On its top sat a decanter of the lavish crimson liquid his Master had been drinking when Mark had entered, the goblet, a pen, and a pad of yellowed paper.

To Mark’s left, a bed came from the wall, reaching near the center of the room where the dividing wall had once stood. The coverings were clean and tidily laid on the bed but worn with age like the pull-down blinds and draperies of the windows. Next to the bed, a single-drawer nightstand stood with a scratched water glass and pitcher sitting in front of a stained-glass shaded, the brass lamp’s lampshade was almost as bright as his Master. He was always dressed exquisitely in a blue suit, a shade darker than the color illuminating his eyes, and without hiding his masculine physique. His white shirt was stark compared to rest of his attire.

A small, round table framed by two wing-back chairs sat along the northern wall of the room. The lamp, taking most of the space on the table, matched the one near the bed. An armoire blocked the door leading to the bed side of the room, leaving the door Mark stood in front of as the only exit.

A smile lit his Master’s face as he turned back to Mark, causing him to blush. “I want you to bring him back, by whatever means necessary. He is the key.”

“Who?” Mark said. Blue fire flared toward him but didn’t lick his flesh as he expected. “Sorry, sir.”

The beautiful smile returned, and his Master continued as though Mark had not interrupted, “I have great plans, and I need him.” Seeing from the blank expression on Mark’s face, he wasn’t following the conversation, the man said, “The one whom left.”

Still Mark didn’t know of whom his Master spoke, and said in a crackling voice, “Master, many have left. I don’t know who—”

Crossing his arms across his chest, he glared at Mark. “Maybe, this job is too big for you. Maybe, I shouldn’t bother your feeble mind. No wonder you never left this rancid town. The world would eat you alive. No, I’ll call on—”

“Master, no. I will do anything you ask,” Mark pleaded. “I live to serve you.” Saliva finally flooded his mouth, and he gulped it down his dried throat. “I will bring anyone you wish. Just tell me the name, and I will track them down.”

His Master’s smile returned, and he said, “You are eager.” He paused as though he contemplated keeping the spindly man before him for the job. His smile faded for a moment, then came back brighter than before. “Oh, Mark. Good ole Mark.” He stressed the k, making his name sound like a dirty word. “I will keep you on the task. Be sure you leave no trace of your presence behind.”

Mark nodded, knowing from other errands he’d been tasked to perform leaving the slightest of physical evidence proved to be awkward to explain. Mostly his retrieval projects had been to acquire strange objects, but there had been people, too; they never stayed long, only until his Master had what he needed from him, then they left town, leaving no trace they’d ever been there.

The man in the blue suit returned to the bureau between the windows. Taking the pen and pad, he shook his head, then grabbed the goblet, swirling the remaining contents. He took the crimson liquid into his mouth. Finally, he wrote on the page, and tore it from the pad, holding it with a limp-wristed hand to the side, without turning back to Mark.

Mark didn’t move from his place near the door, and within a few seconds of him not coming to retrieve the sheet of paper, his Master cleared his throat. Rushing forward, he grasped the paper with index finger and thumb. His Master didn’t release the paper immediately, and each of them held it for a long moment. Relaxing his fingers, the man turned his head to see Mark twitch uncomfortably.

“Don’t fail me, Mark,” he said—again stressing the k—as his hand fell to his side. He returned his gaze out the window, and said nothing more.

Without needing a cue, Mark rushed from the room, slamming the door behind him. His Master laughed at the thudding of his steps from the room. Mark didn’t slow his pace until he reached the small open area on the floor. A window, next to the small linen closet, looked over the dusty street below. Opposite the window and linen closet was the floor’s shared bathroom. Mark stepped onto the white honeycomb floor, and closed the door behind him before turning on the light.

He shoved the paper into his pocket, staring at his pale face in the mirror. His light-gray T-shirt was completely darkened with sweat. At least his pants were dry enough so he didn’t look as though he was caught in a downpour or fell in the lake. He pulled off his shirt, and hung it on the tarnished-brass hook screwed to the door. Glancing at the white, claw-footed tub with the white curtain surrounding it as water coughed from the sink’s faucet, he denied the idea of taking a bath but shook off the idea for the lack of time.

The cool water he splashed on his face and chest gave him no relief of the tightness in his groin, but aroused further his throbbing member already trying to burst from his jeans. As he wiped his torso with a towel, he wished he had a girlfriend. His fingers nimbly undid his pants and pushed them to his knees. He didn’t have to work long before his seed erupted into the porcelain basin.

He groaned with relief, plopping on the toilet behind him to catch his breath. The yellowed paper poked from the edge of his pants pocket, which he pulled free. The name

written in a flourish of calligraphy was someone he definitely knew, and was disgusted with who he was asked to retrieve. They grew up together, and neither considered the other a friend. A smile crossed his face, hoping whatever role this guy was going to play wasn't going to be pleasant.

A shadowy hand reached up from the depths of tub, grabbed the curtain, and pulled it back. Mark screamed, nearly falling from the toilet. His spindly legs helped launch him away from the tub, tangling his feet in his jeans. Trembling in the corner near the door, he watched the curtain slide toward the wall on the circular rod held from the ceiling.

"I can see why you call him master," she said. Mascara ran from her colorless, unblinking eyes. Wet hair dripped in ringlets around her ashen face. He took a deep breath, shaking his head, as she continued, "He had the same effect on me. You should say his name next time."

"Dammit, Dorothy!" Mark cursed, his shock of her being in the tub subsiding. "I did once and won't ever again."

He stood from his crouching position, and pulled at his pants. Seeing the reddish water, he receded into the corner, coughing his disgust. The hard rhythm in his chest slowed.

"I'll do it for you. Be—"

"Stop, Dorothy! Don't say it," he said, panic squeaking his voice.

"Suit yourself," Dorothy replied, reaching her hand up the curtain again. Blood seeped from the gash in her wrist, and down her arm as she pulled the curtain closed.

With his pants secured around his waist, his gaze darted along the floor as he grabbed his shirt from the hook. Finding the paper, he snatched it from the floor. Without another glance to the tub, he hurried out of the bathroom, dragging his damp shirt across the floor. He forced himself to stop looking at the door leading to his Master. His boots clomping on the stairs echoed in the stairwell, then in the lobby as they met the linoleum floor. Silence returned to the hotel when the glass door glided closed, and Mark made his way down the sidewalk.

"I like it better when he contacts me with bird shit," Mark mumbled, crossing the street.