

Chapter 1

Rolling this plan into motion would erase everything about William's past. His son's death taught him that achieving understanding arrived by way of sacrifice. And now he stood, watching the materialization of his calling with the beginnings of his work finally arrived, feeling his confidence bolstered to new heights at his own success. As he surveyed his future, his immaculately-polished black shoes stirred up dirt and dust as he strode across the concrete floor of the warehouse. He leaned down to make sure none of the dust had settled on his dark suit trousers.

Though bigger than he envisioned needing, the building's vast space would not go to waste, William vowed. He would find a far better use for these walls than housing those weekly "counseling" sessions that had far outgrown their usefulness. Even though his superiors would expect that they happen under this roof, he would find a better use for his time than continually perpetuating comfort to people who needed more than words. William knew that this day would mark the beginning for so many that languished in sadness.

"Now, this states that you intend..." William had completely forgotten that he was not alone when the realtor rudely interrupted his musings.

To expedite the realtor's exit, William turned and snatched the outstretched pen. "All I need to know is that you made the changes we discussed." William looked up, hoping to find the expression that countered his expectations. Any good businessman would long ago have abandoned this bumbling idiot. Two properties had fallen through, due to the realtor's inability to follow through with aggressive offers, and his inability to make prompt phone calls had cost William half a percentage point on his payments, as well as a quarter of a point up front. Although William prided himself in having patience with those that needed pushing along in life, even he had his limits, however, and the realtor was quickly raising William's blood pressure.

"Yes, well..." The realtor stammered like a man intent on making his case, but only took a moment longer to find his efforts useless. "The changes are in there, just as you requested, Mr. Thompson." William noted the growing guilt in the realtor's face and plunged his attention to the document in hand. "About the issue with the bank—I wanted

you to know that I made every effort to secure...”

William, eschewing any interest in hearing about the past, waved off the realtor while he signed everywhere the Xs were marked. He handed the document over and swung his back to the presence that had quickly overstayed its welcome.

“Great. I will fax your copies over to you. Oh, could I get a business card or something to attach to this? We like to keep complete files for all our clients.”

William anticipated showing off his new business cards, but had not imagined this to be the place. He wondered if a layperson would share his conviction that the cross looked better in black, as opposed to the gold leaf embossing of the original design his superiors suggested. William, however, felt a solid black background and a smaller cross might be more appropriate, more business friendly. After all, he wasn't into beating people over the head with his religion. He passed the card over his shoulder, without looking to see the reaction.

“All right, Mr. Thompson. Here are your keys. You are all set.”

William held his palm open over his shoulder and waited for the deposit. In another moment, the soles of the realtor's shoes told William that he was wise enough to show himself out. William double-checked the departure out of the corner of his eye.

Alone finally. William turned his attention to mapping out the space. In the front section was an area for couches. In case any of the people that signed the checks came around, they had to put on the appearance that this was a place of warmth, a place for people needing shelter or solace of some kind to come and feel loved. Well, he had already played that hand and witnessed how ineffective that game could be. In the back were a few small rooms hidden from view where the real equipment would stand, waiting to play its part. William would have to devise, later, how best to justify their place. He did not doubt his ability to do so. He had faith.

Now, if only his faith would turn out to be properly placed in Isaac, whom William had selected for the trial run tomorrow night. Isaac would be the best indicator of their success or failure, for he needed the most practice. As such, his success would bode well for the future. Doing so also offered the perverse pleasure of seeing if Isaac would actually pull through, like someone watching a pigeon flap along the street with a wounded wing, taking bets to see if the bird would actually take flight before the

oncoming car ran it over. Although he should be above such pleasures—given the fondness he had developed for Isaac—William could not hide his little school boy giddiness.

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Isaac stood in line, wondering if dark slacks would have been a better choice than the light khakis. Had he used too much gel in his cropped hair? William and Scott had told him it was for his own good that he go first, that it would strengthen his character and build his confidence, but Isaac was not sure he was the right man for the job as he looked around at the guys clad in tight black shirts and matching jeans, bobbing their heads to a melody that he was sure wasn't there. Isaac hoped the lighting inside was as dark as he remembered so nobody would see how nervous he was. He knew he was doing the right thing, but it sounded like such a better idea when somebody else was getting it done.

Once inside, he parted the faded purple curtains. The music assaulted his senses, overtaking his eardrums with such ferocity that he closed his eyes and sucked in his lips as if he were being invaded through every possible orifice. He plugged his ears and eased his fingers out slowly and raised his eyelids again to watch the lights dart along the walls. When he had adjusted to the sound, the smell enveloped his nostrils causing him to tug at his nose like a runner would after drudging through a thick screen of heavy dust. He loosened his shoulders and thrust his arms at his side. He looked around to see if anyone else noticed but each gay guy, oblivious to everything but his own desire to have fun on a Saturday night, sputtered around carrying on like a dog that had grown accustomed, and almost proud, of the scent of its well-worn beds.

Isaac stepped forward and felt like he was wading through a shallow pool, unsure which shore to move towards. A sea of men toppled over one another on the large dance floor to his right. There was a bar lining the far wall but there didn't seem to be any place to stand and the noise would be even more unbearable closer to the dance floor. Then there was a smaller dance floor separated by a solid wall. As he moved closer towards that area, it seemed to be a little more contained and not quite as deafening. He turned around and saw a cozier section of the bar where more properly-dressed men milled about carrying beer bottles, pausing to talk to others who were seated in high-back chairs

or mingling with the pool players. That room seemed to provide the most comfort.

It seems more like a coffee house than a bar, he thought as he edged closer to that room. People disappeared through the back corner. Isaac discovered that the doorway led to the smaller dance floor and he found his way back to his starting point, past the suspended televisions which played gay porn—*they can play this in here?* he thought—that he only stopped to look at for a moment before reminding himself that he still had his coat on.

After he had checked his coat, he made himself comfortable at one of the bars and ordered a lite beer. He looked at the men standing around him and wondered if the beer in his hand helped him blend in. Everyone had their shirts opened or off completely. Isaac unbuttoned the top two buttons and smoothed out his shirt. *There, that's better*, he thought. *Maybe I should fold up my sleeves*. He gave each cuff two folds over. *Maybe I should untuck my shirt*. He gave the shirt a tug. *No, no, that does not look right*. He tucked the shirt back in. *Maybe another button down on the shirt*. He went down another two, stood for a moment, looked around for a consensus, and then buttoned three back up. *There, that looks better. Maybe...no, no, just leave it*, he thought, taking his beer back in his hand while shoving his free hand into his pants pocket and taking a breath to relax. Perhaps he was not cut out for this. Even though he had received encouragement leading up to that night, he wondered if he should have come after all. But showing up empty handed and giving Scott an opportunity was enough of an incentive to push through all his doubts. He sipped his beer and made room for another man to step up to the bar.

While Isaac occupied himself with watching the pool game, one of the players made eye contact. He walked toward Isaac, with his cue stick in hand, clutching the skinny end.

“Now, there, that’s better,” the man said and pointed at Isaac’s smile.

“Sorry, I’m...I’m just a little new to this.” Isaac pursed his lips and shifted his body weight from one leg to the other. *Take the first one and run with it*, he thought.

“Everyone’s gotta have a first time, if this is your first time...”

Isaac nodded yes. It felt like the first time, anyway. He remembered when it had been his first time. When he had felt so ashamed. Now he couldn’t help feeling guilt—guilt over what he had been made to feel was right for him to do—but he just couldn’t

justify it. He kept telling himself that there were just some things he didn't understand and that he needed to do what they told him and things would work out.

Holding out his hand to Isaac, the guy said, "My name's Benny."

Isaac shook his hand hesitantly, then Benny tightened his grip ever so slightly.

"That's better, that's better. Now we're getting somewhere, Mr. First-time."

Isaac smiled, then surveyed the room. He was sure everyone had stopped what they were doing to watch this meeting take place.

"What's your name, Mr. Brown Eyes?" Benny's eyes trailed Isaac's everywhere they peered. Isaac faced Benny and shook his head a bit, as if tripped up by the question,

"Isaac. My name's Isaac."

"Okay, then, now come on over here. I'll let you meet some people that I happen to call friends." Isaac wondered if someone a little less amicable would be a better choice. Isaac felt a little guilty as he watched Benny's ass—pressed tightly in his faded pair of jeans—strut to the bar. "The first one will be the hardest," he had been told.

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"Can I get you something to drink? I think I have some good German Pilsners in the fridge." Isaac removed his coat, hung it in the closet, then shut the front door. He had not had a visitor to his apartment in a very long time.

"Yeah, I'll take a beer if you got it." Benny slid out of his coat and set it in Isaac's outstretched hand.

Isaac offered Benny a seat on the futon and scurried to make neat the top of the chest that acted as a coffee table. Benny laughed and expressed his indifference to the state of Isaac's apartment, but Isaac felt like he needed to keep moving. In between excuses, apologies flooded his mind. *Calm down, calm down*, he thought. When he felt confident that Benny had settled himself comfortably, he made a beeline for the small kitchen just off the front room.

While plucking two glasses down from a cupboard, Isaac heard a slight rustling so he poked his head out of the cubbyhole of a kitchen. Although Benny had disappeared from sight, his shadow painted him in the small hallway that led to the bedroom.

Concerned that he might move further down the hall, Isaac called out, "If you want, I have some books on a shelf in the hallway leading into the bedroom. That is if

you wanted something to look at while I'm in here." He ducked back into the kitchen and mumbled, "Please stay put for at least a moment."

He hoped Benny wasn't tempted to come back into the front room. Maybe he shouldn't have said it the way he did. Maybe Benny thought he shouldn't be looking around and had come back to the futon. *Why'd he have to be so cute? I should have remembered that they told me to try and find someone for the first time that isn't cute, someone you won't have any chance of getting attached to. That'll make it easier.*

Isaac opened the door of the refrigerator and grabbed two beers. His hands quivered as he struggled to pop the tops off, using an opener that was fastened to the side of one of the cabinets. He fumbled in his pockets for a capsule, sealed in a plastic bag.

"You have an interesting assortment of books. Kinda hard to figure out exactly what your tastes are," Benny called out from the hallway.

Isaac struggled with the bag. "Yeah, well, I guess I, ah, like a little bit of everything." Separating the plastic rails, he turned the bag upside-down and begged the pill, with tensed lips, to tumble down into his palm. He balled up the empty bag in the palm of one hand and shoved it into his right pants pocket. Then he pulled the capsule apart, spilling the whitish powder into one of the glasses. His eyes darted around for a safe place to ditch the capsule. For some reason, the trash can didn't feel like a good idea, so he moved his hands to the rim of the sink and let the plastic fall. He turned on the faucet to help the process along.

He reached for one of the beers that was starting to perspire down its own bottle and emptied the majority of it into the glass with the powder. The head of the beer rose and he swirled the liquid around. He then poured out the other beer before the first head had a chance to settle.

Holding tightly onto the ends of the kitchen counter, he closed his eyes. William had said that was the thing to do. We had to. It will be difficult, but it will eventually straighten you out. *I have to be strong.*

Isaac opened his eyes when he heard the soft creaking of the hardwood floors. *He is coming back.* Benny entered the doorway before Isaac had a chance to make his way out into the front room. He had such a nice smile—such a nice smile on such a nice man. William would be proud of him and it would silence Scott's opinion that he wasn't up to

the task.

Isaac held out the beer, and Benny took it with his right hand. Benny reached out with his left hand and cupped Isaac's neck with his long, strong fingers. Those fingers kneaded Isaac's neck, while pulling Isaac closer at the same time. "You sure you are okay with this? You look a little nervous." Benny's eyes followed Isaac's, as they looked everywhere except at Benny's face. When he eventually looked back, their eyes met and Isaac blushed and stifled a small laugh at not being able to compose himself.

"I hope you like the beer. It comes highly recommended from a close friend who knows about these things." *Please let this end soon.*

Benny smiled and removed his hand from Isaac's neck. "Yeah," taking a long drink from the beer, Benny assured Isaac, "that'll do." He wiped the foam residue from his upper lip, using his forearm. "You're still so tense. Relax a little. I won't bite." He took another drink from his beer. "Can we sit, or do we have to stand up all night?"

Isaac smiled and nodded. He gestured to the futon and Benny turned and took a seat. While Isaac scoured the surface of the chest for a coaster, Benny held up a plastic disc. "Looking for this?" He smiled as Isaac took it out of his hand and placed it under his glass of beer on the chest.

Benny reached out and caressed Isaac's cheek. Isaac's skin bristled with a unique sensation at Benny's soft, gentle touch. Isaac bit at his lower lip and turned away as casually as he could. Benny took the hint, but moved his hands onto Isaac's tense shoulders and went to work. "You know, Isaac, it really seems like you're uncomfortable with this, so maybe I should go. I don't want to make you do anything you're not cool with."

"No, I'm okay," Isaac assured him. With that, Benny leaned in and kissed Isaac's neck.

This should last for another ten minutes. I can stay strong for ten more minutes, he thought. Benny's soft lips pressed into Isaac's neck and Isaac felt his body go a little flimsy, as he couldn't deny how good it felt to finally be kissed again by another man. Isaac couldn't remember how long it had been.

When Isaac regained his senses and guessed that enough time had passed, he tensed up again and Benny drew back. "Maybe I should go, Isaac, and we can meet up

some other time.” You could see the resignation in his face, but in a moment’s time, that shifted, as the muscles in his face relaxed and Isaac knew the drug was strengthening its hold.

Isaac felt like he could take a little control. “I don’t want you to leave; I want you to stay. I have to do this—for me.” He tried to grin, but it came across as forced. Benny didn’t bother to smile back. He moved his hand from Isaac’s neckline and pulled down some gelled back short bangs. Benny’s eyes drooped; you could see the fight in his beautiful eyes. They still held that sparkle as they fought. He attempted to articulate, as a mildly intoxicated driver might towards an officer, “Do...do you...can I use your bathroom? I’m feeling...feeling kind of light headed. I think I just need...just need to get some air, or, walk around...or something.”

Isaac sat back, retreating to one end of the futon, as Benny hobbled to his feet before his legs failed him. Isaac prayed the neighbors below him did not hear the thud Benny’s body made on the hardwood floors. The worst part was over. Benny brushed the sides of his face with his hands, like someone checking to see if the mosquito they felt had drawn any blood, and then hoisted himself up using the arm of the futon. After another moment, the battle within Benny’s body ended and he slumped down.

Isaac tried to lift Benny’s limp body, but faltered, so he grabbed him by the ankles and eased him down the hall, so as not to create any more noise for the neighbors. When they reached the bed, Isaac set Benny up and leveraged him until he was lying flat on the mattress. Looking around his bedroom, Isaac pulled down both shades to give himself some privacy, then got to the task at hand. Benny gazed up at Isaac, with his eyes partly opened and his mouth wide. Isaac rushed over and shut the eyes and carefully closed the jaw. *He was such a nice man, and so beautiful*, he thought. No, he shouldn’t be thinking those things, cutting himself off. He had come this far.

Isaac closed his own eyes and repeated in an inaudible whisper, “Forgive me, Father...” When he was finished, he motioned his fingers in the form of a cross over Benny’s body. He leaned down and rolled Benny’s sleeve up past his elbow. Scott didn’t want to have to roll up any sleeves back at the warehouse, and Isaac didn’t want to cause any problems.

Isaac got up from his squatting position and fetched his beer from the front room.

He came back to the bedside and sat Indian style, studying Benny's limp body. Noting the time on the electronic alarm clock by the bed, he took a finger and felt for a pulse on Benny's neck. It was faint, but still there. It would be safe to move him now. He pulled the phone down to the floor and dialed the number he'd been trained to remember.

An alert voice answered on the other end. Isaac felt his own voice wobble, "Yes, I have one. In my apartment...okay...okay...I know... I'll be waiting." Feeling that he had spent his whole life waiting, Isaac wondered when he would finally get to where his patience had been promising him for some time.

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As the warehouse door rose, intermittent cars whisked by on the neighboring freeway. Isaac fidgeted in the front seat of the van every moment of the ten minutes it took to reach the northeast part of the city. Isaac got out of the passenger side when Matthew Coddling, decked out in his faded navy blue Dickies pants that continually made him look like an auto mechanic, brought the van to a halt safely inside the concrete walls. Isaac wondered why William avoided asking him to cut his bleached-out hair, but then he figured that William saw a need in the look.

Two men were busy unloading Benny by the ankles as Scott strode in their direction. Isaac felt himself tense up like a mailman approached by a Rottweiler, and questioned—as he did almost every time he came into contact with Scott—what was it, exactly, that William saw in this criminal?

"Take that one to the back room and lay him up on the table," Scott, looking like he had just woken up from a nap and thrown on whatever was laying on the floor, barked to the two men who were ambling along with him. "Actually got one, eh?" It took him a moment to start something, but Isaac's successful completion of the mission afforded his spirit some confidence, allowing him to hold Scott's beady little stare without turning away.

Scott choked out some guttural noise, then turned and scampered off with an unnerving authority. *One day*, Isaac thought, *you will not be held in such high esteem.*

Isaac turned towards Matt. "That one," pointing in Scott's direction. "I doubt he even cares what we are trying to achieve by doing all this. I wonder if he even understands that we are trying to help people. I'm sure he just enjoys it all." Matt made

no response, but smirked and walked in Scott's direction. *They all hate me*, Isaac thought.

In the back of the warehouse, Scott clicked on the hanging light fixture over Isaac's contribution to the cause. He used two fingers to feel for a good vein, shaking his head, amazed that Isaac had remembered to fold up the sleeve. *Maybe he can follow directions*, he thought. Satisfied with the vein he found, he turned toward a small table that hugged the wall behind him, took up a syringe and inserted an empty vial. He dipped the thick needle into the vein and watched as blood slowly rose in the vial.

Drawing his fingers away from the arm, he allowed himself to softly caress the soft skin. Everything he had learned over the past year had taught him to resist temptation and he had overcome his predilection towards men, but there was something in the way the body looked at peace—so quiet, so innocent. Scott surveyed the still body until he fixed his gaze on its groin. *How long has it been since the sight of another man's cock excited me? Why did none of the other bodies arouse me so?* Cautiously, he extended his hand, inching up the leg, then turning his hand inward to the thigh and stopping just short of the crotch. He brought his hand up slowly and reached for the zipper. Then he paused, bowed his head, took a deep breath, and recoiled, withdrawing his hand and covering his mouth, while looking down scornfully at the body that had tempted him.

Scott composed himself. He shut out all emotion, feeling neither pity nor remorse, as he exhaled, impatiently waiting for the vial to be filled. After another minute, he plucked out the full vial, placed it on the counter, and left the needle dangling from the arm. He took a marker, scribbled a number on a piece of masking tape and stuck the tape around the vial of blood. He struggled to untangle a tag from a bunch in the drawer of the table and wrote the corresponding number on it. He turned around towards the body, disgusted as he realized he would have to remove one of the shoes to place the tag on a toe. Not bothering, he grabbed a finger and twisted on the thin wire fastener. He then jerked out the syringe and tossed it on the table, stopping when he noticed a small trickle of blood on to his shoe. He brushed it off and was glad it left not so much as a mark on his shoe.

Now that the blood was drawn, they could put the fag on the table out of his misery permanently. He would round up Matt and hand him the clean-up work. Matt had said he wouldn't mind being the one to administer the lethal injection to finish off the

job. He actually seemed like he would enjoy doing it. Scott had to appreciate the joy with which Matt was diving into this whole thing. Dedication was so hard to come by these days.

As he passed through the doorway, Scott knew that having to test for AIDS was going to get old quick.