

DEMON ON THE HILL

A Smoke Ravenstein Story

By C. Flemish

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Dedicated to all the people in my life who support this madness called writing.

My wife, our many pets, family and friends. And to you the reader for continuing the slowly fading art of reading. And especially to the little furball that kept me company so many nights while writing, DeeDee. I miss you.

*You don't have to believe in evil
for evil to believe in you.*

— Smoke Ravenstein

CHAPTER 1

Chicago

14th District Area Central

“Go on, rookie. You can handle it.”

The mocking words from his colleagues still spun in Eric’s head as he walked the hallways of Chicago’s 14th District Area Central Police Department.

His boots clacked on the polished black-and-white tiles; the sound echoed off the walls like a metronome counting down to something bad.

Fucking assholes, he thought as he clenched his fists.

He was the youngest deputy on the force, so he got the short end of the stick. That didn’t mean he had to like it. All he had to do was tell Detective Ravenstein he was needed upstairs.

It would have been easier if there weren’t so many stories about Ravenstein floating around. From what Eric could make out, the guy seemed crazy and scared the living daylights out of everyone else at the station. He’d gone through six deputies in as many weeks. One had transferred across town. Two had quit. The others refused to talk about it. No one wanted to work with him, and those who did could not get away from him fast enough.

He held the brown manila folder under his arm as he started making his way down the wrought-iron spiral staircase. The rusty railing slithered through his hand as he made his way down. With every step, it felt less like a staircase and more like a slow spiral descending into the mouth of something waiting. Kindred didn't scare easily. Or at least, he didn't think so. Until now.

Fear crept up his spine, and worse, it felt deserved. The gossip had gotten to him, and that made him angry.

He's just a guy like everyone else. I'm sure they're exaggerating. This is bullshit.

His boots clanged against the metal steps, each one sending a hollow sound that bounced off the walls. Every step pushed him further into the precinct's belly, into the guts no one wanted to visit, where things were forgotten and left to rot. The further he went, the louder the silence became. No chatter, no ringing phones, just the soft hum of fluorescent lights and his own footsteps. Abandonment lingered in the air.

The light fixtures were covered in spiderwebs, their silk strands capturing decades of dust. Lightbulbs flickered, protesting their captivity. Others had been put out of their misery and burned out for good.

The domed hallway had once been painted white. Now, most of the paint had blistered off the walls. Cracks and peeling patches revealed the original masonry, remnants from the time the station was first built.

Detective Ravenstein had been assigned an office as far away from everyone else as possible. Most of the officers at the 14th would go their entire careers without ever crossing paths with him. The few who did usually made every effort not to do it again.

Dark, narrow hallways branched off into the archive and evidence rooms. Thousands of files spilled from their boxes. Cardboard towers

threatened to collapse, spilling farther into the passage and narrowing the path even more.

Ravenstein's office finally came into view. It was the only room that showed any sign of life. A faint sliver of light seeped from beneath the metal door. As Eric approached, the scent of incense and melted wax crept into his nose. Sweet. It reminded him of a church, though he couldn't remember the last time he had set foot in one.

Here goes nothing.

Gently, his knuckles tapped on the door. He saw a shadow break the faint glimmer of light that peeked out from underneath.

"GO AWAY!" the voice snapped from the other side.

"Detective Ravenstein, this is Deputy Kindred. I have a report for you," Eric said, though the trembling in his voice was noticeable.

"Slide it under the door and piss off. Thank you, Dep-U-T-ee."

A mix of fear and anger rushed over him. *What a dick. No wonder they stuck him in the crypt.*

"I was told to deliver it to you in person, sir. Came directly from the captain."

He heard the metal legs of a chair scraping across the floor, followed by heavy footsteps pounding against the concrete in frustration. A deadbolt clicked behind the door, and it swung open with a noticeable whoosh.

Here he was, face to face with the madman. He looked like he was pushing forty. His black hair was kept short but hadn't seen a comb in weeks. It was obvious he'd been sleeping in his white button-down

shirt. Judging by the complexity of the wrinkles, it even looked like it had been multiple nights. He wore a narrow black tie that wasn't tightened, just hanging around his neck like it was a requirement. A small, skinny mustache sat over his lip, and his skin was abnormally pale, almost translucent, but not quite. Ravenstein looked like a vampire who had stopped trying to blend in. Pale, twitchy, and wrapped in an aura of don't fuck with me.

"Well, give me the bloody message then, won't you?" Ravenstein stretched out his arm, his fingers signaling for the kid to hurry up.

Eric looked down at Ravenstein's arm. His skin showed through the torn sleeve of his shirt. His arm was covered in tattoos he had never seen before. They looked like they didn't belong together, runic symbols, jagged lines, fragments of animals, but when he squinted his eyes, they seemed to form something whole. Something alive. And he felt it staring back.

"Well? I don't have a lot of time, boy, so please, if they scared the shit out of you up there, that's not my fault, but your own for buying it."

Eric handed over the folder. "Sorry, sir. I've just never been down here. It's kind of weird."

"What's weird is that a grown man almost pissed himself delivering me a message. A grown man who passed the academy now carries a badge and a gun and is supposed to patrol the streets, catching bad guys. Yet here he is, delivering a message that could've been emailed or phoned in. And you didn't even question it. Just heard 'message' and 'Ravenstein' and your mind went blank, didn't it?"

"It's not like that, sir. It isn't."

"No?" Smoke paused for a second. "Then what is it?"

"I didn't want to come down here, sir..."

Oh fuck. Eric caught himself.

“The truth at last,” Ravenstein said.

He grabbed the young deputy’s shoulder and pulled him toward the table, kicked a chair aside, and pushed him into it.

“So, why’d you do it then?”

The metal door swung shut behind them.

“I’m new, sir. I have to do what I’m told, and I was told to bring this report to you.” Kindred knew he was in trouble now.

“So, you just do everything anyone says because you’re new?”
Ravenstein’s beady eyes locked on him.

“No, sir, but—”

“No buts here, sunny boy. That is something you can do upstairs, but down here... no.”

Smoke swung his legs across a weathered wooden chair, leaning his elbows over its back. His eyes fixated on his new prey.

“Open that folder.” His long, thin finger pointed at the manila folder.
“Go ahead.”

“The captain said it was for your eyes only, sir.”

“First, cut the ‘sir’ shit. No one else around here but me. So cut it.
Now, open the folder.”

Eric hesitated. His fingers slowly reached for the folder. His eyes locked on Smoke. He couldn’t figure this guy out.

He took the folder and held it in front of his chest, staring at Smoke, questioning whether this was a good idea.

“Go ahead,” Smoke gestured. “It won’t bite.”

Eric opened the folder and stared down at it, wide-eyed.

“It’s empty.”

“Indeed.” Smoke leaned back in his chair.

“I don’t get it,” Eric said.

“Same joke every time, kid. Those idiots upstairs think it’s hilarious to send new guys down here to shit their pants. I guess they also want to see if you’d puss out or actually follow orders, even after they filled your head with crap.”

A loud bang erupted, and Kindred jumped up from his chair.

Fuck.

In the corner, a stack of boxes had spilled across the floor. Against one of them, a small black cat was rubbing its head.

Deedee had been Smoke’s sole companion for years. She didn’t blink. She just stared at Kindred, as if deciding whether he belonged here or if he should be shredded like the file boxes. She returned to scratching herself. Her tiny Z-kinked tail stood as straight as it could. Her little yellow eyes glanced once more at Kindred, then she continued purring.

“Ha ha ha!” Smoke slammed his hand on the table, laughing. “A little tightly wound there, buddy.”

Smoke loved giving newcomers a hard time. He didn't respect most people. For Smoke, respect had to be earned. People generally just pissed him off.

He had once told the captain that the world would be better off if seventy percent of the population just died. That hadn't gone over well.

Even though Smoke had tried to defend the statement, claiming he only meant the morons and idiots, his argument fell on deaf ears. The captain had blasted him with the classic "We're here to protect and defend everyone" speech. Smoke just nodded and retreated to his cave. He wasn't the best at socializing, and his people skills, well, they were still under development.

Smoke was a loner, and he liked that just fine. People didn't get him. They either didn't understand or refused to understand his dark sense of humor and his taste for the bizarre. All their talk about acceptance and tolerance.

Yeah, right.

Everything was fine and good as long as you stayed in the box. Their box. But God help you if you didn't. Then they'd tar and feather you. You'd be an outcast.

Newcomers were a welcome break in the monotony. He loved it when he could hear the fear in their voice, when their eyes couldn't meet his. He had zero tolerance for pussies. If you wanted to be a cop and face the horrors of society, you'd better have a backbone or go sell pretzels somewhere.

"It's okay, kid. Go grab yourself some water," he said, pointing to the water cooler in the corner.

Kindred stood and walked over, keeping one eye on the little black feline. He wasn't going to let her surprise him again.

Smoke's fingers drummed on the oak table, his gaze following the young deputy.

Eric reached the water cooler. Beside it, on a small table, were stacks of blue and red plastic cups waiting to be filled. He looked over his shoulder and met Smoke's gaze, then grabbed a red cup without hesitation, filled it, and walked back.

Smoke smirked.

Deedee had rolled onto her back under Smoke's fingers, exposing her belly. Smoke's pale fingers slid through her fur.

"So, tell me about yourself," Smoke said.

"What do you wanna know?" Eric shrugged.

"Whatever you want to share. I'm stuck with you now, so I'd better get to know you." Smoke gave his new deputy a look that did not inspire confidence. "Even though most new deputies don't last a week, I do like to get to know them."

"Hold on a minute. Stuck with me." Kindred gave Smoke a questioning look. "New deputy? What do you mean? I just came down here to deliver the captain's message. I'm detailed with the homicide division." Eric's voice rose an octave. He was clearly caught off guard.

Smoke pulled a flask from his vest and took a sip. His face tightened briefly.

"If it's bodies you want to see, you'll see plenty with me. But I doubt you'll be around long enough. Deputies assigned to me tend to look for other types of employment the moment they see the real work."

“I wonder why,” slipped from Eric’s lips.

Smoke stared, one eyebrow raised.

“Ha ha ha. You’re okay, kid.”

Eric felt a rush of shame. He didn’t want to be rude, but he couldn’t help it. Ravenstein made him uncomfortable. He might not be batshit crazy like the rumors claimed. But he was definitely weird.

“Here’s what we’ll do, kid.” Smoke pulled a pack of Black Death cigarettes from his pocket, tapped one out, and placed the filter on his lips.

“Why don’t you go home for the night? I’m sure you’ve had plenty of excitement for one day. You’re caught off guard. I get it. This might not be what you signed up for, but tough shit. It’s the hand you’re dealt. Make the best of it.”

Smoke struck a match. The sulfur head hissed to life. The flame licked the cigarette, and as Smoke drew on it, the cigarette glowed like the tip of a fuse. Smoke looked like a man who wouldn’t mind seeing what it blew up.

“You can’t smoke in here,” Kindred protested.

“I can’t?” Smoke tilted his head.

“No, it’s against regulations.”

Before Kindred could finish, Smoke pointed the cigarette at Kindred and replied, “Fuck regulations. You think I’m down here because I follow regulations?” He laughed as smoke curled from his mouth.

“Well, you shouldn’t. It’s not allowed. It’s inconsiderate, and it’s unhealthy. It’ll kill you.”

Smoke held up the black pack with the shiny silver skull in a top hat. “It says Black Death, doesn’t it? I know exactly what it does. And I welcome it. As for regulations, I’ve got that covered. And inconsiderate?” Smoke glared. “That’s another fuck you. This is my office. You don’t like it, leave. You want to talk about being inconsiderate? How about sending people down here to ridicule me without even knowing me? How about abandoning the victims of these crimes because nobody wants to work with me, because of inconsiderate gossip? I don’t give a shit. I’m here to do a job. To give the victims a voice. A job I’m damn good at. I do it my way, and my way only. Now, you can be part of the solution or be part of the problem. What’s it gonna be?”

Eric stared at Smoke. He hadn’t expected that.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I have no right to tell you what to do. And I’m sorry for the way you’re being treated. But I never said anything about you, really.”

Smoke cut him off. “But you believed it. Without question. Is that what a detective does? They just believe what they’re told. If you take every story at face value, you’re not a detective. You’re just a filing cabinet with legs. We’d drown the prisons if we did that.”

Eric stuttered, “No, of course not, and—”

Smoke waved him off. “It’s okay, kid... I’m breaking your balls. You seem like a good one. So, from now on, forget everything *they* told you.” His cigarette pointed toward the ceiling. “Fuck the rules. Focus on the job. That’s it. Go home. We work six to six. Sunset to sunrise. The hours the real world pretends don’t exist. That’s when the real shit crawls out.”

“Six to six? What kind of hours are those?”

“Those are my hours. The ones it takes to get the job done. You’ll learn. Oh, and no days off. At least not anytime soon.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Eric was infuriated.

“Wanna quit? Go ahead.” Smoke pushed the phone forward. “Call the captain. Tell him you’re done. Hand in your badge and gun on the way up.”

“I don’t quit anything.” Eric turned on his heels, walked out the door, and slammed it shut behind him.

Deedee gently clawed Smoke’s hand, biting it, playing with it like it was prey.

Smoke wiggled his fingers, pretending to struggle. “We’ll see, baby. He might turn out okay. He’s got spirit.”

From the end of the hall, a single word ricocheted off the walls like a gunshot.

“FUCK.”

Smoke chuckled and blew a ring of smoke toward the ceiling.

CHAPTER 2

14th District, Area Central, 6:00 p.m.

Eric Kindred rushed into the precinct, and the doors swung open with a bang. Smoke was already there, leaning against the lobby wall, a cigarette hanging from his lips as if it belonged there permanently.

“You’re late, Kindred,” he said, tossing a keyring at the rookie. “You’re driving.”

Eric fumbled the catch. “Where are we going? I still need my gear.”

“You got your gun?”

“Yeah.” Eric blinked, confused.

“That’s all you need. Let’s move.” Smoke turned and walked toward the exit without breaking stride.

Eric jogged to keep up. “Wait, where are we going? Was there a briefing? A call or—”

“Relax, kid. Just get to the car. We’ve got some stops to make.”

They stepped into the orange-glow haze of the precinct parking lot. Sodium lights flickered above like dying stars.

“What are we picking up?” Eric asked, slightly breathless.

“Need to get you battle-ready.” Smoke pointed at the road. “Drive.”

Eric slid into the driver’s seat of the unmarked car. The engine rumbled to life.

“I am battle-ready,” he muttered, half to himself.

Smoke gave a dry chuckle. “Kid, you ain’t ready for anything coming your way. Not you. Not me. Hell, not a single soul in our precinct.” He took a long drag on his cigarette. The ember flared red, casting momentary shadows across his lined face.

The sun was sinking fast behind the skyline. Streetlights buzzed to life, blinking one by one like sleepy eyes.

“Just cause you’ve got a gun doesn’t mean you can handle the shit I deal with.”

Eric glanced at him. “I don’t want to sound rude, but... can you be a little more specific?”

Smoke reached into his shirt and pulled out a rosary he had inherited from his father. It was obvious this wasn’t just a thing you’d buy in a church gift shop.

At the end of the chain, instead of a crucifix, hung a large boar tusk, worn and yellowed. Where most rosaries had a simple medallion, this one had a tiny skull carved from a human femur. The beads were made of polished black onyx, as smooth as river stones. At the top of the loop, gleamed a silver crucifix, sharp-edged and menacing.

“Spiritual warfare, Kindred.” Smoke let the tusk dangle, his eyes unreadable.

“Demons. Ghouls. Ghosts. The possessed. Things from places we don’t have names for.”

He shook the tusk at Eric like it was a warning.

This guy is fucking nuts. No wonder no one wants to work with him. He looked at the rosary. Jesus... what the hell kind of priest signed off on that thing? Fuck me.

The beads clicked faintly as Smoke rolled them through his fingers, making a whispering sound like insects tapping against glass.

Smoke gestured with his cigarette. “Turn left. Right up there.”

They turned onto West George Street. Ahead, the towering spires of the Basilica of St. Hyacinth pierced the sky like black needles.

“Pull in behind that electrician van,” Smoke said. “Don’t worry. It’s fine.”

Eric did as told and eased the car behind the crew's vehicle. The workers were packing up for the night, stowing tools and yawning through end-of-day motions.

Smoke was already across the street.

“Whataya waiting for, kid? Let’s go.”

Eric pocketed the keys and stepped out, glancing at the basilica’s looming silhouette.

This is going to be a long assignment. He gave his head a tiny shake.

Smoke took one last drag, then crushed the butt beneath his heel and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

CHAPTER 3

Eric climbed the stone steps toward the towering red-brick edifice.

The Basilica of St. Hyacinth loomed before him, its baroque silhouette glowing faintly under the last gold light of day. Built in 1917 and blessed by Pope John Paul II in 2003, it held a sacred place in Chicago's Polish community. The building radiated history, weight, and something else that pressed heavily on Eric's chest the moment he drew close.

He gripped the sculpted bronze door handle and pulled. The weight of the door felt more like a vault than a church. It opened, slowly revealing the ornate, gilded interior. Arched ceilings soared, painted in rich blues and golds. Incense clung faintly to the air. Candles flickered in crimson glass.

Smoke waited just inside, his fingertips wet from the freshly dipped holy water. He made the sign of the cross with slow, practiced precision.

He looked over his shoulder. "No shortcuts," he said quietly, gesturing to the font with two fingers, then nodding forward.

Eric quickly dipped his finger in the water and moved it from his forehead to his chest, then across his left shoulder to his right. The water felt colder than he expected.

As they walked down the central aisle, the stained glass caught Eric's eye, rich panels filled with saints and angels; there was something mournful in the way the figures looked down, as if they were aware of something just beyond the frame. Marble statues flanked the pews, their gazes solemn, their hands frozen in gestures of benediction and warning.

Smoke shuffled into the first pew, his jacket brushing against the polished wood. He tapped the seat beside him without looking.

Eric sat.

Smoke pulled a wooden rosary from his jacket pocket. This one looked old, but normal, simple beads, worn smooth.

“You’re Catholic, right?”

“Yes,” Eric answered, uncertain. “But it’s been a long time since I practiced any of it.”

“Well, you’d better get reacquainted fast, Kindred. You’re gonna need it.” He let the rosary fall into Eric’s hand.

Eric held the rosary in his palms. It felt warm, like it had been sitting in sunlight, though Smoke had just pulled it from his coat. The moment it touched his skin, he felt something tighten behind his eyes. Not pain, just pressure. Like a door had creaked open somewhere.

“What is all of this?” he said, his voice low, but sharper now. “I’m okay with a lot. I’ve seen some weird stuff. But honestly, and I don’t want to offend you, this is...”

He looked up, incredulous. “You sound like a madman. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“All the time, kid. By now, ninety percent of ’em would’ve already walked out that door we came through. So, you’re doing better than most.” He gestured vaguely toward the entrance. “But you’re free to leave. It’s all about free will. You have to choose. Not me.”

“Choose what?”

“To fight. To engage in the battle that’s going on in our world every damn day.”

Smoke turned toward him, his eyes suddenly sharp. He pulled the boar tusk rosary from around his neck and let it swing between them like a pendulum.

“Life as you know it...” He pointed the tusk at Kindred. “That’s over the moment you step into this. You’ll see things no one will ever believe. Even if you had the guts to tell them, they’d call you insane. A liability. A lunatic. You’ll be marked. Just like me.”

Eric shook his head hard, overwhelmed. He stood from the pew and held the wooden rosary back toward Smoke.

“This is too much. I can’t do this. This makes no sense.”

“Sure, you can,” Smoke replied calmly. “Or don’t. Go back to the station. Make more coffee. File paperwork. Chase domestic calls and run crowd control at parades. I won’t stop you.”

He turned slightly, withdrawing a small leather-bound booklet from his inner pocket. A long sword was embossed on the cover, and across the top, in silver, read "Spiritual Warfare."

Smoke made the sign of the cross again, opened the booklet, and began mumbling a prayer he’d likely said a thousand times before.

“Detective,” Eric said. His voice was tight, but steady.

Smoke didn’t look up. “Changed your mind?”

“I just need to know what you want from me,” Eric said. “I don’t do games well. If you’re testing me, just say it. If you want me gone, say it. I’m not good at guessing.” He kept his voice tight, but there was a hard

edge to it now. He looked exhausted. Not just tired but worn out, and frustrated enough to show it.

Smoke sighed and patted the pew beside him. "Sit down, Kindred."

Eric hesitated, then sat down.

"Give me your hand."

Eric extended it, unsure if he was about to get spit on or slapped, and braced himself.

Instead, Smoke placed the rosary back in his palm and folded Eric's fingers around it.

"This is your strongest weapon. I'm not trying to get rid of you. Actually..." Smoke met his eyes. "You're the first one they've sent down to me in a very long time that I see potential in."

Eric frowned, more wary than relieved, unsure if it was a compliment or another warning.

"Listen, kid," Smoke said, voice lower now. "What I do, what *we* will be doing, isn't for the faint of heart. We fight crimes that don't leave fingerprints. Things that don't obey physics or logic. Spirits. Ghouls. Demons. Foul creatures you wouldn't even find in nightmares." He leaned in slightly. "But they're real. They kill. They destroy. And no one else is coming to stop them." He paused, letting the silence stretch.

"If you're willing, if you believe that the only way evil gets stopped is when good men step up, then the battle's already halfway won. But it won't be easy. And it won't be fun. I'll make you stronger than you've ever been... but I'll also give you a harder time than you've ever had."

Eric sat silent, fumbling with the rosary in his hand, the weight of it keeping him still.

Smoke reached over and wrapped his hand around Eric's, both of them gripping the beads.

"Trust me." Then he pulled out his own rosary. "Don't say anything. Just pray the full rosary. "If you can't remember the words..." He handed Eric the little leather booklet. "Use this." I'll meet you outside when you're done."

Smoke faced the altar, lowered his head, and closed his eyes. Rolling the beads between his thumb and forefinger, he began reciting the *Our Father* in a low, steady tone. His voice barely rose above a whisper, but it echoed faintly in the cavernous space.

Eric sat frozen for a moment, the rosary weighing heavily in his hand. Then he flipped open the booklet. The wafer-thin pages crinkled softly as his fingers slid over them. His eyes searched for the right prayer. Soon, his voice joined the silence, nasal and unsure at first, then the rhythm came back.

When Eric opened his eyes again, he was alone.

Was I gone that far?

He stood slowly and walked toward the exit, his legs a little stiff.

Just before he reached the doors, he caught sight of Smoke stepping out from a side door, shaking the hand of what looked like the priest. The priest's face was pale, drawn. He nodded at Smoke, but he didn't smile. His eyes flicked toward Eric, narrowing slightly, as if trying to judge whether the kid had what it would take.

Smoke glanced up, caught Eric's eye, and gave a small signal: *Move on. Wait in the car.*

Eric nodded and left without a word.

Outside, the city had cooled down, and the night had settled in. Eric got in the car and sat in silence. He placed the rosary inside the pocket of his jacket and waited.

CHAPTER 4

Night had fallen, and the sun had left the sky streaked with deep reds and bruised purples.

The precinct doors swung open. Smoke stepped out into the evening, and the door creaked shut behind him. A breath of chilled air curled around him like a ghost.

“Let’s go, kid. Time for food.”

“I’m not really hungry,” Eric replied. “I ate a few hours ago.”

Smoke didn’t stop walking. “Kid, listen, there are a few rules you need to memorize. Rest when you can. Eat when you can. And shit when you can. Cause if we get a call right now or land in something bad, there won’t be any naps, there won’t be any snacks, and for sure no time for bathroom breaks, got it? You don’t wanna eat, fine. But I’m hungry, and I’m gonna eat. So, go on. Drive. Take Milwaukee, hang a left on Kimball. There’s a little Asian place two blocks in, on the right.” He threw the car keys at Eric.

Eric shifted the cruiser into drive, the engine rumbling awake. They slid into traffic and headed toward what Smoke lovingly called *Dirty Phở*.

From the outside, the place looked more like an abandoned VHS rental store than a restaurant. The faded store sign was in Vietnamese only, flaking under the rusted awning. Old sun-bleached movie posters covered the windows, blocking out what little light remained. The neighborhood felt forgotten, and that was the polite way of saying it. Smoke pointed toward a narrow alley beside the building.

“Here. Pull in.”

They parked; the cruiser's tires crunched over broken glass and gravel. A side door stood crooked on its hinges, but Smoke pushed through it like he owned the joint.

Inside, the entire restaurant was bathed in pink. Not soft pastel pink, but the loud seventies-era pink. Pink vinyl chairs. Pink tile floors. Pink laminate tabletops. Even the ceiling was painted pink.

What the fuck? Eric thought, staring at the pink riot of the place. He'd never seen anything like it.

The place was packed with elderly Vietnamese men, slurping noisily at their noodles; broth dripped from their chins. On the counter, a large aquarium bubbled with fat, slow-swimming Oranda goldfish. Behind the tank, mounted high on the wall, were several golden Buddha statues in various poses, each one smiling, each one staring directly at Eric.

"You're in over your head, kid," the Buddhas seemed to whisper through their wide, eternal grins.

The scent of thick broth mingled with burning incense, and strangely, Eric didn't hate it. It was foreign, but comforting in a way he couldn't name.

From the kitchen, an older man emerged. His dark blue *áo dài* trailed behind him as he shuffled across the pink tiles. His ash-grey hair was tied back in a tight ponytail, and thin strands of facial hair clung to his chin. His skin looked like parchment stretched across bone. When he saw Smoke, a broad smile spread across his face, and his entire expression lit up like a lantern.

He reached out with both hands; clasping Smoke's in greeting before offering a slight bow.

"Mr. Smoke. So good to see you. Come, come. I have good table for you, as always."

Eric saw a smile on Smoke's face for the first time. *So, he does have a heart.* He could tell Smoke genuinely liked the old man.

He guided them toward a table near the fish tank, pulling out a chair for Smoke, then another for Eric, his hospitality sincere and precise.

"Thank you," Eric said, bowing slightly on instinct.

"Mr. Smoke. The usual?" the man asked, his accent laced with warmth and years of practiced English.

"Yes, Khai. Please." Smoke gestured toward Eric. "My young friend here might need a menu."

"Yes, of course. I will bring."

Khai took their drink orders and vanished into the kitchen, his footsteps nearly silent. Eric could hear rapid Vietnamese coming from behind the swinging door. The only words he recognized were Mr. Smoke.

Smoke leaned back. "Ever had phở before?"

Eric shook his head. "Can't say that I have. I don't even know what it is."

"It's bone broth with noodles and meat. I get the beef version. It's a little raw, but the broth's heat cooks it right in the bowl. I'd suggest you try number 18. It's got all the meats. No guessing, just jump in."

Eric nodded, scanning the menu as Khai returned with their drinks and a plate of four crisp egg rolls.

“You ready?” Khai asked, smiling like the Buddhas behind him.

“Yes, Khai.” Smoke pointed at Kindred. “Skywalker here will have what I’m having.”

Eric chuckled. “You’re not my father, okay?”

For the first time since they had met, it felt like two people having lunch instead of a detective training a rookie.

Maybe, just maybe, he could work with this guy. The thought surprised him.

“Okay, okay. Right away. Thank you, thank you.” Khai bowed again and shuffled off.

Within minutes, two enormous bowls of steaming broth arrived, clouding the air with their fragrance. A large plate of sliced jalapeños, bean sprouts, and fresh basil leaves was set in the center of the table like a ritual offering.

“Follow my lead,” Smoke said.

He scooped a few slices of pepper into his bowl, then added a handful of bean sprouts. Then he began tearing the basil leaves, letting them flutter into the broth like paper wishes. He reached across the table for a small brown bottle.

“This is fish sauce. Smells like a rotting corpse, but makes the soup a hell of a lot better. Go slow until you know what you like.”

Eric raised an eyebrow but nodded, dabbing a small amount in the mix.

“Now this,” Smoke continued, grabbing a thick black bottle, “is Hoisin sauce. It’s sweet. Adds depth. Watch.”

He squeezed a wide spiral of the dark sauce into his bowl, then dabbed some onto a plate for dipping. “Try it on your meat. Trust me.”

“Thank you. It actually smells... kind of amazing,” Eric said, leaning in a little closer.

“It’s the fucking best,” Smoke replied, already mid-slurp with a tangle of noodles caught in his chopsticks, “I could eat this all day.” He pointed his chopsticks at Eric. “So. Why become a cop? And in Chicago, of all goddamn places?”

Eric hesitated, then shrugged.

“I don’t really know. I’ve had cops in my life for as long as I can remember, not always for the best reasons. But... I’ve always wanted to help people, I guess. I got bullied a lot as a kid. Learned to stand up for myself. Then I started standing up for others. I liked the uniforms, the cars, the lights... the sirens. I guess most kids do. Never really thought much deeper than that. I just knew it was what I wanted to do.”

He bit down on a piece of brisket, and the flavor caught him by surprise. Eric blinked, then took another bite.

Smoke stared into his bowl, stirring gently with his spoon. “I didn’t have a choice. I’ve been fighting evil since I was born. I had to leave the place I came from.” He slurped up a mouthful of noodles. “When I ended up in this hellhole of wind and concrete, I realized that the only way I could survive was to wear the badge. Let’s just say... it wasn’t easy.”

Before Eric could ask a question, Smoke’s phone buzzed against the table. He cursed under his breath and answered.

“Fuck, they always know when I’m eating. Hello?”

A pause.

“Yeah. Got it. We’re on our way.”

He hung up and jabbed a finger at Eric. “One minute. Shovel down as much as you can. We’ve got a case.”

Smoke grabbed his bowl, arched over it as close as he could, and started slurping fast, barely chewing the noodles and meat. Eric tried his best to mimic him, chopsticks moving frantically, his mouth burning from the heat and spice as he forced the noodles and meat into his mouth.

With a hollow thud, Smoke dropped his empty bowl on the table. He reached into his pocket, threw down a wad of cash, and stood.

“Let’s go. I’m driving. Gimme the keys.”

Eric handed them over as he tried to finish the last bit of broth. He stood and started to make his way to the door. The chair legs screeched across the pink tiles as they made their way toward the alley and rushed into the night. The air outside suddenly felt colder—heavier. Something unseen had been stirred somewhere in the city.

CHAPTER 5

It took only 20 minutes to drive from Dirty Phở to the crime scene. The place was lit up and cordoned off. A mixed bag of onlookers stood on the sidewalk, eager to glimpse a bit of free horror.

Smoke pulled the car over across the street, stepped out, and walked towards the circus of lights and flashing cameras. He crossed the yellow DO NOT CROSS tape, holding up his badge.

“Homicide. Who’s in charge of the scene?” he asked a young officer posted near the entrance.

“Sergeant Warrez, sir,” the rookie replied, pointing toward a cluster of vehicles on the east side of the lot.

About ten cruisers stood parked together under towering mobile floodlights. The electric hum of the generators echoed across the lot. Beneath the glow of modern torches, creatures in white Tyvek moved in a meticulous grid pattern. It looked like aliens had landed in the Windy City.

The forensic techs placed yellow evidence markers across the pavement and dusted the nearby vehicles for prints. Cameras flashed like fireworks as crime scene photographers documented every possible clue, working in frantic unison like a hive under siege. Smoke spotted Sergeant Warrez and made his way over.

“Sergeant Warrez,” he said, flashing his badge. “Ravenstein, Homicide. This is my partner, Kindred.” He gestured behind him without turning. Eric gave a polite nod.

“Catch me up,” Smoke said.

Warrez stepped aside, waving them to follow. “We got the call about forty minutes ago. 911 received it and then dispatched it to us. An unidentified male reported a body and indicated he did not dare to perform CPR. When medics arrived about ten minutes later, they did not know how to handle the case. They checked for vitals, found none, declared the victim dead on arrival, and placed a sheet over him. Our unit arrived about five minutes later. We secured the parking lot right away and called the crime scene unit.”

“Good job.” Smoke shook the man’s hand and walked on towards where the action was. “Let’s go, Kindred.”

They walked towards the flock of white phantoms. One of them stopped Smoke. “Sir?”

Smoke and Kindred both flashed their badges. “Ravenstein. Kindred. Fourteenth District.”

Something clicked in the man’s brain. He had heard the name Ravenstein somewhere before. Smoke could see it in his eyes.

“Yes, Sir. Please wait here, and we will get you suited up.” The face made a call over his radio, and two other Tyvek people showed up, bringing two foldable chairs and two cheap plastic bags. They unfolded the chairs and pointed for the newcomers to sit down.

Smoke and Kindred each received a bag.

Smoke looked over at Kindred. “First Crime Scene?”

Eric nodded, “First real one, we had a few mocked-up ones at the academy, of course.”

Smoke replied with an indifferent grunt.

“Nothing to worry about. Put everything on that is in the bag. Follow basic crime scene protocols. Gloves, booties, the whole shebang. A warning, this is gonna be a bad one.” Smoke was already suited up and stood up.

Erik was still bending down, putting on his booties.

“What do you mean? How do you know it’s going to be a bad one?”

Smoke zipped up his suit. “They don’t call me for the easy stuff, kid. And I can smell something about this is off.”

“Off how?” Erik asked as he tore a piece of tape from the roll he held, sealing his booties to his coveralls.

“Remember when I said that you would see things you didn’t think were possible? I told you there was a reason why no one wants to be around me. Well,” He spread his arms slightly and circled around. “It is showtime. When bad shit happens, real weird, bizarre shit. Stuff that just can’t be explained. They call me. If this were just another dead guy, they wouldn’t have called me. But they did call me. And that means, shit definitely hit the fan. Just giving you a heads up, you might see some weird stuff tonight.”

Smoke pulled his mask up, and the only thing left visible were his dark brown eyes. “Let’s go.”

Eric slowly followed.

Smoke moved through the grid, carefully observing the evidence markers, building a mental picture. They came to the center of the parked cars. One of the vehicles had a shattered windshield that glinted under the floodlights. Glass covered the hood and ground like frost. Someone, or something, had smashed the victim into the car with tremendous force.

Smoke found the lead investigator, who was crouched next to the victim, and politely introduced himself.

“Evening. Ravenstein, Kindred. What do we got?”

“Michael Harvath, Senior CSI. Dead male. Approximately late forties. Maybe. Hard to tell.”

“Hard to tell?” Smoke asked.

“Yeah. Look for yourself. Haven’t seen one like this before.”

Harvath lifted the sheet from the victim’s face and slowly revealed the stiffened body. The stench hit them immediately.

Smoke leaned in closer to observe the deceased male. Behind him, he could hear Kindred vomiting.

Such a waste of good PHO, Smoke thought.

As the sheet came fully off, the smell spread through the air. The smell reached everyone nearby.

Smoke bent down. “Sulfur. You smell that?”

Harvath nodded. “Weird, right? Especially since the body doesn’t seem to be that far into decomposition yet.”

“That is not decomposition.” Smoke said. “Inspector, I need you and your men to give us some more space. Could you all take a minute and stand over there?” Smoke pointed at the entrance of the parking lot. It was not really a question, more an instruction. Harvath had been around the block, knew what Smoke needed, and signaled his team.

“Everyone, a quick second, let’s fall back to the entrance over there. Let’s give the detectives some space.” Harvath started walking, and his flock of Tyvek spooks followed.

“Thank you.” Smoke said, “Kindred, get yourself together. Come over here.” Smoke waved his newbie partner closer. “Are you ok?”

“I guess. Just such a rancid smell. I didn’t expect it. Maybe I ate too much, and the two just didn’t go well together. I’m sorry.” He wiped his mouth as he looked at the deceased man.

“Don’t be sorry. It stinks. It stinks, as few things ever do; you will need to learn to control your stomach. Smell is a big part of what we use as a tool. Come have a look.”

Kindred knelt beside him.

“Tell me what you see?” Smoke asked.

“Male, mid-40s to early-50s, maybe. Pale, as if all blood is missing. Black lesions, putrid sulfur smell.”

“Good. What else?”

“There is some discharge from the mouth, maybe vomit from the impact with the vehicle.”

“Is that all?” Smoke asked.

“I think so. Anything more, we would need an autopsy.” He stood up to have a better look at the scene. He stared at the vehicle with the shattered windshield and then back down at the victim. Smoke stood and walked to the vehicle.

“So here is a vehicle, about an hour ago, drove into this tight parking lot and hit this John Doe hard enough to shatter the window and launch him a good hundred feet. The glass is shattered, with splinters all over the ground. That means it had a serious impact because this type

of glass is not supposed to splinter. The airbag deployed, but there is no blood on it or any blood on the driver himself. If this were a normal case, where is all the blood? The victim's head should be cracked open like a melon.

Where is the blood? There is not a drop anywhere. You said it yourself.”

Smoke walked over to the lifeless body, bent down, and grabbed the hand of the unidentified man.

“Pale? This is beyond pale. This is milk white. Where did all the blood go? What are these black lesions? And what is causing this smell? You with me so far?” He looked at Kindred, who was taking notes.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Ok, now look at this.” Smoke took a pen from his pocket and squatted next to the victim's face. With the tip of his pen, he pushed on one of the eyelids. The skin gave in like wet clay, and Smoke's pen sank into the eye cavity. He pulled on the eyelid.

“Empty.”

He dropped the pen and opened both eyelids with his fingers. “Both empty. How do you explain that?”

“I don't know, I've never seen anything like this.”

“Exactomundo Junior, you can't. Cause there is no natural explanation for this. This one is for us. There is something wrong here. Something supernatural. This man did not just die; it was not a hit-and-run. This was deliberate. Done by some sort of creature or an entity, but it sure as fuck was no accident.”

Kindred's face almost turned as pale as the nameless victim.

Fuck, Kindred thought.

The rude awakening that Ravenstein was not some basket case scared the hell out of him.

If this is real, what else is real?

The eyeless man stared up at him.

You better believe it, buster.

Smoke rummaged the man's pockets and found his keys and wallet, a stack of business cards for The Terra Green Consulting Company, 2 credit cards, and his driver's license.

Jason DeLong

Terra Green Consulting Co.

4532 W. Schiller Ave., Suite 408

"That's nearby," He waved Kindred closer. "Help me move him."

"What about forensics? Can we move him?"

"They're on break. I need to see something."

Eric looked at the waddle of Tyvek suits. None of them were paying attention. Smokes, coffee, and donuts were all that were on their mind.

"They would move him too. I need to check something before we turn the crime scene back over to them. Will you help me or not?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"I need to see his chest and his back. Undo his shirt. When I say go, we roll him. Try to keep his knees together."

As Eric unbuttoned the man's shirt, Smoke saw black lesions peppered across the victim's chest, clustering together at the center.

"Okay. Now." Smoke said.

Sitting side by side, they grabbed DeLong from the back and gently rolled him towards them.

Mwwweeee, a low raspy sound emitted from the victim's gut. Eric shook, startled by the sound. Smoke had to hold back his laughter. "Oh God, the stench." Eric started gagging.

"Don't you dare Kindred. Don't you fucking dare puke over our victim. Swallow it. Push it down, don't you dare."

With tears in his eyes, Kindred swallowed his bile. The putrid stench was punching in his brain; his stomach was trying to wrangle a way out of his body.

Good Lord. No. No. No, no, no.

It took every ounce of willpower he had to keep his stomach under control, but he managed.

"Good job." Smoke said as he removed the victim's shirt from his back.

DeLong's back had noticeably fewer lesions, but between his shoulder blades were three dark claw marks. Smoke looked up at Kindred.

"This isn't good."

"I figured that much." Kindred said with a little more sarcasm than he intended. Smoke let it go.

"It is demonic. See the claw marks?"

“Yes.”

“How many do you count?”

“Three.” The rookie replied.

“Correct. Three is the number of the demonic realm.”

Kindred gave smoke a questioning look.

“Ok,” Smoke replied. “What logical explanation would you have? A three-toed sloth is on the loose in Chicago, butchering people?” Smoke folded the sheet back over the victim and stood up, waiting for Kindred to come up with an answer. He walked around the car, taking a closer look at the windshield and the surrounding parking lot. “I’m waiting, Kindred? Got an answer yet?”

“Not really. I might be able to explain the claws, but not the black spots and the lack of blood.”

“So, what do you have on the claw marks?” Smoke was curious to hear his answer.

“I have seen knives for sale that have three blades; maybe it was one of those types.”

“A three-toed sloth still makes more sense, Kindred. It was not a wolverine-type knife.”

Smoke waved Kindred to follow him. They walked back to Harvath and his ghosts.

“You done detective?” Harvath pointed at the corps with his half-eaten cream-filled doughnut.

“For now. Not much more that I can do from here. I’ll have to wait on the autopsy report. Actually, I’d rather be present when they cut him open.”

Harvath nodded in agreement. “Always better to be present if you can.”

“Is there any video footage?” Smoke asked.

“We are retrieving it as we speak. The owner has two cameras, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. Pretty cheap setup. But who knows, maybe we’ll catch something.”

“Thank you, Harvath. I appreciate the cooperation. Please call me the minute you guys find out anything else?” Smoke handed Harvath his card and started walking towards his car.

“Let’s go, Kindred.”

They removed their Tyvek coveralls and booties and placed them in the assigned trash bag set up by the crime scene unit. They walked to the car in silence, still absorbing what they had just witnessed. It was a slow drive back to the station.

“How long does it normally take? The autopsy?” Kindred asked.

“Sometimes it takes them a few days to get to a body. The coroner’s office has more bodies than freezers. For some, they just do a quick review to meet the law’s requirements, while others sometimes take a lot longer. I will have a chat with him in the morning; hopefully, he can move this one up. He is a good guy. Like me, he is not very liked by the other cops.

“Why do we need to be there?”

“Because the coroner wasn’t at the scene. We were. We remember the smells, the layout, the weird. We share what they didn’t see. Before time erases the details. Details crack cases.”

Smoke cracked his window, letting the cold air wash over them.

CHAPTER 6

“You might want to take a nap for a minute, if you want,” Smoke said to Kindred.

“A nap? Why?”

“We’re going to visit a friend of mine,” Smoke said, “Our work isn’t over yet. Not even close. I need to know more about this victim. Something’s off. Reminds me of something I’ve read about before.” Smoke drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. He leaned back slightly, his eyes focused on the road.

Kindred waited.

“I’ve got a friend. He deals in the occult. Knows things most people don’t even want to hear about. And he does not like living in cities. So, we’re taking a little trip.”

Smoke glanced over at him. “Make yourself comfortable. Take advantage of it. Remember the three rules?”

“I do. Sleep, eat, and use the toilet.”

“Exactly, well, this is one of those times.”

Kindred was surprised by the shift in Smoke’s tone. This was one of the first times Smoke sounded almost worried. He didn’t argue. He turned slightly in his seat, balled up his jacket, and tucked it against the window as a makeshift pillow. The cold air drifted into the car, and he was enjoying it. It helped. A little. The smell from the crime scene still clung to the back of his throat, sour and stubborn, refusing to let go. He closed his eyes, and within seconds, he was asleep.

They drove for over an hour, and the city slowly thinned around them. The tight streets gave way to wider roads. Buildings gradually stretched farther apart. The noise faded. Less sirens. Fewer people. Less everything.

Chicago didn't end all at once. It loosened its grip.

Slowly.

Streetlights grew fewer, and the darkness swallowed them.

Smoke just drove. They drove out toward the outskirts of Aurora.

The road narrowed as they left the main highway, turning onto older pavement that hadn't seen much love in years. Cracks split through the asphalt like dried veins. Trees began to crowd the roadside, their branches reaching in, swallowing what little light remained.

Kindred opened his eyes.

"Where exactly are we going?" he asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

Smoke didn't answer right away.

"Somewhere people don't go unless they have a reason," he said finally.

Kindred shifted in his seat, looking out into the dark. There weren't many houses anymore. The ones that did appear sat far back from the road. No lights in the windows. No movement. Just shapes in the dark.

"This friend of yours," Kindred said, "he legit?"

Smoke let out a low breath that might have been a laugh. "Depends what you mean by legit."

That didn't help.

They passed a rusted mailbox hanging crooked on a post; the numbers were barely visible. A long dirt road cut off to the right, nearly swallowed by overgrowth.

Smoke slowed down.

“There,” he said.

The car left the pavement; tires crunched as they turned onto gravel and dirt. The trees closed in tighter, branches scraping lightly along the sides of the vehicle like fingers testing the surface.

Kindred sat up straighter. *Yeah... this feels right*, he thought. *Of course it does.*

Smoke killed the headlights for a second, then flicked them back on.

“Just making sure we’re not being followed,” he muttered.

Kindred frowned. “Who the hell would be following us?”

Smoke gave him a sideways look. He was not amused. And he sure was not joking.

“You never know,” he said. “You always assume someone’s following you, kid. Didn’t they teach you anything at the academy?”

Kindred held his gaze for a second, then looked back out into the dark. *Yeah... this just keeps getting better.*

CHAPTER 7

There were no lights. At least not real ones. A faint path of stones stretched ahead, barely visible, lit by a few flickering solar lamps pushed into the ground like afterthoughts. The light pulsed just enough to make the shadows feel alive. Wind chimes hung from nearly every tree. Large ones. Small ones. Brass, bamboo, glass, and things Kindred couldn't immediately identify.

Their voices drifted through the darkness whenever the wind stirred. Kindred stared up into the trees. "That's a lot of wind chimes."

Smoke followed his gaze. His expression tightened slightly. "Huh. What?" Smoke looked deeper into the property. "There weren't nearly this many last time I was here."

Kindred glanced back toward the trees. "Maybe he likes wind chimes."

Smoke looked at the trees, then he looked at Kindred. "Sure."

Kindred had never been to a place that had so many. They stepped out of the car. The night itself felt strangely quiet beneath the endless chorus of chimes.

Smoke grabbed his coat and started toward the house.

"Should I come?" Kindred asked.

Smoke glanced back. "Give me a minute."

"Why?"

“Because if he's in one of his moods, I don't want him meeting you first.”

Kindred weren't sure if that was a joke.

Smoke started up the stone path. “Stay with the car. I'll let you know when it's safe.”

“Safe?”

Smoke kept walking. “See? You're learning already.”

Smoke didn't stop. He walked up to the door and knocked. Four times. Then turned slightly and tapped twice on the window beside it.

He waited.

Nothing happened at first.

Then, deep in the back of the house, a light flicked on.

Another.

Then another.

One by one, they came alive, moving toward the front like something had woken up and was making its way to the door.

Smoke stood still, waiting.

He heard something slide. Metal on metal. Then silence.

Peephole, he thought.

“Why the fuck are you using a peephole? I know you’ve got cameras everywhere.”

He could hear keys being inserted into three locks.

One.

Two.

Three.

Each one was unlatched slowly and deliberately. The door opened with a long, dry creaking sound.

“Smoke,” the man said. “What are you doing here at this time of night? You know what time it is?” The slender man corrected himself. “Of course you do. I shouldn’t even ask.”

He stepped back, waving him in. “Come in. Get in here.”

Smoke stepped inside. Behind him, the locks slid back into place. One after another.

Kindred shifted in the car. *What the hell is this place?*

He watched the door close. *Do I go up? Do I wait?* He decided to stay put. *Yeah... I'll wait till he calls me.*

“Lucian Varro,” Smoke said. “It’s been a while.”

“It might seem that way to you.” Lucian looked at Smoke. “You look rough, my friend.”

They stepped in close and shared a brief embrace. A hug that was earned and familiar.

Lucian pulled back. "I was doing just fine," he said, "until you walked through that door. I'm always fine until you walk through that door."

Smoke smirked slightly. "Good to see you too."

Lucian studied him for a moment. "So," he said, "what are you doing here tonight?"

"I've got a case," Smoke said. "And it reminds me of something. I just can't place it. I need you to take a look at a few things."

Lucian nodded slowly. "Of course you do." He turned, already moving. "Come in. You want something to drink?"

"Water."

"Water," Lucian repeated. "We've become simple men." He glanced back. "You never come out here for nothing."

Smoke didn't answer.

"I've got a newbie with me," Smoke said instead.

Lucian stopped. Turned slightly. "One of your many?" he said. "The ones that don't last?"

Smoke shook his head. "This one is different."

Lucian gave him a look. Subtle. Curious. His eyes narrowed. That was new.

"Don't tell him I said that," Smoke added.

Lucian almost smiled. "You trust him?"

“I do.”

Lucian nodded once. “Then I trust him.”

Smoke turned and walked back to the door. Lucian unlocked all the locks again, and the door opened. Smoke used the light switch to flick the porch light on and off, signaling Kindred to come to the house.

Kindred straightened in the car. *Guess that is my invitation.*

He grabbed his phone and climbed out of the car. The wind chimes stirred overhead. Their tiny voices whispered through the darkness. Soft metallic murmurs carried off by the night breeze. It almost sounded like they were trying to speak.

The stone path crunched beneath his boots as he made his way toward the house.

At first glance, everything looked normal enough.

The house sat low among the trees, built from thick timber, dark stone, and weathered cedar. A pitched roof rose above it, but the longer Kindred looked, the harder it became to find a straight line anywhere. Corners curved where corners should have met. Sections of exposed stone pushed through the walls as if the house had been built around the earth rather than on top of it.

Massive boulders rose from the ground around the foundation. Some had been incorporated into the walls themselves. Others stood untouched, as if the builder had simply decided they belonged there.

The house didn't feel like it had been built by someone who needed a place to live.

It felt older than that. It existed to watch something. Kindred couldn't explain why that thought settled in his mind, but the closer he got, the harder it became to shake.

Warm light spilled from the windows. In its glow, Kindred caught glimpses of strange details. Symbols were carved into the stone pavers leading up to the house. Various crystals sat firmly mounted above the doorway, reflecting the porch light. Small wooden charms hung beneath the eaves. He glanced back toward the car. He didn't bother locking it. If somebody was willing to wander this far into the woods in the middle of the night, a locked car was probably the least of his concerns.

The front door stood open, and warm light spilled out onto the path. Outside, two silhouettes waited for him.

Smoke walked out to Kindred.

"I'm about to introduce you to someone important," he said.

"Important to me. Important to the work."

Kindred nodded that he understood.

"I want you to listen. Only talk when you're asked. And don't touch a fucking thing."

Kindred swallowed. "Got it."

The smell hit him first.

Incense.

Not the faint traces that lingered in Smoke's office. These were older, richer layers of frankincense, myrrh, melted candle wax, and dried herbs woven so deeply into the house's fabric that it had become part of the walls themselves.

The door closed behind him, and for a moment, he simply stared.

The hallway stretched ahead beneath exposed timber beams, darkened by age. Candlelight flickered from dozens of sources, casting restless shadows across walls crowded with books, artifacts and things he couldn't even begin to identify. The house seemed alive with shifting light. Books lined nearly every available surface, thousands of them. Rows of exotic wisdom accumulation over a lifetime. Several lifetimes. Massive leather-bound volumes sagged on old shelves. Fragile manuscripts sat protected behind glass. Some books were written in languages Kindred had never seen before.

Others were secured with iron chains anchored directly into the wood. His eyes lingered on one of them. *Why would anyone chain a book?* Before he could answer the question, something else caught his attention.

Crosses.

Dozens of them. Some were made of simple wood; others of pure silver. Some were layered crosses within crosses, wrapped in wire, bound together as if something had been reinforced or was being contained.

Rosaries hung from iron nails driven into the beams. Statues occupied alcoves and shelves. Saints. Angels. Madonnas. Some were polished smooth by age and handling; others were chipped and weathered, with missing pieces that could never be repaired. The deeper he looked, the stranger the collection became.

Bones rested inside small carved bowls. *Animal bones?* He hoped they were animal bones.

Glass jars lined shelves and corners throughout the hallway. Some contained dried herbs suspended in cloudy liquids. Others held things suspended in yellowed fluid that Kindred did not want to look at. One jar appeared to contain a small black hand. He quickly looked away.

Lucian's place felt less like a home and more like a museum curated by someone preparing for a war nobody else knew was coming. Nothing was just for display; every object had been meticulously placed. Every symbol, every relic, every candle, and every cross, had a purpose and had been arranged according to rules only Lucian understood.

Eric turned a corner, and the hallway opened into a large living room. Lucian was already there.

Three glasses of water had been neatly placed on the table. One of them had clearly been prepared for Kindred. A thin slice of lime floated near the surface. A small sprig of rosemary rested beside it. Lucian observed Eric looking at the table.

"I hope you enjoy the water I prepared for you," he said.

Kindred blinked. "Thank you."

Lucian inclined his head slightly. "Travel should always be followed by refreshment."

Smoke took a sip of his water. "See? This is why people think you're weird."

Lucian ignored him.

"Eric, this is Lucian Varro," Smoke said. "He's helped me on cases for years. He was the first person I thought of when I saw what happened tonight."

Lucian nodded. "Nice to meet you, Eric."

"Nice to meet you, sir."

Smoke gestured toward Lucian. "Lucian has been an informant for years. He has helped me more times than I can count. When things didn't make sense, Lucian could point me in the right direction." He looked at Kindred. "He knows more about the occult than I ever will. So, pay attention. Listen. Most important, learn."

Lucian waved the compliment away. "Smoke has always had a talent for exaggeration," he said. "I assure you, Eric, I am far less impressive than he makes me sound."

Smoke snorted. "That's a lie."

A faint smile touched the corner of Lucian's mouth. "Perhaps." He motioned toward the table.

"Please, sit. I hope the water is to your liking. You've both traveled a considerable distance. What brings you all the way out here to beautiful Aurora?" His eyes settled on Smoke. "And before you answer, let me remind you that I have invested a great deal of effort into remaining difficult to locate."

Smoke leaned back in his chair. "I haven't gotten dementia yet," he said. "I'll admit, remembering the roads getting here wasn't easy, but I managed. So, no need for medication just yet."

Lucian smirked faintly.

"You know I wouldn't bother you unless I needed your help," Smoke continued. "We got a case tonight. Kindred's first case."

Lucian glanced briefly at Eric. "My condolences."

Kindred wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that. Smoke ignored the comment and pulled out his phone.

“I’m going to show you some pictures.”

One by one, Lucian flipped through them.

Smoke narrated, “Parking lot. The vehicle hit the victim hard enough to shatter the windshield, dent the hood, deploy the airbags, and throw the body over a hundred feet.”

Lucian studied the first photograph without speaking.

“The victim was milky white,” Smoke continued. “Not a drop of blood. Not on the vehicle. Not on the pavement. Not in the body. We found black lesions across the chest and deep claw marks across the back.”

Lucian remained silent.

Kindred found himself watching Lucian instead of the photographs. Most people reacted to crime scene pictures in disgust or shock. Sometimes in curiosity. But not Lucian. He didn't seem affected by any of it. He was simply studying them. As if he were reading a book.

“And the smell,” Smoke said.

Lucian looked up. “Sulfur?”

The room grew quiet. For the first time since they had sat down, Lucian stopped looking at the photographs. His eyes settled on Smoke. Neither man spoke. Kindred felt like something had just passed between them. Something that he wasn't part of.

“Sulfur,” Lucian repeated.

Smoke nodded. “Strong enough to notice immediately.”

Lucian slowly returned his attention to the photographs and flipped to the next

image. Then another and another. His movements remained calm, but Kindred noticed something had changed. He stopped on a close-up photograph of the victim's face. Or what remained of it. Lucian studied the empty eye sockets for a long moment. Longer than he looked at any of the others' photos.

“Hm.”

Smoke leaned forward slightly. “You see something?”

Lucian didn't answer right away. He examined the image. Then looked at another photograph. Comparing. Searching for anything that could provide a clue. Finally, he placed the stack of pictures back on the table.

“What was removed first?” he asked quietly.

Smoke frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The blood, or the eyes?”

Kindred blinked. That was not a question he expected. Apparently, it wasn't the question Smoke expected either.

“I don't know if we can tell from what we currently have.” Smoke said. “The guy seemed hollowed out.”

Without saying anything, Lucian disappeared down the hallway.

Kindred exhaled quietly. “So... how do you guys know each other?”

Smoke didn't answer right away.

“I've had a long career,” he said finally. “You meet a lot of people.” He took a sip of water.

“Most of them end up hating you. Or avoiding you. That comes with the job.” A faint smile touched his face. “Then there are a few you can't do without.” He glanced toward the hallway. “Lucian's one of those.”

Kindred waited.

Smoke leaned back slightly in his chair. “I don't remember exactly when we met. Fifteen years ago. Maybe twenty.” He shrugged. “There was a case. One I couldn't crack.”

Kindred raised an eyebrow. “You?”

“Yeah. Me.”

That seemed impossible to Kindred.

Smoke stared toward the hallway. “Lucian was connected to one of the victims. Didn't want anything to do with the police. Didn't want anything to do with me, either.”

“What changed?”

Smoke smirked. “I was right.”

Kindred waited for more. But that was it.

“Why?” Kindred asked.

Smoke gave a slight shrug. “He knew I was different. In the same way, I knew he was.”

Another pause. “His brother was killed. We worked it together. Found the guy. Got justice.”

Kindred nodded slowly. “And after that?”

Smoke leaned back in his chair. “That was pretty much it. We went our separate ways.” He glanced around the room. “Lucian has an

understanding of the supernatural I've never seen anyone else have. So, when I run out of options, when I've got nowhere else to go, I come here."

Kindred looked toward the hallway. "But you'd rather not."

"Correct."

"Why?"

Smoke was quiet for a moment. "Because Lucian prefers not to get involved."

Kindred frowned. "Why?"

"Because he understands something most people don't."

Smoke tapped a finger against the table. "Everything has a price. And everything has a consequence." His eyes drifted toward the hallway. "I don't ask him for help unless I absolutely have to. Every time I walk through that door, I'm bringing trouble with me." Another pause. "I respect his privacy. He respects mine." Smoke looked at Kindred. "That's enough. You should learn from that."

Footsteps echoed through the hallway, and the conversation died immediately.

Kindred looked up.

Lucian emerged from the shadows carrying a stack of leather-bound books cradled carefully against his chest. Their covers were cracked and darkened with age, the edges softened by countless hands. Some were secured with tarnished brass clasps. Others bulged unevenly, stuffed with loose notes and yellowed pages that threatened to spill out whenever he shifted his grip.

Beneath one arm, he carried something else. Kindred's eyes locked onto it instantly.

A human skull.

This was not a replica or something you would buy from a novelty shop.

A real one.

The bone had darkened with age, taking on an ivory-yellow tone. Fine cracks spiderwebbed across parts of the surface, and years of handling had polished certain areas smooth. Several teeth were missing, leaving dark gaps along the jaw, while the remaining ones had worn down with age.

Something metallic wrapped around portions of the skull. Silver perhaps. Small stones glimmered whenever they caught the candlelight. Strange symbols had been worked into the metal, disappearing beneath Lucian's fingers whenever he shifted his grip.

For a moment, his police training tried to take over. Wondered if the skull was male or female? Adult? Young? Old? Human remains were evidence. Evidence belonged in a morgue, a laboratory, or a crime scene. Not tucked casually beneath someone's arm like some prop.

Lucian crossed the room and lowered the stack of books onto the table with surprising care. A sliver of dust rose into the candlelight and drifted lazily through the air. He carefully placed the skull down with both hands, its eyes facing Kindred.

Smoke watched without saying a word.

That alone unsettled Kindred. Most people became uncomfortable around human remains. Smoke looked as though he'd seen this a hundred times before.

Lucian remained standing. His attention drifted away from the books and toward a narrow shelf recessed into the wall that at first glance looked no different than the rest of the house. Cluttered with objects he had collected over time.

Candles burned between carved figurines and weathered religious icons. Small jars stood beside rusted keys, fragments of stone tablets, pieces of antler, and faded taxidermy.

Lucian studied the shelf in silence, like a surgeon selecting the proper instrument before making an incision. Finally, his gaze settled on a dark glass bottle resting near the back.

"That one," he murmured more to himself than anyone else, and reached for it.

The bottle immediately bothered Kindred. The glass was thick and uneven, full of tiny imperfections that distorted the candlelight trapped inside it. Faint ripples ran beneath the surface, as if the bottle had once been soft and something had tried to move through it before it hardened. Its neck twisted slightly to one side. Scraps of brittle paper clung stubbornly to the glass. Whatever name it once carried had long since disappeared.

Kindred leaned forward slightly. "What is that?"

Lucian turned the bottle in his hands, and the corners of his mouth twitched. "Something that's been used before."

Smoke still said nothing.

For some reason, that answer felt worse than no answer at all.

Lucian's thumb brushed over the cork and twisted it loose.

The cork came out with a slow, reluctant pull. A soft pop and the smell reached them instantly. It was thick and heavy. Sweet at first, then something darker underneath. Iron. Earth. Something that had been sitting too long in something.

Kindred's nose wrinkled. "That doesn't smell right."

Lucian gave the faintest hint of a smile. "It's not meant to." He set the bottle down and reached for the skull.

Great. Kindred stiffened.

Lucian's hands moved to the upper portion of the skull. Only then did Kindred realize it wasn't merely a skull. The top portion had been cut cleanly away and fitted with intricate silverwork. It was a Kapala.

The polished bone gleamed beneath the candlelight. Small inlaid stones, deep red, dark blue, and dull gold, rested within the metalwork. Symbols repeated around the rim in looping patterns that seemed to fold back into themselves. Circles within circles. Lines crossing through one another like roads leading nowhere.

Kindred stared at it. "Jeez..."

Lucian adjusted it slightly on a stand. The copper base beneath it was just as detailed, engraved with geometric patterns that echoed the work on the skull.

"It's not decoration," Lucian said quietly. "It's containment." He lifted the bottle and poured a small amount into his mouth. He didn't swallow.

Kindred watched him, confused.

Lucian stepped closer to the skull, leaned over it, and let the wine spill slowly from his mouth into the Kapala.

The dark liquid dripped down, thick and controlled, pooling in the hollow of the bone, catching the candlelight as it gathered. Deep red shifted to black where the light couldn't reach.

Lucian took another mouthful. Another slow pour fills the cap, the only way it was ever meant to be done.

Kindred shifted in his seat. “That’s... that’s how you do it?” he asked.

Lucian wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “That’s how it works.”

He looked down at the skull; the surface of the wine wasn’t still anymore.

It moved slightly. Not from the pouring but from something else. Lucian’s long finger stretched across the table and into it. The liquid trembled outward upon contact.

Lucian stared at Smoke. “Finger.”

Smoke stepped forward and pushed his finger into the skull without hesitation.

Then he turned to Kindred. “You too.”

Kindred stared at the Kapala, then at Smoke, then back at Lucian.

“No. I’m not—”

“Put your finger in it, kid,” Smoke said.

“Why?”

“So, he can see the victim.”

Kindred frowned, reaching for his phone instead, holding it up.

“It’s right here. Pictures, videos, everything. You don’t need this.”

Lucian finally looked at him, tired of the conversation already. “You want me to drop your phone in the skull?” he asked flatly. “Let it soak in wine and hope it starts talking?”

Kindred didn’t answer. Lucian leaned in slightly.

“I don’t need pictures,” he said. “I need what you saw. What you felt. What you smelled.” His eyes didn’t leave Kindred. “This is the only way. Stop wasting my time.”

Kindred hesitated.

Then, slowly, he reached forward and held his finger above the skull.

Smoke’s free hand pushed Eric’s finger in the goop.

The moment all three of them were connected, the candle flames shifted. The light was leaning inward toward the skull as if something inside was pulling it in.

Lucian closed his eyes.

At first, there was nothing.

Then—

His body tensed. A sharp inhale. His shoulders locked, his fingers twitching in the liquid.

Smoke watched him closely. Kindred didn’t dare to move.

Lucian’s head tilted slightly, like he was listening to something far away. Then his jaw clenched. And an audible pop. His breathing changed. Faster and uneven.

“Shit...” he whispered under his breath.

His hand tightened, knuckles whitening, his finger still submerged. His body jerked once. Something was pushing through him.

The parking lot. Lucian was there.

He saw the impact. Millions of glass shards exploding outward.
The sound of metal folding penetrated deep inside his skull like metal nails screeching across a chalkboard.

He saw DeLong's body lifting—
Not thrown, but being taken.

Held by something there. Something that just stayed out of sight.

Lucian's face tightened.

“Fuck...”

Darkness.

Then. The victim's eyes. Gone. Not ripped from flesh.

Forced open. Used. Eaten.

Lucian gasped. His back arched slightly, his breath caught in his throat.

Kindred pulled his hand back instinctively. “What the hell is happening?”

“Don't move!” Smoke snapped and pushed Eric's hand back into the skull cap.

Kindred froze.

Lucian's other hand slammed onto the table, steadying himself. His head turned slightly, his neckbones cracked as he continued following something only he could see.

Then his voice dropped. Low and tight.

“It went in through the eyes...”

Another breath.

“Didn’t break in... it opened them...”

His face twisted, disgust creeping in. His hand was shaking viscerally.

“Brain first...” His voice strained. “Tongue... chest... everything...”
He swallowed hard.

“Empty... it left him empty...” The smell hit him next. He flinched.
“Soul’s gone too...”

Silence.

With a scream, Lucian ripped his hand out of the skull. The liquid sloshed, and one of the candles blew itself out.

Lucian fell to the ground. Breathing heavy. Shaking as if something still clung to him.

Kindred stared at him. “What... what was that?”

Smoke walked around to his old friend, offering his hand. “Are you ok?”

Lucian didn’t answer right away. He wiped his hand slowly on a cloth, his eyes distant. He looked at Smoke, different now, no humor, no sarcasm.

“You’ve got yourself an Adalon Feeder,” he said quietly.

Kindred blinked. “A what?”

Lucian ignored him. “This isn’t normal,” he continued. “Not the way it fed. Not the way it entered.”

Smoke stepped closer. “Explain.”

Lucian shook his head slightly. “They don’t do it like this. Not this fast. Not this... rough.” He looked back at the skull. Then at Smoke. “This one’s being pushed. As if it’s being controlled. Used.” Lucian looked at Smoke, confused. “This isn’t feeding.”

A pause.

“It is being forced.”

Kindred felt his stomach drop.

Lucian slowly raised himself back up, his eyes locked on Smoke. “And whatever’s holding it...” A small shake of his head, “It’s pissing it off.”

Silence filled the room. The candles burned lower.

“This thing doesn’t belong in the open,” he said. “Someone put it there. If they lose control of it...” He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t have to.

Lucian stood for a moment longer, his eyes still on Smoke. He turned, walked to the fridge without another word, and pulled it open. The light spilled out across the room.

He grabbed three beers. Popped each one open on the edge of the counter, one after another, and brought them back to the table. One for Smoke, one in front of Kindred, and one for himself.

Kindred looked at it, then back up. “We can’t drink while on duty.”

Smoke didn't even look at him. He picked up the bottle, took a slow sip, then glanced at his watch. "Give it about thirty minutes," he said. "We'll be off the clock soon enough. You can have your warm beer then." He took another sip. "Besides... I don't really need your righteous bullshit right now."

Kindred checked his watch. 5:30 a.m. He blinked. Didn't feel like it.

Lucian leaned back slightly, a beer in hand. "You need to be careful with this, Smoke," he said. "Someone's playing with things they shouldn't be playing with. You don't just find a demon, Smoke. Petty, the person stupid enough to trap one." He let that hang in the air for a second. "I think you're going to see more of this."

Smoke lifted his bottle slightly toward him. "I'm afraid you're right, my old friend. I think this is just the beginning." He took another sip, then set the bottle down. "But I appreciate you pointing us in the right direction."

Lucian gave a slight nod. "Don't wait too long to act on it."

Smoke slid the second beer across the table toward Kindred. "Come on, kid. Get over yourself and drink the fucking beer."

Kindred looked down at the bottle. The cold glass was already sweating onto the tabletop.

"We've been through enough tonight," Smoke said. "We earned it."

Kindred picked up the bottle and turned it in his hands for a moment before standing. He walked it over to the kitchen and set it beside the refrigerator.

"Thank you, Lucian," he said. "I appreciate it."

Lucian looked up from his beer. "You don't drink?"

"I do." Kindred shrugged. "Just not right now."

When he returned to the table, he caught the look on Smoke's face.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, what?"

Smoke took a sip from his bottle. "I just figured you'd enjoy a beer after a night like this."

Kindred laughed softly. "I'm exhausted, Smoke. That's all. I'm not making a statement."

"Sounds like you're making a statement."

"I'm really not."

Smoke looked unconvinced.

Kindred spread his hands. "I appreciate it, Lucian. I appreciate the beer and the hospitality. I just want twelve hours of sleep."

For a moment, nobody said anything. Then Smoke snorted. "Alright, alright. You don't want the beer, don't drink the beer."

"Thank you," Eric replied.

"I wasn't going to put a gun to your head."

Kindred smiled. "That's very reassuring."

Smoke pointed the bottle at him. "Don't push it, kid. That is only out of respect for our host."

Lucian chuckled quietly into his drink and rolled his eyes.

Smoke shook his head and took another pull from the bottle. A few minutes later, Smoke finished his drink and got up. "I guess we'd better get out of your hair, old friend."

"That would be very much appreciated," Lucian said with a smile.

As they walked out, Smoke gave Lucian a hug, making sure Kindred was already outside.

"Appreciate it, brother. I owe you one."

Lucian rolled his eyes. "You already owe me several."

Smoke laughed. "Fair enough."

Lucian raised his bottle slightly. "No need to thank me. Just let me know what you find."

"If I need more," Smoke said, already heading toward the door, "I know where you'll be."

"That is precisely what worries me." Lucian watched them as they wandered off and slowly disappeared into the darkness.

The warm glow from the windows shone through the branches like distant lanterns. Kindred glanced back once and could hear the locks slide back into place.

One.

Two.

Three.

The walk back to the car was quiet. Both men were exhausted, and there was not much to say for the moment, so why fill the silence with empty words? Eric had hundreds of questions, but his desire for sleep was stronger.

The eastern horizon had begun to brighten. Dark blue gave way to gray, and gray slowly surrendered to pale gold. The trees no longer felt threatening in the growing light, though Kindred couldn't shake the feeling that they had been watching all night. Maybe it was the exhaustion. Maybe it wasn't.

They got in the car, started the engine, and slowly maneuvered back to the main road. The sun was now starting to announce itself; the sky turned from dark to a deep indigo streaked with bands of orange and pale gold. Smoke drove for a few minutes, slowed down, and pulled over to the side of the road. He put the car in park and stepped out of the vehicle.

Kindred looked at him, confused. "What's going on?"

"Your turn."

Kindred frowned. "My turn?"

Smoke opened the passenger side door. "You slept on the way in," he said. "Now I'm sleeping on the way out. I'm beat."

Kindred reluctantly stepped out, moving around to the driver's side. Realization slowly spread across his face. "You set me up?"

Smoke slid into the passenger seat, looking confused. "Set you up how?"

"You offered me to sleep on our way in, knowing you would then take your turn sleeping on our way back." Eric looked into Smoke's eyes. They were mysterious as always, but bloodshot.

Smoke stared at him for a second. Then shook his head. "Kindred, I understand it might seem that way. But I am just beat. It's been an extremely long day. I just need to close my eyes for a second. Drive us back to the precinct, please? Not everything is a test or a setup."

"Well, it sure feels that way." Eric protested.

"It's called teamwork." Smoke leaned his head back, already closing his eyes, not dignifying Eric's statement with a reply. "Wake me up when we hit Chicago. I am an old man. I need my naps."

Kindred stared at the road for a second, looked ahead, then over at Smoke, who was already passed out. "Yeah... okay." He shifted the car into drive and pulled back onto the road.

CHAPTER 8

The sun was already up by the time they pulled into the precinct parking lot. Morning light washed over the station, flattening everything out and making it look smaller than it had during the night. Kindred killed the engine and sat there for a moment.

A few hours ago, he had been standing inside a house filled with relics, human remains, chained books, and enough religious symbols to fill a church. He had watched a man use a human skull to look through the eyes of a murder victim. Now two patrol officers were arguing over donuts near the entrance. Nobody seemed concerned. The world had continued on; that was how it always worked. Everyone just lived inside their own version of reality. Beside him, Smoke stirred. The moment the engine went silent, his eyes opened.

Kindred shook his head. "How do you do that?"

"Years of practice."

"You weren't even awake."

"I am now."

Smoke stretched slightly, glanced around the parking lot, and opened the door. Before stepping out, he paused. "You did all right tonight."

Kindred looked over. For a second, he wasn't sure he had heard him correctly. "Didn't expect that."

Smoke nodded once. "You're welcome."

Kindred blinked. "That's it?"

Smoke climbed out of the car. "What did you want? A trophy?"

Despite everything that had happened, Kindred laughed. The sound surprised him.

A few hours ago, he had watched a man convulse over a skull filled with wine while describing a creature that had hollowed someone out from the inside. Now, he was laughing in a police parking lot.

They walked into the station. The building was already humming with activity. Phones rang somewhere in the distance. Coffee brewed down the hallway. Officers moved from desk to desk, carrying paperwork, complaints, and problems that suddenly felt incredibly small.

Nobody knew what had happened during the night. Nobody knew what was still coming.

Smoke slowed near the hallway that split off toward the back of the building.

"You're done for now, kid."

Kindred looked at him.

"Go home. Get some sleep if you can. It's been a long night."

"Yeah."

Smoke studied him for a moment. Longer than usual. "Every night before you go to sleep, I want you to pray the rosary."

Kindred frowned. At first, he thought Smoke was joking. He wasn't.

"The full one," Smoke continued. "No shortcuts. Doesn't matter if we're working a case or not." Smoke stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I mean it."

Something in his voice stopped Kindred from arguing. "Alright," Kindred said.

Smoke nodded. "Good." Then he turned and started walking away.

Kindred stood there for a moment, watching him disappear down the hallway. The words bounced around inside his exhausted brain as he suddenly understood why Smoke had told him to get some sleep. His head hurt. He turned around and headed for the exit. Smoke continued toward the rear of the building. Away from the noise, and most importantly, away from everybody else. Heading toward the quieter part of the precinct, where fewer people bothered to go. The place where he felt most at home. He pushed open a heavy metal door. The staircase waited on the other side.

His hand settled on the railing. As he started going down, cold steel slid beneath his fingers.

Clang.

The first step echoed into the darkness.

Clang.

The sounds disappeared below.

The deeper he descended, the quieter the station became.

Eventually, even the ringing phones vanished.

Good.

He had work to do.

CHAPTER 9

Chicago, 14th District Area Central

The room was quiet. Old pipes clicked somewhere inside the walls. Air moved lazily through the ventilation ducts overhead. Every now and then, the station settled around him with a soft groan that sounded almost human.

Smoke had nestled himself in his chair, tilted back just enough to be comfortable, one boot hooked against the edge of the desk to keep himself from sliding off completely. The overhead lights had been turned off hours ago. Only the amber glow of a desk lamp illuminated the office, casting long shadows across stacks of books, overflowing case files, and decades' worth of accumulated clutter. Most detectives decorated their offices with photographs of family, sports memorabilia, or plaques commemorating careers they were proud of. Smoke's office was different.

He had occupied the room so long that it had slowly become an extension of himself. Leather-bound books crowded the shelves alongside criminal case files. A worn crucifix hung on one wall. Small religious icons sat tucked between stacks of paperwork. A bottle of holy water occupied a permanent place near the corner of his desk. Several bundles of incense rested beside a brass candle holder darkened by years of use.

An antique typewriter sat on a filing cabinet near the window, its black metal frame worn smooth by time. Nobody in the department knew why he kept it. Nobody had ever asked.

A weathered rosary draped over a lamp. A small silver medal tucked beneath a photograph of the inside of a church. The underside of his

bookshelves had symbols scratched in places where nobody would think to look.

His office was nowhere as dramatic as Lucian's collection, nothing that would immediately draw attention; it was still his place of work after all, but it had enough character for anyone paying close attention to realize this wasn't the office of your average detective.

It was the office of a man who spent his life preparing for things most people refused to believe existed.

The only thing in the room that looked completely at home was Dee Dee. Sleeping in his lap as if she owned the place, curled into herself, breathing slow and steady, completely unaware of anything outside her small, contained world.

Smoke was hovering between sleeping and thinking. Fragments of the previous night drifted in and out.

The body. The smell of sulfur. The empty eye sockets still staring at him. Lucian's voice. *This isn't feeding... this is being forced.* Smoke shifted slightly in the chair. His hand moved absently, resting against Dee Dee's back. Something about it didn't sit right. The demon did not make sense. Neither did the kill.

Control.

That was the key. That was the part that stuck. Control was the part that bothered him.

Demons existed. That wasn't the problem. People summoned things they shouldn't all the time. Most of them ended up dead. Control was different. Control meant intention. Control meant someone knew exactly what they were doing, or they were dumb enough to try. Which made them even more dangerous.

The phone rang, and Smoke's eyes snapped open. His foot jerked off the desk, catching the edge of a stack of books as he moved. They tipped, slid, and hit the floor with a dull thud. Dee Dee bolted upright. "Easy," Smoke muttered, already reaching for the phone.

"Ravenstein."

A pause. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand, leaning forward now, fully awake.

"Yeah." Another pause. "Alright." He straightened slightly. "You're running it early?" A faint shift in his tone. "Yeah... I'll be there."

Another pause. "Seven works. Appreciate it, Doc." He hung up. Sat there with his head in his hands for a second and then reached for his cell phone.

The message was short.

Autopsy got priority.

Coroner's office. 0700.

Don't eat before you get there.

He stared at it for a second. Then added:

Not optional.

He pressed send and pushed himself up from the chair, his back cracked slightly as he stood.

He grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair, shrugged it on, and headed for the door.

He scratched Dee Dee behind the ears, checked her food and water one last time, and headed for the door. The books still lay scattered across the floor. He didn't bother picking them up. They'd still be there later. The case would too.

CHAPTER 10

Cook County Medical Examiner's Office 7 pm

The air outside was colder than it should've been for the time of day. Kindred was already there, standing near the entrance, his hands shoved into his pockets, shifting his weight from one foot to the other like he hadn't quite decided if he wanted to be there yet. He looked up as Smoke approached.

"You look like shit," Kindred said.

Smoke didn't slow. "Good," he replied.

Kindred glanced at him. The coroner's office didn't look like much from the outside. It was a prime example of seventies concrete brutalism with no windows on the lower level. It was the kind of place people walked past without thinking about what was happening inside. Maybe that was a good thing. Cause many of them might end up here sooner or later.

The front doors opened with a soft hydraulic hiss. The building was cooler than the outside. Not by much. Just enough for Kindred to notice. The second thing that hit was the smell. A blend of industrial cleaner and disinfectant. The sharp chemicals reminded Eric of hospitals he had visited. Underneath lingered something else. His nose wrinkled slightly.

"Yeah," Smoke said quietly. "You get used to it."

"Do you?"

"Eventually."

The lobby looked like it had survived three decades without anybody bothering to update it. Faded tile floors stretched beneath fluorescent lights that hummed softly overhead. Plastic chairs lined one wall beside a table stacked with outdated magazines. A coffee machine sat in the corner. Nobody was using it.

A receptionist glanced up briefly, pushed a clipboard forward, and returned to her paperwork.

Smoke signed them in as Eric studied the hallway beyond the security door. The entire building operated with a strange kind of calm. As if everybody had accepted, they spent their days surrounded by the dead.

"You ever get used to this place?" Kindred asked.

Smoke looked at him. "The dead? Sure."

Eric frowned.

"The dead don't bother me." Smoke nodded toward the hallway. "It's the living that worry me the most."

A few minutes later, a door opened down the hall.

"Detective Ravenstein?"

Dr. Matthews was in his mid-fifties, slightly balding with a neatly trimmed black mustache.

Everything about him was precise. Pressed shirt. Clean hands. Short trimmed fingernails.

He was the embodiment of a man who controlled his environment because of what he worked with every day.

"Doc," Smoke nodded his way of saying hello.

Matthews gave a small nod. “Good to see you again, Smoke. We moved him up for you.”

“I appreciate that.” The two men shook hands.

Most people avoided death. Smoke and Matthews had built their careers around it.

Matthews gestured down the hall. “Come on. I already have him on the table for you.”

The hallway felt longer than it should have. Cold fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, several of them flickering faintly as they walked beneath them. Every door looked identical. White paint. Small metal placards. No decorations. No personal touches.

Nobody had bothered trying to make the place feel welcoming. Why would they? People rarely came here on good days.

Their footsteps echoed softly against the polished floor. Somewhere deeper in the building, a metal cart rattled briefly before disappearing into silence again. Eric found himself looking at each door as they passed.

Toxicology. Records. Evidence Storage.

Names that sounded clinical and harmless until he remembered where he was. The entire building felt detached from the rest of the city.

Chicago existed outside. The dead existed in here.

They stopped at the end of the hallway. Matthews put his hand on the door and, before he walked through, pointed out the nearest restroom. “Just in case.”

Once they entered the autopsy room, it felt freezing. Eric looked at the thermostat on the wall.

59F. Holy Shit.

The room, just like its caretaker, was meticulous. Stainless steel counters lined the walls beneath rows of cabinets. Rolling carts stood nearby with the tools of the trade laid out and waiting. A Stryker saw capable of cutting through bone in seconds. A Virchow skull breaker is used to remove the cap of the skull. Several enterotome scissors are designed to cut safely through organs and intestines. Beside them rested an ultra-sharp PM40 autopsy knife, its polished blade reflecting the harsh fluorescent light overhead. There was no mystery about what happened in this room. The instruments were displayed openly, as if the dead deserved honesty.

The examination table stood in the center of the room beneath a bank of surgical lights.

Eric's eyes were drawn to the shape that was lying beneath the white sheet. A person he had seen just a few hours ago.

This wasn't the academy; there were no instructors, no training videos. No carefully selected photographs shown from a projector screen. A real man lay beneath that sheet. Waiting to be cut open.

Eric swallowed, his stomach tightened slightly. *Ob No*. He knew the feeling. *I can't*. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on something else. He could not give Smoke the satisfaction of seeing him turn pale.

“Ok. Let’s get started.” Matthews moved to the side, pulling on gloves with practiced ease, the rubber band snapping against his skin. “You’re going to want to stand back a bit,” he said, glancing briefly at Kindred. “Especially you.”

Matthews looked at Smoke. “You said there were... irregularities?”

Smoke nodded.

“You’ll see them.” Matthews slowly pulled the sheet back, exposing the pale remains of Jason DeLong.

Eric held his breath without realizing it. The eyes— Gone. Empty sockets stared toward the ceiling beneath the harsh surgical lights. Eric could still see flashes of Lucian's vision. Something reaching in. Something taking what it wanted.

His stomach tightened. The memory collided with the room's chemical smells, the faint copper scent lingering beneath them. Suddenly, the temperature didn't matter anymore. His mouth filled with saliva. A warning. His body was preparing for something he desperately didn't want to happen. *Not now*. He clenched his jaw and forced himself to focus on one of the cabinets across the room. Anything to stay focused, anything to distract his body from what it wanted to do. *Not now*. A few deep breaths brought him back, but he remained on edge.

Smoke had already put on gloves and slid a mask over his face. Matthews nodded toward the body.

“Well... you’ve already seen the obvious,” he said. “Eyes and any connective tissue are gone.” He leaned in slightly, studying the sockets again.

“Which... I don’t like.” Smoke said.

“And there’s no blood.” Matthews pointed a little flashlight into the eyeless victim. “Not on the body. Not internally. Not in the surrounding tissue. I tried to draw samples earlier—nothing. Completely dry.” He glanced at Smoke. “I’ve never seen that.”

Smoke didn’t respond right away. “Let’s open him up,” he said.

Matthews gave a small nod. “Alright. That is what I wanted to do.”

Smoke stepped back from the table and turned toward Eric. “Come here.”

Eric hesitated, then moved closer.

“Have you seen an autopsy before?” Smoke asked.

“Just... videos. At the academy.”

Smoke nodded once. “This is different.” He kept his voice calm. “You’re going to hear things you’re not used to hearing. You’re going to smell things you’re not used to smelling.”

Eric nodded.

“The saw’s going to cut through bone,” Smoke continued. “It is a very particular sound. Sometimes you’ll hear the bones crack. But for me, it’s the smell. The smell of bone being cut. It is a mix of fire and barbecue.” A small pause. “If you need to step out, step out. No one’s going to give you shit for it.”

Eric shook his head. “No. I’m good.”

Smoke held his gaze for a second longer. “Stay focused,” he said. “Take it in. This is part of the job.”

“Yes, s—”

Smoke cut him off. “What did I say about calling me ‘sir’?”

Eric caught himself. “...Got it.”

Smoke gave a slight nod and turned back to the table. “We’re ready.”

Matthews was already set up, the autopsy knife firmly in hand. “Shall we?”

He drew from the collarbone to DeLong’s solar plexus and back to the other collarbone, then from the plexus he drew a reasonably straight line to the man’s genitalia. Once he was satisfied, he set the blade aside and slipped his gloved fingers beneath the edges of the incision. He gently folded the skin and tissue back, exposing the rib cage beneath.

Eric found himself staring despite every instinct telling him not to. Matthews worked with the calm focus of a librarian opening a rare book. The dead had stories to tell, and it was their job to read them.

Doc plugged in the saw; the cord ran across the stainless-steel surface. The motor gave a low hum as he briefly tested it. Without any hesitation, he started to cut the ribcage from the sides.

A high, vibrating whine filled the room as the blade met bone. Pressure and vibration worked together as the blade chewed through the sternum, the table trembling slightly.

Eric felt it in his chest more than he heard it. A faint, deep vibration. And the smell. The smell that Smoke had warned him about. *Pork chops*. That’s what it first reminded Eric of. His Mom’s pork chops soaking in good, real butter. He almost lost it altogether.

The visual of Matthews almost being arm deep in a dead body, and the memory of his mom’s beloved pork chops. It was too much, and Eric turned around for a second, holding on to the counter behind him.

Matthews set down the saw and picked up the rib shears to finish the separation.

Then, carefully, he lifted the entire front plate of the rib cage and set it aside. Eric couldn’t help himself and stepped a little closer. Matthews leaned in. Paused.

“...That’s not right.”

He reached for a small penlight. Clicked it on and shone it into the chest cavity.

Nothing.

No lungs. No heart. No blood. No tissue collapse. Just darkness. He moved the light downward, where the liver should’ve been. The stomach, the intestines. Empty. All of it.

He glanced at Smoke. “Are you seeing this?”

Smoke didn’t take his eyes off the body. “He’s hollow,” he said.

Eric felt his stomach drop. He took a step back, his shoulder brushing against the wall behind him. The cold tile grounds him.

Matthews leaned closer, his curiosity pushed past professionalism. He adjusted the angle of the light upward, into DeLong’s throat. He followed the esophagus. Tracing it with his little penlight. To Eric, it looked as if a glow bug was traveling up the man’s throat. Mathews stuck the penlight up, as far as he could, the beam traveled upwards, and then, it appeared again, faintly coming back through the eye sockets. A straight line of light. Matthews froze.

“...No obstruction,” he said quietly. “No structure. No residual tissue.” He leaned back slightly. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Silence settled over the room.

Smoke stepped back first. “That’s enough,” he said.

Matthews looked at him. “You don’t want—”

“I’ve got what I need; he is not going to get deader.” Smoke replied. A small pause. “I’ll see it in your report.”

Matthews nodded slowly. Still looking at the body, he signaled to the assistants. “Close him up.” They moved in quietly, replaced the rib plate, and started stitching the skin back into place.

Eric didn’t watch. Smoke peeled off his gloves, stepped on one of the trash cans near the door, and flung them in the trash. “Thank you, Doc. I appreciate you.”

Matthews had taken one glove off already and waved goodbye. “You boys stay safe out there. I don’t want to see you on my table.”

“We’ll try not to.” Smoke grinned as he let Kindred pass him.

They stepped back into the hallway. The smell hit Eric again. It almost smelled stronger out here. A gurney sat parked along one side of the hallway. *Coming? Or going?* He thought. Everything in the hallway felt temporary. Nothing was meant to stay in this place, not even the people who worked here.

They walked in silence. The door opened, and the outside air hit them immediately. It wasn’t warm outside, but it felt like it. Eric exhaled harder than he meant to. He hadn’t realized how tightly he had been holding everything in until that moment.

Smoke stepped out beside him and took a second before moving, letting the air settle, letting the noise of the world drift back in. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it without saying a word.

Eric stood there for a moment, still processing what he had just witnessed, still hovering somewhere halfway between the autopsy room and the parking lot.

Smoke took a slow drag, then glanced over at him. “You did well, kid.”

Eric let out a short breath, almost a laugh, but not quite. “I almost lost it in there.”

Smoke nodded slightly, watching the smoke drift upward. “But you didn’t,” he said. “That’s what matters.”

A pause. Smoke studied him for a second longer. He wouldn’t say it out loud, but for a first autopsy, the kid had handled himself better than most. Better than some guys who had been on the job for years.

“That part doesn’t get easier,” he added. “You just get better at dealing with it.”

Eric nodded. They started walking toward the car, the gravel crunching lightly under their boots. The building behind them already felt distant, like something they had stepped out of but not fully left.

Smoke opened the driver’s door, then paused, his hand resting on the frame. Something about this case didn’t sit right. The victim’s remains, Lucian’s vision. Something was controlling it. Who was holding its leash? Why would anyone in their right mind try to control a demon? He knew that if they found that piece of the puzzle, they would crack this case wide open.

He flicked the last of the ash from his cigarette and dropped it to the ground, crushing it under his boot before getting in. “I’ll see you back at the station,” he said and drove out of the parking lot. Eric followed behind him, glad he could breathe normally again.

CHAPTER 11

Smoke opened the office door and stepped inside. Without breaking stride, he tossed his keys onto the desk and dropped into his chair. The computer hummed to life as he pressed the power button. Behind him, Kindred wandered in and looked around. Smoke barely noticed, his attention already on the screen. Until Dee Dee appeared. The cat materialized from somewhere behind a stack of books, stretched lazily, and jumped onto the desk.

"Don't."

Dee Dee ignored him, stepping directly onto the keyboard, filling the screen with nonsense.

Smoke stared at it. "Fuck Dee."

Dee Dee stared back, walked across the keys one last time, and settled herself in front of the monitor. Satisfied that she had disrupted her human's day at least once.

Kindred watched the entire exchange. "Who's in charge around here?"

Smoke sighed. "The cat."

Kindred laughed quietly, "Just making sure we're all clear on the chain of command."

Smoke pointed at her. "See? That's exactly the kind of attitude I'm talking about."

Kindred looked around the office again. "You know, if I'm going to keep working with you, I need a place to sit."

Smoke glanced up from the keyboard. "You are sitting right now."

Kindred rolled his eyes. "A permanent place."

"You're assuming you get to keep working with me." Smoke stopped typing for a second.

"Permanent or not, I still need a space."

Smoke returned his attention to the computer.

"And somewhere to plug in my laptop."

That actually made Smoke pause. "There's a desk."

Kindred followed his finger. "What desk?"

"The one under all the shit. Over there near the corner and the water cooler."

Kindred stared at the mountain of boxes, books, newspapers, and forgotten case files. "That's a desk?"

"It was when I got it."

Kindred stood up and walked towards the corner Smoke had pointed out. When he reached the boxed-up corner, he turned. "You ever air this place out?" he asked.

Smoke didn't look up.

"No." Before Kindred could reply, Smoke added, "It used to keep people like you away."

Eric started clearing one side of the corner, and a desk leg came into view. Slowly, he started to clear some space.

On the opposite side of the room, Smoke moved straight to one of the shelves against the wall, his eyes scanning titles, his fingers brushing across spines with cracked leather and faded lettering that had been handled too many times. He started pulling some down.

One.

Two.

Then a third, heavier than the others.

He walked over to Eric and dropped them onto the corner he had painstakingly cleared with a solid thud. "Start with these."

Kindred looked down at the stack. "I spend ten minutes cleaning this place up, and you immediately add more crap."

"They're not crap. It's called research." Smoke pulled another book from the shelf. "If we stopped to organize this place and make it nice and homey, we'd never get a damn thing done." He pointed toward the corner. "You got a desk. You got a chair." Then he pointed at the books. "Now get to work."

"What am I looking for?"

"Anything that mentions Adalon Feeders," Smoke said, already turning back toward the shelves. "Anything about entities that enter through or eat eyes. Hollow bodies. Internal consumption. I don't care if it's folklore, theology, or complete bullshit. If it even smells close to what we saw, I want it."

Kindred picked up the top book and flipped it open. "You got anything a little more organized than this?"

Smoke pulled another volume free and dropped it onto his own side of the desk. "This is organized."

Kindred looked around the office. The shelves were overflowing. Books had long ago escaped their designated places and formed colonies of their own across the room. Some were stacked on filing cabinets. Others were piled on the floor. A few appeared to be supporting pieces of furniture. "That's terrifying."

Smoke ignored him and opened a drawer, pulled out a bundle of incense, and struck a lighter.

A moment later, a thin ribbon of dragon blood incense curled upward and drifted lazily through the office.

Kindred shook his head. "One day, OSHA is going to find this place."

"Good."

"Good?"

Smoke settled into his chair. "Maybe they'll clean it for me."

Kindred snorted and opened one of the books. The pages were yellowed and brittle. The small print filled every available inch of the paper. The margins were even worse. Handwritten notes crowded the edges. Some were crossed out, others were circled. Some notes were arguing with other notes written years earlier. It looked less like a book and more like a conversation someone had been having with themselves.

"You actually read all this?"

"I don't read it." Smoke flipped through a second volume. "I scan it. Remember where things are."

Kindred looked at the notes again. "That's insane."

"Probably."

Kindred turned another page, then another. Nothing made sense. Fragments of documents. References to books or events. Half-finished theories and names he couldn't pronounce. A folded piece of paper slipped from between the pages and landed on the desk. Carefully, Eric unfolded it. Three words had been written across it in thick black ink.

DON'T TRUST MIRRORS.

Kindred stared at it. Then slowly looked up. Smoke never even glanced over.

"Found one of the fun ones, huh?"

"What does it mean?" Eric asked, holding up the note.

Smoke turned a page in the book he was reviewing and glanced up for a second. "Kid, you think my eyes are that good? What does it say?"

Kindred looked back down.

DON'T TRUST MIRRORS.

The longer he stared at it, the less he liked it.

"If I knew that, I probably wouldn't have written it down."

"That's not reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be." Smoke shrugged. "Mirrors are tricky. In some cultures, they're portals. In others people's souls get trapped inside them. Allegedly." A pause. "I'm pretty sure that one had something to do with a case."

A loud thump landed on Eric's desk. He jumped out of his chair.

"What the fuck!"

Smoke looked up.

Dee Dee had emerged from one of her sleeping cubbies and, in the process of climbing down, had knocked a book down onto the desk. Her timing was impeccable.

Kindred put a hand against his chest.

Smoke started laughing so hard that he was wiping tears from the corner of one eye.

"You should've seen your face."

Kindred glared at him. "Not. Funny." Still gasping for air.

Dee Dee stretched once, slow and deliberate, and walked straight across the desk like it belonged to her, and placed one paw on top of the book he was reading.

"Hey—" Kindred said, trying to slide the book out from under her.

She didn't move. Just stood there, her stubby tail flicking once, staring at him like he was the problem.

"She outranks you," he said.

Kindred let out a quiet breath. "I'm starting to see that."

Smoke finally looked up from his book. With a sigh, he pushed himself out of his chair and crossed the room.

"You're in the way."

Dee Dee blinked slowly, completely unconcerned. Smoke scratched behind her ear and scooped her up with one arm. She offered no resistance whatsoever.

"Of course," Kindred muttered. "Now she listens."

"She's not listening." Smoke carried her back toward his side of the office. "She's allowing me to move her." He settled her onto his desk. Dee Dee immediately curled into a ball beside a stack of books.

Kindred shook his head, slid his book free, and grabbed another from the stack. "Unbelievable."

Smoke returned to his chair and flipped another page. Then he stopped for a second. "Lucian wasn't guessing," he said.

Kindred looked up. "What do you mean?"

Smoke tapped the page lightly. "These things don't show up in just one mythology. You get pieces. Different names. Different descriptions. But the pattern's the same."

He leaned back slightly, thinking it through. "Entry through the eyes. Internal consumption. Leaves nothing behind."

Kindred felt Lucian's vision again. The hollow body. Missing eyes. "So they're real," Kindred said quietly.

Smoke looked up from the page. "Eric, we just watched a coroner shine a flashlight through a man's throat and out his eye sockets." A pause. "What part of that seemed imaginary to you?"

Kindred frowned. For a minute, the room was silent. Smoke closed the book in front of him.

"That's enough for today."

Kindred looked up, surprised. "We're just getting started."

"And we'll finish it tomorrow," Smoke said. "Sometimes you need to stop when you are ahead." He stood, stretching slightly, rolling tension out of his shoulders. "What we need to do next is not in these books."

Kindred waited for an answer.

"We go to where he worked," Smoke said. "DeLong, talk to his people. See who he was, what he was into, who he pissed off."

Kindred nodded. "Yeah... that makes sense."

"Meet me at noon," Smoke added. "We'll head out together."

Kindred started stacking the books instinctively.

"Leave the books. Go home." Smoke said.

"What was the place again?" Eric asked.

Smoke thought for a second. "Green... something," he said. "We'll pull the file in the morning and confirm it."

Kindred nodded. "Alright."

"Get some rest," he said.

Kindred gave a small nod. "You too."

Smoke didn't answer. He just turned and stepped out into the hallway. Eric followed a few steps behind. As he passed Smoke's desk, he reached down and scratched Dee Dee behind the ears. "See you tomorrow, boss."

Dee Dee blinked, not impressed.

He stepped into the hallway and pulled the door shut behind him.

CHAPTER 12

The next day, Kindred arrived at the precinct right at noon, still carrying the weight of the night before. He hadn't been able to shake it yet. It all felt as if he had lived inside a nightmare.

He stepped towards the front doors and immediately spotted Smoke outside, leaning against the brick near the entrance, a cigarette between his fingers. He looked like he had been there for a while.

Smoke glanced over as Kindred approached, taking a slow drag before dropping the cigarette to the ground and crushing it under his boot.

"Alright, kid," he said. "Let's go."

Kindred slowed slightly, shaking his head as he walked up to him. "When did you even get here?" he asked.

Smoke gave him a sideways look, like the question didn't make sense. "Get here?" he said. "I never left."

Kindred frowned, not knowing if he was telling the truth or not. "You serious? You walked out just before me?"

Smoke didn't answer right away. He reached for another cigarette but didn't light it this time, just rolled it between his fingers as he spoke. "I went upstairs to see the captain, and it got late. I sleep here most nights anyway," he said. "Got a cot in the back of the office. That's all I need."

He said it plainly, without pride or complaint, as if he were stating a fact about the weather.

Kindred studied him for a second, trying to figure out where that fit, dedication, obsession or something else entirely. "Right," Kindred said finally.

Smoke nodded once and pushed off the wall. "Let's go pay the good people at Terra Green a visit," he said. "See what Mr. DeLonge was all about."

The drive across the city gave Kindred just enough time to settle into something that felt like focus again. Traffic moved in steady lines, people crossed streets with purpose, storefronts opened, and deliveries were made. Everything outside the car moved forward like the world hadn't paused at all, like nothing had happened the night before. Inside the car, it felt different.

Kindred flipped open his notebook, glancing down at a few scribbled notes he had made that morning. "I did some digging," he said. "Online stuff mostly."

Smoke kept his eyes on the road. "And?"

“Terra Green Consulting. About forty employees. They handle grants, financial consulting, work with institutions, nonprofits... that kind of thing.” He shrugged slightly. “Looks clean. Straightforward. Honestly, kind of boring.”

Smoke gave a small nod, as if he had expected exactly that. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s how it always looks from the outside.”

Kindred glanced over at him. “What do you mean?”

Smoke shifted his grip on the wheel slightly, eyes still forward. “I mean, people don’t put the truth on their front page,” he said. “They put what they want you to see.”

“Fair enough,” Kindred said.

They drove in silence for a while after that, the city tightening around them as they moved into a denser part of the neighborhood.

“You eat yet?” Smoke asked.

“Yeah. I did.”

“Good. Then we don’t have to waste time.” That was all he said.

They turned onto West Schiller. The buildings here were older, packed tighter together, the kind that had been repurposed more than once over the years. Residential spaces sat above small businesses, everything layered, everything sharing walls.

Terra Green Consulting occupied suite number 453. A glass door, with simple lettering, nothing flashy, indicated they were at the right place. If you weren’t looking for it, you would have missed it.

They parked along the street and stepped out. The air carried the usual mix of city smells. Kindred glanced up at the building once before following Smoke inside.

The lobby was small but carefully designed. Neutral tones, soft lighting, minimal clutter. It was the kind of space meant to put clients at ease without drawing attention to itself.

And then there was the table.

Set just off to the side of the entrance, as if someone had tried to keep it from dominating the room, but it did anyway.

A framed photograph of Jason DeLonge sat at the center. He looked exactly like the kind of man Kindred expected from the file. Well-groomed, confident, approachable. He had a great smile.

A notebook lay open beside the picture; its pages filled with handwritten messages. Some short and formal, others longer, more personal, written by people who had taken the time to say something that mattered.

"Jason. I can't believe you are gone." Derrick.

"You were the best boss I ever worked for." Susan

"Condolences to the family, you are missed." The Hetfield Family.

"Thank you for giving me a chance when nobody else would." No signature.

A candle burned next to it, the flame flickering quietly. Kindred slowed without meaning to. For the first time, the victim wasn't just a name on a report. He was a person.

"Detectives?" The voice came from behind the reception desk, soft but strained.

Eric and Smoke turned. A young woman stood there, one hand resting lightly on the counter as if she needed the support. Her posture was professional, but only just. There was something frayed around the edges, something held together more out of necessity than composure. Her eyes were red, and a tissue rested crumpled in her hand.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her voice catching slightly as she finished the sentence.

Smoke stepped forward, flipping his badge open.

“Detective Ravenstein,” he said. “This is Detective Kindred.” He nodded toward the photo.

“We’re here about Mr. DeLonge.”

The woman’s gaze shifted immediately to the picture. For a moment, she couldn’t speak.

Her fingers tightened around the tissue, and she looked down at it like she had forgotten she was holding it.

“I figured,” she said quietly. “Anna Meyers.” She held out her hand and politely introduced herself. She took a breath, trying to steady herself, and looked back up at them. “He was... he was a good man,” she added, almost under her breath.

Kindred noticed the way she said it. There was no performance in it. No rehearsed sympathy, just loss. Behind her, the office carried on. Phones rang. Conversations drifted from further down the hallway. A printer came to life somewhere, the rhythmic sound of paper feeding through filling the space for a few seconds before stopping again. Beeping as it jammed with yet another piece of paper. Work didn’t stop. Even when you died, the world kept moving on.

Smoke gave her just enough time to collect herself before speaking again.

"We're going to need to talk to everyone," he said. "Anyone who worked closely with him. Anyone who saw him before he left."

She nodded, though it took her a second to fully process what he was asking.

"Yes... of course," she said. "I can arrange that." She glanced toward the hallway behind her. "I can bring people into the conference room, one at a time," she added. "That might be easier."

Smoke nodded. "That will work. Is there anyone not here today, Anna?" Smoke asked.

"I will have to look at our records, but I can find out for you."

"Please do." Smoke walked over to DeLong's picture. She stepped out from behind the desk, smoothing her blouse slightly, grounding herself in routine.

"This way," she said.

Kindred followed, but not before taking one more look at the table. The photograph. The personal notes that had been written down. Small things that could be important.

Smoke slowed just before the conference room, letting Anna step ahead to open the door. As she moved away, he shifted slightly toward Kindred, lowering his voice just enough to keep it between them.

"I'll take the lead in here," he said. "One at a time. Direct reports first, then department heads. We'll work our way down from there."

Kindred nodded.

Smoke glanced toward the open office floor beyond the glass walls. “You don’t need to sit in on all of it,” he continued. “Walk around. Get a feel for the place. See if anything sticks out.”

Kindred followed his gaze. “His office?” he asked.

“Yeah. Start there. See what you can access. Laptop, desk, whatever’s left behind.” Smoke paused briefly. “Don’t force anything. If it’s locked, we come back with a reason. We need to get a search warrant if we want anything to be evidence.”

Kindred nodded again. “And the receptionist?” he asked.

Smoke’s eyes flicked briefly toward the front. “She’s fragile,” he said. “That can go either way. Sometimes it means they don’t know anything. Sometimes it means they know too much and don’t know what to do with it.”

A slight pause.

“Talk to her. Easy. Let her talk herself into something.”

Kindred understood the old good-cop, bad-cop routine without it needing to be said out loud. Smoke gave him a final look.

“Take your time,” he said. “We’re not in a rush yet.” Then he turned and stepped into the conference room.

Kindred remained where he was for a second, watching Smoke shift gears almost instantly.

His posture changed. His presence sharpened. The room belonged to him now.

Eric walked towards the office floor stretched out in front of him. Workspaces were divided by glass partitions and low walls that gave just enough privacy to feel separate, but not enough to hide anything.

People were working, or at least pretending to be. Some looked up as he passed, quickly looking back down when they realized who he was. Others held his gaze a second too long before turning away. Word had already spread.

He walked slowly, not rushing it, letting the space unfold around him. Desks were organized. Too organized in some cases. Stacks of files aligned perfectly. Screens clean. Personal items minimal. But here and there, something broke the pattern. A jacket thrown over the back of a chair, a coffee cup left half-finished, a monitor still open to something unrelated to work.

Jason DeLonge's office sat at the far end. Frosted glass walls. The door still slightly ajar. Kindred pushed it open carefully and stepped inside. DeLong's office was cleaner than the rest of the offices. Not sterile. Just controlled. The desk was empty except for a closed laptop, a notepad, and a pen placed neatly across it. No clutter. No room for distractions. Kindred moved closer, scanning the space. He looked at the framed certifications on the wall.

A bookshelf with a mix of business texts and a few titles that didn't quite fit, older, worn, not the kind of thing you'd expect in a consulting office. He made a mental note of that. He set his notebook down and reached for the laptop. Opened it. The password screen came alive. He didn't push it. Not yet.

Instead, he stepped back, taking the room in again, slower this time. Looking for something that didn't belong. Something that was out of place. There was nothing obvious. Which, in a way, was its own kind of problem.

Back in the conference room, Smoke had already started interviewing. The first employee sat across from him, hands folded tightly in front of her.

Melissa Jacobs was in her Mid-thirties. Professional. Trying very hard to stay composed.

“How long did you work with Mr. DeLonge?” Smoke asked.

“About five years,” she said. “He hired me.”

Smoke nodded slightly. “And what kind of boss was he?”

She hesitated. Then chose her words carefully.

“Demanding,” she said. “But fair. He expected a lot, but he worked just as hard.”

The next interview blurred slightly into the first. Different person, different tone, but the same bullshit.

“I didn’t work directly with him,” the man in his forties said, adjusting his glasses as he spoke. “Different department. But... you hear things.”

“Like what?” Smoke asked.

“That he could be difficult,” the man replied. “He was very specific with how he wanted things to be done. That is important in a place like this.”

Another man, younger this time, more relaxed, was less careful.

“He could be an asshole,” he said with a quick shrug, as if testing how far he could go. “Deadlines mattered. If you missed one, he’d let you

know.” He leaned back slightly. “But he was fair about it. You did your job; he had your back.”

Each conversation added something new. Not enough on its own, but together... a picture started to form.

DeLong seemed competent. He was respected. He was very demanding, but he was fair.

And ... single.

Kindred circled back toward the front desk. The receptionist was back in her seat, though she didn’t look much better than before. She had traded one tissue for another, the box beside her noticeably lighter now. He approached slowly, not wanting to startle her.

“Hey, Anna,” he said, keeping his voice softer this time. “You holding up, okay?”

She gave a small nod, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m trying. I do have our attendance list for you.” She handed Kindred a printout.

Eric looked at the list. 2 people were out today. Sean Serano and Tiffany Marshall.

“Any idea where they are today?” He asked.

Anna looked up from her screen. “Tiffany had a planned medical day, and Sean called out this morning. Sick, I think.”

“Ok. Thank you. What was Sean’s relationship with Mr. DeLong?”

“Sean worked with Jason on various projects; he actually has been here longer than I have. He is one of the department heads in sales.”

“Good to know.” Eric tried to downplay his interest. “How would you say Jason and Sean got along?”

Anna shifted in her chair a little. She didn't want to be a tattletale, but the cute detective was being so nice. She didn't think there would be anything wrong with telling a little office gossip. After all, it was true.

"Well, they sure could go at it sometimes."

"Go at it?" Eric asked, frowning.

"You know. Both had strong personalities. Sean and Jason would often disagree on a project or strategy. They both were Alpha personalities."

"Alphas. I see" Eric feigned "Did they fight a lot?"

Anna looked down for a second. Afraid she was going to get in trouble. That she might have already said too much. "Well, not a lot. Sean respected Jason. But..."

"But," Eric came a little closer, "It's ok, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. Just trying to understand. And Sean isn't here, so it's really helpful to hear how everyone worked together."

Anna relented. "Sean was very upset last year that he did not get a promotion."

"O." Eric nodded.

"Yeah, he worked here so long and really did a great job on one of the projects. He really thought it was his time to move up. But Jason hired someone else. Not even from within the company."

"That must have hurt?" Eric asked.

“Yes, it really did mess up their friendship. They used to do things together outside of work, but after that, they didn’t, and almost everything felt like an argument.”

“I understand,” Eric said. “It must have felt like a betrayal.”

“It did. And it made it hard for all of us, cause we like Sean and we like Jason. But we did not want to get drawn into their issues. We just want to do our job.” She took another tissue and blew her nose.

“Did Sean say when he would be back?”

“No. Not really. He can easily be out all week. I think it hit him hard. You know. Jason being dead. All the years they worked together.”

“I am sure it's hard,” Eric said. He pulled a card from his pocket and gave it to Anna. “When Sean does come back. Could you please ask him to give me a call? And... If you ever need to talk. Just call me.” Eric was somewhat surprised by how easily he could manipulate her. She was a nice person, and he should not have felt so nonchalant about it, but on the other hand, he was pleasantly surprised by how easily he had gotten her to talk.

“Thank you, detective.” Anna’s eyes now had a little shine in them. *I am a jerk.* He thought as the guilt started to set in. Kindred leaned lightly against the counter, giving her space.

“He seems like he meant a lot to people here,” he said.

Her expression shifted. “He did,” she said. “He wasn’t just... the boss.” She stopped herself there, looking down for a second.

Kindred didn’t push it. Not yet. He let the silence sit. Let her decide if she wants to fill it. Behind him, the office continued its quiet, uneasy rhythm.

Phones, angry printers, and muted conversations. The world was moving forward.

But for the people at Terra Green Consulting, it was not quite the same anymore.

Kindred stayed at the front desk a moment longer, letting the noise of the office settle around them before he spoke again.

"How long have you worked here?"

He gave a small, reassuring smile and leaned lightly against the counter, keeping his posture open, relaxed, nothing threatening.

Anna seemed grateful for the change in subject. "Almost three years," she said. "I started not long after he... after Mr. DeLonge expanded the company."

"You worked with him directly?"

"Every day," she said. "I mean... as much as someone in my position can."

Her voice steadied a little as she spoke about work. It gave her something to hold onto.

Kindred nodded. "What was he like to work for?"

She hesitated, not because she didn't know the answer, but because she was trying to choose the right version of it. "He expected a lot," she said. "Deadlines mattered. Details mattered. He could be firm, but he wasn't... mean about it. Not unless someone gave him a reason."

Kindred let that sit for a moment. "Any issues with any employees? Anyone specific who didn't get along with him?"

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “You always get that. People who don’t like being pushed. People who think they deserve more than they do.” She gave a faint, tired shrug. “But it never got out of control. If there was a problem, it got handled.”

Kindred nodded slowly, shifting slightly as he moved the conversation forward. “What about outside the company?” he asked. “Competitors? Anyone giving him trouble? Threats, complaints, anything like that?”

Anna shook her head. “No,” she said. “Not that I ever saw. He kept most of that at a higher level. If there were issues like that, they didn’t come through me.”

Kindred glanced briefly toward DeLonge’s office, then back to her. “What about his personal life?” he asked. “Married? Kids?”

Anna’s expression changed again, just slightly. “No,” she said. “Not anymore.”

Kindred waited.

“He was married before,” she added. “He got divorced a while back. He never had kids.”

“Do you know anything about his ex-wife?” Kindred asked. “Name, where she is now, anything like that?”

She shook her head again. “I don’t,” she said. “It’s been years. He didn’t talk about it much.” A small pause. “But I can look,” she added quickly. “There might be something in the records. Old paperwork, maybe.”

Kindred nodded. “That would be very helpful.”

She relaxed a little, having something practical to offer. “He mostly just worked,” she said. “That was his life. Work, travel, back to work again.” She gave a faint, almost sad smile. “He wasn’t complicated.”

Kindred studied her for a moment. There was something in the way she said that.

It wasn’t wrong. Just... a little incomplete. Kindred wondered if Anna and Jason had been more than just boss and employee. Before he could follow up further, the conference room door opened behind him and Smoke stepped out.

The shift in energy was immediate. The room seemed to tighten around him, not because he raised his voice or changed his posture dramatically, but because of the way he carried himself.

Focused. Direct. Uninterested in anything that didn’t matter.

Doug Blevins followed a step behind. The man was in his Mid-thirties. Slightly disheveled. Shirt not quite tucked in properly, sleeves rolled unevenly. The kind of guy who gave off the impression that he was always a little more comfortable than the situation called for. But right now, that comfort wasn’t there. He rubbed the back of his neck as he walked back to his cubicle, avoiding eye contact with both Smoke and Kindred. Smoke didn’t look at him as he spoke. “We’re done for now,” he said. “Stay available.”

Doug nodded quickly. “Yeah, of course.” eager to be done.

Smoke connected with Eric for a second as he walked away, his eyes already shifting to the next person that stood waiting nearby. Smoke looked at the list Anna had given him earlier.

“Mr. Ortega, Detective Ravenstein.” Shaking the man’s hand as he held the conference room door open.

Che carried himself differently. He was well put together. There was a tension there, but it was controlled. Contained behind a careful crafted expression that didn't give much away unless you knew what to look for. Inside the conference room, Smoke didn't waste time.

"You worked directly with DeLonge?" he asked.

"Yes," Che replied. "I was in operations."

"And what was your relationship like?"

Che took a breath before answering. "Professional," he said. "He was a good boss."

Smoke watched him. Waited. Looking for small micro mannerisms. Che shifted slightly in his chair.

"Some people didn't see it that way," he added. "He had... preferences. Certain people he trusted more than others."
"Favorites?" Smoke asked.

Che gave a small, careful shrug. "You could call it that."

Smoke leaned back slightly, studying him. "Did that ever cause problems?"

"Sometimes," Shane admitted. "Not openly. But people noticed." The tone was different.

Smoke rolled his pen between his fingers. "Would you say that some people maybe resented Jason for having favorites?"

"I don't know," Che replied. "A lot of people get jealous for lots of reasons. I try not to keep score. But I don't think people were upset because he had favorites."

“No?” Smoke asked.

Che shook his head. “No. They were upset because he was cheap.”

“Cheap.” Smoke looked up from his notepad.

“Very much. He was proud that he didn’t spend a penny unless he had to. Many of us haven’t had a raise in many years. Yet the cost of living has doubled. We have lost many good people because of that. But Jason didn’t care about it. He always had a reason.”

“Interesting,” Smoke scribbled a little note and thanked Che for his time. Like with all the other people he had interviewed, he gave Che his card and told him to call if anything came to mind.

By the time the last of the interviews wrapped up, the office had started to empty. The light outside had shifted, casting longer shadows through the glass walls. Office conversations had died down. Smoke stepped out into the lobby again, where Anna still sat behind the desk, though she looked more drained now than before. He reached into his pocket and placed a card gently on the counter.

“I am sorry we have kept you so long. We really appreciate it. If anything comes to mind,” he said, “anything at all, you call me.”

She nodded, her fingers hovering over the card before picking it up. “I will.” She hesitated. “Do you know when...” she started, her voice tightening again. “When will we be able to have the funeral?”

Smoke didn’t soften it. “That’ll depend on the next of kin,” he said. “They’ll need to release the body from the coroner.”

After everything that had happened, Smoke’s words hit her harder than he expected. Her hand went back to the tissue box almost immediately.

“Oh,” she said quietly. Another layer of reality settling in.

Kindred stepped in slightly, his tone gentler, his hand on hers in comfort. “We’ll keep you updated,” he said. “I really appreciate your help today.”

She nodded again, wiping her eyes. “Thank you.”

They left without saying much more.

CHAPTER 13

Neither of them noticed when the daylight had disappeared. One moment, the city had still been gray and tired from the workday. The next, neon signs glowed in storefront windows, and headlights stretched across rain-dark pavement.

Smoke drove without speaking. The silence wasn't uncomfortable. Kindred was beginning to understand that Smoke often thought best when he wasn't talking. After several turns through neighborhoods Kindred didn't recognize, Smoke pulled into a narrow parking spot between a tavern and a bakery that had already closed for the night.

"Let's eat."

Kindred looked up. The restaurant was easy to miss. No bright sign. No advertising. No host standing outside trying to lure people in, just a weathered wooden door and a small gold-painted name on the glass that had probably been there for thirty years. It was the kind of place you only found because a local brought you there. Or because you'd been coming here since before Kindred was born.

Inside, warmth wrapped around them immediately. The smell of garlic, butter, and fresh bread lingered. Tomato sauce simmered somewhere in the back. The smells hung in the air like old friends. Dark wood covered most of the room. The booths showed decades of wear, polished smooth by thousands of customers. Framed photographs filled nearly every wall. Little League teams. Firefighters. Wedding parties. Pictures yellowed by time. Nobody looked at a menu. That was the first thing Kindred noticed. The regulars already knew what they were having. A waitress carrying a coffee pot passed by Smoke and nodded.

"About time."

Smoke nodded back. "Been busy."

"That's what you said last month." She disappeared before he could answer.

Kindred stared at him. "You know everybody here?"

"No. Just the people that matter."

Kindred rolled his eyes. The waitress returned with two beers before either of them ordered. She set one in front of Smoke, the other in front of Kindred.

"You eating?"

Smoke nodded. "The usual."

She looked at Kindred. "First time?"

"That obvious?"

She smiled. "Honey, I know everybody in here."

"What should I get?"

"The lasagna."

"The answer is always the lasagna." Smoke agreed.

"I'll take care of you." She walked away before he could ask another question.

Kindred watched her go. "She's not even going to write that down."

"No."

"How does she remember all this?"

Smoke took a sip of his beer. "Black magic."

For the first time all day, Kindred laughed and leaned back slightly.

"So," Kindred said. "Doug and Che."

Smoke nodded. "What about them?"

"They seem off."

Smoke gave a faint smirk. "I agree. They were different than the rest. Too bad Sean wasn't in today. How convenient." He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice. "Everyone else gave us the same version of DeLonge. Respected. Fair. Good boss." He tapped the table lightly. "Those two didn't."

Kindred nodded slowly. "Che's nervous," he said. "Doug is more... controlled."

Smoke watched him. "Good. You're paying attention."

Kindred sat with that for a moment. Then asked the question that had been sitting in the back of his mind. "You think they're involved?"

Before Smoke could answer, the waitress appeared carrying two plates. She set Smoke's down first, then carefully lowered a mountain of lasagna in front of Kindred. For a second, he just stared at it.

"That's one serving?"

“You sound disappointed,” the waitress said.

“I’m terrified.”

Smoke took a sip of his beer. “Good. Fear keeps you sharp.”

The waitress snorted and walked away. Kindred looked down at the plate. “This could feed a family of four.”

Smoke picked up his fork. “You'd better get started.”

Kindred took a bite while Smoke watched him.

“Well?”

Kindred pointed at the lasagna. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, I get it now.”

“Told you.”

For a few minutes, they ate in silence. The kind of silence that only really good food could create. Eventually, Smoke set his fork down.

“To answer your question, I don't know if they're involved.”

Kindred looked up. “But?”

“But something's off in that office.” Smoke took a sip of his drink. “It’s not the big happy family everyone pretends it is.”

“And Doug and Che?”

“They just made themselves part of the conversation.”

Kindred nodded. The restaurant buzzed around them. Plates clinked. Somebody laughed near the bar. The Cubs game on the television above the counter went largely ignored.

Smoke pointed his fork at him. "Tomorrow, I want you to start digging."

"Into Sean?"

"Into all three."

"Sean, Doug, and Che?"

Smoke nodded. "People leave trails."

"What kind of trails are you thinking?"

"The kind they don't think anybody is looking for."

Kindred leaned back. "Such as?"

"Friends. Family. Financials. Social media. Property records. Ex-spouses."

"Ex-spouses?"

"Especially ex-spouses."

Kindred laughed. "You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"I am." Smoke took another bite.

"Find out who they know. Who they spend time with. See if they're connected."

“You think they are?”

“Most people are.”

Kindred considered that. Sean, Doug, and Che. Three unhappy employees. Maybe it meant nothing. Maybe it was the piece of the puzzle they needed to make sense of things.

Smoke pointed at the lasagna. “Finish your dinner.”

Kindred looked down at the plate. “I’m working on it.”

“That’s what you call working?”

For the first time all day, neither of them talked about demons.

CHAPTER 14

The casino glowed against the night like a beacon for bad decisions. Sean parked near the side entrance and killed the engine. For a moment, he just sat there, staring at the building. Even through the glass, he could hear the distant ringing of slot machines and the music thumping somewhere deep inside. Doug climbed out of the passenger side.

"Now that's what I'm talking about." Sean grinned.

The place felt different tonight. Usually when he came here, he was chasing a lucky streak, a way out, a chance to make tomorrow somebody else's problem. But tonight, he already had money. He had more money than he'd seen in months. The thick roll of bills tucked inside his jacket felt reassuring against his chest. He climbed out of the back seat more slowly.

"You sure this is a good idea?"

Sean rolled his eyes. "You ask that question so much, I'm starting to think you're allergic to fun."

He didn't answer. The three men headed toward the entrance. The doors slid open, and the warm air spilled out to meet them. Slot machines chiming from every direction. Dealers calling out bets. People celebrated wins, others were trying to figure out how to accept losses they couldn't afford. Cigarette smoke clung stubbornly to the air, mixed with spilled liquor, cheap perfume, and the faint scent of old carpet that had absorbed decades of bad decisions.

Sean smiled. *Home sweet home.* He stepped through the doorway. Tonight, he stepped in with money in his pocket.

A hand landed on his shoulder. "Not so fast."

Sean stopped, closed his eyes, and slowly turned around. He knew right away who the hand belonged to. *Frank*.

The bouncer looked exactly the same as he always did. His head was shaved clean, and his neck was thick enough to support a concrete pillar. His broad shoulders stretched the black security shirt across his chest. Frank had spent years dealing with drunks, gamblers, liars, and men convinced they were one lucky hand away from changing their lives. Frank no longer believed people could improve and had zero tolerance for bullshit.

Sean spread his arms. "Hey, Frank."

Frank stared at him. Don't you fucking, 'hey Frank' me, Sean."

Doug immediately started grinning. He started looking for the nearest exit. Frank pointed toward the gaming floor behind Sean. Bright lights flashed, and somewhere in the distance, a jackpot siren erupted. People cheered. The casino kept moving without them.

"You're not going in there." Frank stared him down.

Sean sighed dramatically. "Jesus Christ."

"You forgot something, Sean."

"No, I didn't."

"Oh yeah, you did." Frank folded his arms across his chest. The gesture somehow made him look even larger. "You owe the casino money."

Doug looked from Frank to Sean. Then back again. *Oh, this should be good.*

Sean ignored him. "Technically, I owe the casino money."

Frank raised an eyebrow. "That's exactly what I said."

Sean nodded. "Right, but technically sounds less judgmental."

Frank didn't smile. "Management says you don't touch a table until your marker is paid."

Sean shook his head. "A couple of missed payments, and suddenly everybody loses their minds."

"A couple?" Frank snorted. "Try six."

Doug let out a low whistle. "Six?"

Sean pointed at him. "Don't start."

"You owe a casino six payments?" Doug took a step back.

"I was going through a rough patch."

Frank looked unimpressed. "A rough year."

Sean reached into his jacket. Frank's eyes immediately dropped to his hand. Sean smiled and pulled out a thick roll of cash. Frank blinked. Doug blinked. Even Che looked surprised.

Sean peeled several hundred-dollar bills from the stack and held them up. "Relax. It's all here."

For the first time since the conversation started, Frank's expression changed. He took the money and began counting.

Doug stared openly. "Where the hell did you get that?"

Sean couldn't stop smiling at the surprise in Doug's voice. He liked the envy even more. "Worked this morning."

Che's eyes shifted toward him.

Frank finished counting. "Must've been one hell of a shift."

Sean laughed. "You have no idea."

Frank handed him the receipt and stepped aside. "I'll take care of this."

"That would be kind of you, Frank," Sean said with his most sarcastic voice.

As Sean walked past, Frank pointed a finger at him. "I'm serious. Don't put yourself back in the hole."

Sean started toward the gaming floor. "Frank, if I listened to good advice, I wouldn't be half as successful as I am."

"That's exactly what worries me."

Sean laughed and disappeared into the casino. For the first time in months, he wasn't worried about money. And for the first time in his life, he was beginning to believe there wasn't a problem he couldn't solve.

They found an open blackjack table near the center of the casino. Sean slid into his chair and dropped a stack of chips onto the felt. The sound alone felt good. Not long ago, he would have been counting every

dollar before making a bet. Calculating. Worrying. But tonight he didn't care. He no longer had to care.

The dealer glanced down at the stack and then at Sean. Doug sat beside him and tossed down his own chips. Che lowered himself into the third chair. Unlike his friends, he was not excited to be there. He adjusted himself in the seat and looked around the casino again.

Sean noticed. Che had been doing it all night. Watching. Looking. Waiting for something.

The first cards hadn't even been dealt yet, and already he looked like a man expecting bad news. A cocktail waitress appeared beside them before anyone had to flag her down. She moved with the practiced efficiency of someone who had walked the floor a thousand times before. Her smile arrived before she did. Bright. Professional. Completely detached from whether she actually wanted to be there.

"What are we drinking tonight?" she asked.

Sean didn't even look at the menu. "Whatever's the strongest."

The waitress laughed politely. "That narrows it down to about half the bar."

"Then surprise me."

Doug pointed at Sean. "I'll have whatever he's having."

"That's a terrible strategy," Che muttered.

Doug grinned. "Hasn't killed me yet."

Sean laughed. "Give it time."

The waitress finally looked at Che.

"What about you?"

For a moment, he hesitated. He was considering saying water. He was considering leaving. He was considering a lot of things. Then he sighed. "Same."

She nodded and disappeared back into the crowd. Sean watched her go before settling back in his chair. Everything felt exactly the way it should. For the first time in weeks, he felt completely relaxed.

Across the table, Che looked like he was sitting in a church waiting for his execution.

The first hand was dealt. Sean won. Then he won again. The third hand paid even better. For the next several rounds, the cards kept falling his way, chips piling up in front of him. It wasn't enough to make him rich, but it was enough to get noticed.

It didn't take long for the mood at the table to shift. The dealer's smile became increasingly forced. Every time Sean won, his eyes flicked back to the discard tray as if searching for an explanation. The house was supposed to win. That was the entire point. Yet somehow, Sean kept dragging chips toward him. A couple at the neighboring table started watching. Then one of the pit bosses came to stand guard. Making sure Sean wasn't cheating.

Doug leaned in, laughing under his breath. "You're on fire, man." Sean didn't smile. He just kept playing.

A girl slid in beside Doug not long after. He didn't see her approach so much as suddenly feel her presence. Her perfume cut through the heavy casino smells, sweet layered over something synthetic. Her skin caught the light differently than everything else around them. Smooth. Oiled.

Her movements deliberate. She leaned into Doug, her arm brushing against his, then settling across his shoulders, like it belonged. Doug didn't hesitate, and his hand found her waist.

"Having a good night?" she whispered, her voice low, close enough he could feel her breath on his ear. Doug grinned. "Getting there." He gave her a chip. Whatever she whispered into his ear immediately brought a grin to his face. Her hand lingered on his shoulder a second longer than necessary.

"Maybe we can see each other later. After my friends and I are done here." Doug said with a giant grin.

She kissed him on the cheek. "I'd like that. But you're going to need more than one chip for that." She winked at him, turned, and slowly made her way to the bar.

Doug's eyes trailed her legs and admired the jiggle of her ass in her tight skirt. *Oh boy.*

Sean laughed. "She's already got you figured out."

"Worth every penny," Doug said.

Across the table, Che watched it all and felt further removed from his friends with each passing second.

"You hear about the cops today?" Doug said, half distracted, eyes still on the cards.

Sean placed another bet. "Yeah," he said.

Doug leaned in a little more. "They were asking questions. Talking to people."

Sean didn't react. "They always ask questions."

Che shifted in his seat. "It didn't feel like routine," he said. "They were looking for people."

Sean finally glanced at him. "Everything looks like something when you're scared," he said.

Che leaned forward, lowering his voice. "What if they find something?"

Sean let out a short laugh. "How would they find anything?" he said. "A demon killed Jason." He leaned closer, his voice dropping just enough to carry weight. "A demon," he repeated. "What are they gonna do, Che? Dust it for prints?"

Doug chuckled. "They don't even show up on cameras," he added. "We're ghosts."

Che shook his head. "I just don't like it," he said. "Something always goes wrong."

Sean's hand moved before Che could finish the thought. He grabbed him by the collar and yanked him forward, his grip tightening just enough around the throat to shut him up without making a scene.

"Listen," Sean said quietly, his voice cutting clean through the noise around them. "You need to get your head straight."

Che didn't fight it; he didn't even try. He was used to Sean's outbursts and, over the years, had learned the best way to get him to settle down was to let him play out his little power plays.

"You want to know when something goes wrong? If anything goes wrong," Sean continued, his eyes locked onto him, "it's because

someone can't keep their shit together." A slight pause. "And right now, Che, that someone is you."

Doug watched as Sean shoved Che back into the chair.

"If it wasn't for Doug," he added, nodding slightly toward him, "you wouldn't even be sitting here."

Right then, another girl slid onto Sean's lap like nothing had ever happened. Her skin brushed against his arm, warm, slick with lotion that caught the light every time she moved. She smelled like coconut. Sean's hand dropped to her hip without hesitation. He looked back at Che.

"You don't like it?" he said. "Go home." His voice hardened. "Go cry to your wife. Go tell her, you are about to lose your pretty little house."

Che stared at him for a second. "I'm done," he said and walked off, disappearing into the crowd.

Sean watched him go and shook his head. "Unbelievable."

Doug leaned back, exhaling. "Guy's losing it," he said.

Sean snorted. "He was never built for this."

He nudged the girl toward Doug. "Go take care of him," he said.

Doug laughed, pulling her closer without argument. "Hey, baby, how are you doing?"

Sean stood, pulling a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket, and slid it into the girl's hand.

"I'll be back," he said. "Gotta take a piss."

He moved through the casino floor, weaving between tables and machines, irritated by Che's weakness. His shoulder brushed people harder than necessary. A guy at a slot machine muttered something as Sean bumped him.

"Hey man, watch where you're going."

Sean stopped and looked him up and down.

"Or what?" he said, holding his arms open. Signaling he did not give a single fuck and was ready for whatever the guy wanted.

The man hesitated. Then looked back at his machine.

Sean smirked and kept walking. *Just what I thought.*

In the restroom, the noise dropped just enough to hear yourself think for a moment.

Sean stared at himself in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot, and a small cut had formed at the edge of his lip from earlier. He smiled.

Back at the table, Doug was all in. Drinks were stacked; the chips were moving faster. The girl still pressed against him, her skin warm against his arm, her hand consciencely rubbing up and down the inside of his legs, her laugh too loud to be sincere.

Sean didn't sit down. He hovered on the edge of the table, watching the spectacle.

Then leaned in.

It was something small. Maybe a wrong comment, maybe he bumped into someone's drink. Or his hand brushing past someone else's space. At this point, it didn't take much.

A chair scraped. Someone stood. Sean smashed a glass across a man's face, and all hell broke loose.

"Fuck man," Doug stood up, and he was not standing alone. "I was just winning."

The girl grabbed a handful of chips and disappeared without him noticing.

Security moved in quickly. "Time to go," one of them said, his arm firm around Sean's neck.

Sean didn't move. "Or what?"

Then he heard Frank's voice. "Couldn't even do it for one night, could you, Sean?"

That was enough. Frank told his team to kick them out, and, with little resistance, they were pushed through one of the side doors and straight into the alley. The cold air hit hard. Sobering almost.

One of the bouncers had Sean in a headlock, pushed him in the alley, and stepped forward. "You're done," he said. "You are never coming back."

Sean stepped closer. "Or what?"

The punch came fast, and Sean dropped to the ground. Doug stepped in. Another punch, and Doug hit the ground beside him. Both men were couching rolling across the ground, gasping for air.

The bouncer looked down at them. "If you come back," he said, "I am going to break every bone in your body." I'm not like Frank. I don't give second chances. A pause. "So, stay the fuck away." He turned around and went back inside.

Sean lay there for a second and rolled over to his back. Tears had been rolling from his eyes as he was gasping for air just a few seconds ago. Then he started laughing.

Doug groaned. "What the hell was that?"

Sean pushed himself up slowly, wiping blood from his mouth. Still smiling.

“Nothing,” he said. He helped Doug to his feet, and together they hobbled to the car.

“I was gonna get laid,” Doug said with disappointment.

“Because she got paid, dumbass. Anyone can get laid that way.”

“I don’t judge,” Doug said as they made it to the car.

They opened the doors and let themselves fall inside. Experiencing the brute’s fist again.

Moans of pain and laughter filled the car for a second, then Sean reached into his jacket and pulled out a box.

Doug immediately stopped rubbing his chest. For a moment, neither man spoke. The thing looked ancient. Small dark wooden panels were reinforced with black iron bands. Symbols covered nearly every inch of its surface. The carvings were etched so deeply into the grain that they looked burned rather than cut. Some intersected. Some overlapped. A few disappeared beneath the iron bindings entirely.

Doug leaned forward. "That's it?"

Sean smiled. "That's it." The box rested in Sean's lap.

Doug reached toward it.

Sean's hand shot out immediately. "Careful."

Doug paused; the warning caught him off guard.

Sean stared at him for a second and handed the box over.

Doug held out both hands.

The first thing he noticed was the weight. It felt far heavier than it looked. Then there was the temperature. The wood was cold and felt strangely alive. His fingers ran along the symbols as he turned the box in his hands. *How many were there? Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands.* The longer he looked, the less they seemed like random markings. Patterns emerged. Circles within circles. Lines connecting symbols. Doug's fingertips drifted across one of the carvings. A strange tingling sensation crawled through his hand. Pulling. For a moment, Doug almost let go and shifted his grip. The feeling remained.

"What the hell is this thing made of?"

Sean laughed. "Bad decisions."

Doug smirked. Then the tingling spread into his wrist. He frowned. For a brief moment, he thought he felt something move beneath the wood. "Sean. What the fuck, man?" Doug was freaking out. Sean placed his hands on Doug's for a second. He could feel the vibrations, but he was no longer surprised by the box, nor its contents.

"It's ok. It is feeling you just as much as you are feeling it."

"Dude, this is too much. I don't know, man..." A faint pulse rang through his body. So slight Doug wasn't even sure it had happened. He froze; the box sat perfectly still in his hands. He stared at it. Waiting for something to happen. Listening as if the wood could explode any second now. Finally, he looked back at Sean. "You ever feel that?"

Sean's smile widened. "More than once?"

Doug hesitated. The question in his head suddenly sounded stupid. "I don't know."

Sean leaned forward, his eyes never leaving the box. "I know."

For a moment, the smile disappeared, and something darker settled behind it. Something possessive, protective. Like a man watching someone else holding his loaded gun.

Sean reached out and ran a finger across one of the symbols carved into the lid. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to make this?"

For reasons he couldn't explain, Doug wanted to put the box down and never touch it again. Without a word, he handed it back.

Sean took it immediately. The box settled into his hands like it belonged.

Doug watched him run his thumb along one of the carvings, the way some people touch wedding rings or trace old photographs. There was an unsettling amount of affection in the gesture. Sean smiled. "You know how many times I almost gave up?"

Doug shook his head.

Sean laughed quietly. "A lot."

He turned the box over in his hands. The casino lights from the parking lot slipped through the windshield, catching the iron bands and deep grooves carved into the wood.

"I spent months making this thing." His voice had changed.

The typical Sean sarcasm was still there, but underneath it was something completely different.

Pride.

"I read books that looked like they belonged in museums. Books that smelled like mildew and cigarette smoke. Half of them were written by people who were either geniuses or completely insane."

Doug nodded. "Probably both."

"Definitely both," Sean smirked. "I spent nights in occult bookstores listening to people argue about demons, curses, spirits, dimensions, astral projection, and a hundred other things that sounded completely ridiculous." His eyes locked on the box. "Most of them were nuts."

"Aren't they all?" Doug tried to lighten the conversation.

"Pretty much." Sean chuckled. "But every once in a while, somebody knew something."

He traced another symbol. "I bought books. Crystals. Candles. Herbs. Powders. Half the stuff I couldn't even pronounce."

Doug laughed. "You?"

"I looked like an idiot, man."

"A very expensive idiot."

Sean nodded. "Exactly." His smile slowly faded. "There were nights I thought the whole thing was bullshit." The words hung in the air. For the first time since Doug had known him, Sean sounded modest. And tired. "I'd sit there for hours trying to figure out what some symbol meant or whether some ritual was real, and I'd think..." He shook his head. "...what the hell am I doing?"

Doug looked at him. "So why didn't you quit?"

Sean stared at the box for several seconds. The answer seemed obvious.
"I was running out of options."

The car fell silent. Outside, traffic rolled past on the distant street. A siren wailed somewhere in the Windy City.

Sean's fingers tightened slightly around the box. Then a smile returned to his face.

Growing into a slow, dangerous grin. "But then it worked."

Doug felt a chill crawl across the back of his neck. Sean looked down at the carvings, remembering something only he could see.

"And once you've seen something impossible..." His grin widened.
"...you stop doubting a lot of things." Sean turned the box in his hands, the markings catching faint light. "They want to throw me out," he said quietly, his smile fading, replaced by something colder. "Let's see how that works out for them."

Sean turned the box over in his hands, his fingers feeling for the right spot. Then his thumb found the symbol he had been looking for near one of the silver corners. The carving was darker than the others. Worn smooth around the edges. Doug frowned. "What are you doing?"

Sean didn't answer.

He slid the edge of his thumbnail into the groove. Then pulled. The sound was barely audible. A soft tearing noise as Sean's jaw tightened. Doug flinched. "What the fuck, Sean?"

The thumbnail lifted slightly from the flesh beneath it, and a thin line of blood welled up instantly.

"Jesus Christ," Doug muttered.

Sean squeezed a single drop from his thumb. It rolled downward and disappeared into the carving absorbed by the wood instantly. For a

moment, nothing happened. Then the symbols across the lid began to glow a faint green. The light spread slowly through the grooves like veins awakening beneath skin. Doug stared in disbelief as the box vibrated in Sean's hands.

His hand rested on the box; the green glow pulsed faintly between his fingers.

Outside, the casino continued as if nothing had happened. Cars pulled in and out of the parking lot. Neon lights reflected across the windshield. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed and faded into the city. Inside the car, neither man spoke.

They sat there, breathing harder than they should have. The adrenaline still hadn't settled. Doug wiped at his mouth and stared at the blood on his knuckles.

"What the hell was that, man?" he asked. "You just had to push it?"

Sean didn't answer. His eyes remained fixed on the casino. At the entrance.

On the doors Frank's goon had thrown him through. Doug followed his gaze. Then looked at the box. Immediately, his stomach tightened. "...No."

Sean didn't move.

"Sean. No."

Sean slowly pulled the box from his lap and turned it over in his hands. The symbols glowed softly beneath the blood-filled grooves.

Doug felt his pulse quicken. "Come on, man."

Sean remained silent.

"I thought that was a one-time thing." Still nothing.

Then Sean spoke. Quietly. Almost to himself. "That piece of shit put his hands on me."

Doug closed his eyes. There it was. The real reason. Not money. Pride.

"It is a casino," Doug said. "That's literally what they do."

Sean's jaw tightened. "That casino is where we make money."

Doug stared at him. "And?"

"And he decided we don't belong there anymore."

The words hung in the air. Doug suddenly felt cold. Not because of the box. But because Sean sounded serious.

"You can't be serious."

Sean looked at him. His expression never changed.

"He needs to go."

For a moment, Doug honestly didn't know what to say. This wasn't Jason. Jason had been messy. It was complicated. Jason had to go. At least that's what Doug kept telling himself. This? This was just a guy doing his job. A bouncer. A stranger. Doug shook his head. "No."

Sean's eyes narrowed slightly. "No?"

"No, man. This isn't what we talked about." His voice rose, "This isn't what this thing is for."

Sean stared at him for several seconds. Then a smile appeared.

"You wanted in."

Doug looked away.

"You begged to be part of this." Sean's smile remained. "Don't start growing a conscience now."

The words landed harder than Doug expected. Because part of him knew Sean was right. He had wanted in. He wanted money. The difference was that he'd never really believed any of this was real. A fucking demon box.

Sean looked down at the box. The green light reflected in his eyes. Sean looked completely calm. That scared Doug more than the demon ever had. "Sean..."

Sean ignored him. His bloody thumb rested against the carving. The symbols brightened.

The air inside the car suddenly felt heavier. Doug's ears popped. The pressure change was subtle. But impossible to ignore. The atmosphere itself had shifted. The hairs on his arms stood up. The glow spread deeper through the carvings. Something moved inside the box.

A faint vibration. A pulse.

Doug's stomach dropped as he made a final plea, "No!"

Sean closed his eyes for a second. Then he spoke. "Take care of him."

The words barely rose above a whisper.

Nothing seemed to have happened. The glow faded. The pressure eased, and the vibration stopped. Sean opened his eyes and smiled.

"It is done."

Doug stared at him. The box sat motionless in Sean's lap. Silent. As if none of it had happened.

"You're serious." The words came out barely above a whisper.

Sean didn't answer.

He simply placed a hand on the box and started the engine.

The headlights swept across the parking lot as they pulled away from the casino.

Behind them, the neon lights grew smaller in the rearview mirror.

CHAPTER 15

The alley behind the casino had gone quiet again.

Ron, the bouncer who had thrown Sean and Doug out, stood near the back door, smoking a quick cigarette, questioning some of his life choices. He took a drag and exhaled into the cold air. As he lifted his hand to take another drag, he heard something move in the alley.

He turned, his eyes trying to spot anything that could be a threat.

Maybe it was one of the cats, or maybe one of the many rats living in the alley. The tip of his cigarette briefly glowed a bright orange as he relaxed.

A flash of green erupted from the darkness for a fraction of a second, barely registering with Ron.

He squinted his eyes, and the impact came immediately after.

Something struck him with a force that didn't belong in the natural world. His body exploded into the steel service door, making it buckle inward with a deafening metallic boom, the outline of his entire body visible in the dent.

Ron was dead on impact; his limp body collapsed to the pavement. His cigarette rolled from his fingers. One of his arms was bent the wrong way.

For a moment, nothing moved; he just lay there like a rag doll tossed to the ground.

His body twitched once as a gurgling sound escaped his throat.

Across the parking lot, Sean watched through the windshield, a slow smile spreading across his face. "There it is."

Doug's face had gone pale. He stared at the alley in utter fear. "What the fuck..."

Sean didn't answer.

Doug looked at him, hoping for an answer. Then he looked at the wooden box resting in Sean's lap. The symbols carved into it had gone dark again. "Oh, my God."

Sean chuckled. "Guess it worked."

Doug's stomach twisted. He couldn't stop staring at the alley. A man was dead. And they had done it. Not some monster. Not a random accident. They.

He felt sick.

"We need to get rid of that thing."

Sean looked at him. "No."

"Sean—"

"No."

The single word carried enough weight to end the conversation. Doug swallowed. His hands shaking. In his mind, he kept seeing the body hitting the door. Hearing the sound as it hit the metal door. Feeling the thud as the body hit the pavement in the alley. A complete stranger had just been murdered because Sean got embarrassed. Because his pride got hurt. Deep down inside, Doug realized something far worse.

Jason's killing wasn't a one-time thing. It had only been the beginning.

Sean started the engine. The headlights swept across the empty parking lot, and behind them, the alley disappeared into darkness. Doug couldn't stop looking back.

CHAPTER 16

They lingered longer than they needed to. The restaurant had settled into that late-night lull where everything softened without ever going quiet. The earlier rush had passed, leaving behind a slower rhythm. Forks scraped against plates, glasses were clinking in uneven intervals, and the low hum of conversations no longer needed to compete with one another.

Smoke sat back in his chair, one arm resting along the edge of the table, his beer nearly empty in front of him. He wasn't rushing. He rarely did when there was no reason to. These moments were rare; he knew that all too well. He savored them. A rare moment where, even for a few minutes, he could turn his brain off.

Across from him, Kindred stared at the open pages of his notebook. His pen rested between his fingers. His mind kept circling back to the office, to the faces and voices that didn't quite line up, replaying the small moments that felt off in ways he couldn't explain yet.

"You're chasing it too hard," Smoke said, not looking at him. Kindred blinked, pulled back into the room.

"I'm trying to make sense of it," he said.

Smoke tilted his head slightly, still staring somewhere past him. "You won't," he said. "Not tonight." There was no edge to his words. Just factual, Smoke Ravenstein.

Debra, the waitress, came by, slower now than before, able to relax a little. She wiped her hands on a towel tucked into her apron and glanced at their table.

"You boys alright?" she asked.

Smoke looked up at her and gave a small nod. “Excellent,” he said and took her hand in his. “Thanks for taking care of us, Deb.”

She smiled, tired but real. “I try. You know that. Now don’t stay away that long again. You might be a pain in the butt, but I do like to see you and know you are doing ok.” She leaned in for a hug. The tough Debra from earlier had gone; she was kind, funny in a way, and it was obvious that Smoke and her had a history.

Smoke reached into his pocket and set cash on the table, folding it once before sliding it toward the center. He tipped way more than what the bill called for.

Debra noticed. “Thank you, Smoke,” she said, her tone softening just a little. “You know you don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I can. You took care of me when I needed it.” He winked at her. “So at least let me take care of you now and then when I can.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Get out of here before you make me cry.”

Smoke stood, grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair, and the leather creased softly as he pulled it on. “You don’t hang around here too late tonight,” he said. “Get yourself home.”

She gave a small laugh. “Yes, sir.”

Kindred pushed his chair in, nodded goodnight towards Debra, and followed him out. The door swung open with a muted creak.

They got into the car, Smoke started the engine and let it idle for a moment, his hands resting lightly on the wheel.

“You, ok?” Kindred asked, leaning back into the seat, the day finally catching up to him in a way he hadn’t noticed until now.

“I’m fine. Just thinking. Like you were before, when you were going through your notebook. Just trying to figure out where we go next.”

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

Smoke pulled out into the street, the tires rolling smoothly over pavement that was still holding the heat of the day. “We go back,” he said. “We tighten things up. Same faces, same questions.” He glanced briefly in the rearview mirror before continuing. “People get tired, nervous. They start talking differently. Some might change their story when we are there for a second time, especially if we show up right the next day. They might think we found something. They might think they are under suspicion. And if they do give a different version, we start digging.”

Kindred nodded slowly. “Doug,” he said. “He wasn’t there.”

“No,” Smoke replied. “How convenient. He definitely is on my list of people to talk to.”

Streetlights passed over them in steady intervals, briefly illuminating the inside of the car before giving way to shadow again. Buildings slid by on either side. Slowly, they slid through the night. Moving forward in time. Moving forward in thought. Pursuing an unknown monster that would strike again. It was just a matter of time.

The radio crackled. Smoke reached for it without looking, his fingers finding it by instinct.

“Ravenstein.” Static filled the line for a second, then cleared.

“We got another one.” The words hung there.

Smoke didn't react right away. Kindred looked at Smoke holding the radio, "Another what?" he asked.

A pause on the other end.

"Another one of your eyeless freaks."

Kindred turned his head slowly, his attention sharpening instantly. The fatigue was gone. Smoke's hands tightened slightly on the wheel.

"Where?" He asked

"Back alley behind a place called The Velvet Rail. West Division. Units are already on scene."

Smoke nodded once, though the man on the other end couldn't see it. He knew exactly where it was. "We're on our way. Out."

He didn't wait. "Hit the lights, kid."

Eric turned on the red and blue lights. The car turned hard at the next intersection, the tires gripping as he pushed through the light just before it changed.

"That didn't take long." Kindred looked surprised.

"No. Not at all. And that is never a good thing." Smoke was hyper-focused.

The laid-back man Kindred had witnessed just a few minutes before was far gone. This was the man everyone feared. He could see it. He could feel it. The way he drove, the way he talked. He could see how thoughts were hitting him and how he was already calculating the crime scene without even being on location.

Lights stretched into lines across the windshield. Shadows broke apart and reformed as they passed through intersections, through narrow streets, through pockets of the city that Eric didn't even know existed.

They pulled up a block away from the alley. Smoke didn't rush. He never did. He slid the car into place, killed the engine, and sat there for just a second, letting the silence settle. He took a deep breath and focused. "You ready, kid?"

"Let's do this." Eric nodded.

They stepped out and walked towards the alley. It was lit up like a stage. Portable floodlights cast harsh white beams against the brick walls, flattening the space into something clinical and exposed. Police cruisers lined the street, their lights still cycling red and blue in a rhythm that never synced. Yellow tape stretched across the entrance, snapping lightly in the wind.

DO NOT CROSS.

The wind carried something with it. Kindred caught it before he fully understood what it was. It slipped into his nose, into the back of his throat, thick and wrong.

That same sulfuric rot.

The moment his brain made the connection, he almost threw up. But he didn't.

Smoke had been waiting for his reaction. "Good catch, kid. I smelled it too."

Eric swallowed hard, forcing the air back into his lungs, pushing the nausea down before it could take over. The smell was still there, but it wasn't controlling him anymore.

Kindred wiped at his mouth, nodding.

They crossed the street together. An officer at the tape line raised a hand as they approached, recognizing Smoke immediately. "You're gonna need to suit up," he said.

Smoke nodded. "We know."

They stepped under the tape and toward the staging area. A plastic bin sat open on the hood of a cruiser, filled with everything needed to step into something no one really wanted to walk into.

Smoke pulled the suit on, the material crinkling loudly with every movement. It felt unnatural against his skin, but he sort of liked it. It made him feel like it separated him from the world he was about to step into. In a way, it didn't feel like protection so much as it had become a form of preparation, his own ritual where he left the person behind, and let Detective Ravenstein take over.

With his gloves snapped into place and his mask pulled tight, he moved on. Eric was still working on it, but was not far behind. Smoke patiently waited. The kid was trying. Smoke could tell.

CHAPTER 17

Most detectives looked at the body first. The victim became the center of everything. Smoke had learned a long time ago that dead people rarely told you anything new if you ignored the world that killed them. He stopped just inside the crime scene tape and stood perfectly still.

Kindred almost asked what he was doing, but he caught himself in time.

Smoke closed his eyes and focused; his breathing slowed down, his lungs sucking in as much air as they could before slowly releasing. Mostly, he smelled old trash, urine, and the now familiar smell of sulfur.

He started to visualize what he had already seen walking up, in his mind, imagining how someone or something would approach the door where the victim was lying. He tried to listen for anything unusual. He could hear the city beyond the alley. Distant traffic and the low hum of a world that never completely slept.

Wind moved between the buildings. A loose piece of metal rattling somewhere overhead. Water dripping steadily from a rusted pipe. Smoke opened his eyes and inched forward into the alley. A rat suddenly burst from beneath the dumpster, catching Kindred by surprise.

“Fuck!”

Smoke had to chuckle. “You, ok?” He gave the kid a smirk.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” He replied, slightly agitated and embarrassed. The grey companion of the night darted across the alley and disappeared into the darkness. Smoke didn't even look at it; his

attention remained fixed on the space ahead. Reading it. Feeling it. Trying to visualize what kind of thing had stood here.

The wind shifted. For just a second, the sulfur smell intensified. Smoke slowly turned in a complete circle. Taking it all in. The walls. The pavement. The dumpsters. The fire escapes overhead. Listening. Watching. Waiting.

Then he stopped. His eyes settled on the steel service door. "Now," he said quietly.

Kindred followed his gaze and saw the dent that formed the perfect outline of the bouncer's body. Rob had been slammed into the door so hard that it was a perfect imprint of what his body used to look like, head, shoulders, arms, even the faint outline of his torso. As with DeLong, it was obvious that supernatural force was used.

They both knelt down at the body. For a second, Eric flinched at the brutality of the murder. The body had been flung so hard against the steel door that parts of the bones stuck through the man's skin. Shatter cheekbones, a rib poked through his black t-shirt, and some of his fingers were pointed in opposite directions.

Smoke stepped closer, reaching out and placing his gloved hand against the surface of the door. He knocked once to feel the metal's response. A dull, solid sound. Zero give.

"That is a solid steel door," he said. "Not sheet metal. Not hollow." He let his hand rest for a second longer, feeling the cold metal through the glove. "I don't know of anything, human or otherwise, that does this."

Kindred didn't answer; he was still squatting down next to former Rob. Fascinated with the wounds.

Rob's body was slumped forward, legs stretched out toward the center of the alley. His back rested against the steel.

Smoke's eyes followed the imprint down. From the crushed outline in the metal...

...to the man beneath it. The back of the bouncer's skull was gone. It looked as if something had driven it inward with such force that it had collapsed on itself, its bone fractured and folded as a cracked shell pushed too far. The edges had splintered inward, jagged and uneven, pieces caved into a space that shouldn't have been there.

Like with DeLong, there was no blood. No pooling. No spray. Nothing.

Smoke stepped to the side, crouching slightly, adjusting his angle. Then he went still.

"Jeez..." Kindred muttered under his breath.

Smoke didn't answer.

Rob's head leaned forward just enough for them to see through the shattered back of the skull, straight through... Empty. From the front, Rob was a hollow channel, a passage that ran clean through the body like something had slurped him out from the inside like an oyster.

Smoke reached into his jacket, pulled out his flashlight, and signaled Eric. "Come here," he said.

Eric stepped around the body, positioning himself in front of the victim, standing just beyond the outstretched legs. He looked up toward the bouncer's face, or what remained of it, then back toward Smoke.

"Ready?" he asked.

Smoke didn't wait for an answer and clicked his flashlight on, holding it over the opening at the back of the skull, the beam dropped into the empty space, splitting into two bright shafts of light that burst out through the eye sockets, cutting through the air and striking the pavement between the victim's legs.

Kindred flinched and stepped back half a pace, his body reacting before his mind caught up. "Dammit." Angry with himself for flinching.

Smoke glanced up at him with an unreadable expression. "Empty again," he said, clicking the light off.

Kindred let out a breath, trying to steady himself. "That's... the same," he said.

Smoke nodded once, rising slowly to his feet. "Sulfur smell," he said. "No blood. Hollow."

A small pause. "Same thing."

He looked down at the body one last time, then around the alley. There were no signs of a struggle or anything indicating human interaction. Whatever had happened here, it had been swift and merciless. Rob had died instantly. At least that was something.

Smoke slipped the flashlight back into his jacket. "We don't need to stand here all night," he said.

A uniformed sergeant approached from further down the alley, clipboard in hand. "You see what you need?" he asked.

Smoke nodded. "Yeah, you can bag him up. Anyone seen anything, heard anything?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Everyone is still inside the club. We're pulling them one at a time."

Smoke glanced toward the door the bouncer had come out of. "Alright," he said. "We'll go talk to them."

He turned to Kindred. "Same deal," he said. "Let's split up."

Kindred nodded, already anticipating it. "You got it."

"You walk the room," Smoke continued. "Talk to people. See who's nervous, who's not. Don't push too hard yet. Just listen. See if anyone feels out of place."

"What about you?" Kindred asked.

Smoke pointed towards the buildings. "Cameras," he said. "There are always cameras."

"See you in a bit," Eric said, and he started toward the door. He paused just long enough to look back at the body one more time. The hollow shell gave him the chills. *What the hell.* Then he pushed inside.

The door closed behind him with a dull, padded thud, and whatever life had existed in the club earlier that night felt like it had been drained out long ago. The music still played, but it had been turned down so much that it no longer mattered. The colored lights still moved across the room, red bleeding into purple, then fading again, washing over faces that weren't looking at the stage anymore. The police had taken over the space without ever fully shutting it down.

Uniforms stood in clusters, speaking in low, controlled voices. Plainclothes officers moved slowly among people, asking questions that had already been asked, writing down things that might not matter but had to be recorded anyway. No one was leaving, and everyone knew it.

A group of dancers sat off to the side, wrapped in whatever they could find, jackets, robes, one girl had grabbed someone's hoodie and pulled it tight around her shoulders. One of them cried quietly, her makeup holding just enough to keep the illusion of control, though it had already begun to break at the edges. Another girl leaned into her, whispering something soft. It was the kind of comfort that didn't fix anything but was needed to fill space when silence would be worse.

Kindred slowed as he took it all in. It didn't match what he expected. It felt... wrong to be here after what they had just seen.

"This isn't what I thought it would be," he said quietly. He moved through the room without urgency, but with purpose. Conversations dipped as he passed, not because anyone recognized him specifically, but because the weight of what had happened outside had finally started to settle inside.

The manager stood behind the bar like a man trying to hold something together with his hands. His sleeves were rolled up, and his tie hung loose. His fingers pressed flat against the counter, gripping the edge, clinging to the moment. He looked up when Eric approached, his eyes bloodshot, done with the night. "You here for the same thing?" he asked.

Eric nodded. "Detective Kindred," he said as he showed his badge. The man exhaled slowly, rubbing at his face.

"Rick," he said. "I've been talking to you people all night."

Eric rested against the bar. "You know how this goes," he said. "Take me through this. From the beginning."

Rick hesitated. Not because he didn't want to talk, but because he had already said it so many times. He was exhausted. Mentally and physically. One of his employees, a man he had known for a good

amount of time, had just been killed. And here he was, telling the same fucking story over and over again. Rick's patience was wearing thin.

"They've been coming in the last couple of months," he said finally. "Three of them. Spend money. Drink. Gamble in the back. At first, no problem." He shook his head slightly. "Then it started going... off."

Eric's eyes stayed on him. "Off how?"

Rick glanced out over the room. "One of them was winning," he said. "Too much. Cleaning people out. It started pissing off other customers." Rick continued, his voice lower now. "But then his luck changed. He lost night after night. The other two wouldn't come that much anymore. But this one guy went crazy. He refused to accept it. So, he ended up owing the house money. Lots of money"

Eric nodded as he took notes. "What is lots of money? In your opinion?"

"My opinion doesn't matter. He owed the house 5K, and then he just disappeared."

Eric frowned. "And then he just showed up out of nowhere tonight?"

"Exactly. Walked in like he owned the place. Frank, our head of security, told him he wasn't welcome and that he had to settle his account first. He showed him cash, gave him a hundred, and said that's why he was here, to pay up and have a good time."

"That is ballsy." Eric looked at Rick.

"Been doing this for 23 years, never seen anyone pulling shit like that." Rick sat on one of the stools behind the bar. "We tried to keep it contained. He paid up. We were square. But then they got loud. Got drunk. Started pushing it, and things got out of control. So security stepped in."

“They?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, same two that were with him before. The three happy amigos are all back together.” Rick poured himself a drink. “You want something. Soda, water?”

Eric politely declined. “No, I’m good, thanks.”

“We asked them to leave. You know. Nothing high drama, just it’s time to go. Then, he got all upset.”

“Which one?” Eric asked.

Rick didn’t hesitate. “The loud one and his buddy,” he said. “The third guy wasn’t even part of it at that point. He’d already drifted off somewhere.”

Eric caught that and noted it down. “Your guy took them out?”

Rick nodded, his jaw tightening. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s what we do. Keeps things clean. Keeps people safe. Try to keep it low-key so everyone has a good time. It’s simple, right? People are happy, they drink and spend money. We don’t need anyone to disrupt the flow. And this guy. He is lucky we let him back in after all his bullshit.” His voice faltered slightly.

The room behind them shifted. Eric heard voices raised, another officer calming someone down. The night was wearing on everyone. He let the silence sit for a moment before moving forward. “You got cameras?” he asked.

Rick let out a breath. “Of course. It’s a casino, we got cameras everywhere.”

“I need to see what you have.”

“Sure.” Rick nodded and motioned for him to follow.

The hallway behind the bar was narrow, lit with harsh white light that stripped away whatever illusion the main room tried to maintain. This was where the business actually happened; all the rest was just for show.

The security office was small and cluttered, papers stacked in uneven piles, a computer already awake as if it hadn’t been touched since the first officer sat down in front of it. Rick slid into the chair and pulled up the footage.

“You want the whole night?” he asked.

Eric shook his head. “No,” he said. “Just show me where it started to go bad. I’ll need the entire night later. But you can send that to me.”

Rick handled the little video control, and the footage skipped forward. Hours disappeared in seconds. Crowds formed, then broke into smaller groups, faces that would never matter passed across the screen. Then Rick stopped.

“There,” he said and put his finger on the screen.

Doug was already on the screen, and someone else stood next to him.

Eric leaned in slightly and recognized him immediately. “Is that him?” he said quietly.

“No,” Rick said.

Eric was surprised for a second.

Rick pointed at the other man on the screen. “That’s the guy. That’s Sean. The asshole I told you bout. And I bet you he has something to do with it.”

“Do you know the other guy?” Eric already knew the answer, but wanted to hear what Rick had to say.

Rick shook his head. “Don’t know,” he said. “He’s been with them every time.”

Interesting. Eric thought as he looked at Doug.

The footage continued playing. On-screen security stepped in, words were exchanged. Sean pushed back slightly, his movements loose, fueled by alcohol and ego. Doug didn’t move much at all. He didn’t need to. The energy of the encounter shifted, and the video showed the decision to escort them out. Eric leaned in just a little closer. “Follow them.” He asked.

Rick switched cameras.

The alley appeared on the monitor. The angle high and fixed, covering the service door, the dumpsters, and most of the narrow passage leading back toward the parking lot. There was no sound, just the timestamp ticking in the corner.

Rob came through the door first, one hand locked around Sean’s collar, the other pushing Doug forward. Sean was still talking. Even without sound, that much was obvious. His mouth kept moving, his hands kept opening and closing, his whole body loose with alcohol and wounded pride. Doug looked less angry than confused, like he had stepped into a fight and was only now realizing it had become his problem too. Rob shoved them both farther into the alley. Sean stepped forward again. Rob hit him once, and he dropped hard to the pavement. Doug

lunged in, trying to help his friend, and Rob put him down, too. Kindred watched without blinking.

There it was. Motive.

Sean eventually got to his feet. Doug followed a few seconds later. They staggered away together, one limping, one wiping blood from his mouth.

Rick advanced the footage. Minutes passed. Employees came and went. A man carried out empty boxes. Someone dragged a trash bag toward the dumpster and disappeared back inside. The alley returned to normal. Then Rob stepped out again. This time alone with a cigarette in his hand. He leaned against the steel door, lit it, and took a drag.

Kindred leaned closer to the screen. Rick didn't speak. For several minutes, nothing happened. Rob smoked, and the timestamp on the screen kept running. The alley stayed still. Then Rob turned his head like something had caught his attention.

Kindred's eyes narrowed. "What did he see?"

Rick shook his head. "I don't know. Something got his attention."

Rob straightened, and the next second his body left the ground and hit the steel door with impossible force. The camera itself shook from the impact.

Rob dropped straight down, folding at the base of the door like a coat thrown into a corner.

In the security office nobody moved. Not Rick. Not Eric.

On screen, the cigarette still burned on the pavement beside Rob's hand, the timestamp kept counting.

Kindred felt the hair rise along his arms. He had seen the body outside. He had seen the damage done to Rob, but seeing the moment happen was different.

One minute passed. Then another. Time seemed stuck in that narrow stretch of concrete and steel, except for the little white numbers in the corner of the screen proving the world had not stopped. Almost ten minutes later, the service door opened.

A waitress tried to step out, carrying a trash bag. She was barely able to inch the door open before she saw him. Rob's dead body blocked the door from opening. She backed up fast, one hand flying to her mouth, then vanished inside.

Rick froze the frame, and the office went quiet. Kindred stared at the screen. Rick swallowed. "And you know the rest."

Kindred didn't answer. His mind was already connecting pieces. Three men. Two caught on screen. One missing. Not yet, it wasn't enough. Eric straightened.

"I need copies of everything," he said.

Rick nodded immediately. "You'll have it. Tell me where to send it"

Eric shook Rick's hand and gave him his business card. "Just send it here. Thank you. I really appreciate your help." He turned toward the door, but his eyes lingered on the screen for just a second longer.

"Thank me by getting the bastard who killed Rob. That is all we want."

"I will try," Eric said and walked out.

Eric's focus was on Sean. On the man, they didn't know yet. Was this the same Sean from Terra Verde Consulting? And who was their third

friend? Something was there. They just weren't seeing all the pieces of the puzzle yet.

CHAPTER 18

Eric stepped back out into the night and pulled the door shut behind him. The sound of the club sealed itself inside. He glanced around, trying to find Smoke.

Smoke was talking to an officer on the other side of the road.

"Did you find anything?" He asked as Eric approached.

"Boy, did I. It's all on camera."

"All?" Smoke wondered. "You mean you saw it all happen?"

"Well, I saw Rob, and I saw him die. What I did not see is who killed him."

Smoke frowned for a second. "Ok. You got me. Tell me everything you saw."

Eric caught Smoke up. "So, what do we do now?" he asked.

Smoke didn't answer immediately. Instead, he lit a cigarette, cupping the flame against the wind. He drew in once before letting the smoke drift slowly into the night. "Let's go for a walk."

"A walk?"

"You get good at this job by looking beyond the body." Smoke started toward the street. "Come on."

The two detectives stepped away from the crime scene.

A silver BMW suddenly swung around the corner far too fast. Its tires hissed across the wet pavement. Smoke grabbed Kindred by the shoulder and pulled him back just as the bumper swept past them.

WHACK!

Smoke slapped the hood with the flat of his hand. The car screeched to a stop. The driver's window shot down.

"You cops think you own every goddamn street in this city."

Smoke looked at the man without raising his voice.

"Easy there. This is a crime scene."

The driver laughed. "Then close the fucking road." He pointed toward the patrol cars. "You people don't own the city."

Kindred stepped forward. "Watch how you're talking."

The man looked him up and down. "Oh, we got ourselves a rookie." He smirked. "What? You gonna arrest me?"

Smoke rested a hand on Kindred's shoulder. "It's alright."

Kindred looked at him. "But—"

Smoke shook his head. "This gentleman's clearly in a hurry."

Then he looked back at the driver. "I'm sorry for delaying your evening." Smoke's sarcasm was so dry it almost sounded sincere.

The driver snorted. "Yeah. Thought so." He slammed the car into gear and sped away.

Smoke watched the taillights disappear around the corner.

Kindred stared after the car. "You're just going to let him talk to you like that?"

Smoke took another drag on his cigarette. "Eric... You need to learn to pick your battles."

He watched the car disappear into traffic. "This. Isn't one of them." Smoke flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Come on."

"What are we looking for?"

Smoke smiled faintly. "Everything."

"Yeah," he said.

"You want to get good at this, you stop staring at one spot, and you start expanding it. We need to figure out what killed that guy."

Kindred fell in beside him. They turned left and moved down the block, neither of them in a rush to get anywhere. The street looked half-abandoned. A few businesses still lit, others dark behind metal grates pulled halfway down, neon signs flickering in windows that had seen better years.

A small electronics shop sat first along the row, its front window crowded with boxed speakers, outdated televisions, tangled cables hung like vines behind dusty glass. A security sticker clung crookedly to the door, sun-faded and peeling at the edges.

Next to it, a narrow storefront displayed purses, cheap leather in bright colors, straps dangling from hooks in the window. The fluorescent light inside buzzed faintly, casting everything in a pale, tired glow.

They kept walking.

Further down, the sidewalk narrowed slightly where a metal roll-up door had been tagged and retagged, layers of graffiti overlapping like a conversation no one had finished. A man lay curled near the base of it, wrapped in a blanket that had once been something else, his belongings tucked close to his chest. The smell of urine punched inside their nose as they turned the corner. The light shifted, and the street was narrower now, less maintained. Dumpsters lined the wall, lids half-open, the smell of stale garbage rising in slow waves whenever the wind pushed through. A chain-link fence ran along part of the block, separating the back of one building from another, plastic bags caught in its edges, fluttering slightly in the wind.

Kindred shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. “So, what are we doing exactly?” he asked. “Because right now it feels like we’re just... walking away from a crime scene.”

Smoke took another drag from his cigarette, then flicked it towards the curb. “It’s the same thing you were doing inside,” he said.

Kindred glanced at him. “That didn’t feel like this.”

Smoke gave a faint, almost amused exhale. “Inside, you read people,” he said. “Out here, you read everything else.”

A newspaper skittered across the pavement ahead of them before catching against a curb. Somewhere behind a building, a bottle rolled across concrete and struck a wall with a hollow clink.

Smoke gestured toward the street. “This block is talking.”

Kindred looked around. “All I hear is traffic.”

“That’s because you’re listening with your ears.” Smoke kept walking.

“We don't know where they went after they left the alley. We don't know if they got into a car, walked home, stopped somewhere for a drink, or sat on a bench arguing for twenty minutes.” He glanced toward the buildings lining the street. “So we widen the circle.” Eric looked around again, this time more deliberately.

They had circled around to the alley, this time from the opposite side, the same one they had entered earlier. The floodlights from the crime scene unit were still up, casting long, harsh shadows against the walls.

Rob's body was already loaded on a gurney. Covered by the standard sheet, all strapped down, ready to go see Dr. Matthews. Two EMTs were positioning it, getting ready to roll it out. Kindred's eyes followed the outline of the form beneath the sheet.

Smoke didn't stop. He just glanced once, taking in what remained of the scene, then kept moving.

They passed through the alley and came out the other side, turning right this time to continue the loop. The street opened up slightly here, wider sidewalks, cleaner storefronts.

A shoe store sat across from the alley, brightly lit, modern, glass front, spotless compared to everything else around it. Rows of sneakers lined the interior walls in perfect order, each pair angled just enough to be seen from the street. Above the door, small and easy to miss, unless you were looking for it, a camera pointed outward.

Smoke slowed. Just slightly, taking notice, and then he kept walking.

Further down, a bookstore occupied the corner, narrow, deep, its windows cluttered with stacked paperbacks and handwritten signs advertising late hours. A single lamp burned inside, casting a warm, uneven glow across shelves that looked like they had been there for decades. Another camera sat right above the door. Different angle,

same purpose. They walked another half block before Smoke stopped and looked back the way they had come.

“Alright,” he said. “What’d you see?”

Kindred shifted, thinking. “A couple of stores,” he said. “Electronics place. Purse shop. That bookstore on the corner. Dumpster area. Fencing. A guy sleeping back there...” He shrugged slightly. “Nothing that really stands out.”

Smoke nodded once. Then looked at him. “How many cameras?”

Kindred blinked. “...what?”

“How many cameras did you see?” Smoke repeated.

Kindred hesitated, his mind replayed the walk, thinking of the windows, the doors, the neon lights. He came up empty.

“I don’t know,” he said finally.

Smoke gave a small nod. “See,” he said. “That’s the problem.” He turned and pointed back across the street. “Technology’s everywhere now,” he said. “Half of it you don’t even notice unless you’re looking for it.” His finger settled on the shoe store.

“Camera right there,” he said. “Straight shot at the alley entrance.” Then he shifted slightly, pointing toward the bookstore on the corner. “And that one,” he added. “Angle from the side. Might catch more than we think.”

Kindred followed his gaze. Now that Smoke pointed them out, it was obvious.

Smoke dropped his hand. "We come back tomorrow," he said. "Talk to the owners. Pull what they'll give us. Warrants if we need them."

Kindred looked back toward the shoe store. "You think somebody saw something?"

"I think somebody always sees something."

Kindred nodded slowly. Smoke looked back toward the alley. The floodlights washed the brick walls in hard white light. Crime scene tape fluttered lazily in the breeze. Somewhere behind the buildings, a siren wailed before fading into the city.

"Whatever killed Rob didn't just disappear."

Kindred followed his gaze. "You really think we'll find something?"

Smoke nodded. "Everything leaves a footprint, kid."

Kindred looked back toward the alley. "Even this?"

Smoke's expression never changed. "Especially this."

For a moment, neither man moved. Then Smoke turned toward the car.

"Come on. We've got a long day tomorrow."

CHAPTER 19

Smoke was driving as Kindred sat with the tablet balanced on his knee, replaying the alley footage for what had to be the tenth time. Rob standing by the door. The turn. The impact.

Trying to understand what impossible force had launched a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man through the air like he weighed nothing. Of course, he knew it was supernatural, of course, he remembered the vision they shared with Lucian, but still...

Kindred stopped the video and looked over. "Can we stop this?"

Smoke kept his eyes on the road. "I sure hope so."

Kindred frowned. "You hope so?"

Smoke was quiet for a moment. "Eric, that is what we're trying to find out. Right? I don't have all the answers. We find the pieces of the puzzle, or puzzles, and try to make them fit."

The patrol car rolled through an intersection. Kindred looked back down at the frozen image on the screen. Rob halfway through the air. One frame from death.

"So what's the plan?"

Smoke finally glanced at him. "Tomorrow you're going camera shopping."

Kindred looked up. "What?"

"Every business on that block. Every camera was pointed at that alley. Every camera on the way in or out of the casino, from every possible way. I want footage. I want timestamps. I want angles."

"And if they don't want to cooperate?"

"Then we ask nicely."

"And if that doesn't work?"

Smoke's mouth twitched slightly. "Then we ask with paperwork."

"We meet back here at the office by six," Smoke continued. "We go through it all together."

Kindred pushed the door open and stepped out, stretching once as he stood. "Alright."

Smoke gave a small nod. "Go home and get some sleep. I'm going to check on Dee Dee quickly."

Kindred let out a tired breath that almost turned into a laugh. "Sounds like a plan. You too."

Smoke didn't respond; he was already heading down the stairs.

At this time of night, the precinct had hollowed out. Smoke loved it. It was one of the perks of mostly working nights. No people. Just the way he liked it.

His office door opened with a familiar creak. Dee Dee lifted her head the moment he stepped inside. "Hey kitty cat," Smoke said softly. She came down from her perch in one smooth motion, her small black body weaving immediately around his legs, her bent tail lifting as straight as it could. She brushed against him like she had been waiting at the door all night, like he had kept her waiting on purpose. "I know," he whispered. "I know."

He crouched, scratching behind her ears, and her purring almost filled the entire room.

Smoke stood, crossed to the small cabinet, and pulled out a can of wet food. The metal popped sharply as he opened it, and Dee Dee followed him with focus, circling his feet as he scooped the food into her bowl and topped off her water. She had not eaten in weeks. Smoke watched her for a moment, then lowered himself into his chair, leaning back as the day finally settled into his bones. Dee Dee finished and leaped onto his lap without invitation. "There she is," he said. Dee kneaded once at his shirt before settling, her small body warm against him. Smoke let his hand rest along her back, fingers tracing the kinked little bend in her tail. She stretched up, rubbed her head under his chin, then licked the tip of his nose before giving it a small, playful bite. He huffed a quiet laugh. "Real scary," he said. She blinked slowly, satisfied with her effort.

Smoke stared out into the room, letting the silence wrap around him. "This one's different," he said quietly. "I haven't seen this one before." Dee Dee purred, unconcerned. "I can feel it, though," he added. "We're getting close." He sat for another minute, lifted her gently, and set her down. "I'm going home, Dee," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow." He left the small nightlight on in the corner; the soft amber glow warmed the edges of the room. Dee Dee climbed back onto her tree and curled in on herself without hesitating. Smoke watched her once, then turned and left.

In the parking lot, his 1962 S220 Mercedes waited for him. The black paint caught the faint spill of the streetlights. The car looked like it belonged to another time. Technically, it did. Smoke opened the door, slid inside and let the leather settled around him. He rested his hand on the steering wheel for a moment before starting the engine. It had been his mother's. It was her pride. After she passed, it became his. He had never changed a thing. Every detail, every line, every piece of it remained as close to how she had kept it. He owed her that.

The engine turned over smoothly, and he carefully pulled into the street, his mind drifting somewhere else. He could still see her hands on this same wheel. Driving him to school. The early mornings when the

world felt simple, when the biggest concern in his life was being late, not what waited in the dark corners of it. The long drives felt like they lasted forever when he was a kid. He could hear his mother talk, remember the sound of her voice. It was a time when he felt safe.

For a few blocks, he was able to shut out the world; that was all there was. Then the city returned, tightening its grip around him. His apartment was in one of the older parts of the city. The buildings in his neighborhood still made out of brick, flanked by arrow staircases, whose iron railings had been repainted too many times. It was nothing fancy, and it wasn't impressive, but it was what he called home.

He parked and noticed immediately that one of the parking spaces was empty. Sarah wasn't home. That didn't bother him. Their life didn't work like that. It never had. They shared space, shared time when it mattered, but neither of them had ever asked the other to explain every absence. It was a quiet understanding. And an understanding that had held for over a decade.

Smoke stepped out, locked the car, and headed inside. He took the stairs. He always did. It was pretty much the only form of working out he had time for these days. Each step creaked just enough to remind him they had been there long before he had.

By the time he reached his floor, his breathing had picked up slightly, not enough to matter, but enough to let him know he was getting older. He unlocked the apartment and, after he stepped in, locked the door behind him, dropping his keys onto the small dresser next to the entrance.

On the dresser sat a black wooden bird cage. Vincent, Smoke's pet canary shifted inside, hopping from one perch to another. "Well," Smoke said softly, "still with me."

The canary tilted its head. Smoke checked the water, added fresh seed, and watched the bird move with an alert energy that never seemed to rest. Vincent was more than a pet.

The apartment stretched out behind him like a reflection of his mind. Red walls and black trim. Old wood floors. Dozens of shelves lined with books that had been read, handled, and studied numerous times. Various stones and minerals sat among them, placed with a purpose that only he understood. Religious icons shared space with a variety of older and stranger things.

Smoke shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over a chair. As he crossed the room, he turned on the stereo. Tchaikovsky's April softly filled the space. He moved to the bar, cut a slice of orange, dusted it with cinnamon, and salted the rim of a heavy glass. He poured himself two fingers of Adictivo tequila and enjoyed watching the amber settle in the low light. He kicked his shoes off as he made his way to his chair. The large, worn seat welcomed him back in comfort. Beside it, the floor lamp, which was made from a giraffe leg, cast a warm, uneven glow across the room. Smoke sat, took a slow sip, and let the warmth of his drink settle. For the first time in days, nobody was asking anything of him. No voices, no emails, no questions, and no death.

Just music.

Lucian's words lingered in his mind. *This one's being forced*. That was the part that still didn't sit right. Demons fed, they corrupted, they attached. But this? This felt controlled. Directed. Human hands using something that should never be used.

Smoke leaned back, staring into the dim light of the room. He looked at all the books, trying to place them. He ran cases through his mind, trying to understand them. No matter what he tried, he kept coming up empty. It bothered him more than he would admit.

He took another slow sip of his tequila, the music carried through the apartment, and Smoke let it wrap around him in quiet waves and closed his eyes for a moment. He let the day loosen its grip. Then, almost without thinking, he reached into his pocket. The rosary slipped into his hand like it had been waiting there. It was heavier than most. Not ornate in the way people are accustomed to. It was built, not bought. The cross alone carried some weight. Forged from ancient silver doubloons, the surface was worn smooth in places where fingers had passed over it too many times to count. It didn't shine the way new silver did. It held the soft glow of something older that had seen more than it ever should have. Smoke turned it slightly between his fingers. Tracing the edges. The beads were made from black onyx. Cool to the touch. Smooth against his skin.

Each one held a faint, natural weight, clicking softly against the next as he shifted them in his hand. Onyx had always been a stone of protection, of absorbing what shouldn't pass through, anchoring his spirit when things tried to pull him elsewhere. Smoke was given it for that reason. Or maybe he was chosen for it. He wasn't sure anymore.

Between the larger sections sat small silver medallions of Saint Francis. Each one pressed into place with purpose. Francis the protector, the humble, the one who walked between the natural and the divine without trying to control either. Smoke had always respected that. He recognized himself in it. Demons didn't like humility. They didn't understand it.

Other medals hung along the chain. Some barely noticeable. Some unmistakable. Each one carried a story, and each one served a purpose.

Smoke's favorite was a small, darkened medallion from Montserrat, Spain. The Black Madonna. Another medal he had received at the Vatican, where it had touched stone that had held centuries of prayer. Others were collected from places he rarely spoke about. Pilgrimages he had taken for reasons that didn't belong in reports or conversations.

Places where the air itself kept secrets. Where faith wasn't something, you talked about, and believing was not an option. This rosary had been there. It had absorbed it all. Smoke could not recall a time it had not been with him. He let it hang loosely from his hand for a moment, the beads draping across his fingers.

His feet pushed against the wooden floorboards. They had been taken from churches that no longer stood. Places that had held generations of quiet prayer, whispered confession, grief, and hope.

His thumb moved slowly across the first bead.

He didn't speak out loud. Each bead passed between his fingers with intention. Each movement grounded him further, pulling him back from the edges of the day, from the alley, from the hollow body, from the smell that still clung somewhere in the back of his mind. This was where he recharged and reminded himself that not everything belonged to the dark. The cross brushed against his palm as he prayed the many prayers learned along the way, those taught by his mother, those taught by his father, and his tribe.

For a moment, he was nothing more than a mortal man sitting in a dim room, holding onto something older than himself, something steady enough to carry him through whatever waited next.

Slowly Smoke drifted away.

CHAPTER 20

Eric spent most of the morning knocking on doors.

Some business owners handed over their footage the moment they saw the badge. Others needed convincing. A few wanted warrants. One electronics store owner crossed his arms and told Kindred he wasn't giving the police a damn thing without a judge's signature. Eric didn't argue. He simply made a note and moved on.

By lunchtime, he had accumulated a collection of flash drives, download links, temporary passwords, and hastily scribbled notes. He knew most of the footage would be useless. Cameras pointed in the wrong direction. Others had lenses so dirty you could hardly make out what they recorded. That was detective work. You gathered everything you could and hoped one piece would matter.

The shoe store across from the alley proved most helpful. Their manager pulled the footage without hesitation. The bookstore owner on the corner practically made Kindred coffee while they downloaded the files.

A laundromat two doors down handed over their recordings simply because the owner wanted nothing to do with whatever had happened behind his business.

Piece by piece, the block gave up its secrets. Whether any of those secrets meant anything remained to be seen.

By early afternoon, Kindred was back in his car heading toward the precinct, a folder with release forms on the passenger seat and enough digital footage to keep them busy for hours.

Smoke's office door stood open. Eric found him exactly where he expected. Behind his desk, Dee Dee occupied the center of it. The

black cat lifted her head as he entered, then settled right back down, satisfied that he wasn't carrying food.

"Got anything good?" He asked as he dropped the folder and collection of flash drives onto the desk.

Smoke looked at the pile. "Looks productive."

Kindred dropped into the chair across from him. "Should keep us busy. I got most of them."

"Most?"

"One guy wants a warrant."

Smoke nodded. "Of course he does. Was it the electronics store?"

"How did you know?" Kindred leaned back.

"A hunch. Honestly, I kind of respect it."

"I don't."

That earned a grin. Smoke reached for one of the drives. "Anything interesting?"

"No idea," Kindred admitted. "I haven't watched any of it."

Smoke held the drive up between two fingers. "Let's have a look." Smoke said.

Eric plugged the drive into the computer. The monitor flickered for a second. Dee Dee glanced at the monitor, abandoned the desk, and disappeared into the dark. She already knew this was going to take a while.

Eric leaned forward in his chair as the footage was loading; the glow of the monitor filled the office with a cold, artificial light. He rested one hand on the mouse, the other near the keyboard, ready to stop, rewind, or zoom in on anything that looked even remotely out of place. He found the time stamp and rolled the footage back. People drifted across the screen in reverse, conversations folded into silence, and gestures unraveled as the night slowly rewound itself. He had always found it unsettling to watch a video in reverse. Time wasn't meant to move backward.

The first video was completely useless. The camera hadn't been cleaned, and at night, the glare from a nearby light washed out the entire picture.

"Start the next one," Smoke said as he got up and walked to the far corner of the office. "Do you want something to drink?" He asked.

"Water is fine," Eric replied. He could hear the ice hit the glass and the liquids pour into it. Smoke came back with a tall glass of water and a hand-cut crystal tumbler filled with what looked like whiskey.

"Is that?" He looked suspiciously at Smoke. "Whiskey?"

Smoke gave him a smug look. "For you, this is Coke on ice. I don't ever want you to have to lie for me."

He put the glass of water on Eric's desk, sat back in his chair, and put Dee Dee in his lap.

"Next." He pointed his glass at the screen.

Eric played the next video and rolled the footage backward until Rob was standing again, cigarette between his fingers, the steel service door behind him.

"Far enough. Now play it."

The video moved forward, and Sean and Doug stumbled, forced themselves out of the alley, still arguing. A few seconds later, the alley was empty. Time crawled by on the bottom of the screen. Rob returned carrying a cigarette. He leaned against the steel door, took a long drag, and stared out into the alley. Then there was the moment he turned. Both detectives leaned a little closer to the monitor.

"What did he see?" Kindred asked quietly.

Smoke didn't answer.

On screen, Rob squinted into the darkness, and the next frame exploded with movement. His body slammed into the steel door with such force that the camera shuddered on its mount. Rob folded like a rag doll and collapsed to the pavement. Silence filled the office. Eric reached for the keyboard.

"Play that again." Smoke was already co-driving.

They replayed it. Same result. No attacker. No shadows. Nothing. Just a man standing one frame...

...and dead in the next.

Kindred scrubbed through the footage frame by frame. "There's got to be something."

Frame. Nothing. Frame. Nothing. Frame.

Smoke suddenly raised a finger. "Stop."

Kindred froze the image. "What?"

"Go back one frame."

Kindred tapped the key. The picture changed so quickly that he almost missed it.

A faint green blur.

Gone almost before it appeared.

"What the hell..."

Smoke leaned closer until he was nearly touching the monitor. "There."

Kindred frowned. "I don't..."

Smoke pointed at the edge of the frame. "The green light."

Kindred rewound the footage again, switching to microseconds this time. For less than the blink of an eye, something streaked across the screen. Not bright enough to illuminate the alley. Not clear enough to identify. Just a green glare that seemed to brush across the camera lens, too fast to be seen at normal speed. But it was there.

Kindred slowly leaned back in his chair. "Whatever hit Rob..."

Smoke finished the thought. "...was moving faster than the camera could see."

Smoke nodded toward the remaining drives. "Pull up the other camera."

Kindred swapped the flash drive and a new view filled the monitor. This camera faced the street. It had been mounted above the front door of the small bookstore next to the casino, its only purpose to watch customers coming and going. The alley was completely out of view.

"There," Smoke said.

Eric paused the video. Sean and Doug stumbled into frame, crossing the sidewalk toward a red Ford Explorer parked beneath a streetlight. Doug was waving his arms as he talked, clearly agitated. Sean walked beside him without ever looking back at the casino. They climbed into the SUV, and Sean got behind the wheel. Eric let the recording play. The Explorer remained parked.

"They're not leaving," he said.

Smoke kept watching. "Neither one of them looks ready to leave."

Several minutes passed. Doug continued talking, his silhouette shifting inside the vehicle. Sean barely moved. Then—

Something flashed, another pale green flicker that seemed to exist for the briefest moment before disappearing.

"That's twice," Smoke said quietly.

Kindred immediately backed up the recording. "There..." He stopped the frame. "Did you see it?"

Smoke nodded. "Play it again."

Kindred stepped through the recording frame by frame. The green flicker. Gone on the very next frame.

Smoke looked from one monitor to the other. "Pull up the alley footage."

Eric opened both recordings side by side. Smoke pointed toward the timestamps at the bottom of each screen. "Synchronize them."

Eric enlarged the digital clocks until they filled the lower corners of both monitors. Carefully, one frame at a time, he brought the recordings together.

"Right there," Smoke said.

Eric stopped. The timestamps matched. He advanced both recordings simultaneously, frame by frame.

On the bookstore camera... the green flicker appeared beside the Explorer. One moment later, on the casino camera... Rob's body slammed into the steel door.

Kindred stared at both monitors in disbelief and replayed the recordings. The result never changed.

Green flash. Impact. Green flash. Impact.
Every single time.

Smoke folded his arms, watching both monitors for several more seconds. "They're connected."

Kindred looked at him. "You think those two had something to do with Rob?"

Smoke never took his eyes off the screens. "I think whatever happened in that alley..." He pointed toward the Explorer. "...started right there."

For the first time since the investigation had begun, they finally had a clue. Smoke reached for his jacket. "Come on."

"Where..." Eric didn't even get to finish his question.

"We've got two men to find."

CHAPTER 21

“Where are we going?” Eric asked as he hurried after Smoke.

Smoke didn’t slow. “You’ll see.”

The metal door slammed behind them. Smoke glanced at Kindred as they walked. “You eat yet?”

Kindred shook his head. “No. Been running all day. Figured we’d grab something later.”

Smoke nodded, almost to himself. “Good,” he said.

Kindred looked at him sideways. “Good?”

“We’re grabbing something now,” Smoke replied. “I need to pick something up anyway.”

Upstairs, the precinct was alive, but not in a good way. A conversation near the front desk had escalated, and two men were exchanging fists. *Not my problem*, Smoke thought. Kindred followed Smoke through it, weaving between people, catching fragments of conversations as he squeezed through the doors and stepped outside.

Smoke didn’t slow down as he crossed the lot; he moved like a man already somewhere else, already thinking three steps ahead, done with whatever part of the day this was supposed to be.

He reached the car, yanked the passenger door open, and tossed the keys across the roof without looking.

“They’re yours,” he said. “I’m not driving.”

Kindred caught them mid-air, the metal biting into his palm. He hesitated for half a second, not because he didn't want to drive, but because with Smoke, nothing ever felt casual. Even something as simple as handing over keys felt like a test you didn't know you were taking.

"Alright," he said, sliding behind the wheel.

Smoke dropped into the passenger seat, exhaling as he leaned back, eyes already drifting toward the passing streetlights like he was watching something no one else could see.

"One twenty-five Colorado," he said.

"What's there?" Kindred asked, turned the key, and the engine rolled to life beneath them.

Smoke didn't answer right away. He waited until they were moving, until the precinct lights fell behind them and the city began to swallow them again.

"The best Thai food you'll ever have."

Kindred smirked despite himself. "That confident, huh?"

Smoke glanced at him. "You'll see."

The city shifted as they drove. It didn't happen all at once. It never did. Chicago didn't change in clean lines; it bled from one version of itself into another. Blocks softened into different shapes. Buildings got older. Streets narrowed as if the city were drawing a breath and holding it. Neon signs flickered alive as the daylight drained out of the sky.

"Up there," Smoke said finally.

Kindred followed his gaze, and then he saw it. The storefront refused to blend in. Yellow neon wrapped the windows like a frame of liquid light, spilling onto the sidewalk in a warm, electric glow that felt out of place against the cooling night. In the center, bold red letters burned through the glass:

Little Thailand

“Park around the corner,” Smoke said.

Kindred eased the car into a narrow side street and killed the engine. The smell hit them the moment they left the car. Layers of spice and sweetness rolled out from the building.

Kindred paused for a second. “That smells... unreal.”

“Told you so.”

Smoke was already at the door. He pulled the door, and the bell above it rang. A stretched out, uneven chime wavered as it echoed through the room, like it had rung a thousand times too many and never quite recovered.

From the back, a voice burst through the space. “Smoke! Smoke!”

She came fast. Not walking but moving with purpose, her energy hit the room before she fully did. Her clothes caught the light in motion, bright colors, layered patterns, and gold accents that flashed as she moved. Her makeup was bold and deliberate; each line had been placed to be seen, not softened.

“Hi, Dee,” Smoke said, and for the first time that night, Kindred noticed that something in his voice shifted. It was warmer and felt real.

“You bring friend!” she said, already turning toward Kindred, eyes sharp, assessing the young man, missing nothing. “This one stay? Or like others? Go?”

Kindred blinked, caught off guard by how quickly he'd been sized up.

"This one's staying." Smoke glanced at him. "I think."

Eric rolled his eyes. She nodded once. Already decided.

"Good," she said. "I like him." She didn't wait for Eric's agreement. She turned, already moving. They followed.

The deeper they went into the restaurant, the more it changed. The noise softened behind them; conversations blended into low hums. The lighting dimmed just enough to pull the edges of the room inward. The space tightened. It didn't make it smaller, but closer, more contained.

They slid into a booth. The seat gave slightly under Kindred's weight, the vinyl still warm from the last person who'd sat there. Dee was back almost immediately.

"You want drink?"

"Two Thai teas," Smoke said.

She nodded and was gone again, already moving before the words fully settled. Kindred leaned back, taking it all in now that he had a second to breathe. The colors. The movement. The rhythm of the place.

"She is quite the lady," he said.

"She works hard." Smoke shrugged, his eyes drifting lazily across the room, taking in faces, checking to see if he didn't see any familiar faces. Always on guard.

"Been here long enough," he said. "You start to recognize faces."

“Twenty years?” Kindred asked.

Smoke’s mouth twitched slightly; something between the smirk told Eric it was a memory he didn’t feel like sharing.

“Close enough.”

The menus barely mattered. The food came quickly, steam rising in soft waves that carried the scent of spice and sweetness across the table. The colors were bright, reds and greens layered over glossy sauces that clung to the meat and noodles. Kindred took a bite and paused, letting the heat settle, letting the flavor unfold. Then he let out a quiet breath.

“Holy shit... yeah. That’s really good.”

Smoke nodded once, already halfway through his own plate. “I told you. One day, you will just start believing what I say.”

For a few minutes, the world became something simple. Food. Warmth. The steady clink of utensils against plates. Something normal.

It didn’t last.

The case slipped back in Eric’s mind without warning, settling somewhere in the back of his mind like a weight he couldn’t shake. Smoke could tell, but didn’t say a thing. He continued slurping his noodles and had plenty of things to worry about for himself.

Dee came a few times, checking to see if they were ok, if the food was ok. Kindred praised the food, and Dee repeated that he was a good one and that Smoke had to keep him.

“Don’t let it go to your fucking head.” He pointed at Eric. “She doesn’t do your performance evaluations.”

Eric chuckled at Smoke's attempt at humor and replied with a firm "Yes, Sir." Knowing that it would piss him off.

When Dee came with the bill, smoke whispered something in her ear. She laid her hand on his shoulder, laughed politely, and said: "Of course."

"What was that all about?" Eric asked.

"You'll see." And that was the end of it.

A few minutes later, they had paid and walked back to the car. Smoke had a pink plastic bag in his hands.

CHAPTER 22

Still full from dinner, they drove without saying much. Smoke rested the pink plastic bag on his lap and slowly rolled it down. Inside were two small Styrofoam containers.

"What've you got there?" Kindred asked.

Smoke opened one of the boxes, and the car immediately filled with the warm scent of caramelized sugar. He picked up a plastic fork and speared a piece.

"Fried bananas." He handed it to Eric. "Try it."

Eric didn't hesitate; the soft banana practically melted in his mouth.

"Holy mother of..."

Smoke raised a finger. "Careful now. No profanity."

A grin spread across Smoke's face. Eric's reaction reminded him of the first time he'd tried them himself. Kindred reached for another piece.

"Man... those are incredible."

"I know."

"Thanks, Smoke."

"De nada." Smoke closed the empty container. "Don't ever say I never did anything for you."

Kindred nodded toward the second box. "What's in that one?"

"That one's not for us."

Eric looked at him for a moment, then simply nodded. He already knew the answer to any follow-up question. *You'll see.*

The neighborhood changed gradually. Bright storefronts gave way to boarded windows and faded signs. Sidewalks grew busier, not with people heading somewhere, but with people who had nowhere to be. Small groups lingered outside liquor stores and abandoned buildings. A man pushed an overloaded shopping cart down the middle of the street.

Across the intersection, two men exchanged something in a quick handshake before disappearing in opposite directions. No one paid them any attention.

Kindred watched it all through the windshield.

Up ahead, a black Cadillac eased around the corner and disappeared into the darkness.

Smoke watched it a second longer than necessary.

"Here," he said. "Pull in."

Kindred parked along the curb. The neighborhood carried the weight of the people who had been forgotten. Tents made out of tarps and cardboard huddled beneath the overpass. Shopping carts overflowed with everything they still called their own. A few people sat against the buildings wrapped in blankets despite the mild evening. Others wandered slowly along the sidewalk, talking quietly to themselves. Some looked at the detectives. Most didn't.

Smoke clicked on a small flashlight and swept the beam across the sidewalk. "Watch your step," he said. "Needles."

Kindred lowered his eyes, carefully picking his way around broken glass and scattered trash.

"And be respectful," Smoke added. "Most of them aren't dangerous. They're just trying to survive another day."

Kindred glanced toward an older man sitting against a wall, both hands wrapped around a paper coffee cup.

"Life catches up to people," Smoke said. "Sometimes faster than they can outrun it."

Smoke turned into a narrow alley that most people would have walked right past. It sat hidden between two aging brick buildings. Eric followed.

"What are we doing here?" He asked.

Smoke slowed down, turned around, and faced Eric.

"What you're about to see..." he said quietly, "...you're going to have a hard time understanding."

Kindred let out a slow breath. "At this point, I believe almost anything."

Smoke studied him for a moment before giving a small nod. "Good." He looked deeper into the alley, making sure nobody was around. "Because you can never talk about it. Not to anyone. Not unless you want people looking at you the way they look at me."

Kindred managed a faint smile. "Like I'm crazy?"

Smoke didn't smile back. "Exactly." He said as they disappeared deeper into the alley.

CHAPTER 23

They stepped further into the alley, and Smoke reached into his coat, moving with a kind of familiarity that made it clear this wasn't his first time here. When he pulled his hand back out, the object resting in his palm looked worn from use.

A carved planchette, shaped like an owl, its edges smoothed by time and touch, at its center sat a piece of obsidian, dark at the edges but clearer toward the middle, catching just enough of the ambient light to hint at something beneath its surface.

As Smoke lifted it to his eye slowly and looked through it. The alley changed.

At first, it was easy to miss. A shift in the air. A distortion along the edges of the brick walls, like heat that was rising off the pavement. Then something drifted between two bricks. Subtle at first. Then shapes started slipping through the space where nothing should have been. Forms passed through walls, through the ground, through each other, as if the rules that held everything in place no longer applied. Colors flickered within the spirits, muted and unstable, greens bleeding into reds, reds fading into something darker.

Kindred couldn't see it, but he felt it before he fully understood what was happening.

Smoke lowered the planchette and held it out to him. "Take it."

Kindred hesitated; he slowly reached out and took it from him. The planchette's surface felt colder than it should have. Eric raised it slowly to his eyes and looked through the lens. The world opened in ways he could have never imagined, the spiritual realm pressed in on him, movement sparked everywhere, figures passed through him, around him, through walls that no longer seemed solid. The alley stretched and

folded over itself, layers stacking, shifting, revealing something that had always been there but hidden just out of reach. His body reacted before his mind could catch up. He stumbled back and threw up a little.

Smoke was already behind him, anticipating the vertigo one experiences the first time they enter the spirit realm. He placed one hand steady against Eric's back, the other ready to catch the planchette in case it would slip from his grip.

"What the hell..."

Smoke waited. He'd seen the reaction before. Everyone reacted differently the first time.

"Yes," he said quietly. "It's something, isn't it. This is a gateway."

Eric slowly stood. Still dizzy, feeling like he had just run up and down a set of stairs. He looked at Smoke with a mix of wonder and apology.

"It's all real."

Smoke nodded. "Yeah, kid, it all is."

Chapter 24

Smoke didn't put the planchette away. He turned it once in his fingers, checking for something only he could feel, and stepped a little further down into the alley. Just enough to reach a spot where the air was thinner, where the layers it had just shown Kindred still pressed faintly against the edges of the world.

"Stay close," Smoke said.

Eric followed, slower this time, his eyes adjusting, trying not to chase every flicker of movement that passed through the space around them. The slight outline of the realm was still there. Not as overwhelming as when he was looking through the planchette, but enough to remind him that what he had seen hadn't gone away. It was just a little dimmed.

Smoke crouched.

From his coat, he pulled the small Styrofoam container and popped the lid with a quiet snap. The smell came out immediately, sweet and warm, cutting through the damp rot of the alley. Sticky mango rice.

Eric frowned, watching as Smoke carefully positioned the food on the ground. "You're leaving that here?" he asked.

Smoke didn't answer right away. He adjusted the container slightly, turning it a fraction to align it with something Kindred couldn't see, and slowly took two steps back. "Yes," he said. "I am."

Kindred looked from the food to Smoke, then back to the empty space in front of them.

"For who?"

Smoke lifted the planchette again, bringing it up to his eye. His posture changed, subtle but immediate, like he had slipped into the shell of someone else.

“Derek,” he said, his voice calm and steady. “It’s Smoke Ravenstein.” The name echoed slightly.

Kindred felt it more than he heard it; the sound had weight to it, and it landed somewhere deeper than the alley.

“I brought you something,” Smoke continued. “Figured you’d still be around.”

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then a faint wisp of condensation drifted above the container. It appeared for only a second, no bigger than a breath on a winter morning, before fading again.

Kindred leaned forward without realizing it. “You see that?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” Smoke said. “Don’t move.”

The distortion thickened a slight outline of something that was all Eric could make out without the planchette. A shape began to take hold just beyond the container, loose at first, then tightening enough to suggest the outline of a man. It hovered just above the ground, its edges soft, drifting slightly. Then it tilted, and its glow slowly traced to the food.

“Oh...” the voice came, thin at first, like it had traveled a long way to reach them. “You remembered.”

Eric felt his chest tighten. Smoke didn’t react.

“Hey, Derek,” he said, like this was nothing more than a conversation he’d had before. “It has been a while.”

The shape shifted closer, and the distortion around it became tighter as it leaned over the container.

“It might have been for you. But time passes differently for me.” Derek replied. “You come, and then you disappear again.”

Smoke shrugged slightly. “I’m sorry. Work keeps me very busy, as you know.”

“Always work.” There was something almost amused in the way Derek said it, something that didn’t match the way he looked.

Eric could see the rice move but couldn’t see Derek pick it up, he saw it being lifted in uneven clumps, grains separating, some falling to the ground, and then it disappeared. He stared, unable to look away; he was actually watching a ghost eat.

Derek let out a low, satisfied hum.

“That’s good,” he said, softer now. “God... that’s so good.” The words were dragged out longer than when a human would speak. More rice lifted, hovered, and disappeared in little bite-sized balls.

“It’s the only thing,” Derek continued, “the only thing that still makes me feel anything anymore.”

Smoke watched him, quiet for a moment. “I remember,” he said, watching Derek eat through the planchette. Derek lingered, taking what he could, then the movement slowed, and the container sat still again. Derek’s spirit straightened, his attention shifting back to Smoke.

“You didn’t come here just to feed me,” he said.

“No,” Smoke replied. “I didn’t.”

Derek tilted slightly, studying him. “So, what is it this time?”

Smoke glanced briefly at Kindred and handed him the planchette. Signaling with his hand that it was his turn to watch.

“I’ve got a question,” he said.

“You always have questions, Ravenstein.”

“I do. But where else would I get my answers? Especially when I am looking for information on demons and about how they get trapped.”

Eric could see the air around Derek tighten. He had the looks of a man in his early thirties, but belonged to a different era. Judging by the clothes he was wearing, Eric placed him in the early nineteen hundreds. His skin was light blue-green transparent, his eyes hollow, and even though they were not really eyes anymore, they seemed sad. Derek’s shape spun around.

“That’s not a light question,” he said.

“It’s not a light case, Derek. And I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t need your help.”

Derek drifted a fraction to the side, the outline of him stretching slightly before pulling back together.

“Is it yours,” he asked, “or are you thinking about doing something you shouldn’t?”

“It’s a case,” Smoke said.

Derek was quiet for a moment, as if weighing that. Then his shape shifted again, slower this time.

“People have been doing that for a long time,” he said. “Binding things that don’t want to be bound. It’s never clean. It never ends well.”

Kindred listened, his breathing shallow, trying to hold onto every word.

“It takes ritual,” Derek continued. “Ash. Blood. Objects that mean something. Containers strong enough to hold what you’re trying to trap.”

“Like what?” Smoke asked.

“Boxes. Bottles. Rings. Anything that can carry weight.” Derek paused. “You’ve heard the stories. They all come from somewhere.”

“Genies in bottles,” Smoke said.

Derek gave a faint, warped chuckle. “Exactly.”

Eric could see straight through the finger he pointed at Smoke.

Smoke leaned forward slightly. “Have you heard anything recent?” he asked. “Anything specific?”

Derek didn’t answer right away, and when he did, his voice had changed.

“I’ve heard things,” he said. “About one being taken. You should steer away from this one, Smoke. This one is not good.” Eric could see how serious Derek was. Through the translucency, he could still see the intensity of a worried man.

Smoke’s eyes narrowed. “Taken where?”

“No fixed place,” Derek said. “Whoever has it... They’re moving. Keeping it close.”

“And the demon?”

Derek’s shape flickered. “Not happy,” he said, “Angry. Very angry.”

Kindred felt the words settle. *Fuck*

“So how do we undo it?” Smoke asked.

Derek spun around, his shape now on Smoke’s opposite side; the movement knocked over the empty container on the ground. “You take away control,” he said. “The one holding it... They’re the lock keeping it prisoner.”

Smoke nodded once. “And the container?”

Derek’s form thinned for a moment, then steadied. “You break it,” he said. “You destroy whatever’s holding it together.”

Kindred swallowed, the question slipping out before he could stop it. “And then what?”

Derek turned, his shape floated through Smoke as he made his way to the newcomer. Smoke gagged for a second as Derek’s energy passed through him. Derek stopped a hair from Eric’s face.

Eric could feel the magnetism, the hairs on his body, his eyebrows, the few hairs on his lips, all pulling towards Derek, like little slivers of metal that want to fly away. His skin tingling, not cold, but also not hot. Slightly comfortable, different than the ambient temperature and slightly pulsing, as if Derek’s energy was touching him.

“Then,” Derek said quietly, “you deal with what comes out.”

Smoke exhaled slowly. “Alright,” he said. “That’s what I needed.”

Derek drifted back slightly. “You’ll be back,” he said.

“Of course I will,” Smoke replied. “Thank you, Derek.”

Eric carefully held his hand up in a way to say goodbye, but was too stunned from what had just happened to do it properly.

Derek lingered a moment longer. Then his outline broke apart into thousands of tiny shimmering particles, so fine they reminded Eric of pixels suspended in the air.

As the last of them drifted away, a faint current of air gently rocked the empty Styrofoam container lying on its side.

The air settled. The alley pulled back into itself. Brick, concrete, and the faint smell of damp decay.

Kindred stood there, staring at the empty space where Derek had been. Then he looked at Smoke. “...what the hell was that?”

Smoke slid the planchette back into his coat.

“Information,” he said, and started walking.

CHAPTER 25

They walked back to the car. Smoke nodded to a few of the homeless he recognized from previous nights and quietly slipped one of them a twenty-dollar bill. "Get yourself something to eat," he said. The man nodded without a word.

As they reached the car, Smoke's phone buzzed.

GOT HIM READY FOR YOU.

Smoke glanced at the screen. "Doc's got Rob ready." He looked over at Eric. "You up for it?"

Eric looked pale but managed a tired grin. "Sure. From one kind of dead person to another." He opened the passenger door. "If this one starts floating off the table, I quit."

Smoke wasn't entirely sure he was joking. "Keys."

Eric tossed them over.

"I'll drive."

As they pulled away from the curb, neither of them spoke for several blocks. Finally, Smoke broke the silence. "Have you been doing what I asked?"

Eric rubbed a hand across his face. "I don't know... you've given me a pretty long list."

"The rosary."

Eric nodded.

"Every night?"

"Yes. Every night. It felt strange at first." Eric looked out the window.
"But it came back."

Smoke nodded once. "Good."
Silence settled between them again. Then—

"Eric."

Kindred turned. Smoke had never called him by his first name before.

"I know what people think." He kept his eyes on the road. "They think I'm crazy." A faint smile crossed his face. "Some think I'm a religious nut. Some think I'm a fraud. Hell... some people in this department probably think I should've lost my badge years ago." He shrugged. "I hear them talk."

Eric looked down.

"I didn't choose this." Smoke's voice stayed calm. "I would've loved a normal life." He let that hang for a moment. "I would've loved believing monsters only lived in books." The city rolled past outside.
"But they don't."

"No," Eric said quietly. "They're real."

Smoke nodded. "And now you know it too."

Eric stared through the windshield. "My whole world got turned upside down this week."

"I know."

"No..." Eric shook his head. "I mean, really." He searched for the words. "Last week ghosts were campfire stories." He laughed once without humor. "Today I'm standing in an alley watching one eating fucking mango sticky rice."

Smoke smiled. "Fair."

"I'm trying, Smoke."

"I know you are." Smoke slowed for a red light. "When I tell you to pray..." He looked over. "...I'm not trying to make you religious. I'm trying to keep you alive."

Eric met his eyes. "I know."

"Bullets don't work on this shit."

"No."

"They never will."

The light turned green. Smoke drove on. After a while, he spoke again. "This isn't just a job."

Eric gave a quiet shake of his head.

"It's a calling."

Eric looked over.

"I didn't ask for you to be assigned to me."

"I know."

"I think you were sent."

Eric frowned. "You really believe that?"

"I do." Smoke smiled for the first time since leaving the alley.

"I would've preferred my calling to be giving whale-watching tours in Mexico." Eric laughed.

"Neither of us got to choose our path. But that would be a great calling," Smoke chuckled.

The morgue came into view ahead, sitting alone beneath harsh white floodlights.

Smoke pulled into the parking lot and shut off the engine. "We're here."

Kindred looked at the building. "You seem to come here a lot?"

Smoke shrugged. "More than I'd like."

They stepped out of the car and walked inside. The smell of disinfectant hit Eric, he wondered if you could ever get used to it. They signed in and moved on; they knew where they were going.

Smoke preferred coming to the morgue after hours. Fewer detectives. Fewer families. Fewer questions. Just the quiet hum of fluorescent lights and people trying to do their jobs.

Doc was exactly where Smoke expected him to be. Elbows deep in another autopsy. Without looking up, he nodded toward the next stainless-steel table.

"He's ready for you."

Smoke glanced at the covered body. "Anything different?"

Doc snorted. "I wish." He finished a few careful cuts before setting his scalpel aside and stripping off his gloves. "Same as the other."

Smoke pulled back the sheet. Eric had prepared himself. He'd told himself he was prepared.

The sight of Rob lying there with the top of his skull removed and his chest cavity opened still hit him like a punch to the stomach. He swallowed hard.

Doc noticed. "Gets easier," he said.

Smoke glanced sideways. "No, it doesn't," he said quietly.

"Yeah, nah, it doesn't." Doc gave him a look.

"No," he admitted. "It really doesn't." Smoke studied the body. "No eyes?"

Doc nodded. "Gone."

"The organs?" Smoke asked.

"Same." Doc pointed into the empty chest cavity. "Nothing left to examine." Silence settled over the room. Finally, Doc looked at Smoke. "You've got something, don't you?"

Smoke didn't answer immediately. "I've got a direction."

Doc nodded once. "Good enough for me."

There was no need to say anything else. If Smoke said he was working a lead, Doc believed him. "I love our late-night visits," Doc said.

"That makes one of us," Smoke replied. "Call me if you find something, Doc. We're heading back to the station."

Smoke pulled the sheet back over Rob and nodded toward Eric. Time to go. By the time they reached the door, Doc was already pulling on a fresh pair of gloves and returning to a body on the other table.

CHAPTER 26

"Doc's on your side?" Kindred asked as they walked back to the car.

Smoke lit a cigarette. The flame briefly lit his face before he drew in and let the smoke drift into the night. "He's one of the few." Smoke looked back toward the morgue. "Birds of a feather... You know that expression?"

"I do." Eric nodded.

"Well, that's us. People don't like to be around those who deal with death. And for Doc, it's even worse. People realize that eventually we all end up on his table." Smoke flicked ash onto the pavement.

"So he believes you. All the spiritual stuff."

"He believes what he's seen. Not necessarily me or what he was taught in medical school. But over the years, we've seen a lot together." Smoke took one last drag before crushing the cigarette beneath his boot. "Come on."

They climbed into the car.

"Back to the station?" Eric asked.

Smoke nodded. "We've got a demon to catch."

Smoke started the engine and pulled out of the morgue parking lot. "It's been a long night."

Eric leaned back in his seat. "No argument there."

"Tomorrow, we need to review the club footage." Smoke said.

Eric looked over. "I thought we already had everything."

"We have the outside. We've got the two guys being kicked out." Smoke kept his eyes on the road. "The owner told us they always come in a group of three."

Eric nodded as it clicked. "You are right. We only watched Sean and Doug come out of the alley."

"Exactly. So, the third guy..." Smoke looked at Eric.

"...is still missing."

"Bingo." Smoke turned onto the main road. As he turned the corner, he saw a man peeing. *Dammit* Smoke thought.

"Kindred." Smoke nodded toward a man relieving himself against a brick wall. "Hit the siren."

Eric looked at him. "What?"

"Just do it."

Eric tapped the siren. The short blast echoed down the street. The man jumped so hard he stumbled backward, soaked the front of his jeans, looked up, and raised his middle finger at the patrol car.

Eric laughed. "That's fucked up."

Smoke smiled. "What's fucked up is that he thinks it's ok to just piss against a wall. He got off easy." Smoke's smile disappeared almost as quickly as it had come. "Now... where were we? When you get in

tomorrow, pull every interior camera they have. Bar, Entrance, Hallways. I want to know who walked in with Sean."

Eric was already thinking through it. "I'll start with the timestamp from when they entered and work forward. If he's in there, we'll find him."

Smoke nodded. "Good."

"And Doug?" Eric asked.

"Bring him in. I don't care how. Have him picked up at home or at his work. Whatever it takes."

"You think he'll talk?"

Smoke was quiet for a moment. "I think Sean scares the hell out of him."

"You think he'll break?"

Smoke's expression never changed. "If Doug's still got a conscience, he will."

The station came into view, and Smoke eased into the parking lot.
"Now go get some sleep."

Eric smiled. "See you in a few hours."

"Yeah," Smoke said. "Morning is already here."

In the distance, the sky was already turning a light grey.

CHAPTER 27

By three in the afternoon, Doug Mercer was already sweating through his shirt.

Kindred sat inside Interview Room Three with his notebook open on the metal table, watching the man fall apart one nervous habit at a time.

Doug's eyes were swollen and red. His face had a greasy shine to it, and every few seconds, he adjusted the silver watch on his wrist as if he could somehow turn the whole day backward.

His knee bounced beneath the table. His fingers twitched, and his eyes kept drifting toward the one-way mirror. People always looked at the mirror.

The room didn't offer comfort. It wasn't supposed to. The temperature was turned down on purpose. The walls are boring beige. Cold lights. The table was bolted to the floor. Three chairs. One door. No windows. No place for a man to hide from himself.

Smoke sat across from Doug in silence, like he was studying his prey. His sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. The black tattoos crawled beneath his rolled sleeves like cracks spreading through porcelain.

Doug cleared his throat. "So... what exactly is this about?"

Smoke lit a Black Death cigarette. "You know what it's about."

Doug forced a weak laugh. "No, sir. I really don't."

Smoke drew on the cigarette, then exhaled slowly through his nose. "That's a lie."

Doug's smile vanished. Kindred stayed quiet.

Smoke leaned back in his chair. "You want a drink, Doug?"

Doug blinked. "What?"

"You heard me. Coffee? Water? Soda?"

Doug hesitated. "Uh... water's fine."

Smoke nodded once and stood. "I'll be right back." The door opened and shut behind him.

Doug immediately exhaled hard and rubbed both hands over his face. "What the hell is wrong with that guy?" he muttered.

Kindred didn't answer.

Doug looked over at him. "He always like this?"

"Like what?"

Doug gave a nervous little laugh. "Intense. Like he wants to crawl inside your skull."

Kindred glanced toward the door. "Honestly? I'm still figuring that out myself... but it's been fun so far."

Doug leaned back slightly. "You should be careful around him."

Kindred looked at him. "Why?"

Doug hesitated. "I don't know. Something about him feels... off."

Before Kindred could answer, the door opened again, and Smoke walked back inside carrying one paper cup. He crossed the room calmly and placed it in front of Kindred.

Doug frowned. "I thought you were getting me water."

Smoke sat down slowly. "No."

Doug blinked. "What do you mean, no?"

Smoke lit another cigarette from the end of the first. "I mean, I'm not getting you shit."

Doug stared at him. "Then why'd you ask?"

Smoke shrugged. "Because I'm fucking with you, Doug."
Silence.

Doug's face tightened. "What?"

"You're sitting here lying to me, hiding things, wasting my time, and somehow you thought I was going to bring you refreshments?"

Doug looked toward Kindred like he expected help.

Kindred shrugged as if to say, *First time*.

Smoke tapped ash into the tray. "So tell me, Doug... why exactly would I get you a drink?"

Doug swallowed. "I'm not lying."

Smoke nodded slowly. "That's another lie."

Doug shoved his chair backward hard enough for the metal legs to scream across the floor. “I’m done with this shit. I’m leaving. Next time you talk to me, it’ll be with my lawyer. You guys are crazy. Fuck this.”

The gun appeared so fast that Kindred almost didn’t see Smoke move. One second, Smoke was sitting. The next thing, he was standing beside Doug with the barrel pressed hard into the corner of Doug’s eye socket.

Doug froze.

Smoke’s voice dropped low. “Sit.”

Doug trembled violently. “You can’t do this,” he whispered.

Smoke pressed the barrel harder against the soft flesh beneath Doug’s eye. “I can do whatever the fuck I need to do to catch killers in this city. You might be wondering if this gun is loaded.”

Doug’s breathing broke apart.

“It is,” Smoke said.

Kindred rose halfway from his chair. Smoke glanced at him and made the smallest motion with one hand.

Stay out of it. Or maybe: trust me.

Kindred wasn’t sure anymore.

Smoke forced Doug back into the chair, then lowered the gun and slid it back in its holster like nothing had happened. Doug looked seconds away from vomiting. Smoke sat back down.

“Now,” he said quietly. “Let’s try this again.”

Doug stared at him. His mouth opened slightly, but no words came. He looked at Smoke like he shouldn't exist.

Smoke folded his hands together. "You know Sean Serrano."

Doug nodded weakly. "Yes."

"How long?"

"Years."

"Good friends?"

Doug hesitated. "We worked together."

"That's not what I asked."

Doug rubbed a trembling hand over his face. "We were friends."

Smoke nodded once. "There we go. See, this doesn't have to be difficult."

Doug's breathing slowly steadied. Smoke watched him closely. "What happened after Sean lost the promotion?"

Doug looked down. "He got angry."

"How angry?"

Doug shrugged weakly. "He thought Jason screwed him over."

"Did Jason screw him over?"

Doug hesitated.

Smoke sighed. "You're still doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Trying to protect people who'd feed you to wolves if it bought them another day."

Doug's jaw tightened. "You don't understand."

Smoke leaned forward slightly. "Then help me understand."

Doug looked at the mirror again. Smoke noticed and slapped his palm against the table, the sharp crack snapping Doug's attention back to him. "Stop looking at the glass."

Doug jumped.

"There's nobody behind it," Smoke said. "Nobody's coming to save you."

Doug stared at the table, his face flushed with fear and anger. "He said he found something,"

Kindred immediately looked up.

Smoke stayed perfectly still. "What kind of something?"

Doug shook his head slowly. "At first I thought he was joking."

Smoke's eyes narrowed. "Doug." His voice is quiet now. Sharp. "What kind of something?"

Doug swallowed hard. "He had a box."

Smoke said nothing.

Doug's eyes flicked up. "Okay? He has this box."

"Boxes don't kill people, Doug."

"I know that. You think I don't know that?" Doug threw his hands up.

"What's with the box?"

Doug's lips trembled. "I can't explain it. You're not going to believe me."

"Try me."

Doug shook his head. "This is all fucked up. I didn't believe he could pull it off. I never thought he would do this shit. I never thought any of this shit was real." Tears slipped from his bloodshot eyes.

Smoke pointed two fingers at his own eyes. "Look at me."

Doug did.

"You talking about spirits? Ghosts? Demons?"

Doug's face went pale.

"We believe you," Smoke said. "Because we've seen it."

Doug's breathing hitched.

Smoke tapped the table once. "Doug. We believe you."

For the first time since he had entered the room, Doug looked like he wanted to believe that. "He called it a money demon."

The room went still. Kindred felt the hairs on his arms rise.

Smoke didn't move. "Good," he said. "Go on."

Doug rubbed both hands together. "There was some Asian guy Sean met through one of the bookies at the Velvet Rail. Sean said the guy knew things. Rituals. Old shit. He told Sean how to catch one."

"Catch what?"

"I don't know!" Doug snapped. "A spirit. A demon. Something. He kept calling it a money demon."

"And Sean believed him?"

Doug gave a broken little laugh. "Sean would believe anything if it made him rich."

Smoke nodded slowly. "That sounds about right."

Doug stared at the table. "He built some kind of box."

Kindred's pen stopped moving. Smoke's eyes narrowed as he leaned closer to Doug.

"What kind of box?"

"Wooden. It's small, and he carries it around with him all the time. It has weird carvings all over it. Symbols and shit."

Smoke pulled a sheet of paper closer and picked up a pen. He drew for a few seconds, then turned the paper toward Doug. "Something like this?"

Doug recoiled slightly. “Yes.”

Smoke kept the paper still. “All over the box?”

Doug nodded. “Sean said the symbols kept it trapped.”

Smoke slowly rolled his sleeves higher. The tattoos along his forearms became more visible.

Doug noticed immediately and pulled back from the table, his breathing quickening.

Smoke leaned forward. “Where did Sean catch it?”

Doug shook his head. “I wasn’t there. I don’t know.”

Smoke’s expression changed. “Wrong answer.”

Doug panicked. “No, seriously. I swear. I wasn’t there.”

Smoke reached forward and grabbed both of Doug’s hands.

Doug gasped.

The lights overhead flickered once.

Kindred froze. The tattoos along Smoke’s forearms darkened beneath the pale skin. Thin blue pulses moved beneath the ink like lightning trapped under glass.

Doug tried to pull away, but Smoke held him easily.

“What the fuck is that?” Doug screamed.

Smoke ignored the question. “Where?”

Doug's fingers curled against his will. His jaw tightened. His whole body seemed to lock, every muscle refusing to obey him. The room filled with a sharp metallic smell, like rain hitting hot pavement before a storm.

"Where?" Smoke asked again.

Doug shook his head violently. "I. Don't. Know!"

Smoke's thumbs pressed harder into Doug's skin as he screamed, "THE CEMETERY!"

The lights flickered like a heart under duress.

Kindred felt static crawl along his arms.

Doug's chair rattled against the floor. "He grabbed it at a cemetery!"

Smoke didn't let go. "Which cemetery?"

"I don't know the name!" Doug was crying now. "He said it was on a hill. Some cemetery on a hill."

"What did he trap?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

The blue pulse beneath Smoke's skin brightened.

Doug sobbed. "He said it could help us. He said we'd finally get what we deserved."

Smoke released him.

Doug collapsed forward, gasping for air, sweat pouring from his face onto the metal table. The lights steadied as the room fell quiet again. Doug stared at Kindred as if he had betrayed him.

Kindred gave him nothing.

Then Doug looked at Smoke, not as if he were a detective, but as if he were death in a badge.

Smoke stood, and he left the room. Doug lowered his head and shook silently. Kindred didn't know what to say. A minute later, Smoke returned and placed a glass of water in front of Doug.

Doug stared up at the smoke, then at the glass. When he was sure it wasn't another trap, he grabbed with both hands and gulped it down, almost choking on the water as it cooled his throat.

Smoke sat down, calm as ever, and lit another cigarette. "Don't drown."

His fingers shook badly enough that he almost dropped the glass. Smoke waited until he had finished drinking. Then he leaned back. "Tell me everything."

Doug did.

It all came out in pieces. Sean's casino debts. The promotion Jason got instead of him. The Asian hustler from the Velvet Rail. The blood ritual. The cemetery. The first request for money. The scratch ticket. The check. The women. The way Sean changed after every request.

He spoke about Che wanting out and said he was afraid. He even admitted that he himself wanted to stop, that he knew it was wrong, but he couldn't. That he, too, just wanted more.

He told them how together they had set Jason up and how he became the target.

Rob just got in the way. He had embarrassed Sean, and he was going mad.

By the end of it, Doug Mercer looked hollow. He had spilled every secret he had been carrying, and each one had taken something from him on the way out. After more than an hour, Smoke finally stood.

“Kindred.” Smoke pointed.

Eric looked up from his notes.

“Take him downstairs and get him cleaned up. Intake always has fresh clothes.”

Doug looked down at the wet stain spreading across his jeans. His face collapsed with humiliation.

Kindred slowly stood. Doug couldn’t even look at him. As they stepped into the hallway, Doug whispered weakly, “What the fuck is he?”

Kindred didn’t answer. Because he honestly didn’t know.

Twenty minutes later, Doug sat back inside Interview Room Three wearing gray county sweatpants and an oversized department hoodie. He looked smaller now. Drained somehow. Destroyed. Like fear had hollowed him out from the inside. Smoke sat across from him, still smoking.

Doug leaned as far away from him as possible and wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Doug,” Smoke said calmly. “You, okay?”

Doug gave a weak laugh. "Fuck no, I'm not okay."

Smoke nodded slightly. "I know that was rough."

Doug stared at him, unable to reconcile the calm man sitting before him with the thing that had just dropped him to his knees.

"But remember what we do," Smoke continued. "We solve crimes. We catch bad guys."

Doug swallowed hard.

"And you weren't telling me the truth. I don't have time to waste on people who lie to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Smoke leaned forward slightly. "What happened in this room never happened. All I care about is finding Sean before he does something worse."

Doug nodded immediately. "Is that another test?"

"You're not the one I need, Doug. You mean nothing to me."

Doug looked up carefully.

"But if I call, you answer. If I ask questions, you tell me the truth."

Doug nodded rapidly now. "Yes."

"Good." Smoke leaned back again. "Then we understand each other."

Doug looked exhausted and completely defeated. Smoke pointed toward the door. “Go home. Take a vacation. Drink yourself stupid for all I care. Just stay available.”

Doug stood shakily. “I can go?”

Eric opened the door. “You’re free to leave.”

Doug took one step toward the hallway, then stopped. “What happens to Sean?”

Smoke took a slow drag from the cigarette. “That depends on how stupid Sean decides to be.”

Doug nodded once and left. As he pulled the door shut behind him, Smoke called out.

“And Doug.”

Doug froze.

His eyes widened as he had stepped into a trap.

“I wouldn’t tell Sean you were here today,” Smoke said. “He seems... a little unstable.”

Doug nodded, then hurried down the hallway, his footsteps echoing against the vinyl tile. The door closed. Kindred turned on Smoke.

“What the fuck was that?”

Smoke exhaled toward the ceiling. “The interrogation?”

“You call that an interrogation?” Kindred snapped. “That was fucking torture, Smoke.”

Smoke shrugged. “Worked, didn’t it?”

Kindred stepped closer. “What the hell was going on with your arms?”

Smoke looked down at the fading tattoos beneath his sleeves. “Long story.”

“No. Seriously. I want to know.”

Smoke rubbed tiredly at his face. “Kid... we don’t have time for this.”

“I just watched you electrocute a man with your hands.”

Smoke looked at him. “You did.”

“So don’t give me ‘we don’t have time.’”

Smoke stepped closer and placed one hand gently on Kindred’s shoulder.

“Listen carefully,” Smoke said quietly. “Every minute we stand here talking about my little electricity trick is another minute Sean Serrano is walking around with a demon in a box. He can kill me. He can kill you. He can kill anyone in this city if we don’t stop him.”

Kindred stayed quiet.

“So, when we catch this motherfucker, we can have story time.”

Smoke squeezed his shoulder once. “For now... I need you to be my partner.”

Kindred looked exhausted, caught somewhere between anger and fear. He didn't pull away because if he was honest, he knew Smoke was right. "I want that story time," he said. "And you're buying the beers."

"Deal." Smoke let go. "This world... this side of things... the rules are different."

Kindred swallowed hard.

"There's a method to my madness, kid. Everything in due time."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Finally, Eric asked, "So what now?"

Smoke grabbed his coat from the chair. "Now we find Che." And opened the door.

"And after that?"

Smoke stopped in the doorway. "After that, we find Sean." A faint, humorless smile touched his face. "Or maybe Sean comes to us."

CHAPTER 28

Doug Mercer stepped out of the station like a man walking out of surgery. Alive. Technically. But something had been carved out of him. The late afternoon wind hit his face as the heavy precinct doors shut behind him. He stopped halfway down the concrete steps and rubbed both hands over his face hard enough to hurt. The cheap department hoodie they'd given him scratched against his neck. The county sweatpants hung loose around his waist. He swore he could smell the piss soaked into his skin.

Fuck.

Kindred followed him outside, carrying a manila folder tucked beneath his arm. Doug avoided looking at him. The kid still had that fresh-faced academy look to him. Too clean. Too normal. Suddenly, Doug hated him for it.

Kindred stopped beside him. "We'll need to talk to Che too," he said. "Hopefully, he can corroborate what you told us."

Doug swallowed. "Yeah."

"And if you see him before we do..." Kindred shifted slightly. "Tell him to call us."

Doug gave a weak nod. "Sure."

Kindred studied him for a moment. "You alright?"

Doug almost laughed. Almost. Instead, he just muttered, "Yeah," and kept walking. He reached his car parked halfway down the street. His hands were still shaking so badly that he dropped the keys trying to unlock it. The metal keys jingled loudly against the pavement. He

looked around immediately. Paranoid. Imagining Smoke could just pop up right next to him. Smoke Ravenstein had done something to him in that room. Something he would never outlive.

Doug bent down, grabbed the keys, and climbed inside the car, locking the doors immediately. He checked the back seat.

Empty. *Thank God.*

He sat there breathing hard for nearly a full minute before finally jamming the key into the ignition. The engine coughed twice before turning over. He drove aimlessly for several blocks before finally calming down enough to think. Traffic crawled around him through the orange haze of rush hour in Chicago. Horns blared somewhere behind him. Pedestrians crossed streets carrying groceries and coffee cups, as if the world hadn't shifted sideways.

Doug kept seeing Smoke's eyes staring into his soul. Cold. Flat. And his tattoos.

Doug gripped the wheel tighter.

He saw flashes of the lights flickering, the electricity crawling beneath Smoke's skin.

No. No, fuck that. That wasn't real.

His breathing started speeding up again. At a red light, Doug grabbed his phone and typed out a message with trembling fingers.

**WE NEED TO MEET.
URGENT.**

Three dots appeared almost immediately. Then an address. No greeting. No question.

Doug stared at the message for a second before tossing the phone onto the passenger seat. *Fucking Sean.*

Twenty minutes later, he pulled into the parking lot of a hookah lounge tucked between a pawn shop and a liquor store on Archer Avenue. A purple neon sign glowed in the front windows. Clouds of sweet-smelling smoke drifted out every time the door opened.

Doug sat in the car for another moment before forcing himself out. Inside, the lounge was dim and hazy. Colored lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting soft reds and greens across the walls. Music pulsed low through hidden speakers. Hookah smoke curled through the air thick as fog.

People sat in booths laughing quietly. Watching sports. Drinking tea. Doug envied them.

A basketball game played on mute above the bar. Men ran back and forth across the screen, sweating under arena lights while nobody in the lounge seemed to care who was winning. Every few seconds, a hookah bubbled somewhere in the room, soft and wet, like something forced to breathe underwater.

Sean Serrano sat in the far-back corner booth beneath a flickering green light, one arm stretched across the backrest. He looked calm, which worried Doug even more.

Subtleness was no longer his strong point. He flashed an expensive watch and wore an open-collar shirt showing a gold chain that was easily a month's salary. Doug slid into the booth across from him. Sean looked at him in the hoodie and the sweatpants.

"What happened to you?" Sean asked.

Doug rubbed the side of his face. The pressure mark from Smoke's gun barrel still burned beneath his eye. "They interrogated me for two fucking hours."

Sean leaned forward slightly. "And?"

Doug gave him a broken little laugh. "And?" He lowered his voice. "This guy's fucking insane, Sean."

Sean's expression barely changed. "Ravenstein?"

"Yes, Ravenstein." Doug leaned across the table. "He pulled a gun on me in the interrogation room."

Sean stopped moving. The hookah pipes bubbled softly around them. "In the station?"

"Yes. In the fucking station." Doug pointed at the bruise. "See this?"

Sean looked at it for a moment, then glanced around the lounge. He could see the imprint Smoke's barrel had left behind.

"What?"

Doug stared at him. "No, shit. Exaggerating? Fuck you, man. This is all because of you."

Sean didn't blink. "You do that sometimes when you're scared."

Doug leaned closer. "This guy operates on a whole different level, man. He does not give a fuck."

Sean stayed quiet.

Doug rubbed his face. "And he knows things."

Sean's eyes narrowed slightly. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Doug shook his head hard. "He just knows. When you're lying. When you're thinking about something. It's like he can smell it on you."

Sean leaned back slowly. "So, what are you telling me?"

Doug looked up.

Sean's voice stayed calm. "You told him anything?"

Doug looked offended. "No."

Sean kept staring at him. He didn't believe Doug.

"I gave him enough to get out of there, alright? Enough to calm him down."

Sean's jaw tightened, but only slightly. "What exactly is enough?"

Doug lowered his voice even further. "I didn't tell him you killed Jason."

Sean's eyes sharpened. "I appreciate you not telling the cops I killed Jason?" he said with a sarcastic voice of a man who was about to rip someone's head off.

Doug stared at him. "Oh, don't start this shit."

Sean leaned forward, just enough to close the distance between them. "No, seriously, Doug. I killed Jason. But why? Huh. I am not the only

one guilty here.” His voice stayed low, but something underneath it had changed. “We all agreed Jason needed to go.”

Doug looked around nervously. “Keep your fucking voice down.”

“You wanted money for your parties and your little side chicks,” Sean said. “He needed money for his house and all the bullshit Lucy wanted done. Everybody benefited. You all wanted in.”

Doug swallowed hard. “Not like this.”

Sean gave a small, humorless smile. “Funny how morality shows up after the bodies start dropping.”

Doug rubbed his shaking hands together beneath the table. “You didn’t see this guy.”

Sean looked tired of hearing it. “Here we go.”

“No. Listen to me.” Doug leaned closer. “His tattoos moved.”

Sean stared at him. “What?”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re fucking high.”

“I’m not fucking high.” Doug’s breathing quickened again. “The lights started flickering, and this blue shit started moving under his skin.”

Sean watched him suspiciously. Doug lowered his voice to almost a whisper. “And electricity started crawling across his arms.”

For a minute, both men went completely silent. The basketball game changed to a commercial. A smiling woman in a white kitchen held up a

bottle of dish soap while Doug talked about impossible things. Sean looked away for a second. But Doug saw it. For the first time all night, uncertainty crossed Sean's face. Then it vanished.

"So what did you tell him?" Sean asked.

Doug hesitated. Sean noticed immediately that his buddy was hiding something.

"What did you tell him, Doug?"

Doug sighed. "I told him about the box."

Sean closed his eyes for a second and bit his lip. "Motherfucker, Doug."

"I didn't tell him where it is."

Sean opened his eyes. "Oh well, thank you. That would be the fucking cherry on top. You told a detective about the box."

"I didn't tell him where it is," Doug repeated quickly. "I swear."

Sean sat very still, his hands resting against his forehead.

You stupid son of a bitch.

He wanted to slap Doug.

No.

He wanted to kill him. He closed his eyes for a second. Then the feeling was gone.

The hookah pipe on the table beside them bubbled and hissed. Smoke drifted lazily between them, dispersing a sweet smell of apple and mint.

Doug looked around the lounge. “We’re fucked,” Doug muttered.

Sean ignored that. “What about Che?”

Doug looked back at him. “What about him?”

Sean’s eyes stayed fixed on the table now. “You think Che can handle what you just went through?”

Doug immediately looked uneasy. “Sean...”

“You think he keeps his mouth shut?”

Doug rubbed his forehead hard. “Che’s scared.”

“Exactly.”

Doug’s stomach dropped. “No.”

Sean looked up at him calmly. “If there’s no Che, they can’t interrogate him.”

Doug stared at him in horror. “No, man.”

Sean said nothing.

Doug leaned back in the booth, his one hand scratching the other. “Fuck. Oh fuck. No man.”

“Relax.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to relax?” Doug hissed. “This whole thing’s falling apart.”

Sean reached across the table and grabbed Doug by the front of the hoodie, just enough to make Doug stop moving. “Get yourself together.”

Doug stared at him wide-eyed.

Sean’s voice dropped lower. “You want Ravenstein coming back for you?”

Doug immediately looked away.

“You want him sticking guns in your face again? Making the lights dance? Crawling around inside your head?”

Doug said nothing. Sean released him slowly. “That’s what I thought.”

Doug’s fingernails started leaving marks on his skin. “We can still run.”

Sean almost smiled, holding up his phone for a second. “And go where? These days, you can’t run anywhere.”

Doug had no answer. Sean leaned back against the booth again. “We handle Che,” he said.

Doug stared at him. “You keep saying we.”

Sean smirked faintly. “That’s because we’re all in this together.”

Doug looked sick. But deep down, he knew it was true. Che wouldn’t last a second. That was the worst part.

The waiter passed their table carrying a tray of small glasses filled with dark tea. He didn’t look at either of them. The music kept pulsing low through the walls. The basketball game came back on. Somebody missed a free throw, and two men near the bar groaned as it mattered.

Doug looked around the lounge one more time. “We’re fucked,” He whispered again.

Sean watched the television for a moment. Then he shook his head once. “No.”

Doug looked up.

“Che is” Sean’s eyes stayed on the game. “We’re adapting. Everybody has a weakness.”

Doug swallowed. “Even Ravenstein?” he asked.

Sean finally looked at him. “Especially Ravenstein.”

Doug lowered his head. “Fuck, man... I never wanted this”

The bubbling hookah pipes hissed softly in the dark. Sean grabbed Doug’s hand and yanked it towards him. “But you wanted the money.”

CHAPTER 29

Smoke stood beside the unmarked car parked near the Field Museum, the lake wind pushing cold through the city in long, restless breaths. Traffic rolled past in streaks of red taillights. Somewhere farther downtown, a siren wailed and disappeared into the maze of concrete and glass.

Kindred leaned against the hood beside him, finishing the last bite of a Chicago dog wrapped in greasy paper.

“You always eat like this?” he asked.

Smoke took another bite from his own. “What? You expected caviar and champagne?”

Kindred smirked. “No. I figured a guy like you survived on cigarettes and anger.”

Smoke pointed the hot dog at him. “Anger is expensive. Hot dogs are affordable.”

Kindred laughed quietly.

Smoke crumpled the wrapper in one hand and tossed it toward the nearby trash can.

The lake wind caught it before it got there. The greasy paper skipped across the parking lot like a frightened animal. Kindred sighed, walked over, trapped it beneath his shoe, and dropped it into the trash on his way back.

Smoke watched him. “You always clean up after people?”

“My mother would've killed me if I didn't.”

“Smart woman.”

They finished eating in silence. Smoke stared out across the black water of Lake Michigan.

“You know what Sean's problem is?”

Kindred shrugged. “He's a narcissist.”

“That too, but no.”

“A control freak.”

“Partly.”

Kindred thought for a second. “He thinks he's smarter than everybody.”

Smoke nodded once. “He probably does.”

“So, what is it?”

Smoke rubbed his thumb across the empty wrapper still in his hand before realizing it was gone. “He thinks the world owes him something.”

Kindred looked at him. “What's the difference?”

“The difference is people like Sean never think they're the bad guy.”

The city lights shimmered across the water. “They spend years building a list. Every person who got promoted instead of them. Every break, they never caught. Every excuse they can find.” Smoke looked back

toward the museum. "By the time they finally hurt somebody..." He shrugged. "They're just settling the score."

Kindred nodded slowly. "Che doesn't fit that."

"No." Smoke agreed.

"Why?"

"Because Che still feels guilty." Smoke stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets. "That means there's still something worth saving."

"And Doug?"

Smoke let out a quiet breath. "Doug's weak."

"Weak?"

Smoke nodded. "Evil at least has conviction." The wind picked up again, rattling the bare branches of a nearby tree. "Weak people panic."

Kindred waited.

"They don't think." He looked over. "They react."

Kindred frowned. "And that scares you more?"

"Every time." Smoke said dead serious.

Kindred watched a couple walk past toward the museum, bundled in jackets, laughing about something neither of them could hear.

"You really think Che's in danger?"

Smoke watched them disappear into the darkness. "Yes."

Nothing else needed to be said. Smoke opened the driver's door. "I'll drop you at the station."

"You're not going home?"

Smoke shook his head. "Not yet."

Kindred climbed into the passenger seat. "Where then?"

"Church."

"You actually do that often?"

"More than you know and not as often as I should." Smoke started the engine.

The radio crackled for a second, and Frank Sinatra drifted softly through the speakers.

Kindred looked over. "Sinatra?"

Smoke adjusted the volume. "Good voice."

"I was expecting Metallica or something."

Smoke pulled away from the curb. "Don't ruin the moment."

Kindred grinned and leaned back in the seat. The city rolled past in wet reflections and orange sodium light. Elevated trains rattled overhead. Pedestrians crossed intersections while traffic drifted through pools of red brake lights. Smoke drove one-handed, a cigarette resting between two fingers outside the cracked window.

"You worried?" Eric asked.

“Yes.”

He glanced over. It was the first time Smoke had admitted fear without trying to hide it. Neither of them spoke again until they pulled into the station parking lot.

Kindred reached for the handle, then paused. “You want backup tonight?”

Smoke looked at him. “You offering?”

Kindred shrugged. “I don't know. Maybe.”

Smoke studied him for a second, and a faint smile tugged at one corner of his mouth.

“Go home, kid.”

Kindred nodded. “Get some sleep while you still can.” He climbed out.

Smoke rolled the window down. “And keep your phone on.” The door shut.

Sinatra was still singing as Smoke pulled away from the curb and disappeared back into the river of Chicago traffic.

Twenty minutes later, he crossed into Polish Downtown. Old brick buildings. Corner bars with neon beer signs glowing in dusty windows. Closed bakeries that would be busy again before sunrise. Church spires rising above the rooftops like dark fingers pointing toward heaven. A man stood outside a tavern smoking beneath a flickering sign. Across the street, an elderly woman walked a small white dog that looked annoyed to be outside.

The cigarette burned low between his fingers as he reached for his phone and dialed from memory. The line rang twice.

"You sound troubled."

Lucian's voice always carried the same quiet certainty. Calm. Measured. Like he already knew tomorrow and simply hadn't decided whether to tell anyone.

Smoke lit another cigarette from the dying member of the first. "You were right."

Silence.

"The Abaddon?" Lucian asked.

Smoke nodded even though Lucian couldn't see him. "Like you said. A Feeder." Smoke tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"It has been centuries since I have heard those words spoken outside old texts."

"So, it's real."

"I never said it wasn't."

Smoke watched the traffic light change ahead. "He trapped it."

"How?" Lucian asked.

"Blood bond."

Another pause.

"Contained inside some kind of carved box."

Lucian exhaled slowly. "That is... unfortunate."

Smoke snorted. "Did anyone ever tell you, you've got a gift for understatement?"

"If the binding is genuine, the demon will identify itself with its keeper."

"Feeding through him." Smoke asked, flinging the cigarette out the window.

"Yes."

Smoke watched as a city bus lumbered past.

"It feeds his greed. His anger. His fears. Eventually..." Lucian stopped.

"Eventually what?"

"It becomes difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins."

Smoke didn't answer. "So how do I stop it?"

"You break the bond."

"And?"

"You destroy the prison."

Smoke's jaw tightened. "And then?"

"You pray."

Smoke let out a tired breath. "That's not exactly a plan."

"No. But it's all I've got."

Traffic thinned as Smoke turned toward the church. Saint Michael's rose ahead through the darkness, its stone walls washed in pale light.

"You should carry every protection you possess," Lucian said. "Holy water. Salt. Iron."

"I was already working on it."

"I know."

Smoke parked along the curb. "You make it sound like a war."

"It has always been a war."

Smoke shut down the car, the engine ticked softly as it cooled.

"And Smoke..."

"Yeah?"

"If I am worried..."

Lucian let the words hang.

"...you should be worried."

The line went dead.

Smoke stared at the phone for another second before slipping it into his pocket. Lucian never wasted words.

Smoke stepped out into the cold. The church stood above him, quiet and ancient. Light glowed faintly behind stained glass. Somewhere inside, a single candle burned before the altar. He started to climb the worn stone steps. Halfway to the doors, his phone rang.

Unknown department extension.

He answered immediately. "Ravenstein."

"Hey, Smoke. We got another one."

His stomach tightened. "What kind?"

"The no-eye cases."

Smoke closed his eyes. "I'll head over."

"Yeah..." The officer hesitated. "This one's bad."

"How bad?"

"Whole family."

Smoke stopped climbing. The wind pushed past him, carrying the faint smell of incense from somewhere inside the church.

"Husband."

A page shuffled.

"Wife."

Another pause.

"Two kids."

Smoke looked at the church doors. "Where?"

"Small house near Saint Paul."

"Chestnut." Smoke turned toward the street.

"Yeah." The officer paused. "How'd you know?"

Smoke was already walking back to the car. "I'll be there." He ended the call and immediately dialed another number.

Kindred answered on the third ring.

"...Hello?"

"You awake?"

A pause. "Smoke?"

"Get dressed."

"What happened?"

Smoke opened the driver's door. "I'm picking you up."

"Where are we going?"

Smoke looked once toward the church before climbing inside. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Che is dead."

CHAPTER 30

Eric was half asleep when three hard knocks rattled his apartment door. He had already dressed himself after Smoke's call and figured he had time to close his eyes for a few minutes. Apparently not.

He rolled off the couch, rubbed the sleep from his face, and opened the door.

Smoke stood beneath the dim apartment light, cigarette glowing between his fingers. "We got another one. Grab your coat."

Eric's stomach tightened. "What happened?" he asked as he closed the door behind him.

Smoke turned toward the stairs.

"We'll see when we get there. For now, all I know is that they are all dead."

Rainwater shimmered across the pavement beneath the streetlights. Sinatra had disappeared from the radio. Now only the hum of the tires and the steady sweep of the windshield wipers filled the cab. Smoke drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting near the open window, cigarette smoke disappearing into the night.

Eric looked over. Smoke looked exhausted.

"You knew, didn't you?"

Smoke watched the road and gave a slight nod. "When they said it was a whole family..." His jaw tightened. "Yeah. I knew."

The wipers crossed the windshield again. "And when they gave me the street, I knew for sure."

Kindred stared out his window. "What the hell happened to Sean?"

Smoke didn't answer immediately. "I don't think Sean's driving the bus anymore."

Kindred looked over. "You think that thing is?"

Smoke shrugged. "I think every time Sean opens that box, he gives away another piece of himself."

The city slid past, street by street, block by block.

"You think Sean did this himself?" Kindred asked.

"No. He's too much of a coward for that." Smoke flicked ash out the window. "But he sent it."

Kindred rubbed the back of his neck. "So, the demon is cleaning up loose ends?"

Smoke glanced at him. "What do you think this was?"

Kindred didn't answer.

Smoke looked back at the road. "Che was going to talk. Sean knew that, so he took him out. If I were Doug," He took another drag from his cigarette, "I would be worried."

They turned onto West Chestnut Street; red and blue lights painted the neighborhood in slow-moving color. Neighbors stood behind police tape, wrapped in jackets, speaking in hushed voices.

Across the street, a little girl clung to her mother's leg until her father quietly guided her back toward the porch.

The Ortega home looked painfully ordinary beneath the flashing lights. The porch light still burned. The light of the television flickered through the drawn curtains. A small bicycle lay on its side near the front steps, exactly where a child had left it earlier that evening. Smoke parked against the curb and shut off the engine. His eyes lingered on the bicycle for just a moment before he climbed out.

A young patrol officer hurried over to meet them. "Detective Ravenstein."

"In the flesh." Smoke said as he opened the trunk, removed two pairs of latex gloves, and handed one to Eric.

"How bad is it?"

The officer swallowed. "I've never seen anything like it."

"You should be glad for that." He pulled on the gloves as they walked toward the tape.

"CSI is inside, but..." The young officer lowered his voice and glanced toward the open front door. "Nobody wants to stay in there any longer than they have to."

Smoke followed his gaze. "I don't blame them." He flung his cigarette butt in the gutter, well outside of the perimeter of the crime scene, ducked beneath the yellow DO NOT CROSS tape, and climbed the porch steps.

The front door stood partially open. Smoke caught it immediately. Sulfur.

Faint, but unmistakable. It lingered beneath the stale air of the house like something had passed through moments earlier.

Smoke looked toward the dark hallway, then at Eric. "It was here."

Eric slowly shook his head, mentally preparing himself for what he was about to see. They stepped inside. The television was still on. Some late-night sitcom filled the room with canned laughter that echoed strangely through the empty house.

Smoke stopped. "Damn."

Eric stepped around him, and even though he had told himself to accept the sulfur smell and tried to envision a dead family, his breath caught in his throat.

The Ortega family sat together on the couch as though they had simply fallen asleep watching television. Che and Lucy, their two children neatly between them. For the briefest instant, it almost looked peaceful. Until you saw their faces.

Eric's knees weakened. He reached for the edge of the dining room table to steady himself before lowering himself into a chair. All of their eyes were gone. The sockets smooth, as though they had never existed. Their mouths hung slightly open, and their skin clung tightly to the bones beneath, pale and brittle in the glow of the television. They didn't look dead. They looked hollowed out.

For one awful second, Eric was reminded of Halloween decorations sitting on somebody's front porch. But these weren't decorations, they were the shells of the Ortega family.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing, willing the room to stop spinning. He had seen death before. Shootings. Overdoses. Fatal car wrecks. But never anything like this.

When he finally opened his eyes again, the Ortega family was still sitting there. Empty sockets. Slack mouths. Hollow shells with nothing left inside. He swallowed hard and wondered how Smoke managed to keep doing this.

Smoke moved toward the couch without saying a word. The CSI technicians quietly stepped aside to give him room.

He crouched beside the youngest child and removed the small flashlight from his coat. The beam disappeared into the empty eye socket. Eric watched, already knowing that it would pass cleanly through the skull before emerging through the second socket. The Ortegas' heads glowed softly like lanterns as Smoke examined each member of the family, just like he had done with the previous victims. All four the same result. When Smoke finally stood, his attention shifted to the wall behind the couch. Dark stains spread across the paint in uneven patterns behind the bodies.

It wasn't soot. Something else.

The faint outlines of the family were burned into the wall, as if something had struck them with such violence that it had driven their shadows into the wall itself.

Smoke stared at it for several long seconds. The sitcom audience laughed. The sound seemed impossibly loud inside the room.

"Can I turn off the TV?" Eric asked, disturbed by the laughter and the glare the TV cast across the faces of the Ortegas.

"I think that would be fine." Smoke nodded as he crossed over to Eric and rested a hand on his shoulder. "You alright?"

Eric looked up. "I'm okay." The lie sounded weak even to him. "I've... I've never seen anything like this."

Smoke nodded. "I hope you never do again."

A CSI technician approached, carrying an evidence bag. "Detective?"

Smoke turned. "What you got?"

"The phones."

"Got the father's?"

The technician handed over the bag. Smoke removed Che's phone and unlocked it. That was the first break they got for the night. His thumb moved down the screen. Then stopped.

Eric noticed the change in his face immediately. "What?"

Without answering, Smoke handed him the phone.

The first message had come from Eric's number.

We'd like to stop by and ask a few follow-up questions.

Che's reply:

Sure. We're home.

Eric scrolled farther.

A few minutes later, Che had sent another text, this time to Sean.

Sean... the detectives want to come interview me.

Another message.

I can't do this anymore.

The last one.

I never wanted this. I'm out.

Eric slowly lowered the phone. "Shit."

Smoke's jaw tightened. "We need to find Sean."

The television audience erupted into laughter, echoing through the dead house as if it belonged in another world. Eric walked over to the TV and finally turned it off.

CHAPTER 31

The first wave of chaos had passed.

The neighbors who had crowded behind the yellow tape earlier had long since drifted back inside, their curiosity finally giving way to locked doors and glowing televisions. Only the news crews remained. Portable lights illuminated the front yard while reporters rehearsed solemn expressions for cameras that weren't rolling yet. Uniformed officers kept them well back from the house.

Smoke hated reporters.

Inside, the Ortega home had settled into the quiet rhythm of a homicide investigation.

Evidence markers dotted the living room floor. Cameras clicked. Someone rolled a tripod across the hardwood, its rubber feet squeaking faintly. A detective quietly dictated notes into a recorder while a crime scene technician dusted the hallway light switch for fingerprints.

The Ortega house had become a machine.

Smoke stood near the dining room table, flipping through Che's phone while the CSI team finished documenting the scene. In the other room, the bodies were waiting for transport. Two tall ones, two small ones. White sheets had finally been pulled over the Ortega family, but they did little to soften the horror waiting beneath them. The cloth settled over each face in strange, uneven contours, dipping where their eyes should have been and again where their mouths were hanging open.

Eric stood near the kitchen counter, arms folded tightly across his chest.

Every time he blinked, the sheets disappeared. He still saw hollow sockets. The pale skin stretched tight across bone, and Smoke's flashlight passed cleanly through a little boy's skull.

He looked away and concentrated on the floor instead.

Smoke stopped scrolling. "We have enough."

Eric rubbed both hands across his face. "For what?"

Smoke looked up. "For Sean."

Smoke crossed the living room toward a uniformed sergeant standing near the front door.

"I want Sean Serrano entered into NCIC immediately. Get his picture out to every patrol unit in the city. His vehicle, too. Red Ford Explorer."

The sergeant nodded. "I'll get it done."

Another detective approached, carrying a small notebook. "We pulled the registration. Explorer is still registered to Sean Serrano."

"Any activity?" Smoke asked.

"Nothing yet."

Smoke slipped Che's phone back into an evidence bag and handed it back to the technician. "There will be."

He turned toward Eric. "Let's go. There is nothing here that will tell us where Sean has gone."

They stepped onto the front porch. "I bet you he wasn't even anywhere near this place."

The cold air hit Eric like a bucket of water. He filled his lungs and held them there for a moment before slowly letting them out. For the first time since entering the house, he felt like he could breathe again.

Smoke leaned against the porch railing, lighting another cigarette. "You, okay?"

Eric gave a tired laugh. "That's the third time you've asked."

"And you still haven't answered."

Eric looked down the quiet street. The flashing patrol lights reflected off rain-soaked pavement. A tow truck rumbled past at the end of the block. One of the reporters practiced her introduction while the cameraman adjusted the light above her. Life had already moved on.

"I don't know what I am right now."

Smoke nodded slowly. "That's fair. Nobody said this would be easy."

"You ever get used to it?"

Smoke flicked ash into the gutter. "No."

Eric looked at him. "You don't?"

Smoke shook his head. "If you ever do..." He crushed the cigarette beneath his heel. "...it's time to find another job."

A young patrol officer hurried over carrying a clipboard. "We pulled Serrano's last known addresses."

Smoke looked down the page. An apartment, several previous residences, and his parents' house. He folded the paper once and slipped it into his coat pocket. "Great job. Thanks."

The house behind them hummed with quiet activity. The investigation would continue for hours. Maybe until sunrise.

They walked back to the car, Eric climbed in, but before closing the door, he looked back at the Ortega house one last time. He slammed the door a little harder than he meant to. Smoke looked over.

"What?" Eric kept staring through the windshield.

"...Nothing." Smoke watched him for another second. He entered Doug's address into his phone, waited for the route to appear, then eased the car away from the curb.

"Where are we going?" Eric asked.

"Doug. He has to be next on Sean's list. If he isn't, he will be soon." Smoke checked the traffic in his mirror and merged. "We need to get to him before Sean does. Maybe Che's murder scared him enough to finally tell us everything." He glanced over briefly. "Try his phone."

Eric dialed. The call connected almost immediately.

"The number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service."

Eric frowned and tried again. Same message. He slowly lowered the phone.

"What?" Smoke asked.

Eric pressed the speaker button and played the message for Smoke.

“Son of a Bitch.” Smoke slammed the steering wheel so hard the horn went off.

CHAPTER 32

Douglas Reed had convinced himself that disconnecting his number had been the right decision. The apartment was silent except for the ticking of a cheap kitchen clock and the occasional hiss of rain against the living room window. Every light in the place was off. Doug sat in the darkness with a pistol resting across his lap, staring through a narrow gap in the blinds. He hadn't slept since his meeting with Sean.

Every pair of headlights that drifted across the parking lot made him flinch. Every car door that was closed on the streets below him made his pulse jump. Twice, he had been certain Sean had found him. Twice, it had been nothing more than neighbors coming home from work. His phone lay on the kitchen table. Nothing but a paperweight now.

Ravenstein had told him to stay close to the phone and had promised him they weren't interested in him. Doug hadn't believed a single word of it. He had never trusted cops, even though half of his family were cops. Outside, an unmarked sedan rolled slowly into the parking lot. Doug felt his stomach knot.

"No..."

The driver's door opened.

Doug saw Ravenstein climb out, and Kindred stepped out of the passenger side a second later.

Doug stumbled backward from the window. "They found me..."

His eyes darted around the apartment, and he grabbed the backpack he had already set ready, just in case he had to make a run for it.

The front door? Too obvious.

The bedroom window? Three stories up. No.

The hallway.

His breathing became quick and shallow.

"They know..." His mind raced from one impossible thought to another. Maybe Sean had already talked to them. Telling them it was all Doug's idea. That wouldn't surprise Doug a bit. Sean had always just been about Sean and nobody else. Maybe the police had found something. Maybe they knew about the money. Maybe they knew everything.

A sharp knock rattled the apartment door.

"Douglas Reed!" Ravenstein's voice boomed from the hallway. His voice was calm but solid. "We need to talk."

Doug backed farther into the apartment. His hand tightened around his pistol.

Another knock.

"Doug, I know you're in there. Let's stop fucking around, buddy. We just want to talk."

His chest tightened. Sean. Smoke. The demon. The three of them had become impossible to separate inside his head.

Another knock. Louder this time.

Doug spun toward the rear hallway, shoved open the fire exit door, and bolted into the stairwell. The heavy steel door slammed behind him with a deafening crash.

"He went out the back," Eric said.

"He just made the worst decision of his life."

Both detectives took off after him.

Rainwater splashed beneath Doug's shoes as he burst from the rear exit into the alley behind the apartment building. His lungs burned as he sprinted toward the street, slipping once on the wet pavement before catching himself against a brick wall.

"Doug!" Smoke's voice echoed between the buildings. "Stop running!"

Doug glanced back. Big mistake. His foot caught a broken section of pavement, sending him crashing shoulder-first into a dumpster. Pain shot down his arm, but fear shoved him back to his feet before he even realized he'd fallen. He ran harder.

Chicago was alive all around him. An elevated train thundered overhead. Flashes of light as the carts flew by. Wind funneled through the alley, carrying scraps of newspaper and the smell of rain-soaked asphalt.

Behind him, Smoke was in relentless pursuit. "Doug! We're trying to help you!"

Doug's laugh came out somewhere between a sob and a scream. "Stay away from me!"

He spotted another apartment building ahead, its rear security door propped open with a broken cinder block. Without thinking, he darted inside.

The stairwell smelled of mildew and piss. Doug took three steps at a time. His lungs screamed. His legs felt like they were filling with wet

cement, but he kept climbing. Adrenaline boosts him on. Behind him, the heavy fire door burst open.

"Doug!"

Eric's voice echoed through the narrow stairwell. "Stop! We don't want to hurt you!"

Doug didn't even look back. He grabbed the handrail and pulled himself around the first landing, nearly losing his footing on the wet soles of his shoes. The pounding footsteps behind him grew louder. Closer.

Eric rounded the corner just as Doug reached the next flight. "Doug!"

Doug's instinct took over; he spun, swinging his pistol wildly through the air. The steel slide slammed into Eric's cheek with a sickening crack. Pain exploded across Eric's face, and the world flashed white. His legs buckled beneath him, and he crashed shoulder-first into the metal railing before sliding hard against the concrete wall.

Doug stared at him for half a second. "Oh... shit..."

He saw the service pistol riding on Eric's hip and, without thinking, ripped it free from the holster. Eric tried to reach for him, but his arms felt heavy, disconnected.

"Smoke!" His voice echoed through the stairwell. "He took my gun!"

Doug was already running again. Climbing up further, hoping for another way out.

Smoke reached the landing just as Eric struggled to sit upright. Blood trickling from a split beneath his eye.

Smoke looked at him for the briefest moment. "You with me?"

Eric nodded, winced, pointing up the stairwell, "Go get him. Gun."

Smoke was already halfway up the stairs. "I'll be back. Call it in."

Eric forced himself to his feet, one hand gripping the railing. "Go!"

Smoke didn't waste another second. He charged up the remaining flights, his footsteps echoing through the concrete shaft. Above him, he could hear a heavy door slam open. He could feel cold air pouring down the stairwell. Doug had reached the roof.

Smoke pushed harder. By the time he burst through the rooftop access door, he was exhausted. Doug stood nearly thirty feet away, his chest heaving as rain drifted sideways across the rooftop.

Chicago stretched out behind him in every direction, a sea of lights beneath low clouds and mist. Ventilation units hummed softly in the darkness while loose gravel skittered across the roof.

Doug backed away the moment he saw Smoke. Slowly backing up, never taking his eye off the cop, both guns ready in his hands. He kept creeping backward until the backs of his legs touched the low concrete parapet.

Smoke kept his hands where Doug could see them. "Doug."

"Don't." His voice cracked. "Don't come any closer."

Smoke studied him for a long moment. The trembling hands. The darting eyes. He had seen this too many times, and it could go both ways. He didn't think that Doug would kill him. But he was also not dumb enough to not. Doug was a man trying not to fall apart. Smoke slowly reached behind his back.

Doug immediately jerked both pistols higher. "I said don't!"

Smoke stopped. "Look, I'm putting mine away."

He slowly turned so Doug could see him, slid his backup pistol back into the holster beneath his coat, and raised both empty hands. "See?"

Doug didn't answer.

Smoke lowered himself onto one knee. Then slowly sat on the rain-soaked gravel. "I told you before, Doug." His voice remained calm. "I'm not here for you."

Doug blinked.

"I don't care about the gambling." Smoke spread his hands slightly. "I don't care about the money."

Doug stared at him.

Smoke nodded toward the pistols. "The only thing you've done tonight that made me angry..." He paused. "...was turning off your phone."

Doug's breathing slowed just enough to listen.

"I told you to keep it on because I knew Sean would come for you."

The words hung between them. Smoke leaned forward slightly. "Right now, I'm the only person standing between you and him."

Doug shook his head. "No..."

"You don't believe me."

"No..."

"I just came from Che Ortega's house."

Doug frowned. "What?"

Smoke watched his face carefully. "Sean killed him."

Doug's expression emptied. "No."

"He killed Lucy, too."

Doug's head shook harder. "No..." He shook the pistols at Smoke. "You're lying."

"And the children."

The rooftop fell silent.

Doug stared at Smoke, his eyes overflowing with tears. Waiting. Waiting for him to admit it was a lie.

Instead, Smoke quietly said, "I watched the coroner carry all four of them out of that house."

Doug's knees buckled, catching himself against the parapet. "No..." his voice barely a whisper. "That wasn't..." He swallowed hard. "...that wasn't the deal."

Smoke didn't react. "What deal?"

Doug buried both hands in his hair, the pistols hanging loosely from his fingers. "We were only supposed to scare him." His breathing became ragged. "Sean said... Sean said if Che disappeared for a while, nobody

would ask questions." He looked at Smoke. "I swear..." Tears rolled down his face. "I never agreed to this."

Smoke believed him. Not because Doug was innocent. But from experience, he had learned that guilty men lied, but broken men confessed.

"Where's Sean?"

Doug wiped at his face with the back of his hand. "I don't know."

Smoke waited patiently. Rushing would not get them anything.

"He never stays anywhere for long." Doug stared at the city beyond the rooftop. "He owed everybody money. Clubs. Bookies. Loan sharks. Friends. He sleeps in his Explorer some nights...some girl's apartment the next...sometimes a motel if he hit a jackpot."

Smoke nodded. Every piece fits.

Doug looked back at him. "He's gone, man."

Smoke slowly stood. "I'm not asking you to find him tonight." taking one careful step forward. "I'm asking you to come downstairs. Come with us."

Doug looked at the pistols. Then at Smoke. "I can't."

"You can." Smoke kept his arms wide and his palms open, making sure Doug did not perceive him as a threat.

"I can't." Sobbing, right on the point of breaking.

Another step.

"We'll protect you."

Doug's laugh was a broken, hopeless sound. "There isn't a place on earth you can hide me from that thing."

Smoke stopped. "There are ways. You know I have ways."

Doug looked up. For the first time all night... He had the smallest flicker of hope. But as fast as it appeared, it now vanished. His face collapsed beneath the weight of everything he had done. Thinking of all the things they had done, everything Sean had become. Thinking of Che, his kids, and what they would never become. He slowly lowered Eric's pistol.

Smoke saw it. He was slowly connecting with him.

"Doug..."

Doug looked at him with empty eyes. "If I'd never met Sean..." His voice broke. "...those kids would still be alive."

Smoke took another step. "This isn't your only choice."

Doug gave him the faintest smile. Smoke had rarely seen so much suffering on a man's face.

"I'm sorry."

Smoke lunged. "Doug!"

The gunshot cracked across the rooftop. Doug's body folded backward over the parapet.

For the briefest second, one hand reached for empty air. Then he was gone. His body tumbled between the canyon of buildings before ending

in a distant, sickening impact far below. Smoke stood frozen at the edge. Beneath him, people began shouting.

Smoke closed his eyes and sat on the edge of the roof, his head in his hands. He had been one second too late. Behind him, Eric stumbled onto the roof, one hand pressed against the blood running down his face. He looked at the empty space beyond the parapet.

"...Doug?"

Smoke nodded. His eyes were pointing towards the street below. Finally, he spoke.

"Call it in."

Eric swallowed and made the call. He sat next to Smoke; this time, it was his turn to ask if Smoke was ok.

"This kind of shit will never be ok, buddy." They waited for yet another crime scene to be processed.

CHAPTER 33

Sean Serrano looked like hell. Three nights without real sleep had carved deep shadows beneath his bloodshot eyes. A week's worth of stubble darkened his jaw, and his clothes stank of cigarette smoke and sweat. Every time he caught his reflection in the rearview mirror, he barely recognized the man staring back at him.

The red Ford Explorer drove aimlessly through Little Village. Sean wasn't going anywhere in particular. He was avoiding the men who were looking for him. Debt collectors and the cops.

He slept wherever he thought nobody would look. Behind grocery stores. In abandoned parking lots. One night, he just parked beneath an overpass. Every morning, he woke convinced someone would find him. Every night, he drove somewhere else. His life had been reduced to whatever fit inside the Explorer, a duffel bag filled with clothes, a half-empty carton of cigarettes, a few bottles of water, a backpack stuffed with cash that somehow never seemed to get any thicker, and the box. It rested on the passenger seat, wrapped inside an old gray sweatshirt. Sean looked at it again. He had lost count of how many times he had checked it during the drive.

"You already ate," he muttered. His own voice sounded strange inside the empty vehicle. He reached across the center console and rested his hand on the shirt. It felt warm. It was always warm now.

Sean pulled his hand back. The heater hummed softly while rain drifted across the windshield in thin ribbons. Chicago slipped past outside in blurred reflections of storefronts, taillights, and advertising signs.

People hurried along sidewalks with umbrellas tucked against the wind, living their ordinary lives. Sean couldn't remember what ordinary felt like anymore. His phone vibrated in the cup holder.

Unknown Number.

He ignored it. A few seconds later, it buzzed again.

Unknown Number.

He let it ring. Then again. And again.

Sean cursed under his breath. "Leave me the hell alone." The phone finally stopped. He glared at the screen.

78 missed calls.

Fuck.

Silence returned inside the vehicle. At least for almost a minute. Then it rang again. Sean lost it and snatched it up. "What?"

Nothing. Then a voice he recognized immediately. Cold and patient.

"You should've paid your debts, motherfucker." The line went dead.

Every muscle in his body tightened.

Frank.

He looked into the rearview mirror. An older black sedan turned onto the street behind him. It stayed there. Matching his every turn. Matching every lane change.

Sean's mouth went dry. "No..."

He made another right turn. The sedan followed. A second set of headlights appeared in the mirror. Another car. Closing fast.

Sean's fingers tightened around the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. "They found me."

The sedan surged forward until its headlights swallowed the rearview mirror. Sean slammed his foot onto the accelerator. The Explorer leaped ahead, tires hissing across the rain-soaked pavement. He shot into the intersection just as a delivery truck blasted its horn. Sean yanked the wheel, missing the truck's front bumper by inches before it disappeared behind him.

Sean's pursuers never fell back. They stayed glued to him. Another pair of headlights appeared alongside. Then another.

"They're boxing me in," Sean whispered. His pulse hammered in his ears. The phone rang again. Same number. Sean answered without taking his eyes off the road. "What?"

"You can run all night," Frank said calmly. "You're just gonna die tired." Frank had hung up.

Sean threw the phone onto the passenger seat. "Son of a bitch!"

The first gunshot shattered the quiet.

BANG.

The rear window spider-webbed instantly. A second shot punched through the remaining glass. Safety glass exploded across the backseat.

Sean ducked instinctively as tiny cubes of glass showered over his shoulders. "Fuck!"

He fought the steering wheel as the Explorer fishtailed across the rain-soaked pavement. People on the sidewalk scattered in every direction. A man jumped from his bicycle and dove behind a parked car.

Sean blew through the red light and clipped a car on the rear bumper.

A city bus blasted its horn as it barreled through the intersection. Sean missed it by less than a car length.

His entire body shook. At this point, he wasn't driving anymore. It was surviving.

Another volley of shots rang out behind him. One round punched through the rear hatch. Another shattered the driver's side mirror. Sean glanced toward the passenger seat. The sweatshirt had slipped halfway open. The carved wooden box stared back at him.

Waiting.

"No," he muttered. He grabbed the sweatshirt with one hand and pulled it back over the box without taking his foot off the accelerator. "Not now."

The rain hammered harder against the car, splashing in through the back as he drove without direction. Anywhere was good, anywhere away from Frank. The wipers struggled to keep up.

Sean turned sharply into an industrial district, and warehouses and machine shops replaced restaurants and neighborhood bars. The streets were nearly empty now, lit only by the occasional security light reflecting off wet pavement. Maybe he could lose them here.

The thought had barely crossed his mind when the second car swung around the corner ahead of him. It blocked half the street. Sean's eyes widened. "No..."

He yanked the wheel. The Explorer mounted the curb, bounced violently back onto the pavement, and slammed broadside through a chain-link fence behind a closed auto repair shop. The impact drove the breath from his lungs. The airbags exploded with a deafening whump, filling the cab with white powder and the sharp smell of burned

propellant. For a second, everything went silent. Sean gasped for air, his ribs screaming every time he inhaled.

Blood trickled from a cut above his eyebrow and ran into one eye.

Headlights flooded through the broken fence behind him. Car doors slammed. He could hear the voices getting louder.

"GET HIM!"

Sean's head snapped toward the passenger seat. The box. He ripped it free, wrapped it tightly inside the sweatshirt, and stumbled out of the Explorer just as another bullet punched through the driver's side door.

He ran. He ran like never before, spitting blood, struggling to keep his balance. He was surviving on pure instinct. Not because he thought he had a chance at escape. No. Because stopping meant dying.

Sean tore through the darkness; his footsteps echoed through an abandoned factory.

Rows of rusted machinery stretched into the shadows like the skeletons of forgotten giants. Conveyor belts hung frozen in place beneath decades of dust while rainwater dripped steadily through holes in the roof, striking the concrete floor below with slow, hollow echoes.

He glanced over his shoulder.

Flashlights bounced wildly through the darkness behind him. Boots splashed through puddles as his pursuers closed the distance, their heavy breathing echoing through the abandoned factory.

"There! He went this way! Get him!"

Sean shoved through another steel door as a bullet struck above his head. He found himself on a narrow metal catwalk that overlooked the factory floor nearly thirty feet below.

Fuck. He froze.

The catwalk ended twenty yards ahead, where a section had collapsed years earlier. Twisted steel hung over open air. Beyond it, there was nothing but empty space and a long fall to the concrete below.

Shit...

The footsteps behind him slowed. Four men stepped onto the catwalk. Pistols drawn.

They spread out instinctively, cutting off every escape.

Rain dripped steadily through the broken roof, soaking everything and everyone.

One of the men smiled.

Rain streamed through his hair and down his face. He ran his tongue across his lips, tasting dirty rainwater and rust.

"End of the road, Sean."

Sean clutched the sweatshirt tighter against his chest. "I've got the money."

The men laughed. "No, you don't. You would've brought it if you had it."

"I can get it." He looked left and right. Looking at the men, considering the jump.

"You already had your chance. Too many chances. Frank doesn't care anymore if you have the money or not. The only thing he wants now..." The tallest of the four men raised his pistol. "... is you dead."

Sean looked over the side. Thirty feet. *It's too high.*

He looked back at the men. He could feel the heat pulsing from the bundle in his arms. His breathing became shallow. "I don't want to do this."

"What?" one of them laughed. "You're gonna beat us to death with your shirt." The others chuckled.

Sean slowly peeled back the shirt. The carved wooden box rested in his trembling hands. For a moment, he simply stared at it. He knew what would happen. He also knew what would happen to him if he didn't.

He heard the pistol's safety click off, and he closed his eyes. He dug his thumbnail into the carved groove, tearing it free as he lifted the box toward the men. Blood ran beneath the nail and soaked into the glowing green symbols.

"...Kill them."

The temperature inside the factory plummeted.

One of the gunmen frowned. "What the hell..." Every light fixture in the building exploded at once. Glass rained down through the darkness. The flashlights died in their hands.

For one split second, there was absolute silence. Then... something moved.

Metal screamed somewhere below as though enormous claws scraped across it. One of the men fired blindly. The muzzle flash lit the factory

for the briefest instant. Something clung to the underside of the catwalk.

A green flash...

Then darkness swallowed everything again.

Human screams ripped through the factory, mixed with uncontrolled gunfire and a low, guttural growl that barely sounded alive.

Sean flattened himself against the railing, both hands clamped over his ears. He heard a body strike the concrete below.

Another man cried out.

"Help—"

The plea was cut off mid-word. Silence.

Sean slowly lowered his hands, afraid of what he might find.

The factory had gone almost completely dark. Only the faint green glow of the box illuminated the catwalk. The carved symbols pulsed unevenly, like a slowing heartbeat, before fading one by one.

One of the bodies hung draped over the railing. It was the tall man who had pointed his gun at Sean only seconds earlier. A dark silhouette slowly peeled itself away from the ruined body and slipped soundlessly back into the shadows. Smoke drifted lazily from the man's empty eye sockets like paper burning without flame.

The empty sockets settled on Sean.

The last symbol faded.

The box went dark. Heat lingered in the wood.

Sean looked down at the factory floor. The pale light filtering through the broken windows barely reached the bodies below, but it was enough. He could make out where the four men had fallen, their limbs twisted at impossible angles.

Their faces...

He looked away.

He didn't need to see them to know what they looked like. The job was done. It was time to get the hell out of there.

He wrapped the sweatshirt around the box and stumbled back the way he had come. Every instinct screamed at him to run. He backed away from the railing, wrapped the sweatshirt around the box, and hurried through the factory before bursting through a rusted fire door that spat him out into the alley beyond.

He had never welcomed cold rain like this before. Hard drops hit his face as he looked at his hands. The crusted wounds under his nails and the fresh blood that was being washed off.

I need to get out of here. Out of Chicago. Leave everything behind. The debts. The cops. Frank. Ravenstein. Just keep driving until there is nothing left in the rearview mirror.

Sirens wailed somewhere. Slowly getting closer.

From the corner of his eye, Sean could see police lights reflecting off the wet brick walls at the far end of the alley.

Fuck

An unmarked sedan swung hard around the corner, tires hissing across the rain-soaked pavement before stopping sideways across the exit. The driver's door flew open.

Smoke Ravenstein ran out, pistol already in his hands. "Sean!"

Sean froze and for the briefest second their eyes met. A moment of Fear. Then hate.

Smoke raised his pistol. "Police! Don't FUCKING move!"

Sean turned and bolted deeper into the maze of alleys.

Smoke took off after him without hesitation. "Sean!"

The shout echoed between the buildings as sirens converged on the neighborhood from every direction.

CHAPTER 34

Sean didn't stop running until the sirens became distant echoes. His lungs burned. Every breath felt like broken glass scraping through his ribs. Blood from the cut above his eye had dried along the side of his face, leaving one eyelid sticky every time he blinked.

He slowed beneath the elevated train tracks, bracing his hands against his knees while another train thundered overhead. The vibration rolled through the steel beams before disappearing into the sleeping city. Somewhere behind him, police cruisers searched block after block. Frank's men were probably doing the same.

He forced himself upright, pulled the sweatshirt tighter around the box and disappeared deeper into the neighborhood. *I need to keep moving.*

The businesses grew smaller here. Pawn shops. Laundromats. Discount grocery stores. Places that barely survived during the day and looked abandoned after midnight.

Then he saw it.

Behind a small neighborhood church stood a large metal donation bin overflowing with unwanted clothes. Sean glanced up and down the empty street. Nothing.

He hurried across the parking lot, climbed onto the side of the bin, and reached as far inside as he could. His fingers found a gray hooded sweatshirt. A pair of blue jeans and an old baseball cap.

Good enough for now.

The jeans were a size too big. The sweatshirt pulled tight across his shoulders. It didn't matter. He stripped off his bloodstained clothes behind the donation bin and pulled on the dry ones.

For a brief moment, he caught the smell of somebody else's laundry detergent. It was strangely comforting. *Better than blood.*

He stuffed a few extra clothes into a faded backpack someone had left beside the bin and slung it over one shoulder. He almost looked like everybody else. Almost.

As he pulled the hood over his head, a familiar voice drifted through his memory. *Sounds like you've run out of luck.* The voice brought him back to where his trouble really started.

He was sitting inside O'Malley's, a neighborhood bar where the air always smelled faintly of stale beer and bleach. A baseball game played silently on the television above the bottles, with only a handful of customers occupying the stools. The bartender polished a glass and looked at Sean. "You look like hell."

Sean laughed without humor. "I feel worse."

"Gambling again?"

He stared into the whiskey in front of him. "I thought I could win it back."

"And?"

"I buried myself deeper."

She shook her head. "You keep borrowing money to pay people you already owe, Sean."

"I know."

"You keep thinking the next hand is gonna fix everything."

"I know." Sean rubbed both hands across his face. "I've borrowed from friends. Family. Bookies." He looked down into his drink. "Hell, I borrowed from one bookmaker just to pay another. I'm out of people to call."

Three barstools farther down, an elderly Asian man slowly lifted his beer.

Without looking at Sean, he spoke. "You don't need better luck."

Sean glanced over. The old man took another slow drink. "You need a money demon."

Sean chuckled. "A money demon?"

The bartender rolled her eyes. "Oh, great. Here we go."

Sean picked up his whiskey and slid two stools closer. "So what, old man?" he said with a crooked smile. "You got one in a bottle back there?"

For the first time, the old man looked directly at him. His eyes were calm. Ancient. "No."

Sean smirked. "Then what are you selling?"

The old man studied him for a long moment. "I'm not selling anything." He pushed his empty beer glass toward Sean. "If you're buying..."

Sean looked at the bartender. "Another round."

She sighed and reached for another bottle. Sean turned back to the old man. "So what's your name?"

The old man wrapped both hands around the fresh beer and gave the faintest hint of a smile. "Just call me Chu."

A car door slammed somewhere nearby. The memory shattered. Sean blinked. He was back in the rain. His pulse hammered against his ribs. He looked at the box tucked beneath his arm.

"You ruined everything," he whispered.

Pulling the hood lower over his face, Sean hugged the buildings and disappeared into the darkness, keeping to the alleys. Every passing set of headlights sent him deeper into the shadows. Twice, he flattened himself behind dumpsters while patrol cars rolled slowly through the neighborhood. Once he heard a police cruiser stop less than half a block away, its spotlight swept across the parking lot before moving on.

His parents still lived on the southwest side of the city. He hadn't been back in almost three years. Not after the gambling. He had borrowed money from his father and promised over and over again that it would be the last time.

Tonight, he had no choice.

The neighborhood looked exactly as he remembered it. Small brick homes with neatly trimmed hedges. Porch lights left burning through the night. Wind chimes swaying gently beneath covered patios. Everything was normal.

It was a world Sean had removed himself from, making one bad decision at a time.

He circled the block before slipping into the alley behind the house.

The detached garage was still there. So was the loose side window. He slid it open carefully and climbed inside. His father's workshop still smelled like motor oil and fresh-cut lumber. Old cardboard boxes were stacked along the walls. Nothing had changed.

The old duffel bag still hung from a nail near the workbench. Sean filled it quickly. Dry clothes. A heavier jacket. A flashlight. A pair of work gloves. A half-empty box of protein bars. His father always kept emergency cash hidden inside an old coffee can on the top shelf.

Sean hesitated.

Then reached for it. A little over two hundred dollars could buy him some meals. He stuffed it into his pocket. *Sorry, Dad.*

His eyes drifted across the workbench. His father had always believed that if you took care of your tools, they would take care of you. Sean picked up one of the carving knives. Its worn wooden handle fit perfectly in his hand. The memory returned.

...

Sean found Chu sitting at the same end of the bar three nights later.

"You came back," Chu said without looking up from his beer.

Sean slid onto the stool beside him. "You weren't kidding?"

Chu looked at him. "I never joke about things that can kill people."

Sean laughed nervously. "I'm serious."

"So am I."

The bartender set two beers on the bar. Sean nodded his thanks.

"Tell me." His eyes were big and excited.

Chu took a slow drink before answering. "There are things in this world that feed on more than flesh."

Sean smirked. "Ghost stories."

Chu ignored him. "They feed on fear. Greed. Desperation. On people like you." He looked at Sean over the rim of his glass. "The more broken the soul, the sweeter the meal."

Sean shifted uneasily. "So, this... money demon..."

Chu shook his head. "No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"There is no money demon."

Sean frowned. "You just said..."

"I said you need one." Chu folded his hands around the bottle. "What you need is a Feeder."

Sean waited.

Chu continued. "It doesn't create wealth. It takes it."

Sean frowned. "Takes it from who?"

"Whoever stands in its way."

Sean studied the old man's face, trying to decide whether he was listening to a drunk or a lunatic. "And how do you control something like that?"

Chu didn't answer immediately. Instead, he finished the last of his beer. Then quietly said,
"You built it a prison."

...

"Sean?"

His father's voice drifted through the garage yanking him from his memory. He froze. The back door creaked open. Warm yellow light spilled across the rain-soaked driveway. His Dad stood in the door with a worn baseball bat. Sean remembered the bat.

"Sean... is that you?"

He carefully placed the carving knife back where he'd found it. "You need to go back inside, Dad."

"Son... what happened?"

Sean slung the duffel bag over his shoulder. "I'm sorry." He climbed through the window.

"Sean!" His father stepped into the yard.

"Please... just go back inside." Then Sean disappeared between the neighboring fences, swallowed once again by the darkness.

Sean walked until his legs finally gave out. The neighborhood had grown quiet. The rain had stopped, leaving only the occasional drip from overflowing gutters. A FOR SALE sign leaned crooked in the yard of a small ranch house. Every window was dark.

Perfect.

Sean circled the property once before forcing open a basement window. The house still smelled of new paint. Whoever had lived there had moved out months earlier, leaving behind little more than a worn couch and a broken end table. Sean locked the back door, closed the curtains, and collapsed onto the couch.

For several minutes, he simply lay there, staring at the ceiling while the box rested against his chest. Still warm. Silently waiting as if nothing had happened inside the factory.

His eyes slowly closed.

...

"You still have time to walk away." Chu stood beside the tailgate of an old pickup truck parked near the edge of St. Adalbert Cemetery. Rain dripped from the brim of his hat as he stared through the rows of weathered headstones.

Sean looked at the shovel lying in the bed of the truck. "I didn't come this far to quit."

Chu nodded once. "I was afraid you'd say that." He handed Sean a folded piece of paper. Several names had been written across it.

"They've all been buried less than a year."

Sean unfolded the paper. "What is this?"

"Their graves."

"You want me to rob a cemetery?"

"You need to build it a prison," Chu said.

Sean looked back toward the rows of headstones. "This is insane."

"So is borrowing money from men who kill you if you don't pay them."

Finally, Sean grabbed the shovel.

The first coffin was heavier than he expected. His shovel struck the lid with a dull, hollow thud. He froze and forced himself to pry the lid open. The smell hit him instantly. Sweet and rotten. He stumbled away from the grave and vomited into the wet grass.

Chu shook his head. "No prison is built without sacrifice."

Days blurred together.

Sean cut narrow strips of coffin wood inside Chu's workshop while fine sawdust drifted through the stale air. Bone ash mixed with black resin filled the carved symbols, one careful groove at a time. His hands bled. The carvings became deeper. More precise. Sometimes, late at night, Sean could have sworn the symbols shifted beneath his fingertips when he wasn't looking directly at them. He never told Chu. He wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

The finished box rested on the workbench between them. It wasn't beautiful. It wasn't supposed to be. Its dark wood drank in the light around it, while the carved symbols seemed older than the wood itself.

Sean reached toward it.

Chu caught his wrist. "When this is finished..." He waited until Sean met his eyes. "...your life will never belong to you again."

Sean slowly pulled his hand free. "My life stopped belonging to me the day I borrowed that first dollar."

Chu closed his eyes for a moment. Then quietly nodded. "So be it."

...

Sean jerked awake. Morning light spilled through a crack in the curtains. For a second, he couldn't remember where he was. Then he felt the weight of the box beside him.

From the front of the house, he heard a female's voice drift in. "...the kitchen was remodeled three years ago... the schools are really good..." A different woman laughed.

Sean sat upright.

Shit.

He grabbed the duffel bag, wrapped the box inside his sweatshirt, and ran to the front door, opening it as if he belonged. "Welcome in, everyone."

Sean slipped past the couple running down the lawn before anyone could react.

"What the—" The realtor stared after him in stunned silence. "Hey!"

Sean never looked back.

CHAPTER 35

Smoke climbed the final flight of stairs more out of habit than energy. Every muscle in his body ached. The chase. Doug's death. The endless reports. It was finally starting to take its toll. Somewhere in the building, a television played softly behind a closed apartment door. A baby cried. Pipes rattled inside the walls.

Smoke reached into his pocket for his keys. Then stopped.

His apartment door stood open just enough to spill light into the hallway.

He slowly withdrew his hand from his pocket, every instinct he possessed was telling him something was off. Jeffrey should have been singing. Instead...

Silence.

Smoke shifted one slow step to the side until he could see through the narrow opening. Jeffrey lay motionless inside the cage near the front window. Tiny yellow feet curled toward the ceiling. Smoke closed his eyes for half a second.

"Damn it."

He stepped backward without taking his eyes off the doorway. His hand instinctively found his pistol. He moved automatically, the familiar ritual calming his breathing even as his pulse quickened. He reached into his coat pocket, took out his flashlight, and carefully threaded the ultraviolet filter over the flashlight's lens. A faint beam spilled across the hallway. Checking the door and inside the apartment.

Nothing.

Next came the rosary. The heavy onyx beads slipped over his head until the boar tusk settled against the center of his chest, and a silver cross at the back of his neck. Smoke drew one slow breath and pushed the apartment door open with the barrel of his pistol.

The smell hit him like a ton of bricks. Sulfur. Rot. The smell he was all too familiar with.

The Feeder had paid him a visit. Its smell poured out of the apartment thick enough to taste. Smoke slowly stepped inside.

The apartment looked as though a tornado had passed through it. Books littered the floor in torn heaps. Pages drifted lazily beneath the spinning ceiling fan, rising and falling like dying moths. Entire bookshelves had been ripped from the walls, leaving jagged holes in the drywall where anchors had once held them in place.

Near the living room, the television still struggled to function. The picture stretched and twisted across the cracked screen, faces melting into impossible shapes before snapping back again. Dialogue dissolved into bursts of static while the canned laughter slowed until it almost sounded like distant screaming. Smoke swept the room with his pistol and flashlight.

Nothing...

He moved deeper into the apartment, one careful step at a time. The kitchen had fared even worse. Cabinet doors hung from broken hinges. Plates and drinking glasses covered the tile floor in glittering shards. Half the contents of the refrigerator had been ripped out and hurled across the room. Milk ran slowly down one wall while egg yolk pooled beneath the overturned kitchen table. The refrigerator door still stood open. Its pale-yellow light spilled across the destruction as if it refused to believe what had happened. One of the metal kitchen chairs caught Smoke's attention. He stopped beside it. The chair hadn't been broken.

All four of its legs had been twisted. The steel tubing spiraled almost one full turn. Smoke had seen entities throw furniture. He had seen them punch holes through walls. He had never seen one play with steel.

His jaw tightened.

"You're stronger." He holstered his pistol for a second and took his flashlight, slowly sweeping the ultraviolet beam.

The apartment came alive beneath the violet glow.

Thin streaks of pale, plasma-like residue stretched across the walls and ceiling in tangled patterns. Some resembled claw marks burned directly into reality itself. Others drifted across the plaster in lazy spirals.

He followed the glowing trails from one room to the next. Living room. Kitchen. Hallway. Bedroom. It wasn't random destruction. The thing had opened drawers. Ripped apart closets. Thrown books from shelves. Even the mattress had been flipped onto its side.

Smoke stopped in the bedroom doorway. Sarah's framed photograph lay shattered beside the bed. He bent down, picked it up carefully, and brushed a few pieces of broken glass from the smiling face beneath. His thumb lingered there for a moment. Then he quietly set the photograph on the dresser.

The residue continued past him, climbing the bedroom wall before disappearing across the ceiling.

Smoke stood perfectly still. It hadn't come here to destroy. It had come here to hunt. The Feeder had searched every room. Looking... For him. Smoke put away his flashlight.

"It couldn't find me." The words barely escaped his lips. His eyes drifted to the rosary resting against his chest. The prayers. The fasting. Sarah's protective charms. Everything had worked together. It hadn't stopped the Feeder. But it had been enough to confuse it, to keep it from seeing him clearly. At least for now.

A faint rumble of thunder rolled somewhere beyond the apartment windows. The distorted television crackled again in the living room and, with a loud spark, finally died.

Smoke looked across his walls, across the rooms. Taking in the destruction of what he considered his sanctuary. "You came into my home," he whispered with anger in his voice. The apartment had gone quiet. Whatever had come here...

...was gone.

Smoke stepped back into the hallway. His eyes settled on Jeffrey's cage. The little canary lay exactly where it had fallen, one wing stretched awkwardly beneath its body. "I'm sorry, little guy." Smoke knelt beside the cage.

Jeffrey had warned him more than once over the years. The little bird always sensed things before Smoke did. Sometimes it was restless pacing. Sometimes, there was frantic chirping. Sometimes he simply refused to sing.

He had always done his job.

Smoke reached into the cage and gently lifted the tiny body into his hand. It weighed almost nothing. His thumb brushed softly across the yellow feathers. Then something caught his eye. Smoke frowned and leaned closer. Jeffrey's tiny eyelids rested half open.

The eyes...

... gone.

Two impossibly small hollow sockets stared back at him. Smoke's stomach tightened.

"You sick fuck..." He turned the little bird carefully beneath the hallway light.

Empty.

For several long seconds, he sat on the floor, Jeffrey resting quietly in the palm of his hand. His eyes drifted slowly across the apartment. When it couldn't find him...
...it took the only living thing it could.

Smoke carefully wrapped Jeffrey in a clean dish towel and laid him inside a small cardboard box from the pantry, and put him in the refrigerator. "I'll bury you tomorrow, little friend." His voice was barely more than a whisper. The grief settled somewhere deep inside him, replaced by something colder. Something dangerous.

He pulled his phone from his coat and texted Sarah to stay away. She knew what that meant. Then, he dialed Lucian.

He answered on the second ring. "You sound tired."

Smoke looked around the apartment one last time. "It came to my home."

Silence. Then Lucian spoke quietly. "...How bad?"

Smoke's eyes settled on the refrigerator. "It found me."

Another long silence.

Finally, Lucian said, "Come over."

Smoke ended the call without another word. He stood and took one last look at the apartment before stepping into the hallway and pulling the damaged door shut behind him.

Somewhere out there, Sean Serrano was still running. And Smoke intended to find him before he sent that thing after someone else.

CHAPTER 36

Smoke flew down the apartment stairs, taking them two at a time. His phone was already in his hand before he reached the lobby. Time wasn't on his side, and every minute Sean Serrano remained free made the city a little more dangerous. The door to the apartment building groaned shut behind him.

The neighborhood had settled into the hour before dawn. Delivery trucks replaced commuters. Somewhere in the distance, an elevated train groaned through the darkness while a newspaper tumbled across the empty street.

Smoke unlocked the car and slid behind the wheel. For a moment, he simply sat, his hands resting on the steering wheel. They were trembling from the adrenaline crash that always came afterward. The realization that death hadn't brushed past him tonight, but had walked through his home, searching room by room, trying to find him had rocked him. He closed his eyes and took a slow breath.

He started the engine, pulled away from the curb, and reached for his phone. Kindred answered after the second ring.

"...What the hell, Smoke?" His voice was thick with sleep. "I just got home."

"Get dressed." Silence followed by a tired sigh.

"What happened?"

Smoke eased around a delivery truck parked half on the curb. "My apartment was hit."

"What?" Eric stood from his bed.

"The Feeder came looking for me."

Another silence. Longer this time.

"And you're still talking to me."

"Yeah." Smoke stopped for a red light, his eyes drifting to the empty passenger seat. "It didn't find me." The light turned green.

"You think Sean sent it?" Kindred asked.

"I know he did." Smoke watched a pair of pedestrians hurry across the intersection before continuing. "Sean doesn't need to know where I live. All he has to do is give it my name."

The words hung between them.

"If it can find people..." Kindred said quietly.

"It can hunt them." Smoke's jaw tightened. "But something threw it off." His fingers brushed unconsciously against the rosary hanging beneath his shirt.

"For now?" Eric said as he stepped back into his pants.

Smoke didn't answer. His silence was answer enough.

Eric exhaled slowly. "What do you need?"

"I don't know how much Sean knows about you." Smoke changed lanes, keeping his eyes on the traffic ahead. "I'm not taking chances."

"I'm listening."

"Throw some clothes in a bag."

"...You're serious."

"I've never been more serious."

Kindred didn't argue this time. "I'll be ready."

"I'll pick you up in ten." Smoke ended the call before either of them could say anything else.

He already knew who he needed to call next. And he wasn't going to like the conversation. Smoke let the phone rest in his hand for a moment before scrolling to another number. He already knew how the conversation was going to begin. Lucian hated surprises.

"...Smoke. Again. So soon." Lucian's voice carried the slow irritation of a man dragged out of a comfortable chair with a book still open in his lap. In the background, Smoke heard soft classical music drifting through the receiver. Somewhere farther away, old floorboards creaked.

"I need a favor."

Silence.

"No surprise." Lucian had known Smoke long enough to recognize that those four words almost always meant trouble. "What kind of favor?"

Smoke guided the car beneath the elevated tracks. Shadows from the steel beams swept across the windshield in slow intervals as another train rolled overhead. "A big one."

Lucian sighed. "Those are usually the kind of favors you ask for."

Under different circumstances, Smoke might have smiled, but tonight he didn't have the energy. "I need you to keep somebody at your place."

The silence that followed stretched long enough for Smoke to hear nothing but the tires humming against the pavement.

"No."

Smoke had expected that answer. "It's temporary."

"No."

"Lucian..."

"I do not like people. And I don't like them in my house longer than they need to be."

"You tolerate me."

"Barely."

A corner of Smoke's mouth twitched before the expression disappeared just as quickly. "He's a good kid."

"He is. I still do not care."

"You should."

"That sounds dangerously close to optimism."

Smoke glanced into the rearview mirror before changing lanes. "It's Eric."

The conversation changed. Smoke could almost hear Lucian straighten on the other end of the line.

"What happened?"

Smoke watched the empty streets slide past outside his window. "My apartment was hit."

A chair scraped across a wooden floor. "...Explain."

"The Feeder came looking for me. It searched the entire apartment," Smoke continued quietly. "Every room. Every closet. It tore the place apart trying to find me."

"But you weren't there."

"No."

"What stopped it?"

"Everything you taught me... everything life taught me. The prayers. The rosary. Sarah's protective charms." He paused. "Together, they must have thrown it off. I don't think it could lock onto me."

"For tonight," Lucian said.

Smoke didn't answer, but he agreed with Lucian. Neither of them believed the protections would work forever. "The apartment was covered in residue." Smoke continued.

Another long silence.

"Plasma residue?" Lucian asked.

"Everywhere." Smoke slowed for a blinking yellow light before continuing through the deserted intersection. "It left trails across the walls... the ceiling... like it had burned throughout the house."

Lucian muttered something quietly. Not Latin. But a language Smoke had heard before.

Harsh consonants. Ancient. Every time Lucian spoke, the hairs on the back of Smoke's neck stood up.

"And?" Lucian finally asked.

Smoke swallowed. "It killed Jeffrey, because it couldn't kill me." The words came out softer than he intended.

"Your bird?"

Smoke nodded even though Lucian couldn't see him. "Hollowed him out."

The line went completely silent; even the background music seemed to stop.

When Lucian finally spoke again, his voice sounded older. "Abaddon Feeders..."

Smoke waited.

"There are reasons very few texts survived." Lucian was walking through his house now.

"You've said that before."

"I know."

"So, tell me something you haven't."

"When predators become too successful..." Lucian said quietly, "...nature has a way of hiding the knowledge of them."

Smoke frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means there are creatures so dangerous that the people who understood them rarely lived long enough to teach anyone else."

Smoke drove in silence. The city slowly loosened its grip. Traffic lights became farther apart. Strip malls gave way to dark tree lines. Before long, the only light came from the headlights carving a tunnel through the night.

Smoke felt the weight of those words settle over him. "I can't let Kindred become the next victim."

"You understand what you're asking of me."

"I do."

More silence.

Then Lucian let out a tired breath. "...Fine."

"Thank you, my friend. I owe you one."

"You actually owe me 498 ones," Lucian muttered. "I already regret this,"

"You regret everything."

"That is because most things are regrettable."

This time, Smoke did smile. Only for a second. "I'll be there soon."

Lucian ended the call without needing to say another word. Smoke's smile disappeared as he lowered the phone onto the passenger seat.

The road ahead stretched into darkness. By the time Smoke turned onto Kindred's street, the eastern horizon had begun to lose some of its darkness. The first hint that dawn wasn't far away.

Eric stood beneath the awning outside his apartment building with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. His hair was still damp, and he wore the same jacket from earlier. He looked like a man who had gotten dressed in under two minutes.

Smoke rolled to a stop beside the curb, and Eric climbed in without a word. The bruise along his jaw had darkened overnight, stretching from the corner of his mouth toward his ear. He closed the passenger door and looked over.

"You look worse." Smoke pulled away from the curb.

"I feel worse. Are you ok?"

"We don't have time not to feel ok right now."

"I guess you're right," Eric said as he pushed his bag to the backseat.

Eric's neighborhood drifted past outside the windows. A bakery was starting to open, the warm smell of fresh bread escaping every time the back door swung open. A sanitation truck lumbered through the next intersection while a pair of workers in reflective jackets hosed down the sidewalk in front of a produce market. The city was waking up. Smoke doubted either of them had the energy for another day.

Eric broke the silence. "So..."

Smoke kept his eyes on the road. "So."

"What happened?"

Smoke took a slow breath. "The apartment looked like a tornado had gone through it."

Kindred listened.

"Books ripped apart. Furniture destroyed. Every room searched."

"Searched?"

Smoke nodded. "It wasn't destroying things."

"It was looking for you."

"Yeah. And it couldn't, so it was pissed."

Kindred stared out the side window, then looked over again. "You think Sean told it where you live?"

"No." Smoke shook his head. "He doesn't have to."

Kindred frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He knows my name." Smoke glanced at him. "That's enough."

Kindred sat quietly, turning that over in his mind. "So, it just..."

"Sean gives a command. It does the killing." Smoke finished the sentence for him. "It knows what it's looking for."

Eric didn't like that thought. Neither of them did. "Where are we going?" He finally asked.

"Lucian's."

Kindred laughed once, short, humorless. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Good cause you are going to stay with Lucian for a while."

Kindred looked at smoke. "Excuse me?"

"Just until this is over."

"You decided that?"

"Yes."

Kindred shifted in his seat. "You could've asked."

"I'm not asking." Smoke's voice remained calm. "I'm telling you."

Kindred looked out the windshield. "You really think I'm in danger."

"I think Sean is desperate." Smoke slowed as they left the tighter city streets behind. "And desperate people make desperate decisions."

The farther they drove, the fewer lights remained. Buildings gave way to older neighborhoods, then scattered houses tucked beneath towering oaks. The city slowly loosened its grip until only the occasional porch light reminded them; they weren't alone.

"You don't trust me."

Smoke looked over. "What?"

Kindred kept watching the road ahead. "You've never invited me to your apartment."

"No."

"You've never introduced me to Sarah."

"No."

"You don't even tell me where you disappear to half the time."

Smoke was quiet for several seconds. Then he smiled faintly. "You're more observant than I gave you credit for."

Kindred didn't smile back. "You keep your work life and your personal life separate."

"I try damn hard." Smoke's expression grew serious. "You know how many people, in my entire career, I've spent time with after work? How many have been to my apartment or met Sarah?"

"How many?" Kindred asked.

"Zero."

Kindred looked over. "Zero?"

"ZE-RO." Smoke kept his eyes on the road while he made the zero sign with his hand. "And I'd like to keep it that way."

"That's not normal, Smoke."

"It is where I come from." Silence settled between them for a moment before Smoke spoke again. "You know what gets cops killed?"

Kindred looked at him.

"They get comfortable." Smoke pointed through the windshield. "They tell people where they live. They bring work home. They become friends with people they barely know. They stop thinking about who might be watching." His voice stayed calm. "It isn't just demons." He counted them off with one hand still resting on the steering wheel. "A pissed-off gang member. A hacker. A stalker. Some drunk we arrested five years ago, who finally got out of prison." Smoke shrugged. "The more people know about you... the more they can use against you." He glanced at Kindred. "It isn't personal."

Kindred nodded slowly. "I know."

"No..." Smoke shook his head. "I don't think you do." He reached forward and turned the radio on. He was done talking.

A news anchor talked quietly about the morning commute while traffic reporters discussed lane closures somewhere back in the city. Kindred realized the conversation was over and settled deeper into the passenger seat, staring out the side window as civilization slowly disappeared behind them. After several quiet miles, fatigue caught up with him. He folded his arms. Closed his eyes and within minutes, the steady rhythm of the tires and the warmth of the heater pulled him into a light sleep.

Smoke drove on alone; glad the kid was asleep. The road narrowed while the trees grew thicker. Morning birds had begun to wake somewhere deep in the woods, their songs drifting through the small crack in the driver's window. The air carried the scent of pine, damp earth, and wood burning somewhere in a distant chimney. Nearly an hour later... Lucian's house finally appeared. Its porch light casted a

warm amber glow across the weathered steps. Every window was dark except for one.

Smoke parked without saying a word. Eric stared at the house. "This place gives me the creeps."

"This place keeps us alive." Smoke stepped out of the car. Eric grabbed his bag from the backseat and followed as soon as he got out of the car. The sound of the hundreds of windchimes reminded him where they were.

Smoke raised his hand toward the old brass knocker. Before his fingers even reached it... The door opened, and Lucian stood waiting on the other side. He looked from Smoke...

...to Kindred...

...then stepped aside.

"Detective Kindred. I would say, good to see you again. But under the circumstances, that would be a lie."

CHAPTER 37

Smoke stepped inside first, wiping his boots across the worn mat. Kindred followed him inside and quietly removed his coat, taking in everything with slower eyes than he had the first time he'd crossed the threshold. The house hadn't changed. But he had. Smoke was exhausted. He made his way towards the living room and motioned Eric to follow.

"You, ok?" he called out to Lucian.

"I was," Lucian answered from somewhere beyond the room. "Then you arrived."

Smoke allowed himself the faintest smile. "Good to see you too." They found a place to sit and waited for their host to join them.

Lucian appeared a moment later, carrying a cast-iron kettle in one hand and three worn ceramic mugs balanced effortlessly in the other. Despite the hour, he looked exactly as he always did. Perfectly composed as if time itself had no effect on him.

His eyes settled on Smoke first. "You look terrible."

"I've looked worse."

"That's true."

Only then did Lucian shift his attention toward Kindred. He saw the bruise along his jaw and felt the exhaustion behind his eyes. The overnight bag was lying at his feet. He looked at Smoke, "You were not exaggerating."

Smoke shook his head. "I rarely do."

Lucian set the mugs on the oak table and stepped closer to Smoke, and tilted his head slightly. "You smell like sulfur."

Smoke nodded once. "My apartment wasn't so lucky."

For the first time since they had walked through the door, Lucian's calm expression slipped ever so slightly. "You were lucky. Few live to tell." Lucian remained silent for several seconds. "Perhaps," he said quietly, "we still have time."

A fire burned quietly inside the old stone fireplace, filling the room with the scent of cedar and hickory. The massive oak table that had sat at last time had disappeared beneath stacks of books gathered from every corner of the house. Some were so old they looked as if they had been copied by hand centuries ago. Loose pages covered with notes lay scattered between them, held in place by crystals, carved stones, and coffee mugs that had long gone cold.

Kindred looked over the collection. "You pulled all of these out tonight?"

Lucian looked almost offended. "I was already reading."

Smoke smirked. "He means before I called."

"Ah." Lucian nodded. "That is a different accusation." Lucian handed each of them a steaming mug before taking his own seat at the head of the table. For a little while, they sipped from their tea and looked at the notes and books. The fire cracked. Somewhere deeper in the house, an old grandfather clock marked that another hour had passed.

Lucian folded his hands across one of the open books. "Tell me everything."

Smoke started at the beginning. Sean. The apartment. The residue. The twisted chair. Carefully walking Lucian through every detail of how he had searched every room. He deliberately left Jeffrey until the end.

Lucian closed his eyes when Smoke finished. "The bird?"

Smoke nodded. "It hollowed him out."

Lucian looked at his hands for a moment. "I liked that little bird."

"So did I." Silence settled over the room again.

Eric spoke. "I don't understand something."

Lucian looked at him.

"If Sean can control it..." He hesitated. "...why doesn't he just order it to kill all of us?"

Lucian leaned back in his chair. "Because he cannot control it. He gives it orders. Yes."

"That's control," Eric replied.

"No." Lucian shook his head gently. "That is direction."

Kindred frowned. "I don't see the difference."

"The difference," Lucian said quietly, pointing his finger at the young detective. "Is everything."

He reached toward one of the older books and carefully turned several brittle pages until he found an illustration drawn in faded black ink.

"Here. Look." He showed Eric an image of a wolf bound by a chain.

"If I remove this chain..." Lucian said. "...the wolf may run where I

point." His finger rested on the drawing. "But it remains a wolf. It still chooses how to hunt. It still decides when to bite. It still hungers." Lucian's eyes now intense, penetrating Eric's being. "And eventually... It remembers the chain."

Kindred stared at the sketch. "So, Sean..."

"...is not the master." Smoke finished the thought. "He's a man foolish enough to believe he is."

Lucian nodded. "Exactly."

He turned another page. The paper crackled softly beneath his fingertips. "Throughout history, they have carried many names." His finger traced several faded lines of text written in different languages. "The Greeks believed creatures like this fed upon souls unable to find peace." He turned another page. "Northern tribes spoke of grave spirits that lingered near battlefields until there was nothing left to consume." Another page was turned over. "The Hebrews described destroyers that gathered where suffering had become part of the land itself."

Kindred listened without interrupting. "So, they are demons?" Lucian considered the question. "Perhaps."

The answer surprised Eric. "You don't know?"

Lucian smiled faintly. "I have lived a very long time." He rested one hand on the ancient book. "And one lesson continues to repeat itself. The moment someone tells you they completely understand the spiritual world..." He closed the book. "...leave."

Smoke chuckled quietly. Lucian looked at him. "You laugh."

"Because that's exactly what my father used to say."

Lucian's expression softened. "He was a wise man."

Smoke nodded once. "He was."

Lucian looked back toward Eric. "What matters is not what we call them." His pale eyes drifted toward the dying fire. "What matters...is that they were here long before we were. And they will still be here long after we're gone." Outside, the wind chimes whispered again.

This time... no one spoke for a long while. Lucian stared into the fire. The fire shifted, sending a shower of sparks dancing up the chimney before settling once more into glowing embers.

Finally, he looked at Smoke. "You did not come here to discuss theology."

Smoke managed a tired smile. "No. We sure didn't." He set his empty mug on the table.

"I already have a room ready."

Smoke looked at Lucian. Even after all these years, it still unsettled Smoke how often Lucian knew what he was about to say.

"You've known me my entire life."

Lucian nodded. "I have."

"How many people have I ever brought through that front door?"

Lucian didn't need to think. "Very few."

Smoke looked toward Eric. "There's a reason." He paused for a second. "My father used to tell me that every person you care about eventually becomes part of your weakness."

Kindred frowned. "That's a hell of a thing to teach a kid."

"It wasn't meant to keep me from caring about people." Smoke looked into the fire. "It was meant to remind me that evil looks for leverage." His voice remained calm. "Family. Friends. Children. The more it knows..." He shrugged. "...the more ammunition it has."

Kindred slowly nodded. "The lecture in the car."

Smoke smiled faintly. "Exactly."

Lucian watched the exchange without interrupting.

Smoke looked back at him. "This kid has already seen more than most detectives see in an entire career." He paused. "He should've quitted three cases ago."

Eric snorted. "I've considered it."

"I know." Smoke nodded. "But you're still here."

Eric didn't answer, they both knew why. Smoke continued.

"He wants to understand. He doesn't pretend to know everything. And when he's scared..." Smoke glanced toward him. "...he keeps walking anyway."

Eric felt slightly uncomfortable. "You're making me sound better than I am."

"No." Smoke shook his head. "I'm describing exactly who you are."

Lucian studied Kindred with thoughtful eyes. "So..." he said softly. "You believe he is ready."

Smoke answered immediately. "No."

Kindred looked over, questioning what was going on.

Smoke continued before he could speak. "But I believe he will be."

There was a difference. A very important difference, and Lucian understood it.

"I am getting older," Smoke said quietly. His gaze drifted toward the shelves lining the walls.

"So are my books," Lucian said.

Smoke smiled. "I hadn't noticed."

Lucian ignored the joke.

"There comes a day when knowledge must be passed to someone else." He looked at Eric again. "The question is always whether the next pair of hands will treat it with respect."

Eric met his gaze. "I don't know anything about the occult world."

"No." Lucian nodded. "You don't. And the occult world is only a very little part of the universe we operate in."

"I know enough to respect it." Eric defended himself.

Lucian smiled slightly. "That," he said, "is a good beginning."

He walked slowly toward the front windows, looking out into the darkness where the wind chimes whispered among the trees.

"You may stay."

Lucian raised a finger without turning around. "There will be rules."

Smoke chuckled quietly. "I told you."

Lucian ignored him. "You do not remove books from the shelves. You do not enter rooms with closed doors. You do not feed the ravens."

Kindred blinked. "You have ravens?"

"I have rules."

Smoke laughed.

Lucian finally turned towards Eric. "And one more thing..."

"If I wake you in the middle of the night..." Lucian's expression became serious again. "...do not ask questions. Do as I say."

Eric noticed that the smile had disappeared from Smoke's face. "So that's happened before?"

Smoke stood, pulling on his coat. "More than once."

Lucian walked Smoke to the front door. "You are right. This one is different," Lucian said quietly.

Smoke nodded. "I know."

"You've been saying that a lot tonight."

"Because it's true."

Lucian studied him for another moment. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, he said,
"Stay alive, my friend."

Smoke rested one hand on the old wooden door. "I'll do my best."

He stepped out into the cold morning air. Behind him, the door closed softly and he could hear Lucian locking all the locks.

For a moment, he stood on the porch, listening to the hundreds of wind chimes hidden among the trees. He had stopped asking Lucian what they were for years ago.

Then he headed for his car...

Sean Serrano was still out there.

And somewhere close behind him...

...something else was on the hunt.

CHAPTER 38

Smoke didn't look back as he pulled away from Lucian's house. For the time being, one weight had lifted from his shoulders. Kindred was safe. At least as safe as anyone could be. Between Lucian, the wind chimes whispering through the trees, and enough books to fill a monastery, there weren't many places Smoke would have trusted more.

Eric would complain. He was going to be angry. He'd probably spend the first day arguing with Lucian about the rules. Smoke smiled to himself. The kid would survive. Sean Serrano... that was another matter.

By the time Smoke reached the station, the parking lot had begun to fill. He steered toward the rear of the building and slipped in through the back entrance, hoping to avoid the morning crowd.

The plan almost worked.

Voices echoed from somewhere down the hallway.
"...I'm telling you, the report was on your desk."

"It wasn't."

"It was."

"It wasn't."

Someone else laughed. Another officer complained about the coffee tasting like it had been filtered through an old sock. Business as usual.

Smoke quietly disappeared down the basement stairs before anyone noticed him. His office felt strangely empty.

Kindred's desk sat exactly as he'd left it. A legal pad. Two case files were neatly placed next to his laptop. Smoke caught himself glancing toward the chair, almost expecting Eric to look up with a question. The room answered with silence. He hung his coat on the back of his chair and dropped into it with a long, tired breath.

A soft meow answered him. "So much for peace and quiet." Smoke looked toward the pile of boxes along the wall. Dee Dee stretched one front paw, blinked sleepily at him and decided she wasn't interesting enough to stay awake for him, turned twice in her blanket, and promptly went back to sleep.

Smoke shook his head. "I love you too."

He had barely picked up Sean's file when a cup of coffee appeared beside his elbow. Smoke looked up. Captain Ramirez had sneaked in and stood over him, holding a second cup in his own hand. "You look like hell."

"I've looked worse."

Ramirez studied him for a second. "That's getting harder to believe."

Smoke accepted the coffee. "Thanks."

Ramirez leaned against the desk. "I heard about Doug."

Smoke nodded. "I tried."

"I know." The captain took a slow drink from his own coffee. "You've been running on fumes for days."

"Longer than that."

"I ought to send you home."

Smoke looked around the basement. "You know..." He wrapped both hands around the warm cup. "...this is probably the safest place I've got right now."

Ramirez didn't answer immediately. He knew Smoke wasn't joking. Finally, he sighed. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Smoke smiled faintly. "I'd appreciate it."

The two men stood quietly for a moment. Old cops. There was no need to fill every silence.

Finally, Ramirez looked toward the evidence board. "You getting close?"

Smoke followed his gaze. Sean's photograph stared back from the center. "I can feel it."

Ramirez nodded. "That's the dangerous part."

Smoke looked at him. "You mean the part where detectives stop sleeping because they think one more hour will solve everything."

Ramirez chuckled.

"I wasn't planning on sleeping anyway."

"I know." Ramirez started toward the stairs before stopping halfway. "You might not believe this..."

Smoke looked up.

"...but this city needs you." He pointed his finger at Smoke. "And I'll deny I ever said it."

Smoke raised his coffee cup. "I'll try not to disappoint."

Ramirez pointed a finger at him. "Get some sleep."

"Yes, sir."

Ramirez walked out of the office. "And don't make me come looking for you."

Smoke smiled. "Thanks for the Caffeine, Captain. It will help me sleep." He raised his mug.

"Fuck you, Smoke." Ramirez flipped him off without even looking back.

"Yes, sir." He drank from his coffee. "...Fuck me. Fuck me very much."

Ramirez's laughter slowly faded, and the basement fell quiet again. Dee Dee cracked one eye open, clearly annoyed by the noise, flicked her tail once, and settled back to sleep.

Lucky cat.

Smoke carried his coffee to the evidence board. Sean's photograph waited where it always had.

"You've been lucky, Sean." He studied the photograph for another moment. "But luck only lasts so long."

CHAPTER 39

The Blue Star Motor Lodge looked like the kind of place where people came to disappear. Sometimes by choice. Sometimes because someone else made the choice for them.

The faded neon sign buzzed weakly above the office, several of its letters long since burned out. Every few seconds, the current dipped, leaving only **TAR** glowing before the rest of the sign reluctantly sputtered back to life.

The parking lot had seen better decades. Oil stains blackened the cracked asphalt. Empty beer bottles rested beneath rusted pickup trucks that looked as though they hadn't moved in months. Cigarette butts floated in shallow puddles left behind by the night's rain, gathering along the curb like driftwood.

Smoke eased the unmarked sedan into an empty space near the office. He shut off the engine but didn't get out. For a moment, he simply watched.

A woman in a pink bathrobe stood outside Room 12 smoking her first cigarette of the morning. She stared blankly across the lot, looking as tired as the building itself. Somewhere, a television blared an infomercial.

Smoke glanced around. *This place should come with a tetanus shot.*

He crossed the parking lot. The office door chimed softly as he pushed it open. A heavyset man wearing a faded yellow polo shirt sat behind a scratched sheet of plexiglass, watching a courtroom television show mounted high in the corner. The volume had been turned almost all the way down, leaving only muffled arguments and canned applause. The

clerk looked up. The moment he saw Smoke's badge, relief spread across his face.

"Oh, thank God."

Smoke rested both hands on the counter. "You called about Sean Serrano?"

"That crazy son of a bitch? Yeah."

"What happened?"

The clerk rubbed both hands over his face. "He comes walking in looking like he'd slept in a dumpster. Clothes didn't fit. Face all cut up. Kept looking over his shoulder every five seconds."

"Did he ask for a room?"

"Cash only."

Smoke nodded. "And?"

"He hands me a credit card." The clerk snorted. "Gets pissed when it declines."

Smoke frowned. "I thought you said cash."

"I did." The clerk shrugged.

"So did he."

"He started arguing."

"With you?"

The clerk slowly shook his head. "No." His voice dropped. "With somebody who wasn't there." "I've worked here fifteen years," the clerk continued. "I've seen drunks. Meth heads. Crack addicts. Guys detoxing. Hell, I've seen two Elvises fight in the parking lot over a vending machine." He leaned forward. "This wasn't that."

Smoke held his eyes. "What was it?"

The clerk swallowed. "He'd stop talking..."

He demonstrated, turning his head slightly as though listening to someone standing beside him. "...then he'd answer."

"What did he say?"

"Not now." The clerk counted on his fingers. "Leave me alone." He kept counting. "I'm trying. And once..." He hesitated. "...he said somebody's name."

Smoke's expression never changed. "What name?"

The clerk frowned, trying to remember. "It wasn't a white name."

A second passed.

Then his face brightened. "Chu."

Smoke didn't move. But something behind his eyes shifted slightly.

The clerk continued. "He kept saying... Chu... you lied to me."

"You know that name?" Smoke's eyes stayed on the motel clerk.

"I've heard it." That was all he offered; he shifted uneasily beneath the silence. "I swear, officer, the guy wasn't putting on a show. Every time

he stopped talking, it was like..." He searched for the right words.
"...like he was waiting for somebody else to finish."

"You ever see anyone with him?" Smoke asked.

The clerk shook his head. "Nobody."

"He didn't meet anyone?"

"No."

"Didn't make a phone call?"

"I don't think so."

Smoke nodded slowly. "Walk me through it."

The clerk pointed toward the coffee pot sitting on a hot plate behind him. "He came in right about the time I was making fresh coffee. Couldn't have been more than..." He looked at the clock on the wall. "...five-thirty. He looked exhausted. Kept rubbing his eyes. Every few seconds, he'd glance out the window like somebody was about to come through that front door."

"Scared?" Smoke asked.

The clerk nodded. "Beyond terrified." He looked back at Smoke. "But it wasn't just the police he was afraid of."

"What makes you say that?"

The man hesitated. "I've seen people hiding from the cops. They watch the parking lot." He pointed toward the ceiling. "This guy... he kept looking over his shoulder."

"Like somebody was behind him?" Smoke offered.

"Exactly." The clerk lowered his voice. "Twice he actually backed himself into that corner." He pointed beside the vending machine. "Wouldn't let anything get behind him."

Smoke walked over and stood where Sean had stood. From there, he could see the front door. The parking lot. The hallway leading toward the rooms. No blind spots. He nodded almost to himself. "Cornered."

"What?" The clerk asked.

"That's how prey thinks." Smoke looked around the office again. "You said he paid cash."

"Eventually."

"Where'd he get it?"

The clerk shrugged. "I don't ask, Mister."

Smoke smiled faintly. "Understood."

The clerk looked confused. "I've learned that around here, the less I know, the longer I live."

Smoke couldn't argue with that. "What room?"

"Twenty-three."

"Is it still occupied?"

The clerk shook his head. "No. He left about an hour ago."

"Alone?"

"As far as I know." The clerk reached beneath the counter and produced an old-fashioned brass key attached to a thick blue plastic tag bearing the number 23. "I haven't had housekeeping in there yet."

Smoke accepted the key. The brass felt warm from the clerk's hand. "Mind if I take a look?"

"Be my guest." He paused before adding quietly, "Just..."

Smoke looked up.

"If you find him..." The clerk glanced toward the parking lot. "...tell him whatever's chasing him... it can have him."

Smoke looked at the man. "You really believe he was that scared?"

The clerk met his eyes. "Hell yes. He swallowed. "I think he was more scared than he knew what to do with himself."

Smoke slipped the key into his coat pocket. "Thanks." He pushed open the office door. Somewhere down the row of rooms, a curtain moved. Smoke looked toward Room 23. The door stood closed. Waiting.

He started walking. *Where have I heard the name Chu?* He kept his eyes on the motel room. He reached the faded blue door, rested one hand on the knob, but didn't turn it. Instead, he studied the peeling paint, the chipped frame, and the fresh scrape marks near the deadbolt.

Sean hadn't slept here. He'd hidden here. And whatever little sleep he had managed to get... hadn't come easy.

Slowly, he pushed the door inward. The stale air that drifted out carried the familiar scent of sulfur. The room was empty.

An unmade bed filled one side of the room. A flickering television played an early morning game show with the volume muted. The curtains had been pulled tightly shut, leaving only a thin ray of sunlight cutting across the stained carpet.

Smoke slowly walked through the room. Every detective knew that motel rooms told stories. You just had to know where to look.

The wastebasket overflowed with candy wrappers, empty water bottles, and crumpled napkins. Three untouched packets of motel coffee sat beside the television. Someone had tried making a pot, abandoned the idea, then smashed the cheap Styrofoam cup beneath one heel. The mattress sagged toward the center. The blankets had been twisted into tight ropes. Not the restless sleep of someone having nightmares, but the desperation of someone afraid to close their eyes.

Smoke stopped beside the nightstand and moved toward the bathroom. The mirror above the sink had been wiped so many times that streaks covered the glass in overlapping circles. Damp paper towels filled the trash beneath it. Smoke ran a finger across the edge of the sink; black residue clung to his fingertip.

He kept checking behind himself. Smoke's expression changed looking back at the mirror. *If every time he looked... it was standing there...*

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to. Smoke noticed something on the small writing desk beneath the window. A motel notepad. Only one page remaining. Every other sheet had been torn away, crumbled into little balls and thrown across the room. He picked it up carefully. Nothing had been written on it. At least... Not with ink. Smoke turned the page toward the window. Faint impressions crossed the paper where someone had pressed hard enough to mark the sheet beneath. He reached into his pocket and took a pencil. Using the side of the graphite, he lightly shaded across the page.

Slowly... Letters began to appear. Not sentences. Names.

Frank. Doug. Smoke. Then, written over and over until the paper had nearly torn...

Chu.

Near the bottom, barely visible beneath the other impressions, another word slowly emerged.

Lied.

Smoke stared at the words for several long seconds. He folded the page and slipped it carefully into an evidence bag. *Who is Chu?*

He looked around the room one last time, checking that he had not forgotten anything or left any clues unchecked. *Sean knows.*

As he turned to leave, Smoke paused in the doorway. His eyes settled on the closet. The door stood open only a few inches. Something inside caught the light. Smoke crossed the room and pulled it open. An old duffel bag sat abandoned on the floor. Empty. Except for a handful of cedar shavings... and a fine gray powder gathered in one corner. Smoke crouched beside it, rubbing a little of the powder between his fingers.

Bone ash.

His stomach tightened. Sean hadn't just brought the box here. He'd tried to repair it. Smoke slowly stood. *No...* Smoke stared at the empty duffel. *He's getting ready.* Smoke looked toward the window and beyond the parking lot.

Whatever he's planning... the box isn't enough anymore.

Smoke slipped the evidence bag containing the notepad into his coat and took one last look around the motel room, stepped into the parking lot, and quietly closed the door behind him.

The motel clerk looked up as Smoke crossed toward the office. "Find anything?"

Smoke stopped beside the window. "I figured out he hasn't slept in days."

The clerk frowned. "That's it?"

"For now." Smoke started toward his car.

"Detective."

Smoke turned.

The clerk scratched the back of his neck. "I forgot something."

Smoke waited.

"When he left..." The clerk hesitated. "...he asked where he could get something to eat."

Smoke raised an eyebrow. "What'd you tell him?"

"The pizza place across the street was already open."

"The one in Milwaukee?" Smoke asked.

"Yeah."

"You see him go in?"

The clerk shook his head. "No."

Smoke thanked him, climbed into the sedan, and drove to the pizza place down the street. Sean hadn't eaten. Not properly. Probably not in days. Eventually... fear lost to hunger, and even fugitives had to eat.

The parking lot only held three cars. The pizza shop itself was nearly empty. Smoke parked a little further away so he could watch both the entrance and the street. He waited ten minutes. Then fifteen. Still nothing. Then, dispatch crackled through the radio. "Unit Twelve."

Smoke picked up the microphone. "Twelve."

"Patrol requesting assistance. Disturbance reported behind Rossi's Pizza. Male matching the BOLO is acting erratically in the alley."

Smoke's eyes lifted toward the narrow alley running beside the restaurant. In the shadows, he could see Sean standing beneath the flickering security light.

Smoke set the microphone back in its cradle. "I've got him. Send back up."

He stepped out of the car.

CHAPTER 40

The security light above the alley looked as though it had simply grown tired of trying. Every few seconds, it flickered, hiding the man beneath it in darkness before reluctantly revealing him again.

Sean leaned against the brick wall, a greasy slice of pizza in one hand, the stained cardboard box tucked against his chest with the other. He ate fast, barely chewing, as though someone might take the food away before he finished.

He never heard Smoke approach.

"Hi, Sean."

All he felt was the cold steel of Smoke's pistol settle against his temple.

Sean froze. The slice of pizza slipped from his fingers and landed face down in a puddle. Slowly... he turned. His eyes met Smoke's, and every trace of color drained from his face.

"No..."

Smoke said nothing.

Sean stared at him. "That's impossible."

Smoke raised an eyebrow, letting Sean know it actually was possible.

"You should be dead."

"I've had a bad day." Smoke grinned.

Sean shook his head violently. "I sent it after you."

"I know." Smoke took a step back, holding his barrel straight at Sean's temple.

"It found you?"

"It tried."

Sean stumbled backward until his shoulders struck the brick wall.

"No..." His breathing became shallow. "...that's impossible."

Smoke lowered the pistol slightly but never took his eyes off him. "You look terrible."

Sean let out a hollow laugh. "You have no idea."

Smoke studied him quietly. The expensive clothes were gone. His beard had grown in uneven patches, and his knuckles were covered in fresh cuts. Dark circles hung beneath bloodshot eyes that hadn't seen sleep in days. He looked less like a killer and more like a man who had been on the run, knowing that soon he would run out of places to hide.

"Haven't slept much?" Smoke asked.

Sean laughed again. "It doesn't let me." His eyes drifted toward the backpack. "It talks all the time."

Smoke waited, letting Sean do all the talking.

"When I eat." A pause. "When I try to sleep. When I close my eyes." Sean rubbed both hands across his face. "It never shuts up."

Smoke nodded once. "My mother had dementia."

Sean looked at him, confused.

"Near the end, she'd have conversations with people who'd been dead for twenty years."

Sean swallowed. "It's not like that."

"No?" Smoke nodded. "I don't imagine it is."

For a moment, both men were silent and just looked at each other.

Finally, Sean spoke again. "You think I haven't tried?" His voice cracked. "I threw the damn thing into Lake Michigan. It came back?" Sean stared at him. "I buried it. It came back." He threw his hand up in the air, and Smoke took a step back.

"I locked it inside a storage unit." Another bitter laugh escaped him. "Every damn time it was sitting on the front seat when I got back to the car."

Smoke understood. Not the murders or the greed, but he understood the prison Sean found himself in. It was exactly as Lucian had said. Sean wasn't controlling the box anymore. The box was controlling him.

Sean looked toward the backpack. "You know what the worst part is?"

Smoke remained silent.

"I don't even want the money anymore." His voice almost broke. "I just..." He looked away. "...want it to leave me alone." The words carried softly through the alley.

Smoke watched him for several seconds before asking quietly, "Why didn't you turn yourself in?"

Sean didn't answer immediately; he rocked slowly back and forth. "I thought I would win."

"What changed?"

Sean looked down at the backpack resting against his boot. His fingers tightened around one of the straps. He closed his eyes. "I think it's done with me."

Smoke followed his gaze. "Is it in the backpack?"

Sean nodded weakly. His breathing hitched. "It knows your name."

Smoke didn't blink. A faint smile crossed his face. "Funny."

Sean looked up. "What is funny?"

"I know its name too."

Sean looked down; his hands were trembling. One of the cuts across his knuckles reopened, and a single drop of blood splashed across one of the carved symbols. The reaction was immediate.

The grain darkened. The silver bands surrounding the ancient prison answered with a long, low metallic groan.

Smoke's expression changed instantly. "Stop bleeding on it!"

Sean looked down. "What?"

"Every drop feeds it!" Smoke pointed at the box with the barrel of his pistol.

Instinctively, Sean wiped his bleeding hand across the backpack. Fresh blood smeared across several more symbols. The glow spread deeper into the grain. Sean stumbled backward.

Smoke was already moving. "Give me the backpack."

Sean hugged it tighter. "I can't."

"You don't have a choice."

"I said I can't!"

Smoke grabbed one shoulder strap. Sean clung to it with surprising strength. The backpack jerked violently between them. Smoke felt how something inside shifted.

A wave of sulfur rolled through the alley. The silver bands groaned again.

Sean grinned, "It knows you're here."

Smoke tightened his grip. "I don't care."

Sean suddenly drove his shoulder into Smoke's chest, and the two men slammed into the brick wall. Smoke absorbed the hit, hooked Sean's leg, and dumped him hard onto the wet pavement. The backpack tore free from Sean's grip.

Smoke stepped back and leveled the pistol. "Don't. I will shoot you right here, Sean."

Sean stared up at him. He looked completely defeated.

The back door of Rossi's Pizza slammed open, and the sound echoed through the alley. A young cook stepped outside carrying two black garbage bags. Smoke instinctively glanced toward the noise, his gun

drawn. The young man froze when he saw the gun and let the bags drop to the ground.

One second. That was all Sean needed.

He threw the backpack toward Smoke and bolted.

"Sean!" Smoke lunged after him. He took three long strides, and then he stopped.

The backpack was lying abandoned beneath the flickering light.

For a moment, Smoke stood frozen, looking toward the fleeing figure that was already halfway down the alley. Another few seconds...and he'd be gone. Then he looked at the backpack.

He didn't hesitate.

He bent down and grabbed it. The weight settling into his hands like wet concrete. He felt it right away.

Wrong.

Very wrong.

By the time he looked up again, Sean was climbing the chain-link fence at the end of the alley, disappeared over the top, and vanished into the darkness beyond.

Smoke watched the empty fence for a moment and then looked down at the backpack. "You made me choose."

With the backpack in one hand and his pistol in the other, Smoke turned and disappeared into the rain.

CHAPTER 41

Smoke drove without turning on the radio. He needed the silence. Silence helped him think.

The wipers kept a steady rhythm while rain blurred the view beyond the windshield. His thoughts never left the wooden box resting on the passenger seat. He hadn't looked at it once. He didn't need to. He could feel its presence. It felt like he was sharing the car with someone who refused to speak but never stopped watching you.

Sean had looked terrible. Pale. Exhausted. Hollow. A man that was running on empty. The arrogance that had driven him to commit such horrific acts had been replaced by desperation. Yet when the moment came to save his own skin, Sean had surrendered the box without hesitation. It didn't make sense.

The box wasn't just an item. Sean had poured months of his life into it. Blood rituals. Sacrifices. Countless risks. He had killed for it, over and over again. You didn't throw something like that away.

What's his plan?

Had Sean accepted that everything was lost and decided to disappear, hoping to build a new life somewhere else? Or was this only temporary? Was he already planning how to get the box back? Would he come after Smoke? Set an ambush? Perform another ritual? Make another sacrifice if that's what it took?

No...

Sean wasn't finished.

Smoke glanced at the box beside him. Only Lucian could tell him what it truly was. The scent had changed. When they started driving, it had smelled of damp cedar and old wood. Now another scent drifted through the car every few minutes. Sulfur, hidden beneath the smell of wet canvas.

Smoke glanced into the rearview mirror, checking to see if he was being followed. At least for now, Sean was gone.

Smoke reached for the radio microphone. "Dispatch."

The speaker crackled almost immediately. "Go ahead, Twelve."

"Update the BOLO. Sean Serrano fled on foot from the alley behind Rossi's Pizza approximately three minutes ago. White male. Mid-thirties. Approximately six feet one. Unshaven. Grey hoodie. Blue jeans. Possible injuries to his face and hands. Consider him dangerous."

"Copy, Twelve. Units are responding."

Smoke set the microphone back into its cradle. Within minutes, every patrol car in the district would have Sean's description.

They would set up roadblocks. Conduct traffic stops.

He wouldn't last forever. Eventually, someone would recognize him. Eventually, he'd make a mistake. Smoke had learned a long time ago that running only worked until exhaustion caught up with you. Sean was already exhausted. He would make a mistake soon enough.

His eyes drifted toward the passenger seat, thinking about the box. It looked so small and innocent. Nothing about it suggested that people had died because of what rested inside.

Nothing except...

The silver bands and the markings. Even through the canvas, faint ridges pressed against the fabric. Smoke remembered the way they had groaned after Sean's blood touched the carvings. It hadn't been loud. But it sounded alive.

His phone vibrated in the center console. He ignored it at first. Then it vibrated again.

Unknown number.

Smoke answered without taking his eyes off the road. "Ravenstein."

Lucian's calm voice filled the car. "You were just about to call me."

Smoke allowed himself the smallest smile. "How's the kid?"

"He's doing better than I expected," Lucian said. "I pointed him toward my library and haven't heard much from him since."

Smoke smiled faintly. "So, the books are winning."

"For the moment." His voice carried its usual calm certainty, but Smoke had known him long enough to hear the fatigue beneath it.

"You've been up all night."

"I don't sleep particularly well when ancient evils are wandering through the city."

Smoke looked through the rain-streaked windshield. "Neither do I."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The steady rhythm of the windshield wipers filled the silence. The steady rhythm of the rain offered the closest thing to peace he had felt all night.

Finally, Lucian asked the question he'd been holding back. "What happened?"

Smoke exhaled slowly. "I found Sean."

"And?"

"He ran."

Lucian didn't sound surprised. "I expected as much."

Smoke glanced toward the backpack again. "But he left me something."

"You have the Feeder?" Lucian asked.

Smoke nodded instinctively before realizing Lucian couldn't see him.
"I've got the box."

Lucian's voice had changed. Quieter. More deliberate. "Don't open it."
"I wasn't planning to."

"Good."

Smoke frowned. "You sound worried."

"I am." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Smoke replayed the alley in his mind. "He was bleeding."

"How badly?"

"Nothing serious. Cut knuckles. A few drops."

Lucian didn't respond.

"The blood hit the carvings," Smoke continued. "The symbols lit up. The silver bands started groaning." He hesitated. "And..."

"And?" Lucian asked, gripping the phone on the other end of the line.

"It started smelling like sulfur. Just like all the bodies did."

Lucian let out a slow breath. "That makes sense. It's how it works."

Smoke looked at the backpack resting on the passenger seat. It looked exactly the same. Ordinary. Quiet. Yet he couldn't shake the memory of the metallic groan that had echoed through the alley.

"It didn't want Sean bleeding on it," Smoke said quietly. "The moment his blood touched the wood... something changed."

"You were right," Lucian replied. "Blood is the key."

Smoke allowed himself a faint smile. "I usually am."

Lucian chuckled. "No... usually you're just stubborn. Sometimes that happens to look like being right."

Smoke shook his head. "Well, this time I was."

A brief silence settled between them.

"Bring it to the house," Lucian said at last. "We've reached the point where speculation isn't enough. I want to examine it in a controlled environment."

Smoke glanced at the backpack again. "You think we'll learn something new?"

"I know we will," Lucian replied. "I've studied the writings for years. I've never had one of these in front of me."

Smoke looked again at the backpack resting on the passenger seat. It looked exactly the same. But now he couldn't stop thinking about the faint metallic groan echoing through the alley.

A little over an hour, Smoke's tires crunched softly across Lucian's gravel driveway. He shut off the engine, for a moment... everything was quiet. Then he started hearing the first wind chime ring. A single clear note drifted through the darkness. Another answered. Then another.

Within seconds, every wind chime hanging from the ancient oaks surrounding the property had come alive. Smoke frowned. There wasn't enough wind to move a single leaf. Yet hundreds of brass and steel tubes swayed violently beneath perfectly still branches, their voices rising into a chaotic chorus that echoed across the property. He stepped out of the sedan.

The backpack rested on the passenger seat. As soon as he lifted it from the seat, the sound changed. The chimes grew louder. Smoke stopped halfway between the car and the porch. Curiosity got the better of him. Holding the backpack by one shoulder strap, he slowly extended it away from his body. The nearest wind chimes shifted. Not much. Just enough to notice. He moved the backpack slowly to his left. The chimes followed. He moved it back again. Once more, they leaned toward it, trembling furiously like compass needles finding north.

A slow smile crept across Smoke's face. "So that's what you've been listening for."

The front door opened before he reached the porch. Lucian stood quietly beneath the warm porch light. He looked first at the backpack, then at Smoke. "I wondered how long it would take you to figure that out."

Smoke glanced back toward the restless trees. "They're not reacting to me."

Lucian shook his head. "They never were."

Smoke looked down at the backpack resting against his leg. "They're warning you."

"Everything serves a purpose, Smoke. You should know that by now." The wind chimes continued their relentless chorus as Smoke stepped onto the porch. The noise became almost deafening.

Lucian held up a hand. "Don't bring it inside. Not here."

Smoke stopped. "Where?"

Lucian motioned toward a small stone outbuilding tucked behind the house, half-hidden among the trees. "I've prepared a place."

The wind chimes slowly quieted as they crossed the yard, though none of them ever fell completely silent. Lucian led them past the house toward a low stone structure tucked beneath the trees. It looked older than the house itself. Massive stones had been stacked without mortar, each one carved with weathered symbols that time had nearly erased. Moss filled the grooves of the deeper carvings, giving the runes a dull green glow beneath the lantern light. The heavy oak door hung on hand-forged iron hinges, blackened with age.

Inside, the floor wasn't wood or stone. It was packed earth, swept clean, and bordered by a wide circle of smooth river rocks. Every stone carried another carved symbol. Thick iron chains disappeared into the walls. Shelves held clay jars, bundles of dried herbs, old tools, and battered leather-bound books that had clearly never been intended for casual reading. In the center stood a broad stone worktable.

Kindred looked up from it. Books, yellowed maps, and handwritten notes lay spread across its surface in carefully organized stacks. "You got it."

Smoke nodded once. "Nice to see you too. I found Sean."
Kindred's hopeful expression faded. "But you didn't get Sean."

"He got away."

Lucian broke the silence. "He won't stay lost forever. And he is not our focus."

In the center of the room sat a heavy cedar chest no larger than an old sea captain's trunk. Silver symbols had been carved into every side. Inside, several inches of perfectly still water rested.

Smoke stopped beside it. "What is this?"

"Holy water."

Smoke raised an eyebrow. "That's a lot of holy water."

Lucian's mouth almost formed a smile. "This time I've had time to prepare." He pointed toward the chest. "Put the backpack inside."

Smoke hesitated only a second before lowering it carefully into the water. The moment the canvas touched the surface...

Hissssss...

The sound wasn't loud. It was sharp. Like water striking hot iron. Tiny ripples spread across the water before racing toward the silver-lined walls of the chest.

Deep inside the backpack... the silver bands surrounding the prison answered with a long, low groan.

Smoke looked up. "It doesn't like that."

Lucian's eyes never left the chest. "No."

He stepped closer, resting one weathered hand lightly against the cedar lid. "It remembers."

Silence settled over the room. Even outside... the wind chimes had finally grown still.

Lucian looked from the chest to Smoke. "Now..." he said quietly, "...let's find out exactly what Sean imprisoned."

CHAPTER 42

The cedar chest remained perfectly still. Only the faint ripples crossing the holy water betrayed that something inside hated its surroundings. Smoke stood with his hands resting lightly on the edge of the stone table. Kindred sat nearby, surrounded by open books, loose pages, and yellowed maps. He looked far more comfortable than he had a few hours earlier. Lucian carefully closed one volume and pulled another toward him. The leather cover had long since worn away beneath decades of use. Handwritten notes protruded from nearly every page.

"I've been chasing the same passage since you left," Lucian said. "I knew I'd seen it before, but I couldn't remember where." He looked at Kindred. "Turns out it wasn't my memory that failed me."

Kindred smiled awkwardly. "The reference was indexed wrong,"

Lucian continued. "Eric found it."

Smoke looked over at his partner. "Not bad for your first night."

Kindred shrugged. "I was just reading."

Lucian smiled. "Sometimes that's all it takes."

Smoke chuckled. "Sometimes the youngest eyes find what the oldest stop looking for."

Kindred shrugged. "I wasn't looking for the creature."

Smoke raised an eyebrow.

"I was looking for the symbols."

Lucian nodded approvingly. "And that's exactly why you found it." He slowly turned the book toward Smoke. An elaborate drawing filled both pages. Not a creature. Not a demon. A drawing depicted a wooden box identical to the one resting beneath the holy water. Smoke leaned closer. "That's it."

Lucian shook his head. "No." His finger rested on the illustration. "That's another prison."

Smoke looked up. "Another?"

Lucian opened another book. This one was thinner. Its pages were brittle enough that he turned them with the back of his fingernail.

Smoke watched him for a moment before asking a question that had been bothering him since the alley. "If Sean built the prison..."

Lucian looked up. "...who built the first one?" He smiled. "Probably someone who asked the same question you just did."

Smoke folded his arms. "So, this has happened before."

"Oh yes." Lucian carefully laid the book beside the first one. "Human beings have always believed they could control forces they barely understood. Kings." He turned a page. "Priests." A page turned over. "Generals. And many men, desperate for power."

Kindred looked toward the cedar chest.

"They all thought they'd be different." Lucian nodded. "They always do."

Smoke walked slowly around the table. "Tell me more about the Feeder."

Lucian rested both hands on the open book. "The oldest accounts describe them as scavengers of the dead. They don't bring death. They arrive after it." He turned another page. An ancient illustration showed pale figures scattered across a battlefield. Between the fallen, faint green wisps drifted like smoke. The artist had painted gaunt, elongated shapes following those lights through the carnage. "Witnesses rarely described the creature itself," Lucian said. "Most spoke first of the light. A pale green glow moving silently among the dead."

Kindred studied the drawing. "They feed on the souls."

Lucian nodded. "That's the belief. Some cultures call it the last breath. Others believed it was the soul leaving the body. Whatever it was, the Feeders followed it." He traced one of the drawings with his finger. "Like ravens circling a battlefield before they descend, Adalon Feeders are drawn to places where death lingers... and to places where it is about to arrive. Like ravens and crows, they are drawn first to the eyes and the soft organs beneath the ribs. Carrion birds strip away the flesh. The Feeder strips away what flesh cannot hold."

Smoke paid close attention as Lucian walked gently up and down the room.

"For centuries, they were reported after great battles, plagues, famines... anywhere death overwhelmed the living. Cemeteries. Mass graves. Fields where thousands fell in a single day." Lucian looked toward the cedar chest. "That is where they belong." His expression hardened. "Our friend Sean taught one to hunt the living."

Smoke thought back to Saint Adalbert. "The Hill."

"The Hill." Lucian nodded once. "They do not create death but consume what death leaves behind."

Kindred frowned. "Like vultures?"

Lucian smiled. "An excellent comparison. A little simple but in this case accurate."

Smoke looked toward the backpack submerged beneath the holy water. "And Sean changed all of that."

"Someone showed him how to do that." Lucian's expression darkened. "He didn't simply imprison it. He redirected its purpose."

Smoke waited.

"He trapped it and forced it to hunt among the living."

Smoke thought about every innocent person caught in the path Sean had created. "Every one of those deaths..."

Lucian nodded slowly. "...violated the creature's own nature."

Smoke stared at the cedar chest. "Which means..." He finished the thought himself. "...it isn't hunting anymore."

"It is waiting." Lucian looked at the ripples in the water. "Patience is one of the things demons never lack."

"If that's true..." Kindred said, looking from Lucian to Smoke. "...then it isn't after everyone."

His eyes dropped to the chest. "It's only after Sean."

Lucian closed the book. "I believe so."

Both detectives focused on Lucian. Aside from the sound of the cedar chest, the room was silent.

Every now and then... the holy water released another tiny hiss, followed by faint ripples spreading across the surface before disappearing against the silver-lined walls.

Smoke stared at the chest and asked again, "So..." looking at Lucian. "...what happens if I destroy the prison?"

Lucian didn't answer immediately. Instead, he slowly closed the book in front of him. "I honestly don't know."

Smoke smiled faintly. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"I know what the books say." Lucian folded his hands behind his back. "I know what history suggests. But no one who wrote these accounts was ever foolish enough..." He looked toward the cedar chest. "...or brave enough... to set one free."

Kindred looked from one man to the other. "So, we're guessing?"

Lucian shook his head. "No. We're making an educated decision."

Smoke nodded. "Sometimes that's all we get."

Lucian walked to one of the windows overlooking the dark trees. "The Abaddon Feeders existed long before Sean Serrano, and they'll exist long after we are gone. They belong among the dead." He turned back toward Smoke. "My belief is simple. If you return it to where it belongs..." He glanced toward the cedar chest. "...I think it will return to doing what it has always done."

Smoke met Lucian's eyes. "And if you're wrong?"

Lucian looked at the cedar chest for a long moment before answering. "Then we'll deal with the consequences."

Smoke snorted. "Not much of a plan."

"It's the only plan I've got."

Kindred smiled despite himself.

Smoke looked toward him. "How much paperwork do we still have waiting back at the station?"

Kindred groaned. "Enough to make me consider another demon."

Smoke laughed. "There he is."

Kindred looked between Smoke and Lucian. "You really won't let me go with you?"

Smoke walked over and rested a hand on his shoulder. "This stopped being police work the moment we knew what was in that box."

Kindred searched his face. "You sure?"

Smoke nodded. "You've done everything I could've asked for."

Kindred looked disappointed. "I could learn."

Smoke smiled. "I know. If we do this right... You'll never have to."

Kindred held his gaze for a long moment before finally nodding. "Fine. Drop me off at the station."

Smoke reached into his pocket and tossed him a set of keys. "Top drawer of my desk."

Kindred caught them. "What am I looking for?"

"Everything we have on Sean. Phone records. Financials. Addresses. Friends. Storage units. Anything we haven't looked at twice."

Kindred frowned. "You think he's still planning something?"

Smoke gave a slow nod. "Men like Sean always have a backup plan." He looked at Kindred. "Finish the reports. Update the case file. And if anybody spots Sean..." Smoke's expression hardened. "...I want to know before anyone else."

Kindred nodded. "You'll know."

Eric started walking toward the door and looked back at Smoke. "Watch your back, Ravenstein."

Smoke smiled. "I'll do my best."

Kindred looked at Lucian. "You too."

Lucian smiled. "I've managed to stay alive this long."

Kindred laughed softly. "I guess I'll see you both tomorrow."

Smoke waited until the front door closed. The room suddenly felt quieter. Outside, the wind chimes had begun to sound again.

Smoke watched the cedar chest for another moment, then looked toward Lucian, resting both hands on the edge of the table. "So... how do we put things back the way they were?"

Lucian's expression became solemn. "We don't." He looked toward the cedar chest. "It needs to restore the balance itself. All we can do is destroy the prison... and trust that nature restores the balance."

CHAPTER 43

The eastern sky had begun to pale by the time Smoke and Lucian reached the outskirts of Chicago. The cedar chest remained secured in the back of the vehicle, wrapped in heavy canvas and bound with three silver chains Lucian had insisted upon adding before they left.

Neither man had spoken much during the drive.

Lucian sat quietly in the passenger seat, his hands resting in his lap, his lips moving almost imperceptibly. Every now and then, Smoke caught a whispered prayer, too soft to make out. He respected the silence. Whatever Lucian was preparing himself for, words would only get in the way.

Around them, Chicago was slowly waking. A CTA train rumbled across an elevated section of track, carrying the first commuters of the morning. A postal truck sat with its hazard lights flashing while a mail carrier worked house by house along a quiet residential street. A pair of cyclists waited patiently at a red light as a city bus hissed to a stop a block ahead, its doors folding open to welcome another day. Little by little, the city settled back into its familiar rhythm. Completely unaware of how close it had come to losing it.

"You've been watching them." Lucian's quiet voice broke the silence. Smoke never looked away from the windshield. "I always do."

"The living?"

Smoke nodded. "They're why we do this."

Lucian smiled faintly. "I've spent most of my life studying the dead."

Smoke glanced at him. "And?"

Lucian watched the passing streets for a moment before answering. "The dead are remarkably uncomplicated."

Smoke smiled. "They don't lie."

"They don't panic. They don't convince themselves tomorrow will somehow fix what they refused to do today."

Smoke leaned back in his seat. "The living sure are a lot more work."

Lucian looked out at the city again, where lights flickered on in apartment windows, and another train disappeared into the distance.

"They're also worth saving." Smoke said.

Saint Adalbert Cemetery appeared through the thinning morning mist. Its weathered iron gates stood open. As if it had been waiting for their arrival.

Smoke pulled onto the narrow gravel road that wound between rows of old monuments and towering oaks. The tires crunched softly beneath them. Lucian looked toward the hill rising above the older section of the cemetery.

"There."

Smoke followed his gaze. The mausoleum sat exactly where he remembered it.

Smoke shut off the engine, and Lucian rested one hand lightly against the dashboard. "Smoke."

Smoke looked at him.

"If today is the day..."

Smoke smiled faintly. "Then it's been a hell of a ride, my friend."

Lucian smiled back. "Likewise."

Lucian's eyes held his. "Once we break that prison..." He glanced toward the cedar chest in the back. "...there is no putting it back."

Smoke looked through the windshield toward the Hill. "I know."

Lucian waited. "You can still walk away."

Smoke looked out across the endless rows of gravestones. People spent their whole lives trying to outrun death. He'd spent most of his time trying to understand it. Finally, he opened the driver's door.

"If I walk away..." He stepped out into the cool morning air. "...nothing changes." He walked toward the rear of the vehicle and placed a hand on the cedar chest. "But if I'm right..." He looked toward the Hill. "...everything goes back the way it should be."

Lucian studied him for a long moment. "Ok, my friend."

Without another word... the two men lifted the chest together and began the slow climb toward the mausoleum.

A thin veil of mist drifted between the headstones, softening the rows of granite and marble until the older sections seemed to rise and disappear like islands in a gray sea. Rain still clung to the branches overhead, gathering at the tips of blackened limbs before falling one

quiet drop at a time onto monuments that had stood watch over the dead for generations.

Their feet crunched over the damp gravel path as they followed the winding road deeper into the cemetery. The noise of Chicago had faded behind them. Here, the city surrendered to older sounds. The rustle of leaves. The distant caw of a crow. Wind slipping through iron fences whose paint had surrendered to rust decades earlier. Smoke paused beside a weathered monument, half-hidden beneath creeping ivy.

“Are you ok?” Lucian asked.

“Mmm.” Smoke nodded. The names on the stone had nearly disappeared beneath a century of rain. A husband, a wife, and their three children. Five lives, reduced to a few fading lines of carved granite. He rested his fingertips lightly against the cold stone.

“Smoke,” Lucian asked, concerned. “Are you ok?”

“I am just thinking, my friend. Cemeteries always make me think. People often think cemeteries exist for the dead. They don't.” Lucian nodded but didn't speak. He knew his friend needed a minute.

“The dead no longer need remembering. The living do. Every statue... Every cross... Every flower left beside a grave... Every name carved into stone... acts of devotion to the people buried beneath them. Promises made by those still above.”

They continued climbing the gentle rise toward the oldest part of the cemetery. Massive oaks stretched overhead, their twisted branches reaching across the path like tired hands. Moss climbed the bases of forgotten monuments. Marble angels stood with broken wings and weatherworn faces; their expressions softened to a stage where sorrow and peace had become impossible to tell apart. Then they saw it. The mausoleum.

Age had stained the limestone almost black. Thick ivy clung to its walls, disappearing into cracks that winter after winter had slowly widened. The bronze doors stood slightly ajar, their green patina streaked by rainwater.

This was where Jason DeLong's trajectory to death had begun. The place where Sean Serrano had trapped something that should have remained untouched forever.

Smoke stopped at the foot of the worn stone steps. The chest pulsed once.

Smoke and Lucian looked at each other. The faint whisper inside the prison wasn't language anymore. It sounded more like something speaking from the bottom of a deep well.

Smoke slipped his free hand beneath his shirt, lifted the boar-tusk rosary from his neck, and wrapped it around his fingers. The beads felt warm.

Lucian nodded. "Smart move."

Above the mausoleum's entrance, timeworn Latin had been carved deep into the stone.

Memento Mori.

Remember that you must die. Smoke knew death all too well. He studied the inscription for a long moment before looking down at the object they had brought with them.

They climbed the steps, and the bronze doors complained softly as Smoke pushed them open. The sound echoed through the mausoleum before fading into a silence so complete it almost seemed to swallow it

whole. The scent of old limestone mingled with dust, extinguished candles, and the faint sweetness of decaying flowers left behind by families who still remembered. Rows of marble crypts lined the walls from floor to ceiling, their polished faces interrupted only by brass nameplates dulled with age. Some bore fresh bouquets. Others hadn't been visited in decades.

Smoke stood quietly for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust. His flashlight remained clipped to his belt. They didn't need it. The narrow stained-glass windows high above the entrance admitted just enough gray morning light to paint long ribbons of color across the stone floor. Reds. Blues. Golds. Beautiful once. Muted now. The chest pulsed again. A little stronger this time.

Smoke looked down, then at Lucian. Lucian met his eyes with his usual calm expression, giving the slightest lift of his shoulders. The symbols beneath the canvas remained dark, but he could feel the warmth growing through the fabric. It was becoming restless.

"Let's set it down. This is a good place." Lucian's voice echoed through the chamber.

They carefully lowered the chest. Smoke took a few steps back as Lucian knelt down beside it. He pulled various items from his coat and started making preparations. He drew ancient symbols around the chest as his voice deepened to a low hum. He lit incense and let frankincense drop down on his writings.

Smoke stood near a window, moving rosary beads through his fingers as he was deep in prayer, asking for protection for himself and his friend.

Lucian lit the final candle. The small flame flickered once before settling into a steady burn. The cedar chest rested in the center of the stone

altar, surrounded by three circles drawn in salt, cedar shavings, and iron filings.

Smoke looked toward Lucian. "Ready?"

Lucian nodded once. "As ready as we can be, my friend."

Smoke stepped forward and opened the cedar chest; the holy water inside rippled gently.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then... the silver bands surrounding the wooden prison gave a long, low groan. They had burned through the backpack. Smoke carefully removed what was left of the backpack and lifted the box from the water.

The symbols had changed, the carvings now looked darker, and the wood felt cold.

Smoke rested on the altar.

Neither man spoke.

Finally...

a voice.

Not through the air but through bone. It was ancient. It had been patient.

"Balance..."

Smoke never looked away from the prison. "You were trapped against your will."

Silence.

Then...

"Freedom."

Lucian slowly opened his eyes. "It speaks."

Smoke leaned slightly closer, never looking away from the prison. "Sean forced you."

The answer came immediately.

"He violated the covenant."

"You killed because he commanded it."

Another pause.

"The prison forces me to obey."

Smoke glanced toward Lucian, who gave the smallest nod. *It's not lying.*

Smoke looked back down. "I'm willing to destroy the prison and set you free."

"Freedom is never without cost."

Smoke answered without hesitation. "You leave everyone alone.

Restore the balance. That is all we need."

Silence.

The candles bent outward, and the temperature inside the mausoleum dropped.

"Balance."

"You return to the Hill and stay there."

The silence stretched so long that Smoke almost thought it refused.

Then,

"It is done."

Smoke looked toward Lucian. "Good enough?"

Lucian let out a slow breath. "Then let's finish it."

Smoke nodded once and picked up the iron hammer resting beside the altar. Its weight felt reassuring. He looked once more at the prison. The at Lucian.

Do it. Lucian nodded.

Sean had built it. Chu had taught him. Greed had filled it. Fear had carried it.

Now...

It ended here.

Smoke raised the hammer. The first blow shattered one of the silver bands. The sound echoed through the mausoleum like a church bell. The second strike split the wood. Dark cracks spread across every carved symbol. The third blow collapsed the prison inward.

For one impossible heartbeat... Everything stopped.

Silence settled over the mausoleum with such completeness that even the echo of the hammer seemed to have been swallowed. Then the air changed.

The pressure settled over them with a crushing weight, like the moments before a violent thunderstorm when the world instinctively knows something is about to break. Smoke felt it against his skin...

against his chest. Every breath suddenly demanded just a little more effort.

Then the cold arrived. Their breath drifted into the air in pale clouds. The candles bent away from the shattered prison, their flames shrinking until they became little more than trembling blue points. Something rose from the broken cedar.

At first, it looked like smoke. Then faint ribbons of pale green light began moving through the darkness, flowing beneath its surface like distant lightning trapped inside a storm cloud. Every time Smoke thought he recognized the outline of a face... it dissolved.

Something long and unnatural seemed to emerge from the darkness before it disappeared again. A hand... a claw... perhaps nothing at all. His mind could not settle on an answer.

The stained-glass windows caught the pale green glow for the briefest instant, washing the saints in an eerie emerald light before the color faded again. The darkness continued to gather until it touched the vaulted ceiling. It wasn't standing inside the mausoleum. It had become part of it.

Smoke stepped next to Lucian.

The Feeder turned toward him. "We once almost met."

"We did," Smoke said.

"I could not find you."

"No offense, but I hoped to never see you again."

The creature remained perfectly still, studying him. Smoke asked the only question he still cared about. "What about Sean?"

The Feeder slowly turned its impossible face toward the cemetery beyond the mausoleum doors; its voice rolling through the chamber like dry leaves swirled over forgotten graves.

"His debt remains." Then... **"He shall no longer be a concern for you."** The feeder drifted through the open doorway and disappeared into the morning mist.

Smoke stepped to the mausoleum entrance. Beyond the drifting fog, the Hill stood silent. The pale green glow faded among the ancient oaks...

Then it was gone.

He looked down at the shattered remains of the prison. Splintered cedar and twisted silver.

He pushed it together into a little pile with his shoe, poured the remaining holy water in a circle around the shattered wood. A sharp hiss echoed through the mausoleum.

Lucian bent down and pulled a little vial from his pocket, filled with what looked like oil. The small cork released, and Lucian whispered something Smoke could not understand. He let the yellow drops drip across the wood, seeping into every crack and carving. Then, he struck a match.

The cedar caught immediately. Orange flames consumed the last fragments of the prison Sean had fabricated. They stood quietly beside the fire until nothing remained but blackened ash.

Smoke looked through the open doorway toward the Hill, then looked at Lucian. "Do you think it will keep its word?"

Lucian stepped beside him. The cemetery had become still again, rows of weathered stones slowly emerging from the morning fog. He nodded once. "I think the city belongs to us again."

Together they walked out of the mausoleum. Behind them... the last embers from Sean Serrano's prison quietly died.

CHAPTER 44

Sean Serrano was stuffing his clothes into trash bags like a madman when his motel door flew off its hinges. The entire room shook. Sean spun around instinctively.

But he was too slow.

The first gunshot exploded through the tiny motel room and tore through his right knee.

Sean screamed and collapsed sideways into the cheap motel dresser hard enough to knock the lamp onto the floor. The old television tipped sideways, crashed face-first into the carpet, and burst into sparks and static.

“FUCK!”

Sean’s scream could probably have been heard another block away.

A second man stepped into the room from behind the shooter, carrying a pistol fitted with a suppressor. Both men wore dark rain jackets soaked from the storm outside.

The taller one smiled casually as he looked down at Sean writhing on the floor, desperately trying to hold his ruined knee together with both hands and failing miserably.

“Well,” he said, “gotta make sure you don’t run again.”

“No, please no...” Sean begged for his life. He stretched out his hands, as if they could stop the bullets, and squeezed his eyes closed in fear.

The second shot shattered Sean’s left knee.

His kneecap exploded, instantly painting his pants red. Sean screamed so hard his voice cracked. He couldn't stop his body from collapsing onto the carpet, clutching both ruined legs while blood spread rapidly beneath him.

The taller gangster closed in slowly, almost relaxed, rain and flashing lightning filled the broken doorway behind him.

The motel television spat static through a cracked screen.

Sean sobbed openly. "Please— please—"

The shorter gangster kicked him hard in the ribs. "Where is our fucking money, Serrano?"

Sean gasped and pointed weakly toward the bed. "Bag... bag..."

The taller man grabbed the duffel bag from beneath the mattress and dumped stacks of damp cash onto the bedspread and started counting it immediately.

Sean squeezed his mouth against the stained carpet, trying to muffle his screams.

"I gave you everything." He said.

The man kept counting. "Looks like it."

Sean looked up desperately. "So, we're done, right?"

The taller gangster glanced at his partner, calmly raising the pistol again.

Sean's eyes widened. "What the fuck, man?! No!!"

The shot tore through Sean's thigh. Not the knee this time. The pain shot through his leg and punched him in the head.

Sean screamed in agony and rolled onto his back, clutching at the wound. He did not have enough hands to cover all of them. Blood soaked the carpet beneath him.

The taller gangster shrugged slightly. "I wouldn't want you limping unevenly."

His partner laughed hard at that.

"Yeah," the man continued casually, "wheelchairs are smoother."

Sean stared at them in disbelief through tears and sweat.

"You said if I paid..."

The taller man interrupted, "That was before you ran. And we had to search half of Chicago to find you. So, now our boss told us to send a message to all the other fuckers out there that might owe him money one day."

Lightning flashed outside the motel window. Bright enough to turn the entire room white for half a second.

Then...

BOOM.

The thunder hit instantly, and the motel windows exploded inward. Glass blasted across the room like shrapnel. Both gangsters screamed as razor-sharp fragments tore into their faces, shredding their skin and flesh as they penetrated deeper.

One of them stepped on the lamp as he stumbled around, his fingers fumbling across his face. Trying to feel what was left of it. The television died instantly. The motel walls crackled violently as electricity surged through the wiring hidden behind them. Sean curled against the bed, trying desperately to crawl backward despite his shattered legs.

Then the room went cold.

Dead cold.

The taller gangster slowly turned toward the center of the room.

“What the fu...”

Something moved. Darkness seeped through the shattered window in slow rolling waves, holding lightning trapped beneath its skin.

The demon emerged in fragments.

Its glow illuminated the dark motel room as pale, stretched limbs drifted through the shattered window. Endless black eyes locked onto Sean while its jaw unfolded sideways through layers of teeth.

Then it turned toward the gangsters.

The taller gangster opened fire with all he had. Round after round left his barrel, each flash illuminating the room orange for a split second. The bullets vanishing into darkness.

Then the Feeder grabbed him, a flash of electricity exploded across his body instantly. White-blue arcs burst from his eyes, mouth, fingertips, and ears. His spine bowed backward unnaturally while every muscle in his body locked tight. The smell of burning flesh filled the room.

The second gangster tried to run. But to no avail, the Feeder turned its mouth towards him, and the second man lifted violently off the ground.

The rays of electricity erupted through him, too. His scream lasted barely a second before smoke began pouring from his illuminated mouth.

Their smoldering bodies dropped onto the motel floor, the carpet catching fire where they made contact.

Sean didn't want to look, but couldn't avoid them. His would be killers, lying on the floor, their mouths open and their eyes hollow. Smoke slowly curling from their empty eye sockets.

Sean pissed himself.

The Feeder turned toward him, electric sparks could be heard popping in the air. Sean dragged himself backward across the bed, leaving thick smears of blood behind him.

“No no no no...”

The creature floated closer, savoring the fear, the pleas for help. Its tongues swirled slowly inside its mouth as if relishing the suffering pouring off Sean.

Sean could feel the heat that was rolling off the demon. Waves strong enough to warp the motel air.

As the feeder moved forward, the wallpaper blackened along its path. Plastic fixtures softened, and the curtains near the shattered window burst into flame.

Sean screamed. “I CAN SET YOU FREE!”

The Feeder loomed above him, laughing. “I have already been set free. Maggot.”

Sean could feel the radiating heat starting to push through his clothes, slowly cooking his skin. His hoodie started melting, and small flames appeared across the fabric. His eyes were wide with fear.

“We had a pact!”

The creature’s voice penetrated Sean’s skull. “There was never a pact. You trapped me.”

Sean sobbed.

The Feeder leaned closer, hovering above the whimpering, blood-soaked bag of flesh, melting the clothes from his flesh, and the mattress beneath him began smoldering. Sean’s skin started blistering from the feeder’s heat.

“You trapped me.” It said again, turning its head, making sure it could savor every ounce of pain, sucking up the suffering as new blisters formed across Sean’s body.

Tiny at first. Then swelling rapidly with fluids beneath the skin.

Sean screamed louder, vaguely becoming aware of the smell. Burning fat. He could smell himself being cooked alive.

The Feeder hovered inches above him, its radiation washing across Sean’s body in waves.

His skin bubbling like grease inside a frying pan. Liquid fat began dripping onto the mattress beneath him, making soft sizzling sounds. What was left of him thrashed violently.

“PLEASE!”

Outside, a fist slammed against the remains of the motel door.

“HEY!” The motel manager’s voice echoed through the hallway. “What the hell is going on in there?!”

“HELP ME!” Sean begged with whatever strength he had left. The manager hesitated as another violent flash of light erupted through the room, bright enough to spill out into the hallway beneath the broken doorway.

On the bed, Sean’s skin was splitting open across his arms and neck. Fat rendered away beneath the impossible heat. Muscle tissue blackened. His lips peeled backward from his teeth while his eyes boiled wetly inside their sockets.

The Feeder remained hovering above him silently. Watching. Savoring as Sean convulsed.

The bed caught fully on fire beneath him now. The room filled with smoke.

Sean could no longer speak; foam filled his throat and mouth, bubbling wet noises as his throat cooked from the inside.

The Feeder lowered closer still. Its endless black eyes reflected Sean’s burning body. It was enjoying every second.

Sean’s body shook, and he reluctantly let go of his final breath.

A sudden white flash erupted through the motel room, bright enough to blind anyone unfortunate enough to look in its direction.

The Feeder vanished. Smoke drifted low across the motel room while the fire detectors screamed overhead.

Resting on the burned-out mattress bed of springs, thin trails of smoke curled upward from inside Sean's skull.

The hotel manager finally stepped inside to see what was going on and staggered backward in horror. Fumbling for his phone with shaking hands.

"911, what is your emergency?" an unknown person across town answered.

"Oh God...

Please send somebody."

CHAPTER 45

Smoke drove through the sleeping city with one hand on the wheel and the other resting near the rosary beneath his shirt. Steam curled upward from sewer grates and rooftop vents before dissolving into the cold morning air. For a few brief minutes, the city almost looked peaceful. For the first time in weeks, the pressure was gone. His phone vibrated on the passenger seat.

"Ravenstein."

"Smoke, it's dispatch. Patrol just found a burned body at the Blue Star Motor Lodge. Looks like it's Sean Serrano."

Smoke stared through the windshield, watching the empty streets slide past. "...You sure?"

"Pretty sure. Homicide's already on scene. Identification's being confirmed, but it looks like him."

Smoke closed his eyes for a brief moment. "I'll head in." He ended the call without another word. For a few seconds, he simply drove. Then he picked up the phone and dialed Lucian. He answered after the second ring.

"Smoke,"

"It's done."

A quiet pause lingered between them.

"They found Sean," Smoke said. "Burned body at the Blue Star."

Lucian remained silent.

Smoke looked out at the city passing beyond the windshield. "Looks like the Feeder kept its word."

"That is a big relief," Lucian replied quietly.

Another moment of silence passed.

"We destroyed the box," Smoke said. "It's free now. I guess, for now, order is restored."

"We handled this well," Lucian said finally. "It doesn't always go the way we want. Or turn out the way we expect."

Smoke snorted softly. "Yeah, well, I'd still rather send them back to hell."

"You kept balance."

"That's the job," Smoke replied. "Keeping the status quo."

"And Sean?"

"The Feeder got its pound of flesh. That was part of the deal."

Lucian understood immediately. There was nothing more to ask. Smoke changed the subject. I hear the kid came to visit you. A faint amusement entered Lucian's voice. "He's spent the last hour trying to explain why pineapple belongs on pizza."

Smoke closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I told him he was spiritually compromised."

That earned the faintest smile. "Fair."

Lucian's voice softened. "You chose correctly, Smoke."

Smoke tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "Maybe. I don't think I chose him. Looks like he chose me."

"Get some sleep."

"Yeah," Smoke muttered. "That's the plan."

He was quiet for another moment.

"Lucian..."

"Yes?"

"Thank you." Without waiting for a reply, Smoke ended the call.

Lucian stood near the doorway, looking exactly the same as he always did. Composed, ancient, and always slightly annoyed. He watched as Kindred gathered his things from the old wooden table.

Kindred slid his notebook into his bag. "Thanks again for letting me come over and study the books."

Lucian folded his hands calmly behind his back. "Let's not make it a habit."

Kindred smiled slightly. "I'll try."

Lucian studied him quietly for a moment. "I have to say, it was not as unpleasant as I expected."

Kindred blinked. "...I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"It is."

Kindred laughed softly. Lucian tilted his head slightly and held out his hand.

"It was good meeting you, Eric Kindred."

The way he said Eric's full name sounded strangely formal. Eric nodded respectfully and shook the offered hand. "You too, Lucian."

Lucian's eyes narrowed slightly. "And for the record..."

Kindred paused near the doorway.

"Pineapple will never belong on pizza."

Kindred laughed. "I'm gonna keep working on you." He pointed his finger at Lucian, signaling he would never give up trying.

"Please leave." Lucian held the door open, truly hoping his guest would leave.

Eric returned to the station a little while later and made his way quietly downstairs.

The basement door to Smoke's office stood half open. It shouldn't be. Slowly Eric approached.

Smoke sat behind his desk; Deedee sprawled lazily across his lap while he tossed a small crumpled paper ball across the office. She launched herself after it immediately. Caught it. Brought it back.

"I taught you were going to take some time off?"

"I am. Just had to come up and finish a few things. When I am off, I am off. I don't want to come in to do a timesheet or something stupid."

Eric nodded in agreement. "...You play fetch with your cat?"

Smoke took the paper ball back from Deedee without looking up. "She's smarter than most detectives." Deedee purred loudly. Smoke glanced toward Eric. A tired smile crossed his face. "I'm glad you're back, man."

Eric stepped inside slowly. "I am too. You, okay?"

Smoke leaned back in the chair. "Yeah." He rubbed his jaw slowly. "Just tired. Really, really tired."

Eric nodded. "It's been a rough couple of weeks."

Smoke snorted softly. "That's an understatement." For a moment, neither of them spoke. The silence felt comfortable now. Different from before. Smoke tossed the paper ball again, and Deedee sprinted after it as her life depended on it. Smoke watched her for a second before speaking again.

"You should disappear for a few days too." He stretched slightly in the chair. "Recharge. Remember the three rules."

Eric nodded immediately. "I think that's probably smart."

Smoke looked toward him and nodded. "I'll see you next Monday then. Six p.m."

"Monday, six p.m., it's a date," Eric replied.

Smoke slowly stood from behind the desk. Then, he unexpectedly held out his hand.

Eric frowned slightly. "What?"

Smoke looked him directly in the eyes. "Glad to have you on the team, kid."

The sincerity behind it hit harder than he expected.

"You did good."

Eric shook his hand firmly. "Coming from you..." He laughed quietly. "That's a huge compliment."

Smoke smirked faintly. "Don't let it go to your fucking head, pineapple pizza boy." He grabbed his coat from the chair. "Still a long road to retirement." He walked past Eric and tapped him once on the shoulder. Then headed for the doorway.

"Hey," Eric called after him.

Smoke turned slightly. "Yeah?"

Eric leaned casually against the desk. "On my way back here, dispatch put out another homicide call."

Smoke's expression stayed neutral. "Oh yeah?"

"Near that hookah lounge we visited. The Blue Star Motel."

Smoke tilted his head slightly. "That so?"

“Hotel room caught fire.” Kindred watched him carefully now. “One dead male. Burned out the entire room.” He paused. “Vic apparently had no eyes.”

Smoke stared at him for a second. Then slowly looked upward like he was honestly considering it. As he reached the doorway, he said, “Weirdest thing. You know, eyes often melt in intense fires.”

Eric smirked. “I’ve heard about that.”

Smoke shrugged slightly. “We live in a weird world, kid.” And continued walking down the hallway.

“Oh,” he added over his shoulder casually, “make sure Deedee gets enough food and water.”

Deedee meowed loudly from the desk. Smoke pointed toward the cat without turning around. “I’m sure you two will get along.”

For the first time since meeting Smoke Ravenstein... the madman of the basement, Eric realized he no longer wanted his old life back.

CHAPTER 46

By the time Smoke pulled onto Lake Shore Drive, Chicago was fully awake.

Traffic rolled steadily through the city while tired morning radio hosts replaced the late-night jazz station somewhere between downtown and the outer neighborhoods. Steam still drifted from sewer grates, but the storm had mostly moved on.

Smoke drove with one arm resting against the open window of his old Mercedes while his other hand tapped lazily against the steering wheel. Nobody was chasing him, no spirits, no murders needing to be solved. No desperate phone calls demanding answers. Just traffic.

No one would believe him, but for now, he was just loving traffic.

Delivery trucks crawled through intersections, and exhausted commuters waited outside bus stations holding paper cups of coffee like life preservers. Smoke drove in silence for a while. Just taking it all in. Letting the noise slowly drain out of his head.

Before his planned recharge retreat, he had one more stop to make. It felt like the perfect way to start a few quiet days. He smirked, reached over to the passenger seat, grabbed a folded piece of paper from beneath a file folder, and glanced at the handwritten address.

About twenty minutes later, he turned off the main road and rolled slowly into a quiet residential neighborhood lined with narrow trees and expensive parked cars.

Smoke circled the block. Then he saw it.

The silver BMW. He leaned back slightly in the driver's seat. "Well, well," he muttered to himself. "Look at that."

The BMW belonged to the asshole from the casino who had nearly run him and Eric over at the Jason DeLong crime scene. Smoke remembered every detail. Big mouth. Big ego. Zero patience. Everything about him rubbed Smoke the wrong way. Smoke had memorized the license plate. Sometimes his attention to detail came in handy.

He parked, checked if there were any cameras and when he was certain everything was ok, he walked past the car slowly, like he didn't care about it at all. He crouched briefly near the rear tire behind the driver's side.

Pssshhhhhh.

Air hissed softly into the morning silence. Smoke moved to the front tire.

Pssshhhhhh.

He stood again calmly, slipped the small knife back into his pocket, and walked on as if nothing was going on. He looked at the car with satisfaction.

Who's the tough guy now, asshole?

He walked back to his car, unaware of the big grin on his face. After spending the last several weeks dealing with murder and demons, a flat tire was just what the doctor ordered.

He drove home, and by the time he reached his apartment building, the exhaustion had fully settled in. His head felt heavy, a slight headache lingering bone-deep. A reminder from the universe that he was still human.

Smoke parked, grabbed his coat from the passenger seat, and slowly climbed the stairs toward his apartment. Sarah's car wasn't there.

Working.

Each step pounded in his head. The headache did not relent. He unlocked the apartment door carefully and stepped inside.

It was quiet. Soft light filtered through the blinds.

Ted, the replacement canary, hopped cheerfully around inside his cage in the hallway, completely unaware of the horrific fate of his predecessor.

Smoke looked toward him. "Well," he muttered tiredly, "you seem less traumatized than the rest of us."

Ted chirped.

Smoke smiled faintly. "Yeah. Keep up the good attitude."

He set his keys beside the cage and glanced automatically at the food and water.

Still full. Good.

Smoke shrugged his coat halfway off his shoulders, then he froze.

A sound.

Faint.

Somewhere deeper inside the apartment. The muscles in his body tightened instantly. His exhaustion vanished, replaced by instinct.

Slowly, he let his jacket slide to the floor while his hand moved toward the pistol at his back.

Another sound. Shadows. Movement. Coming from the kitchen area.

Smoke drew his weapon smoothly and moved carefully through the apartment.

Silent. Every step controlled. Years of instinct took over automatically.

Ted chirped behind him, completely unconcerned.

Smoke peeked around the corner and scanned the living room first.

Nothing.

The overturned furniture from the earlier attack had been cleaned up before he left. Everything had been returned to normal again, but his eyes still checked.

Another sound. A cabinet door closing softly. The kitchen.

Smoke pivoted on his heels and stepped closer to the corner wall, tightening his grip on the pistol.

Then...

...singing.

Soft. Off-key. Warm.

Sarah.

Smoke relaxed immediately and exhaled. *Fuck*, he thought. He holstered the pistol before stepping into the kitchen.

“Hey,” he called tiredly, leaning lightly against the doorway. “I thought you were working.”

From inside the kitchen, Sarah answered casually while still singing the last line of the song she had stuck in her head.

“Nope. The car broke down.” Pots clinked softly. “Had to take it to the shop. Sophie gave me a ride home.”

The smell hit him. Garlic. Butter. Meat roasting. Real food. Homemade food, just the way he liked it.

Sarah finally looked over her shoulder from the stove and smiled.

“There you are.” She pointed a wooden spoon toward him. “Come on, baby. I made us dinner.”

Smoke stood there quietly for a moment, watching her move around the kitchen beneath the warm yellow light. He could watch her all day.

And for the first time in a very long time...

He felt like he was normal.

THE END