

the fallen

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joshua dagon



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“I think we as gay people have more space to dream... in that liberation, that freedom from structure, lies the possibility of nothing happening: being in a void that you have to fill with parties and poppers, which is a trap that some gay men fall into. If we have nothing to do but service our own pleasure – because society has taught us that’s all we’re worth and we’re exiled from positions of authority from which we could actually shape society – then we just become hedonists.”

– Clive Barker

“The beautiful know they have power.”

– Anne Rice
Merrick

“That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don’t know nothing about it.”

– Mark Twain
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

For Arthur and for Kristie.

Angels. Both of 'em.

PROLOGUE



Rome, Italy

A small chapel on the Borgo Vittorio, northeast of the Piazza San Pietro



"Get on with it," the demon said. "This is too intrusive."

"I'm sorry," said the man. He didn't want to be around her any longer than necessary either. "However, I have to know what will happen if this doesn't work."

"I will be destroyed."

He raised an eyebrow before he could stop himself.

The demon hissed at him. "You would not remain unscathed in that process, I assure you."

"How — ?"

"The Beast also has his law. There is but one consequence for breaking it."

"And he would be aware?"

"Only if we fail. Then all would be subject to his punishment."

"Meaning me right along with you."

"Yes."

"As well as the mortal you will eventually find? The one who'll give voice to your spell?"

"It is not my spell. Yes, though. All."

She was sitting in the corner, on the floor. The sound of her skin moving against the wallpaper and over the carpet made his already queasy stomach lurch.

He could smell her too. She could take a pleasing form, he knew. Why didn't she? At least the lights were dim. They were just about out, really.

"And the skotos?" he started, trying to ignore the churning in his gut. "How will you find him?"

"I do not answer to you."

"If I'm to suffer along side you should our endeavor fail, then I think —"

"The problem would not exist had you but followed my instructions from the beginning!"

He backed away from her, again, before he could stop himself,

retreating further into the shadows within his study.

Regretting having summoned her, regretting everything, he stopped backing away. No place was safe anymore.

"Don't chastise me," he said, hearing his voice tremble, hating it.

"Why?" she asked. "Is that a sin?"

"And now you mock me."

"I'm tired of you. I'm leaving now. Do not summon me again."

"I am not powerless," he said, sounding to himself a bit steadier.

"You would do well to remember that."

"Don't ever say such a thing to me again, stupid man. You can't even follow simple instructions. Real power is obviously beyond you."

The man took a deep breath. His pride wanted to boast further to her. His common sense kept him from it.

"Be on your way then," he said after a moment. "Consider, though, my order will continue to search for the skotos as well."

"Keep them well out of my way," she said, hissing. "It would be such a shame for still others to have to suffer along side me."

The shadows rippled before him and she was gone.

CHAPTER I



That Which Comes From the Darkness

Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness.

- Job 10:21-22 (KJV)

Los Angeles, California
An alley just off of Highland Avenue, between Romaine Street and
Santa Monica Boulevard



Nick was only slightly alarmed by the idea of seeing a gargoyle in the alley. He thought he was hallucinating. A little side effect of mixing the wrong drugs, perhaps. It wasn't common for him to get warnings about possible negative interactions from freelance dealers in, let's call it, 'amateur pharmaceutical services.'

Even though the first bump of Special K that his boyfriend gave him back inside the club probably would have been more than enough—considering that Nick had already downed two doses of the GHB he'd acquired that afternoon—he didn't refuse when Darren went on to say, "Take two. They're small."

So, he took another hit of K. However, since he didn't think the little plastic bullet was working correctly, he did three more after that.

Had Nick waited just ten minutes before snorting the additional hits of K, he might have reconsidered. He might have given himself the chance to notice that the two compounds were enhancing each other significantly—both of them being essentially central nervous system depressants—and he was getting very high, very quickly.

Then again, Nick didn't know the specific chemical distinctions. He knew that K, or Special K, was a dried cat tranquilizer, which,

oddly enough, made club dancing, among other things, a euphoric pleasure for people. Also, he'd heard that GHB was really just a liquid amino acid supplement, but was suffering from incredibly bad press in the States. He didn't understand why. He thought the stuff was wonderful, and couldn't possibly imagine ever having sex again without first indulging in a little G-cocktail.

Although Nick was new at using it, the dealer he'd seen that day did explain how to portion the GHB so it wouldn't knock him out. Nevertheless, it was a very busy weekend, and this very popular amateur pharmacist's apartment soon contained two more customers, both of whom were consistently semi-bulk buyers. Consequently, in his haste, he'd neglected to mention to Nick that mixing G with K might make him sick—or even very, very sick—and that mixing G with alcohol might kill him. Oops.

Darren didn't know Nick had taken the GHB or he likely wouldn't have offered him any Special K at all. Nick wasn't in the best of moods. He took the second dose because Darren was acting like such a jerk. No, Nick wasn't going to refuse any additional drugs. So far, his evening really hadn't been very pleasant, and any assistance in that area was therefore more than welcome.

Not only did Nick's boyfriend not know what he'd previously taken, he also didn't notice when both the letters, the notorious G and K, started to fight with each other inside of Nick and sent him running to the men's room.

The men's room in a popular Hollywood club on a Saturday night is the stupidest place in the world to which to run if you think you're going to be sick, unless you feel like getting the crap beaten out of you for heaving all over the guy in front of you in line. Suddenly noticing this, Nick took a deep breath, wiped the sweat off his face, got a reentrance stamp from the bouncer, and ran outside to puke. He just barely made it up the street two blocks, around the corner, and into a secluded alley before he started vomiting uncontrollably.

The majority of the drugs had already been absorbed. Nick's awareness was quickly becoming considerably slim. He didn't notice when his knees buckled and he collapsed onto an empty cardboard box, or that he'd already destroyed his four-hundred dollar pants, or that there was an exceptionally large demon sitting in the shadows.

He was extremely disoriented and becoming rather light-headed, having vomited the as-yet unabsorbed contents of his system in several consecutive bursts, mostly Evian and Diet Sprite. He then had to suffer his body's vigorous attempt to continue vomiting for the next

several minutes. So, when the creature eventually spoke to him, he certainly wasn't ready to sprint away in fear. He did register shock, but nothing near panic or terror, at encountering the apparent apparition, and all the while felt only temperate curiosity that he was talking to it.

He'd managed to collapse into a comfortably isolated alley, as far as he could tell. It wasn't the main alley, which dissected the block and ran directly behind the building. That one would have been much, much larger, complete with a wet and slimy central gutter, ancient wooden telephone poles, neatly spaced metal dumpsters, and the biting smell of urine. It was also equipped with screaming halogen floodlights, which the genius city officials believed would reduce the occurrence of muggings, drug deals, and back-alley pavement quickies. However, what the lights actually did was create very dramatically shadowed recesses and lightless hollows; perfect for such goings-on.

The main alley directly behind this particular club was actually a very busy place, as would be well known to any club regular who ever cut through it on their way from a secluded parking space, which was why Nick had run up the street to look for someplace more private.

A short distance north, he found a much smaller alley very near the end of the next block. He wanted to make sure he ran down the street in the opposite direction of the already forming line for entrance to the club. This little side alley contained only one metal garbage dumpster, a dry cement gutter, and no lights at all. Though, it was fenced across in its center, which was the genius city officials' only attempt to prevent the criminal element from using it to make continuous rounds in the area.

It was here that Nick collapsed in his on-coming stupor, right where the light from the distant street died in an angle across the gutter, right where the dumpster blocked the north half of the alley, six and a half feet from where eight-hundred and seventy pounds of winged nightmare silently rocked back on its haunches and held its breath as the wayward nightclubber stumbled around the corner.

The wings were what initially made Nick suspect he was delusional. After he'd finished his first round of retching, he caught a very brief glimpse of them in the rapidly passing glow of some distant headlights. He could only see their tips. The light didn't travel far into the alley, and it really was only for an instant, but he knew immediately what they were, or what he *thought* they were.

He'd seen gargoyles before, both the medieval stone guardians

themselves as well as any number of contemporary artistic representations of them, and these wings appeared similar enough so that they came to mind. This set of gargoyle's wings, though, were solid black against the washed-brick building, and Nick could tell they weren't made of stone because they had fur on the edges, and, of course, because they moved.

The wings quivered a bit for the half-second that the light hit them and they were visible, as if their owner had been startled or shaken. It was just enough for Nick to register that they also resembled the thin leathery wings of a bat. Although, from the size of them, and how high they were, if this bat was sitting on the ground, then it was about seven feet tall, and the tops of its wings were eleven feet high.

He was still staring up into the blackness of the inner alley, trying to reconcile what he thought he'd seen, when something bumped the metal dumpster, rolling it halfway out into the light.

Nick held his breath, but he couldn't hear anything. The dumpster, unlike the giant bat, was obviously real. So, whatever had bumped into it and sent it rolling three feet on its casters, Nick reasoned, must also be real. Maybe the wings had been a trick of the light—and his chemically compromised eyes—and it was just a dog or something in the alley.

Yeah, it was just a dog that knocked into a solid-steel trash dumpster, which normally required a hydraulic truck to move, sending it further out into the light so he could see it better. Nick didn't know if he was more frightened by the possibility of an imaginary, seven-foot flying rat or of Cujo the Wonder Pooch.

His fear, though, was soon overwhelmed by the growing eclipse of his normal senses.

"Hello?" Nick cautiously said to the darkness.

He held his breath again. Nothing answered him, not that he'd expected anything to answer him. He didn't hear a thing actually; no panting from the super dog and no giant bat sounds, whatever those might be.

"Hello?" he repeated, a little louder this time.

Despite the quiet, he was becoming uneasy. If he'd been sober, he might even have fled, just to be on the safe side. Although, if he'd been sober, he wouldn't be hurling his guts out in some grit-riddled alley in the first place.

The thing that bothered him the most, while he still had the mental resources with which to focus on it, was that there wasn't even an echo. Nick thought there should have at least been an echo.

It might have been the drug's increasing obliteration of his reasoning, or just brazen stupidity, but before the chemicals could completely debilitate him, Nick thought he'd try to get up, just for a second, and poke his head a little further into the shadows to reassure himself that he was alone. He'd just cross the line where the light ended and make sure he wasn't sharing this cozy little secluded alley with anything furry that might also weigh more than his car.

He sat up and scooted forward about a half a foot.

"I think you'd better stay where you are," said a voice out of the dark.

Nick froze. His mind desperately attempted to decide if he'd actually heard anything. Meanwhile, his testicles seemed to have leaped into his chest.

The voice had been quite clear, both its auditory quality and its instructions. Nick wasn't going to move.

He would have been much more upset, but maybe because he'd shifted his body or maybe because he'd forgotten to breathe, the dry heaves returned. The first couple were dry and painful. The next few were suspiciously damp, and very, very painful. He didn't think about the voice for a minute. He was in pain and much more concerned with his possible drug overdose than he was with an imaginary voice giving him directions. At least for the moment he didn't think about the voice. He didn't think about it, that is, until he heard it again.

"That was charming," the voice from the darkness said. It was quite deep and actually had a pleasant resonance. Nick thought it sounded like the guy from all the movie trailers. Though, it was soft enough to avoid any echo between the walls of the buildings.

"Wha...?" Nick was trying to speak, but he realized he wasn't breathing.

"I suppose I should be grateful that you missed me before you ran out of juice," said the voice.

As if to contradict it, Nick coughed up some more goo, wiped it on his pants, and then sank against the wall.

"Lovely," came the voice again, deeper, reverberating. What was James Earl Jones doing in an alley?

"That'll never wash out," the voice continued. "What are those? Versace?"

"What?" Nick managed. His head was beginning to swim and even the brick wall behind him didn't feel quite stable.

"Your pants, brainy. You got puke all over your pants."

Nick felt all the wetness in his lap and on his chest. "Oh, crap!"
"Are they Gianni or Donatella?"

"What?" He was concentrating on his stomach and wondering if it was done trying to send out all of his other organs. "Oh, um ... they're Versace."

"Yes, thank you. I see. However, do you know if they're by Gianni or Donatella Versace?"

"Oh god, um, I don't know." The ground began to tilt slightly to the right. Nick leaned against the wall so he wouldn't slide into it.

"How much did you pay for them?" the voice inquired.

"Oh, holy crap, my fucking head," Nick stammered, pressing his fingers to his temples.

The wall began tilting right along with the ground. Nick crouched down into the corner, wondering if he'd eventually slide up to the roof. If the tilting continued, the whole building would be upside down in a few minutes. It would probably hurt to slide across the old bricks, he thought, not to mention most likely flying right off the top of the building and straight up into the sky.

"Were they expensive?" came the voice again.

"What?"

"Your Versace pants. They look expensive."

"Oh, my god! I ruined my fucking pants!"

"As noted."

"Who are you?" Nick squinted into the dark.

"What were they? Two? Three?"

"Four," Nick answered, "and a quarter."

"Ouch," the voice winced. "And they look like they're Gianni to me. What a shame."

"Who...? What...?" Nick was still struggling quite a bit just to breathe.

"You should relax for a minute, kid. You're pretty messed up."

"I'm fine," he insisted.

Nick could barely tell that he was sitting down. He pressed his back hard against the wall to assure himself it was still there. It was, although it was still slowly tilting backward along with the ground, but not enough to send him tumbling up the wall. In fact, it hadn't seemed to have made any significant progress at all in its effort to flip upside down. That was good.

"Really, I'm fine," Nick said again.

"Uh-huh. Yeah." The voice was, apparently, unconvinced.

"It's nothing," Nick insisted. "Maybe I'm coming down with the

flu." It was an automatic answer; he would have given it to anyone.

"Well, buddy, 'nothing' seems to be kicking your ass right now. So, just take some deep breaths." Then he added softly, "I'm not going to hurt you."

Nick wasn't worried about that. After all, there really was no voice. He was imagining it. Even so, he decided to take the advice of the considerate delusion and try to settle down for a second. Even if he was able to stand up, which he doubted explicitly, he didn't need to be wandering around, especially if he was going to be encountering giant talking bats everywhere.

He closed his eyes and tried to consciously control his breathing.

"Good boy," the voice said in a soothing whisper.

Although he'd decided it wasn't real, Nick answered the voice again. Just because it wasn't real didn't mean he had to be rude.

"Thanks," he muttered. "I think."

Nick tried to take a deep breath. He managed one, and then half of another before the nausea returned. He held his breath and winced when it made his stomach cramp. He held it though, until he knew he wasn't going to barf again.

"You need to keep breathing," the voice offered.

"Actually," Nick said, gasping a little, "I'm just hoping the heaving will stop."

"Keep breathing and don't talk so much."

"Are you always so bossy?" Nick asked with a smile. At least he thought he was smiling. He had to concentrate specifically on his face in order to be aware of what it was doing.

"Quite often," the voice said. "More so with young men who can't handle their illegal compounds."

"I told you, I'm just a little sick, I haven't—"

"Save it." The voice stopped him. "I can smell it in this mess. There's keteset, and enough butyrate for two people."

"How...? Oh, my god, what the fu—?"

"You should really space that shit out more, the GHB. It's very unforgiving, from what I hear. You haven't used it before, have you? You're not going to take any more tonight, are you?"

"Hold up, hold up, hold up." Nick didn't know if he was amused or irritated. "What are you talking about? How do you—?"

"I told you. I can smell the chemicals in this crap you shot at me. Sheesh, there's a lot of keteset. You're quite the little Hoover."

"Oh right!" It was coming back to him suddenly. "Riiiiight!" He nodded and shook his finger in the direction of the voice. "You know

what I took because you're it! I mean, you're from it. Whatever. I'm just imaging you and this little lecture." Nick was relaxing a bit now that he'd put it together again. He'd almost forgotten that he was just humoring an apparition. He *had* forgotten that he'd never known the 'B' in 'GHB' stood for butyrate.

"Okay," it said.

"No, don't 'okay' me!" Nick laughed. "You little fuck, I'm on to you!" He was beginning to slur.

"Yup. You sure got me pegged there, Einstein."

"No, no, no, no, no! Admit it! You're a gargoyle! Like from France!"

"France?"

"Yeah, France! I seen 'em! Lots of 'em. On the big church. The one with the thingy... the, you know... you know... the thingy..."

"Notre Dame?"

"Yes!" Nick slapped his knee for emphasis. "Fuckin' Notre Dame! I saw the gargoyles on the church, and I'm feeling guilty and shit, so I'm hallucinating you." It came out sounding like 'halooocinatin'.

Slurring or not, the clarification made perfect sense to Nick and he was glad he'd been able to explain it to the illusion.

"Okay, whatever."

"So, you can stop lecturing me, because you're gonna be gone in a minute."

"Look, don't feel guilty about the drugs. Everyone takes drugs. It just depends on how you look at it. Alcohol is a drug. Every cup of real coffee is a drug. The sugar in your Pop Tarts is a drug. If you want to feel guilty, do so because you're an idiot."

"Oh... what?"

"You're an indulgent, spoiled, little idiot. Look at you. You've obviously either trusted the wrong people or you're too ignorant to trust yourself. Here, you're paying for your lack. Now, whether that's a lack of appropriate caution or a serious degree of intellect, I'm not yet sure. Either way, you're sitting there because of doing something rather stupid. You're in a lot of danger right now. So, like I said, you need to relax until it passes."

"I thought you said you wouldn't hurt me." Nick thought about getting up, but he didn't want to try that until the ground and the wall stopped moving.

"And I won't. But you're very likely to hurt yourself if you don't sit still for a few minutes. I don't care if you think I'm a hallucination, just sit still and breathe."

"I'm not going to hurt myself." Nick raised himself up only an inch or two before slipping back against the wall. He thought it was really comfortable right where he was, suddenly, and tried to remember why he'd been attempting to move in the first place.

"Fine." The voice sighed. "But if you manage to get up and to walk back into that club, looking like that, not to mention smelling like that, the bouncer is either going to call the police, beat the shit out of you, or both."

"Bossy. Bossy."

"Neither of which would be a very productive development in your life, I assume. No one is around, so sit still."

Even in this dreamy state, Nick knew the voice was right. All he needed was for some grouchy, underpaid, and under-bribed, door guy to decide to use him to work out some hostility. He'd seen it happen to people he knew and, although he'd wanted to help them, he knew he couldn't or he'd just end up in the same mess.

Still, he thought it would be a toss-up. He was on friendly terms with enough of the security guys at the club to maybe get away with it. He tried to recall if he'd recognized any of them either on his way in, or during his rather rapid exit.

Nick's boyfriend, Darren, knew just about everyone who worked at the club very well; he promoted large parties there from time to time. The manager was a close friend of both of theirs. The real problem was that there was no guarantee either of them would be anywhere near the front doors. Even if they were, Nick wasn't eager to put them to the test and embarrass them like that.

No, Nick didn't want to stagger into the club smelling like vomit and gutter filth. Darren might be able to keep anyone from calling the police, but even so, Nick would never hear the end of it.

He decided he could spare some time and at least hang out long enough to sober up and crawl into a cab. Once he got back home, he could shower, change his clothes, take some far more familiar drugs, and come right back. That decided, he closed his eyes and tried to relax again.

"You're a really bossy gargoyle," he said.

"I'm not a gargoyle," the voice huffed.

"Shut up. Yes you are."

"I'm not a hallucination either, little boy. Though, I doubt you'll be able to make that distinction tomorrow. You'll be lucky to remember where you live later."

"You're a big, fat, ugly, flying, hairy, bossy, gargoyle."

"If you're trying to retaliate because I called you an idiot, you're not going to wound me with names. And you're certainly not going to affect my opinion by insisting that I'm a gargoyle."

"You're kinda bitchy, too."

"Oh, I'm hurt. It's so terrible to be berated by a half-conscious junkie."

"You know, you can go anytime. Why don't you just fly away?"

"I can't."

"I saw the wings, Batman!"

"Yes, I suppose you did at that," the voice admitted. "That's why I can't leave at the moment."

"What?"

"I'm visible, it seems, which isn't my intention just now. Maybe I only need to rest as well. Maybe it will pass."

"Knock it off!" Nick clutched his head again. "You are an illusion! God, I almost wish I'd just pass out, or something."

"No, you don't. You know that wouldn't be a very good idea. I wouldn't hurt you, but I couldn't protect you either."

"There ya go! I know that! You can't do shit! Like some mugger is gonna be scared off by my delusion." Nick laughed a little at the thought.

"Look, I'm not a delusion, and it would be better for both of us if I didn't have to confront a mugger or anyone else. You're bad enough. So, maybe you should keep your voice down. In fact, I think that that's crucial at the moment. You should be very, very quiet."

"Yeah, right. I wouldn't want anyone to hear me talking to myself."

"Okay, whatever."

"I'm so sure that a gargoyle is going to say stuff like 'whatever.'"

"Just like you're so sure that I'm a gargoyle." The voice sighed. "Just like you're sure I'm a figment of your imagination, a remnant image from your adolescent jaunt to Europe."

"Fine, freak. What are you then?"

There was no reply.

"Come on!" Nick tried to slide himself across the ground closer to the line of shadow. If he could move another foot into the alley and get just his head out of the dim light, maybe he could see it again.

"You know I saw you! Why wouldn't you —"

"Do not come any closer!" the voice hissed angrily. There was a sudden breeze. A warm gust of wind threw dirt and trash out of the alley and into Nick's face. It was harsh and brief, making him close his

eyes to it as it died. He heard the sound of a heavy tarp, or a tent flap, fluttering in the wind.

"Your glimpse of me was an accident," the voice whispered, "but if you gain the full sight of me in this state, by choice, then I cannot honor my earlier words. My promise to you will mean nothing."

Nick stopped. "Meaning...?"

There was another sigh, a touch of breeze, and barely a whisper, but Nick heard it clearly. "I will have to kill you."

Nick looked away, down at the pavement, which was still heaving like the deck of a ship, and decided not to push it for now. He rolled back and slid across the cardboard of the box he'd crushed. He leaned back and felt the comfort of the now-familiar wall. He wasn't in exactly the same spot, but he wasn't in the dark either.

"It's very important that you understand," the voice went on, just a little louder, "at least for now, I am not a figment of your imagination. I'm not an image that your drugged-out mind has called forth to punish you for your indulgence, and it would be a very bad thing for both of us, as matters are at the moment, if you were to actually see me."

The wall and the ground were still moving. Nick realized there was very little he knew for sure right then. He knew he was outside and it was night. He knew he'd messed up with his evening's party favors and was experiencing a degree of influence he'd never had before. He'd had mild hallucinations, the heaving ground or a slowly spinning dance floor, far away voices when he was alone in the quiet after he'd gotten home, but nothing ever visited him. He'd never stumbled upon giant, gothic creatures in the night.

"What are you?" he decided to ask again.

"It is not important. What is relevant—"

Nick started to move again.

"Stop!" the voice commanded.

Nick stopped, staring into the dark and seeing nothing.

There was a sigh from the shadows, long and tragic. It was followed by a grunt, the fluttering tent, the shuffle of gravel, and the dumpster again, creaking on its casters as something very big bumped it.

"Well?" Nick tried to sit up and have a better look around his dream. This *had* to be a dream. He'd overdosed, and this was a damn dream.

His friends had told him about their own hallucinations, usually from drugs for which Nick wasn't ready or even interested in exploring, such as LSD or mushrooms. One such acquaintance

described a baboon running through his living room. Another detailed how he'd watched the fruit at the supermarket get up and dance. They'd been laughing at the memories, thoroughly at ease, thoroughly amused. Nick thought it sounded frightening. He couldn't think of anything more frightening.

"I am a demon."

Except that.

Nick sat back against the wall and closed his eyes tightly.

"I think you should shut up now," he whispered.

"That won't change what I am," said the voice in a brusque, smug tone.

"Okay, whatever." Nick giggled at the quote.

He still wouldn't open his eyes. He was just going to ride this out. Pressing himself against the wall again, he ran his hand along its rough surface behind him and, despite the feeling of subtle motion, he was glad for it; he could be certain the motion wasn't real, but the reality of the wall was clear enough.

"What's the big deal?" he asked the voice. "Why don't you want to be seen?"

"Do I need to threaten you again? I assure you, although you only saw a tiny portion of me, I am quite large, and rather capable of killing you very quickly."

"No doubt."

"Little boy, if you only knew what kind of situation you're in right now —"

"I have a name."

There was another grunt. "I'm sorry. You have not mentioned it."

"What?" Nick feigned shock. "You don't know it already, oh mighty demon?"

"I said I was a demon. I didn't say I was 'mighty.' And no, I don't know it already. You know, I can see that, as well a sarcastic little junkie, you're also a very typically assuming human."

"Okay, okay, um, if you're not an illusion or a hallucination from my head or whatever, and you are what you say you are, then I thought you guys could, like, read minds and stuff. I thought —"

"Yes. That's true. I can do that."

"Well, shit! Then what's my name?"

"I can't do it from here."

"Oh, dear god." Nick shook his head. This was getting silly.

"I'd need to touch you."

"What?"

"I'd need to touch you, you'd need to allow me to do so, and then I'd know the contents of your mind. With your permission, if I simply held your hand, or touched your skin, just for a few moments, I would understand what you believe to be the truth. I'd know you. I'd know you better than you know yourself, better than anyone else knows you now or ever will."

"Golly."

The darkness issued a disgusted grunt.

"What do you mean by what I 'believe to be the truth?'"

"I mean I'd know and understand your image of yourself, the world, and your relationship to it."

"My image of the world?"

"Yes," the voice said, sighing again. "Everyone has one, and they're all quite different."

"Like an—"

"Yes, crude little boy," the voice huffed. "Very funny."

"No, no." Nick chuckled. "I was going to say 'opinion.'"

"I'm sorry. As I said, I'd have to touch you first. And no, not really like an opinion. It's much more powerful than that. It would be what is the source of your opinions, what shapes them, what powers them. I'd know your opinions as well, of course, but I'd also know why you had them, how they were formed."

"That's an awful lot of shit to know about someone."

"Yes," the demon agreed. "Yes, it is."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that."

"Not many are."

The butt of a cigarette had stuck to the dampness of Nick's shirt. It had lipstick all over it. It looked fresh and was dark and very red. He flicked it off.

"So, I'd have to *let* you touch me?"

"Again," the voice began, sounding irritated, "yes."

"So, if you just, like, jumped on me—"

"I'd only be able to rip the beating heart from your chest and chew it like a piece of gum before you had the chance to piss yourself," the voice calmly said, "but, no, I wouldn't be able to glean from you the name of your childhood teddy or whether you hated your mother."

Nick just stared into the dark. The alley echoed with the sounds of the city's summer night; the whisper of far away cars and the muffled throb of the music from the club nearly two blocks away.

There was another long and lonely sigh. "You know," the demon said, "you can be a little annoying."

Nick decided not to respond.

"Look," the demon went on, "I have no reason to hurt you. Not at the moment. I'm in a difficult situation right now because I'm very tired, and being so drained is why I think I'm still here, still visible to anyone, despite my best efforts. I know you couldn't possibly comprehend any of this, much less relate to it, but please do try and understand. It *is* rather stressful."

Nick was still somewhat shaken by the image of a seven-foot winged monster standing over his eviscerated torso, chewing his heart like a piece of Juicy Fruit.

"Perhaps before it gets too late I'll be able to phase out," the demon said, "or at least change form. Then I'll be able to leave this alley, and the darkness, without gaining any further witnesses."

Nick closed his eyes against another cramp. This one was worse than the others. He felt the bile rising, stinging his throat, but he managed not to vomit.

"Besides," the demon continued, "it will take a least another hour or so before..." He stopped.

"Before what?" Nick asked.

The dumpster creaked, the tent flap fluttered, a burst of dust flew from the cement into Nick's eyes. He blinked.

"Nothing," the voice answered. "Just before anyone starts to leave the club and wander around. Don't worry. In the morning this will perhaps seem to have been just a dream." He sighed again. He did that a lot. "This will seem like a dream, and we'll both be free."

Nick's head was still swimming. The ground and the wall were still heaving dramatically but, fortunately, they hadn't yet flipped the building.

"You keep calling me 'little boy,'" he said tentatively.

"I'm sorry. As I said, I'd —"

"It's Nicholas."

"Nicholas," the demon repeated. "Well, I suppose it's nice to meet you then."

"My friends call me Nick."

"How interesting."

Nick rubbed his shirt, smoothing it. It was very wet, and sort of sticky. He tried to swallow, afraid he'd start retching again, but he didn't. His mouth was dry, his jaw was trembling, and his teeth felt gritty.

"Are all demons as bitchy as you?" he asked.

"I really wouldn't know."

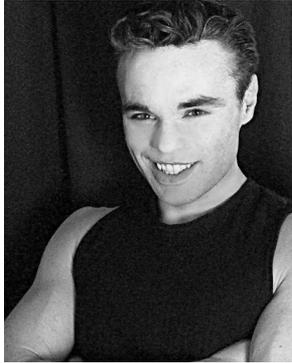
"What's yours?"

"My what?"

"Your name."

There was a long silence. Then—here it comes, Nick thought—another long and anguished sigh.

[END OF EXCERPT]



Joshua Dagon is a novelist,
playwright, and columnist.
He lives in Las Vegas, Nevada.