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Updated and revised 2002.

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive
Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200,
Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

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ISBN 0-8423-5741-6, mass paper

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 02
6 5 4 3 2 1

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At the Poseidon Arena in San Francisco, the mega-popular heavy metal band The Scream tore through their last set in front of a packed house. The music was loud and the show was exciting—a combination of the latest high-tech special effects, makeup, and costumes.

The Scream's lead singer, Tommy Doland, had a red pentagram painted across his face.

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His intense dark eyes peered out from the center. His shoulder-length hair was coal black, except for a great shock of bright blue hair in the front. His outfit was part Roman emperor and part Darth Vader. His long cape billowed out behind while he strutted the length of the stage singing:

*I'm riding on wings of fire.
I'm burning the fields of desire.
In touch with the overlord,
He takes me higher. . . .*

On the word *higher* his voice catapulted into a loud shriek, one of the band's trademarks. The audience's response was immediate and frenzied.

The audience itself was something to behold. Dressed in homemade versions of the same costumes and makeup as the band members, the crowd seemed even angrier than the band. They moved constantly, slamming into each other with a fierceness that was somewhere between a wild, uncontrolled dance and an outright riot.

Mike Parsek, the drummer of The Scream, looked toward the angry wave of humanity as he hammered out the driving beat and wondered just how close the crowd was to losing control. Three kids had been hospitalized last week at their concert in Denver. Mike

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was the first to admit that it could've been a lot worse. Kids had been crushed to death at other bands' concerts. Even so, creating that kind of excitement was the key element of the band's performance. After all, the fans came because they *wanted* a wild ride.

Mike scanned the screaming fans again and frowned. Sometimes he worried how that ride might end.

Tommy Doland never seemed worried about that part of the concert. His method of operation was always the same: Take it higher, drive it harder, push it farther.

A highlight of the show was always Mike's drum solo. No matter how much Mike pushed it, Doland always wanted to go a little farther. For this tour the drum solo had become a big production number loaded with special effects. The climax of the solo now included the eruption of a giant fire cannon that had been made to look like a fierce dragon. When Mike's solo reached its peak, two huge flamethrowers concealed in the dragon's mechanical throat blasted out twenty-foot streaks of fire over the heads of the audience, making them scream in delight.

It was time for Mike's solo, and he jumped in with a vengeance. As he increased the volume and tempo, he felt the tension build in the audience—who expected something

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spectacular at this point—and in himself, as he prepared for the coming explosion.

Launching into the final pattern, Mike eyed stage manager Billy Phelps, whose job it was to ignite the cannon. As usual, Billy nodded along with the beat, one finger on the button, ready to fire. Mike steeled himself for the blast and nodded slightly, but the visual cue was unnecessary. Billy knew the timing by heart. He pressed the button.

There was a brief hesitation and then a crackling sound that Mike had never heard before. A puff of smoke came from the dragon's mouth. This was followed by a clinking sound that came off like a groan from the pit of the dragon's stomach, which was then followed by silence.

Something was wrong.

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. Part of him was glad it hadn't worked. Every time the cannon went off, he wondered if the teens in the first row were going to become burnt offerings. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught a glimpse of Tommy Doland. The lead singer appeared to be laughing.



Later on in the show, the band wailed away as Doland sang the lead to their latest hit, "Army of the Night." Meanwhile, Billy worked on the broken dragon.

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“I can’t figure out why this thing isn’t firing,” he muttered to himself as he examined the circuitry of the control panel for the fire cannon. “Everything here looks OK. Must be up in the barrel. Better cut the power.”

With that, he switched off the control board and began crawling underneath the cannon. Onstage Doland sang:

*Army of the night,
Not afraid to fight,
Marching into danger
Without any light.*

As Doland writhed across the stage, the crowd screamed. Guitarist Jackie Vee ripped into a searing solo. Meanwhile, Billy had worked his way to the end of the cannon’s barrel.

Doland continued singing:

*Army of the night,
The master’s wishes soar,
Risking our life
To fight an unholy war.*

At these words, as though an unseen hand moved it, the ignition switch on the cannon’s control panel vibrated to the on position. Unaware of this, Billy reached inside the

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barrel to shine his flashlight down the dragon's mouth. Doland continued to sing:

*Army of the night,
Unholy alliance,
Our soul submitted
For your compliance.*

Suddenly, the loading mechanism of the fire cannon began to shake, but since Billy was at the opposite end, he didn't notice.

Mike looked up from the drums, sensing a difference in the cannon's vibration. He looked over to the control panel and saw that it had switched on. Then, with horror, he saw the small red light on the loading mechanism also flicker.

The cannon was about to fire!

Mike tried to catch Billy's eye, but the stage manager leaned down so far into the cannon that only his legs could be seen.

"Billy!" Mike shouted. "Get out of there!"

Billy didn't hear him. The loading mechanism vibrated, and the light on the panel shifted from red to green.

Mike knew that he would never reach Billy in time, so he hurled one of his drumsticks at the stage manager's legs. It connected, and a bewildered Billy pulled his head out from the cannon to see what was happening. Spotting the stick on the floor, he looked over to

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Mike, who waved frantically for him to get out of the way.

But there was no time. The cannon fired.

The flame that shot from the dragon's head was a wall of fire. It shot over Billy's head and out across the stage. Grant Simone, the band's bass player, turned just in time to see his amplifier catch fire. With a yelp, he dived out of the way.

Billy was not so lucky. His clothes were aflame.

The crowd screamed, unsure if this was part of the show or an accident. Mike leaped off his drum riser and ran toward Billy. As he passed Doland, he snatched the lead singer's cape and charged for the burning man. Leaping through the air, Mike landed on top of Billy and knocked him to the ground. Quickly he began to smother the fire with the cape.

After several long, terrifying seconds, it was over.

Thirty minutes later Billy was carried off in an ambulance. Another fifteen minutes passed before the police had cleared the auditorium completely.

Onstage the road crew began to break down the elaborate set. Mike, still stunned, stood by his drums watching one of the roadies begin to dismantle the huge fire cannon.

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“Hey, Mike,” the roadie said, “why didn’t Billy shut that thing down while he worked on it? Doesn’t he know better than that?”

Mike looked at the roadie for a long moment. “He *did* shut it down. I saw him do it. The thing . . . kicked on by itself.”

The roadie looked at Mike as if he were nuts but didn’t say anything.

Mike left the stage and headed for Doland’s dressing room. He knocked twice on the door.

“Come in,” Doland said.

Mike opened the door to see Doland standing before the mirror, still wearing his stage makeup. “Oh, it’s the hero of the hour. Come on in, Mike. What’s up?”

“Doland, I know for a fact that Billy shut that cannon down before he started working on it. I saw him do it. The thing came on by itself like some sort of . . .” He trailed off, not sure what to say.

Doland smiled strangely. “Some sort of what, Mike?”

“Some sort of . . . monster. Like it had a mind of its own.”

Doland laughed gruffly. “Come now, Mikey. A church boy like you doesn’t buy into that sort of nonsense, does he? Sounds like black magic, doesn’t it? You don’t believe in black magic now, do you?”

Mike turned away from Doland’s sneer.

“I’ve told you before. I don’t like you teasing me about my father.”

Doland gave a look of mock sympathy.

“Oh, you mean the good reverend? I wouldn’t dream of it, Mike.”

“How can you be joking around like this with Billy in the hospital?”

Doland shrugged. “Billy’s going to be all right. You heard the paramedic. He’ll be OK, thanks to that quick business you did with my cape—which, by the way, you owe me for.”

Mike couldn’t believe his ears. “You’re worried about the cost of the cape?”

Doland shook his head. “Not really. I know that what happened here tonight is good for business. This little accident will sell a hundred thousand more CDs for us by the end of the week.”

“It’s not about money, Doland. It’s like I’ve been saying all along. Things are out of hand. This devil stuff has gone too far.”

Doland squinted his eyes and mimicked Mike’s voice. “*This devil stuff?* Little church boy’s afraid of the big bad devil stuff, eh? Sometimes I think you’re in the wrong band, Mikey boy.”

Mike knew he was on risky ground since Doland could easily get him kicked out of the band if he wanted to push the issue. “Listen to me for a minute,” he continued. “Something has changed. Can’t you see that?”

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“I see far more than you, Mikey. But don’t sweat it. I know what I’m doing.”

Mike shook his head. This was getting him nowhere. He started to leave, then paused at the door. “It used to be fun, Tommy, but . . . don’t you see? We’re losing control—”

Doland cut him off with a nasty laugh. “I haven’t lost control of anything, Mikey. Everything is just the way I want it.”



It had not been one of Scott Williams’s better days. . . .

First the church’s youth group camping trip was canceled because they couldn’t find enough chaperones.

Then Mom asked him to clean his room. Naturally, he figured that meant piling everything that was on the floor up onto his bed so he could go play baseball with the guys. That part was fine. It was coming home and finding Mom steamed that wasn’t so fine. That and the discipline she had in mind for him.

“I still don’t see why I have to wash these stupid windows,” he complained for the tenth time.

“Because they’re dirty,” Mom replied.

“Why can’t Becka help?”

Mom sighed, tucking a strand of brown hair currently under siege by gray behind her

ear. They had had this conversation in one form or another several hundred times. “If you’d cleaned your room the way I asked you to, I wouldn’t have given you this extra duty.”

“You said you wanted to see the floor of my room. Well?”

“I also wanted to see your bed. Scotty, you’re fifteen! You’re too old to pull a stunt like that.”

“OK! OK! I’m sorry,” Scott mumbled as he went back to wiping the living room window. Outside he could see his older sister, Rebecca, playing football with her sort-of boyfriend, Ryan Riordan. Scott waited until Ryan lobbed her a pass before rapping on the window to distract her. “Hey, Becka!”

Becka caught the ball before turning toward her brother in the house. “Yes, Scott?” she called pleasantly. “May I help you?”

Scott grimaced, then called out, “Why don’t you guys come in here and give me a hand with these windows!”

Becka laughed. “No way! You earned that job, little bro.”

Scott went back to his mumbling. “Might as well clean windows. With the camping trip canceled, it’s going to be another boring week. I *never* get to do *anything*.”

“What are you harping about now?” Mom asked as she walked through the room.

“Nothing,” Scott answered. “I was just

wondering why we never get to do anything fun. It's boring hanging around Crescent Bay all the time."

Mom looked surprised. "How can you say that? You've had quite a few adventures since we moved to Crescent Bay a while ago. You've also traveled all over the place. You got to visit Louisiana not long ago. Your sister went to Europe."

"That's different," Scott whined. "We were helping Z."

Z was their friend from the Internet. Although they'd never met him in person, he'd led them into all sorts of intense adventures helping various people.

"Are you telling me that you never have any fun on these trips?" Mom asked.

Scott shrugged. "A little, I suppose. But Z always sends us to goofy places. Why can't he send us someplace exciting to do something fun?"

"Let me guess—" Mom pretended to search for an answer—"because Z isn't your personal cruise director?"

Scott frowned but only for a second as he suddenly saw a large FedEx truck stop in front of their house. He raced past Mom and headed outside, even managing to beat his sister to the truck.

The driver laughed and handed him a large envelope. "Sign here, son."

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Scott signed the form and quickly opened the envelope.

“What is it?” Becka asked.

Scott examined the contents. “I’m not sure . . . some airline tickets, a hotel reservation, and some other kind of tickets. . . . *Wow!*”

By now Mom was out the door as well.

“Wow, what?”

Scott was so excited he could hardly speak. “It’s the concert tickets from Z. . . . Our trip to L.A.! It’s been like a month since he mentioned it. He sent us three free tickets *and* backstage passes to see The Scream in Los Angeles. Awesome!”

“The who?” Mom asked.

“The Scream,” he explained. “Remember I told you about them, Mom? They’re so awesome! And we’re going to get to meet them!”

Mom took the package and read the computer-generated note that accompanied the tickets. “All it says is, ‘Look for the drummer. More later. Z.’ Well, I can’t say I’m happy about Z’s wanting to send you on another mysterious trip. But I see there’s a ticket for me, too,” she said. “I suppose I could use a short vacation.”

Scott was all smiles. “Then we can go?”

Mom nodded. “All of us can go.”

“Great! Just wait’ll the guys hear about this!” He turned to his sister. “Is this cool or what?”

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Becka looked at him before finally managing a lame, “Yeah . . . cool.”

But the feeling in her gut told her she was anything but thrilled about this. The Scream was popular with all the kids at school. But from what she’d heard of their stuff, the band was definitely heavy metal—real head-banger stuff. She didn’t have a big problem with that. But the fact that they definitely flirted with satanic stuff *was* a problem. That kind of stuff always gave her the creeps. Even now she felt her skin crawl.

What possible reason could Z have for wanting them to meet The Scream?