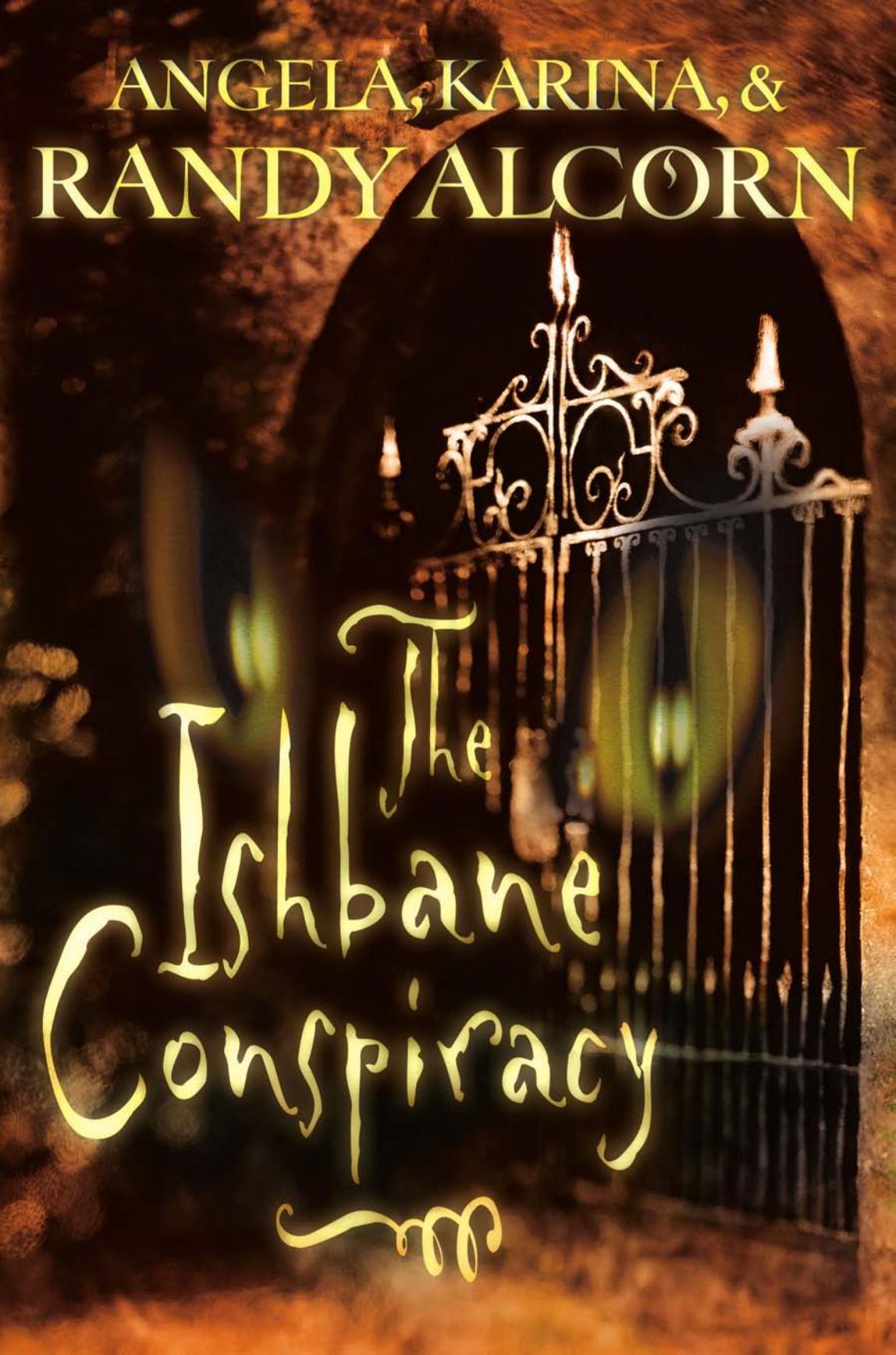


ANGELA, KARINA, &
RANDY ALCORN

The
Ishbane
Conspiracy



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RANDY ALCORN

Multnomah® Publishers Sisters, Oregon

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To

Lucille Alcorn (1918–1981)

*An awesome mother to Randy and grandmother to Karina and Angela,
Whose departure created a huge hole in our lives.*

and

Adele Noren (1916–2001)

*A wonderful mother to Nanci and grandmother to Angela and Karina;
Who left this world for another the week we finished this book.*

*Lucille and Adele became dear friends in the Shadowlands.
And now they're together with the Person they were made for,
in the Place they were made for,
there in the real world.*

*Thanks, Grandmas, for your faithfulness to King Jesus
and for your undying love for your families.
Both of you touched our lives for eternity.
Keep your eyes open for places you want to show us there.
We can hardly wait for the grand reunion.*

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Our heartfelt thanks to Nanci Alcorn, wonderful wife and mom of the authors! Thanks to Dan Stump and Dan Franklin for their love for Christ, for their encouragement and prayers, and also, Lord willing, for giving their last names to Angie and Karina soon after this book is published.

Thanks to our great staff at Eternal Perspective Ministries—to Bonnie Hiestand for some typing, and Janet Albers, Kathy Norquist, and Penny Dorsey for proofreading.

We've gleaned insights from various experts on youth culture including Josh McDowell, Dawson McAllister, and the incomparable Steve Keels. We've also benefited from Frank Peretti's recollections of his childhood in *The Wounded Spirit*. Thanks for your honesty, Frank.

The idea for the correspondence portions of *The Ishbane Conspiracy* came from C. S. Lewis's classic *The Screwtape Letters*. Randy's book *Lord Foulgrin's Letters*, also inspired by *The Screwtape Letters*, introduced various characters in *The Ishbane Conspiracy* including Jillian Fletcher, Diane Fletcher, Daniel Fletcher, Brittany Powell, and Ian Stewart.

We're deeply indebted to the prayer team that faithfully lifted us up during the writing and revising of this book. Any eternal impact *The Ishbane Conspiracy* might have is the product of the prayers of these brothers and sisters.

We're thankful for being able to work together harmoniously on a big and challenging project. All the weekly meetings, the study and discussions on fiction writing, the research, and the writing were an investment not only in the book, but in one another's lives. We're so grateful for the oneness we experienced in this process.

We want to thank above all others our Lord Jesus, who has filled our hearts with joy. His loving assurances of our eternal pleasure in Him show for what they are, the always-broken promises of the father of lies and his warriors of darkness. We pray that by His grace, God would expose the strategies of our enemies, so we would not buy into their

deceptions. We pray that readers would, through this story, come to see themselves for who they are, their enemies for who they are, and—above all—their God for who He is.

Note to Readers from Randy Alcorn

The main characters in *The Ishbane Conspiracy* are eighteen, nineteen, and twenty years old. It's a book about young people and the struggles thrust upon them by their culture and the enemies of their souls. But while it's a book *about* youth (and their families), it's not just a book *for* youth. This isn't a "youth novel." It's an adult novel with main characters who happen to be young. It's as much for people in their thirties, fifties, and seventies as for people in their teens and twenties.

How can adults and teenagers enjoy the same book? The same way both enjoy many of the same movies. *October Sky* was about kids. *Remember the Titans* was about high schoolers. Yet most adults loved both movies. The central characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are children, but countless adults read them over and over. *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* have teenage main characters. Yet grandfathers enjoy them as much as grandchildren, and often more. No one thinks of them as teen novels. Likewise, *Lord of the Flies* is a story *about* boys, but it's not just a story *for* boys.

Of course, we're not foolish enough to consider *The Ishbane Conspiracy* a classic, but the point is valid—a story can have main characters who are young without being exclusively or even primarily a book for youth.

I receive many letters from teens and even preteens who have read my "adult" novels—*Deadline*, *Dominion*, *Edge of Eternity*, and *Lord Foulgrin's Letters*. Interestingly, these young readers rarely talk about the teenagers in those books (such as Carly in *Deadline*, and Ty or Gangster Cool in *Dominion*). Rather, they connect with the main characters, who are adults. Often their favorite character in *Deadline* is a young boy, Little Finn. Their favorite in *Dominion* is an old man, Obadiah Abernathy.

Similarly, *Dominion* is centered on the lives of African-Americans, but is not an African-American novel. Most of its readers aren't black. The primary characters in my novels tend to be men. But women read them as much as men do.

Just as the young can enjoy reading about the old, and whites about blacks, and women about men, *the older can enjoy reading about the younger*. This is one of the great benefits of reading a good story—entering into another person's world and coming away with a better understanding of real people. My daughters and I hope that parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts will gain from *The Ishbane Conspiracy* a greater understanding of the battles our young people fight and the joy they seek. I expect even more young people will read this novel than my previous ones. But I hope no fewer older people will read it, because it is for them as much as any book I've ever written.

My daughters Angela and Karina helped me write this book. It was my first collaboration since writing a book with my wife, Nanci, fifteen years ago, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I can't think of two people I could have worked with who would have been more qualified and skilled, both spiritually and artistically. We read and discussed books on fiction writing, brainstormed characters and plots, stimulated one another's thinking, prayed

together, had lots of fun, and shared the frustrations and mind-numbing hard work of disciplined writing. Angela and Karina are true coauthors, not token ones. This is their book as much as it's mine, and they have my deepest respect.

Angela, Karina, and I—along with their mom Nanci—are pleased to offer this book to our Lord Jesus. We pray He'll use it to make readers of all ages aware of the spiritual battles we face. May our eyes be opened to the strategies our accursed enemies are using to sabotage the lives of young people. And may we also see in a new light the King's joyful alternative.

*"Sometimes the best way to see a thing
is to look at its opposite."*

A. W. TOZER, *THE PURSUIT OF GOD*

1



DECEMBER 31, 3:25 A.M.

The moonlight cast an eerie shadow through the bedroom window. Jillian Fletcher kicked the mass of blankets to the side of the bed. She lay awake, weary, but unable to close her eyes. She appeared safe and snug in her nice home in the suburbs, but her heart ached for something she could never quite identify. Tonight a foreboding presence seemed to occupy the room. She wondered if she'd watched one too many horror movies with her friends.

A chill worked under Jillian's skin. She had the feeling she was being watched. She got up and shut the blinds, then spread two fingers between them and peeked out. She looked at the dark elm tree outside her second story bedroom. Was someone in the tree, watching her? For a moment she thought she saw the glimmer of eyes. She stifled a scream, then when she could see nothing, shivered and backed away. She went back to bed and pulled the covers over her, as if they were a warrior's shield protecting her from falling arrows.

The digital wall clock moved toward midnight.

"Another pointless New Year's party," Jillian Fletcher said, yawning, drained from last night's sleeplessness.

"The only people who aren't drunk are boring...or taken," Brittany said. "If this doesn't pick up soon, I say we leave and find a real party."

"Or we could just go home. I'm so exhausted."

"After this spine-tingling excitement, you'll be asleep before I get you home. You need to get a life, Jillian. And I'm just the one to help you do it. Back in a sec."

"Can't we go home?" Jillian said, her voice trailing off behind Brittany, who was already halfway across the room.

Jillian scanned Adam Brotnov's huge downstairs family room. There must've been fifty kids. The drinkers were over in their corner. Ty Lott and David Richards tilted back their beers, laughing too loudly at nothing. Apparently Adam's parents didn't have problems with underage drinking—or didn't think it was their business to come downstairs and check the place out. Jillian watched Ty light a joint. She wondered what her mom would think if she knew her perfect little daughter was at this kind of party. Most parents didn't have a clue. Mom was one of them.

Adam approached Ty.

"If you're going to smoke weed, go outside, away from the house." Ty and David laughed their way up the stairs and out the door. Jillian guessed they wouldn't be back. She felt relieved. Mom wouldn't smell it on her clothes.

There were three downstairs bedrooms. One had all the coats. Another was a make-out

room, but it was full. Tired of waiting, some had gone out to their cars.

The third room had a group thing going, with a circle on the floor. Jillian guessed it was a game of Dungeons & Dragons. She drew closer to get a look. The door was slightly open. She smelled a sickening sweet incense. It was a New Age thing, with lights out and candles burning. Two girls and a guy were turning up tarot cards, then interpreting them. One of the guys was Ian Stewart, Brittany's old boyfriend.

Jillian felt something brush her ear. She jerked around.

"Let's go in," Brittany said. "It'll be fun." Jillian didn't want to, but she followed Brittany, who immediately sat in the circle. Jillian stayed back by the door, crouching down, trying not to draw attention to herself.

"This is the Magician card," said Skyla Stokes. She was a friend of Brittany's. She sat on folded legs, facing most of the kids. She had this wild Joan of Arc haircut that made Jillian wonder if the hairdresser sheared it with dull hedge trimmers. She was a four-point student and into Wicca. Some of the kids called her "Sabrina" behind her back, but for Skyla it was serious stuff. She was part of a campus coven of thirteen, mostly seniors. Brittany had told Jillian that Skyla put a curse on Corrie Ward just before her skiing accident left her paralyzed.

Skyla looked at one of the boys and said, "Okay, you drew the Magician—that means you have a mastery of words and matter. You have hermetic wisdom."

"What's hermetic wisdom?" the boy asked. Everybody laughed.

"You're a mediator-communicator," Skyla said. "You're a master manipulator of the material world. You can work miracles and do illusions. You are Hermes, god of orators and liars, merchants and thieves. Okay, now draw your other card."

He drew.

"The ace of swords," Skyla pronounced.

"What does it mean?"

"It's about the brutal aspect of power. It's about violence and consuming heat."

"Ooh," was the general response, partly joking, but Jillian sensed she wasn't the only uneasy one.

"Who's next?"

Someone Jillian couldn't see drew a card.

"You're the priestess," Skyla said.

Jillian stood on tiptoes to see her—it was Tara, a girl from youth group. Her dad was on the church board.

"You have the spiritual and intellectual face of the anima," Skyla said, "the feminine nature of the soul. You have primordial feminine wisdom, with the balancing forces of nature. You know the ancient healing arts, magic, and spiritual mystery."

"I *do*? Cool," Tara said. More laughter. The crowd seemed captivated. Though it unnerved her, Jillian was riveted too. Skyla's mysterious voice, the darkness broken by flickering candles...well, at least it wasn't boring.

"Draw your next one," Skyla said to Tara. She turned it up.

“The Death card!” somebody called. The room rumbled.

“Whoa. Look out!” said Ian Stewart. “Violence, brutal power, death—everybody be careful driving home!”

Laughter erupted. Brittany’s laugh was the loudest. And she looked right at Ian.

Jillian sneaked out the door, hoping Brittany didn’t see her. Brit would tease her, tell her she was paranoid. Maybe she was. Death and violence weren’t entertaining thoughts. Not with what had happened to her dad.

Jillian walked aimlessly around, hearing the occasional laugh, but noticing the vacant troubled look on a lot of faces. Were people really having fun, or were they just pretending to? Were they as lonely as she was? She didn’t feel at home here.

The party was supposed to be a celebration, but why did she feel so vacant? And why did everyone else look so empty too? Only one semester of high school left. But what would be next? She wanted to go away, anywhere. Do something different, anything. Find whatever it was she was missing. But how? Where? Jillian didn’t know what was wrong. But whatever it was, she felt powerless to change it. What did she have to look forward to? She sighed. Her want list was topped by two items. She wanted a boyfriend. And she wanted to move to a new house. She needed a new person and a new place. Yeah, that was it. Her prospects for happiness boiled down to two questions—who and where?

Jillian got some punch and sat in a chair by herself, away from the traffic, staring at the room as if it were a galaxy far, far away.

Suddenly it went pitch black. An eerie silence was pierced by screams. Guys were taking advantage of the opportunity to scare girls and pretend they weren’t afraid. Jillian crossed her arms and wrapped them tight, pulling back from the darkness into her chair. The lights popped back on. Kids cheered.

After twenty minutes, Brittany and several others finally emerged from the room.

“It was cool, Jillian. The lights went out at the perfect time. You really should try the tarot cards. We’ve got to get some.”

Jillian nodded, not saying what she really thought. She rarely said to Brittany what she really thought.

Brittany ruffled her friend’s hair, then Jillian playfully poked Brittany’s stomach.

“Ow! Careful with the abs. Those exercises are killing me; the price you pay for perfection.” Her eyes darted. “Hey. There goes Ian.”

Jillian followed Brittany’s gaze to the corner couch by a big punch bowl, where Ian Stewart was greeting another guy. They slapped hands.

“You still have it for Ian, don’t you, Brit? That’s why you wanted to go in that room.”

“My interest was purely metaphysical,” she said. “Well, okay, maybe I wanted to reconnect with Ian. We got pretty close...you know, before I...had my problems. He backed off then, like I had leprosy. I don’t blame him. I was a little messed up. Hey, you see who’s talking to him?”

“I see him. Who is he?”

“You don’t remember Robbie Gonzales?”

“No! That’s Rob? He looks so different with short hair. Guess I haven’t seen him since he graduated last year. He goes to Portland State, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. I heard that’s where Ian wants to go next year.”

“I wonder if Rob still drives that pimped-out banger car, the black one? He looks...nice.”

“He looks *buff*. If I wasn’t taller than him, I’d be interested.”

“Well, I’m not taller than him, and I *am* interested.” Jillian felt instant redness, realizing she sounded more like Brittany than herself.

“Honey, there’s nobody in this room you’re taller than. Okay,” Brittany whispered, raising an eyebrow. “Let’s do a bathroom mirror check, then we’ll mosey on over their direction.”

“I’ll go, but I’m not going to flirt.”

“You say you’re interested, then you say you’re not going to flirt? Make up your mind, sweetheart. I know where I’m headed...right back into Ian’s life. Rob’s there for your taking.”

“I’m not going to throw myself at him.”

“Don’t get self-righteous. You’ve gone conservative on me ever since...well, you know.”

Jillian teared up instantly. “You’re talking about Dad?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I meant since your dad’s...change. You know. When he got religious and stuff. At first you hated it, but then you started to buy into it. And then...”

“And then he died,” Jillian said, a single tear cutting through her makeup, and exposing the underlying freckles.

“Oh, man. I’m sorry, Jill. I didn’t mean to bring up your dad.”

“No, don’t say that! I *want* people to bring him up. Sometimes a few hours go by where I don’t think about him, and I feel awful.”

“Do you think he’d want you to feel that way?”

“Probably not.”

“Right. He’d want you to move on with your life. He’d want you to go talk with Rob.”

Jillian laughed at the leap in her friend’s logic. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Let’s see that face. Nothing Bobby Brown Essentials can’t repair. I’ll get you back in the mood.”

Brittany grabbed Jillian’s right hand and tugged on her to follow. In a lighter moment, Jillian would have bounced along next to her. As number one flier for Kennedy High’s cheerleading squad, she was known for being “spirited,” without crossing that fine line to “bubbly.” But her dad’s death in the car accident last spring had taken its toll. Right when she thought the wounds had started to heal, fresh pain would cut through her again.

She’d been reading the Bible once in a while and attending a church youth group, more than anything because she knew that’s what her dad would have wanted. But except for her friend Lisa from school and Greg and Kristi, the youth pastor and his wife, Jillian hadn’t made any real friends at church. She had a new faith, sort of, and yet...she didn’t really own it. She wasn’t sure she wanted to. Not after what God had done to her dad.

They marched across the room beside a ten-foot hors d'oeuvres table. Brittany's straight cinnamon brown hair hung nearly to her elbows, and it swung like a pendulum from one side to the other. Something about it always made Jillian want to laugh. They were such opposites.

Five minutes later they emerged from the bathroom. Brittany led the way, wandering through the crowd, accidentally-on-purpose meandering near Ian and Rob, who were sitting on a couch, engaged in heavy conversation.

Brittany picked up a ladle from a punch bowl five feet from the guys, then looked at Jillian and said in a loud voice, "Yeah, that's true, isn't it!" She laughed hard and long.

Jillian stared at her, then saw the commanding look in her friend's eyes, and suddenly started laughing herself.

"Brit?"

Brittany, her face full of surprise, turned and looked at Ian. "Ian Stewart? I didn't know *you* were here."

Ian grinned. "Didn't you see me in the tarot room? I was hoping we could talk. I miss hanging out with you. Seems like it's been months. You remember Roberto?"

"Of course. Hey, Robbie. Love your hair."

Rob laughed, like he wasn't sure if she was kidding.

"Jillian, remember Rob Gonzales?" Brittany asked.

"Sure. Hi, Rob," Jillian said. He nodded and smiled.

Ian pulled a vacant love seat over to face the couch. "Sit down," Ian said. Brittany sat next to Ian on the love seat, leaving Jillian standing there, gazing at the space next to Rob.

"We didn't mean to interrupt," Brittany said.

"No problem. We were getting too serious for a party anyway, right Rob?"

Jillian sat down carefully, trying to leave the perfect amount of space.

The four talked and laughed. Within five minutes Jillian was amazed at how natural it felt, how comfortable she was with these guys, especially Rob. It was like being with old friends.

Brittany pointed to the smoky quartz on the chain around Ian's neck. "What's the stone? It's new, isn't it?"

"It's an Osiris crystal. Got it last month."

"What's Osiris?" Jillian asked.

"An Egyptian god."

"You believe in God?" Rob asked.

"I believe in gods. I can't narrow it down to one god as opposed to another. I don't think we're alone. I think there are a lot of outside forces that influence us."

"Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do." Brittany sang the *Twilight Zone* theme. "Still reading all your metaphysical stuff, Ian?"

"When I'm not playing basketball. And when I don't have a beautiful girl at my side."

"So how do you like Portland State?" Jillian asked Rob.

"Some of the profs are from another planet—speaking of the *Twilight Zone*—but some

are pretty cool.” His dark brown eyes sparkled. “Besides doing a ton of studying, I’m involved with a campus Bible study group. Plus there’s an awesome church nearby. Sometimes I make it out here on Sundays to my home church.”

“How’s campus life?” Jillian asked.

“Fine, as long as you stay away from the drugs and booze and the...” he looked at the floor, “other stuff. But I really like it. I’ve met a lot of great people. I’ve been trying to talk Ian into coming next fall, staying in the apartments, maybe being my roommate. I’m sure the basketball coach would like to meet him.”

They talked and laughed about everything. Jillian tuned out the rest of the party and lost herself in conversation.

“So how’s your senior year going?” Rob asked.

“Got senioritis, of course. I’m really looking forward to getting out. Mom says I shouldn’t rush it. But I want to get out there, do something. Cheerleading’s going great, church youth group is good. Even work’s kind of fun.”

“Where do you work?”

“I’m a waitress at Red Robin. Just Thursday nights and an occasional weekend. I get great tips.”

“Red Robin, huh? Maybe I’ll stop by sometime.” Rob seemed to blush, then turned towards Ian. “When’s your next basketball game?”

“Friday night, home against Grant. They’ve got a 6-7 center, but my man’s 6-4, so we’re even. We faced off in a summer clinic. He’s decent, but I can handle him. Should be a good game.”

“Maybe I’ll come check you out Friday,” Rob said.

“Great,” Brittany said. “Then you can see Jillian do her cheerleading. She’s a...what do you call it? Glider?”

“Flier,” Jillian said, not smiling. She wanted to strangle Brittany, who was already asking Ian about the meaning of the Osiris stone. Jillian and Rob gradually leaned back and caught each other’s eye.

“You mentioned your church,” Rob said. “Tell me more about it.”

The more she talked, the more she wanted to. He seemed genuinely interested.

“11:59!” someone shouted.

“What?” Brittany asked.

“It’s almost midnight?” Rob said. “You’ve got to be kidding. Last I looked it was 10:45!”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” Ian said.

“I guess,” Jillian said. “This started out as one of the worst New Year’s parties I’ve ever been at. Now...it’s like one of the best.”

“What do you mean, *one* of the best?” Ian asked, his arm around Brittany.

Twenty kids gathered around a computer, where full-screen digits counted down the seconds. When it showed “11,” Jillian heard the deep breath.

“Ten, nine, eight...” kids shouted in unison.

Ian and Brittany turned to each other and pressed their lips together. Jillian looked nervously at Rob out of the corner of her eye.

“Seven, six, five...”

Rob moved a little closer to her. She hoped he wasn't close enough to see her freckles through her make-up.

“Four, three, two...”

“Happy New Year, Jillian,” Rob said.

Streamers flew, balloons popped, noisemakers fired, someone beat on pans and someone else turned up the music. Jonathan from the jazz band blew his trumpet. Everybody laughed.

Jillian felt something she hadn't felt in months. Maybe it was hope. For the first time since her dad's death she actually felt like celebrating.

Rob stepped up to the table, filled three punch glasses and handed one first to Jillian, then Brittany, then Ian. He filled his own glass and lifted it up in the center of their little circle. “To four friends, and to the year ahead of us...whatever it may bring.”

The four glasses clanked, Ian's a little too hard, spilling some punch. They all laughed and drank up.

A cell phone rang. Five people reached for theirs, but drew blanks. Ian pulled his phone from a big pocket on his cargo pants and held it up to his ear.

“Yeah, Ty? Right. Still at the party. Wait. Slow down. I can't understand you, man. You called 911? What do you mean? Why?”

Ian waved his long arm for quiet. People stopped what they were doing and gathered by the couch to listen. “David? He was just drunk, man. I've seen him that way lots of times. Wait...what did you say? I can't understand. Start over. Say it really slow.”

While everyone in the room listened breathlessly, Ian's face turned white.

“David's *dead?*”



Letter 1

My dearly demoted Foulgrin,

So you've just returned from a long visit to the House of Corrections? I trust you found it therapeutic. Beelzebub has made me your parole officer. He instructed me to watch you carefully.

When I heard you had the gall to call yourself “Lord,” why was I not surprised? Even when I supervised you centuries ago, you were my most arrogant agent.

Don't bore me with your excuses. You claim your uncomplimentary references to Beelzebub were a trap set for your old understudy Squaltaint? I'm uninterested in politics.

I'm a no-nonsense demon. I equip subordinates in the fine art of deceiving and destroying human vermin. Keep your mouth shut and do your duty. Your previous experience with three of these four young vermin should prove helpful.

Let's get some things straight. First, Lucifer gave me the title "Prince"—I did not assign it to myself. Second, I welcome this new assignment no more than you. *Your* demotion got *me* reassigned from a top administrative position. To be transferred from directing the American politics department to baby-sitting you is a major downward career move.

I won't play games, Foulgrin. I have a job to do. I'll do it as efficiently as possible so I can quickly return to Beelzebub's inner circle. Your former secretary Obsmut is now at my service. He's assured me he knows your tactics well. He can read between the lines of your communication. Put aside your ego. Let's get some work done.

I read your initial dossier on Jillian Fletcher. You whine that you don't grasp the language and emotions of this young female. You complain you don't understand her taste in clothes or music. But in order to defeat the enemy, you must *know* the enemy. You must study her, her friends, and her family. This will give you the edge so you can take her down.

What always matters is the bottom line. Is she moving away from the Enemy or moving toward Him? Whoever or whatever draws her toward Him must be at the top of your hit list. Eliminate her any way you can.

Despite your failure to understand Jillian, you say you're confident you'll succeed. You've seen her up close, due to your years assigned to her father, Jordan Fletcher? I have his file in front of me. You failed miserably with him, Foulgrin. Is it your intention to do the same with her?

The reports show Fletcher's life and death were a defeat for Erebus. Many were touched by his conversion. The Enemy even used this sludgebag's memorial service for His ends. Fletcher left his family a Christian heritage. But there's a dark lining in every silver cloud. First, his fatherly influence is gone. Second, the girl blames the Enemy for taking him from her.

New Year's is one of my favorite seasons. It means Christmas—or as we prefer to call it, the "winter holidays"—is safely behind us. We've buried the manger under mountains of toys, videos, and designer clothes. But there's always the threat of the Carpenter rearing His head and being seen for who He is. The Enemy has this annoying habit of enabling some of them to see through our blanket of materialism. They grasp the terrifying significance of His invasion of the dark planet. As long as the Carpenter stays in the manger, it's tolerable. But if they see Him crucified and risen, beware. All heaven could break loose.

The New Year always raises hopes in these bloated bags of chemicals the Enemy calls His image-bearers. We dash their hopes until they become cynical, resigned to eking out their miserable existence. Then they die and victory is ours. The New Year inspires innumerable resolutions broken before the frosts of February. All their efforts at self-reform divert their attention from the Enemy's offer of lasting supernatural change.

The atmosphere of the party sounded delicious—drinking, drugs, fornication, materi-

alism, gluttony, pretense, deceit, and even the occult. A demon's dream party. Increasingly typical, I'm glad to say. That the vermin died from alcohol poisoning is icing on the cake. We've cultivated a youth culture of death and self-destruction. The more the better.

Remember, though, the Enemy has a way of using our victories as warning shots across their bows. There's always the danger He'll use death to turn their thoughts toward what lies beyond it. And what they can do to prepare for it.

I want full reports not only on Jillian, but also on the other three young bipeds. Meanwhile, keep them busy. Their parents believe ceaseless activity will keep them out of trouble. What it really does is keep them from pondering what's missing in their lives. They'll never turn their attention to the Enemy. Not as long as we can lock them onto our long lineup of alternatives.

Anticipating your first report,

Prince Ishbane

2



JANUARY 4, 10:42 A.M.

Jillian walked with Brittany into First Memorial Church. They meandered past the large display of photographs, ball gloves, jerseys and skiing trophies. Brittany pointed at one photo of her, standing near David. In the pictures David looked alive and vibrant. And now...

A tall pale man in a dark suit escorted them up the aisle and seated them near the front. Jillian looked at her watch. She should be in English class, but when there was a student funeral—Jillian had been to five of them in her high school years—students were always excused. The school had it down to a science. Grief counselors were brought in. Students were encouraged to ask questions and seek help from staff and peer counselors. Teachers were trained what to say and what not to say. But somehow it never made everything okay. After all was said and done, the kids were still dead.

Jillian endured the uncomfortable moments when the piano was playing and people were being seated and the service hadn't started, but you could hear sobs, mostly quiet but occasionally loud enough to make you turn your head and look. As Brittany read the program, Jillian thought about her best friend.

She'd met Brittany Powell at a junior class water ski trip a year and a half ago, a week before classes started at Kennedy High. Brittany had just moved up from California. She was tall and bronzed, athletic and brilliant—and with a razor-sharp tongue. Jillian was the cute cheerleader, a B-plus student. But she had to work for those grades, while Brittany's A's seemed effortless.

Different as they were, in a matter of weeks they'd become inseparable. They'd talked about a lot of guys, seen a lot of movies, cruised a lot of town, done a lot of malls and pulled off some unforgettable escapades, like going down to Oxbow Park at midnight, wading in the Sandy River in the moonlight and freaking out at sounds in the woods. Brittany was always the instigator.

Religion was a sore spot between them. Besides a couple of other funerals and her sister's wedding, Jillian knew Brittany hadn't been to church since she was a kid. She didn't understand or appreciate Jillian's recent interest in Christianity—sometimes Jillian didn't understand it either. But Brittany had been there for Jillian. She'd even skipped a huge volleyball tournament to be at Jillian's dad's funeral. The coach had asked his star outside hitter to reconsider. "No way," Brittany told him. She was like that. She could be wild, outrageous, and infuriating. But she was always loyal to Jillian.

Suddenly Brittany's head turned and her antenna went up. Ian had walked in, escorted by Tall-and-Pasty-Face. Brittany beckoned for Ian to join her. Jillian still couldn't see Ian without remembering that Ouija board thing they did at his house last year. It was the scariest night of her life, a lot scarier than the Oxbow adventure. She still had nightmares

about it. But worst of all was four weeks later when Brittany attempted suicide. Jillian shuddered at the thought, and though she smiled at Ian, she wondered if the two were good for each other.

A month after her best friend attempted suicide, Jillian's dad had died. It had been the hardest year of her life. Now here she sat, about to start her last semester of high school, uncertain about college, uncertain about everything. And it was starting with another funeral, this time a classmate's.

She noticed a middle-aged couple up front, the man in an old suit, the woman in a nice dress, both staring at the shiny mahogany casket.

David's parents. What must they be feeling?

Greg, the youth pastor at her church, Sovereign Grace, stood up and took the microphone. He'd probably been asked since he knew so many students at Kennedy. She wondered if he'd ever met David.

"Let's pray," Greg said. "Lord, this is a tough time for us. Especially for David's family and closest friends. We need Your help. Open our minds to Your truth today, Lord. Your Bible tells us, 'Death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.' Make us aware of our mortality, Lord. And help us take it to heart. Your Word says it's appointed unto us once to die, and after this the judgment. Help us live our lives and make choices in a way that prepares us for the day we stand before You. We want to remember David today, Lord, but we know he's not here. He's in another world. If David could come back from the other side, I'm sure he'd plead with us to prepare today for when we'll each stand before You. We pray for Your comfort on his parents and brother and sister, and all who loved David. And we pray also that You'd speak to our hearts today, in the name of the Lord Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen."

"Amen," Jillian heard someone whisper behind her.

The speakers blared "Higher," a song by the black-on-black group Creed. It spoke of dreaming, being guided through another world, and longing to escape from this life to a better one. Some place where blind men see, some place higher. Though she didn't think it was a Christian song, Jillian could identify with the longing. She wasn't sure whether David had.

Ty Lott went forward and read a tribute to his friend. Ty cried. So did everyone, even Brittany. It sounded so unlike a gathering of high schoolers. No laughter, no catcalls, no smart remarks. Stone silence, except for the weeping.

Principal Chandler said a few nice words about David, even though everybody knew the two couldn't stand each other. Then he said, "I'd like to introduce our guest speaker, the pastor of David's family's church where we're gathered today, First Memorial. Reverend Braun."

The lean graying man, wearing a black robe, stepped behind the pulpit.

"Hello, young people," he said, smiling broadly but sounding solemn. "This day of heartbreak brings us together in memory of our dearly departed friend..." he looked at his notes and paused, "Mr. David Richards. He was a dedicated student, a fine athlete, a

beloved son. All who knew him were touched indelibly by his life. We will not soon forget our dear friend...David. We desire this service to be a time of healing for all of us. Let us pray and dedicate this memorial service to David's memory. If you feel comfortable doing so, pray with me now to the heavenly parent, whomever you may conceive him or her to be."

After a singsong prayer that gave Jillian the creeps, she looked up and saw Brittany roll her eyes.

"Phony," she whispered to Jillian, too loud. Jillian elbowed her and Brittany laughed.

Reverend Braun quoted from *Newsweek* and *People* and read a Robert Frost poem. He spoke of the strength and character of this misunderstood generation. He read a heart-warming story Jillian remembered getting in an e-mail, the kind that said at the bottom if you really loved your friends, you'd forward it to ten of them, and if you didn't you were a big loser. Jillian had sent it to ten of her friends.

Reverend Braun spoke of "holding fast to your truth, your own set of values" and said death is a "passage to a better place," and "like leaves changing color in the fall." He spoke of the "resurrection of lilies blooming in the spring after the cold darkness of winter." He said, "David is now in that higher stage of spiritual development." He said that since David so loved skiing, "the snow of winter should always remind us of David and his life, and the legacy he has left us." Reverend Braun assured everyone that death, while tragic, was a natural part of the cycle of life. "David is in a better place," he said, and "he will always live on in our memories."

Jillian didn't know David that well. But his rep was as a party boy, a heavy drinker whose life goal seemed to be to get as many girls in bed as he could. He'd been arrested several times, she knew. He didn't attend a church, and she'd certainly never seen an indication he was a Christian.

So how does this guy know he's in a better place?

When the service was over, a crowd gathered at the casket and held hands and cried. Feeling cold and empty, Jillian moved away from the casket. She got separated from Brittany and the crowd swallowed her. People she'd never had a conversation with were hugging her. She felt terribly alone in a sea of faces. Shivering, she withdrew and walked quickly to the end of a hallway. She opened a door marked "Third Grade Sunday School," and squeezed into a little red plastic chair.

Jillian recalled the words a pastor spoke at her father's funeral. "There's a time for everything...no man knows the day of his death." It sounded so cruel. She wanted to live in a different world, one where she would know what was coming, one that wasn't so...out of control.

"You okay?"

The voice startled her. She looked at a face she hadn't expected to see. She tried to compose herself, to look cool. It didn't work. Tears flowed.

"Didn't mean to scare you." Rob walked closer, but stopped. He looked as if he wanted to reach out his hand, but wasn't sure if he should.

“How’d you know I was here?” Jillian asked.

“I saw you at the service. I...watched you come back here. Thought you looked upset. Wondered if you felt like talking.”

“No,” she said. Then after a pause, “Yes.”

He laughed.

“Is that clear enough?” Jillian asked.

“How about we go to Starbucks? Or Café Delirium. Somewhere we can talk without...talking.”

“Okay. I’m sure not going back to school like this.”



Letter 2

My scheming Foulgrin,

I was delighted to hear your Reverend Braun did the service. “Pray to the divine parent, whomever you conceive him or her to be”? Magnificent.

I checked Braun’s file. It’s full of memos from you and Squaltaint. This is my kind of clergyman. His reassurances about David being in heaven were perfect. The Enemy has used funerals time and again as platforms to communicate His truth. This bothersome youth pastor, Greg, was trying to do that. Fortunately, he could only bootleg in so much truth in a prayer. Not enough to neutralize the main message from our man Braun.

Braun’s point was clear—if this vermin David, who never gave a thought to the Enemy, is really in heaven, everyone must go there automatically. So why think about it? Why bother with such inconveniences as repentance, confession, asking forgiveness, believing the Enemy’s forbidden book, seeking to obey Him, gathering with the forbidden fellowship? If David is in heaven, everyone—with the possible exceptions of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao—will be there too.

Of course, *we* know what everyone in the universe except those on The Stupid Planet know. Hell, not Heaven, is their default destination. They can enter the nonsmoking section only through a change in reservation. The Enemy must intervene to draw them to Him. They must embrace His gift. Just don’t let *them* understand that.

On the authority of a “Christian minister,” they’ve been reassured that it requires no repentance to go to heaven! After hearing this, anyone saying “you must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved” will be considered a narrow-minded bigot.

We cannot create. But we *can* infect. Braun is our infiltrator. The god he offers is anything and everything, and therefore nothing. His message is rat-poison wrapped in taffy. He would have made an outstanding demon!

Apparently Rob and Ian will be sticking close to Jillian and Brittany. They should

prove useful. I've decided you should employ team temptation with the three tempters assigned to the adolescent vermin: Raketwist, Pendragon, and Baalgore.

In spite of a thumbs-down from Obsmut, I'm appointing you team captain. In my letters to you, I will address concerns related to each of the teenage vermin. It will be up to you to relay the messages to R, P, and B. Don't make me regret this decision.

It looks as though Brittany will prove your greatest asset in taking down Jillian. She's materialistic and cynical? She tugs Jillian away from spiritual interests? Stretches her moral comfort zones? Keeps her from developing deeper friendships at the church? Perfect. She's a page right out of hell's playbook.

Brittany's convinced the church is a hangout for hypocrites and losers? If there's one thing these teenage sludgebags don't want to be, it's losers. Cool is everything. Yes, Brittany's occult experience is most promising. Revive that interest. Your encounter with her at the Ouija board last year and your appearance in her dream after her attempted suicide are notable. Remember, though, when it comes to deceiving and destroying Jillian Fletcher, Brittany may prove more useful to you alive than dead.

Implement our usual strategy with Jillian. Make her think that because she's doing her good Christian deeds, she's pulling Brittany up. Of course, her friend is actually pulling her down. Since down is our direction—and gravity is always on our side—we have no objection that Brittany has some good qualities.

It was Amrael who reassigned your adversary Jaltor to Jillian. Don't forget that Jaltor beat you in your skirmish over her father. Let that thought twist in you like a knife.

Rob is the only one you've not had previous experience with, and he's my biggest concern. He's the wild card in this quartet. Do your background check!

I'll orchestrate from a distance our conspiracy against these four adolescent vermin. I'll lead, you follow. I'll call the play, you run it. Have I made myself clear, Foulgrin?

At least two of the four are headed toward hell with minimal help from us. But even the Christians we can blind, distracting them from serving the Enemy. His children are always at the top of our hit list.

Let's make it a foursome, shall we?

Delighting in their destruction,

Prince Ishbane