

*“Blessed are they who observe justice,  
who do righteousness at all times!” — Psalm 106:3*

DECEMBER 19, 1997

A HUMID FRIDAY night in December finds itself privy to illuminated pixels, a blinking message tab, images upon images upon images, and short lines of text flying at hyper fast speeds across the globe. Most others in Los Lunas would be succumbing to the bright lights of the neon strip on a night like this, but for Gerald Ringer and his sentence to house arrest, no such fun is possible.

*Click.*

But he has found that he much prefers other methods of entertainment.

*Click-click.*

A neon jungle is much the same in the downtown quarter as it is through the screen of a computer.

New research from environmental journalists show the dangers of rising algae populations in Florida freshwater habitats.

*Click.* Gerald scrolls through the article. His eyes scan bright pixels that stack and connect to form letters on the screen.

Algae blooms, they say, are killing native freshwater plants like eelgrass to near extinction. But why care about a single species of aquatic grass? Well, say the journalists, because there is one iconic animal whose diet relies almost entirely on eelgrass: the Florida manatee.

*Click.* Gerald coughs and clears his throat. *Click-click.*

In Emerald River, a quaint town on...

A fly buzzes nearby. Gerald doesn't particularly hate flies, nor does he enjoy them. But this one catches his attention. His attention splits between the article on the screen, and the fly coming in and out of his field of vision.

...team of dedicated conservationists, with the help of numerous donors and volunteers, have gathered to help. They are putting in their best efforts on all fronts, from scooping up algae to recording...

Outside, through the blinds, Gerald can see the bright red taillights of a sedan that has just pulled up to the curb. He glances at it, though he knows nothing of who might be inside. His eyes flicker back to the screen, but only for a moment. The red lights catch his eyes again. It's just a car. It's just a fly. The humid air suddenly starts to feel stickier than before—or, stickier than he had previously noticed, anyway.

...Kaitlin (left), Jamie (center), and Henry (right), each sponsor a manatee calf fighting for its life. "Watching little Pepito grow alongside his mother has been so rewarding," Henry revealed. "It really gives me a reason to wake up each..."

Gerald's message window blinks. Finally. *Click*. He's there at the speed of light and his hands are already at the keyboard. He can't help it—the blinking draws him in just like the flashing OPEN sign of a bar. Fuck manatee conservation efforts. He's not kidding anyone by trying to act interested in that eco-liberal bullshit. Let the algae grow. Whatever. It will never affect him.

Nothing new from LilMissVegas82. The same goes for Selena\_R\_S. Instead, something much more exciting. Much more forbidden. In the group *Los Lunas Lurking*, a lone message has popped onto the screen:

AOL Instant Messenger  
Ger\_Bear1's Buddy List  
Group: Los Lunas Lurking - Instant Message [12/19/97, 11:03pm]  
jj\_da\_sk8r: is anyone awake right now?

Gerald's fingers hover above the keys. He blinks. He tries to ignore the fact that his heartbeat may have just sped up.

jj\_da\_sk8r: my friend said this group was cool

Just like that, bait is dropped into the tank. Replies trickle in.

shdk9492jg: yeah super cool asl? 27 m los lunas  
jollyjonah: drop a pic let's see  
BigGus72: 38 m 11, i'm up all night  
jj\_da\_sk8r: oh sweet i'm 13 m los lunas, hope that's ok

Bait. Fresh bait. Live bait. Gerald's eyes widen. His fingers fly. *Tap tap tap tap*. This can't end well. The fly buzzes in front of the monitor several times, but now, he doesn't notice.

Ger\_Bear1: hey kid u seem young, be careful joining random groups on aol

Ger\_Bear1: probably safer to stick with 1 on 1 chats

The chat is still. Gerald waits with bated breath.

Outside, red taillights no longer flicker on and off. The fly, too, has ceased its movements, and now sits on the rim of a lukewarm, flat can of root beer. The night is humid, but surely not enough so to warrant the beads of sweat that begin to roll down the back of Gerald's neck.

A red flashing message appears. A new message request.

Yes, Gerald groans inside his head. Yes, yes, yes. Accept.

*Click-click.*

AOL Instant Messenger

Ger\_Bear1's Buddy List

Ger\_Bear1 : jj\_da\_sk8r - Instant Message [12/19/97, 11:09pm]

jj\_da\_sk8r: thanks for the warning

jj\_da\_sk8r: i was a little nervous honestly lol

jj\_da\_sk8r: r u cool? whats ur asl?

Ger\_Bear1: its fine, u gotta be careful though

Ger\_Bear1: i'm 18 m los lunas

Ger\_Bear1: old enough to get u booze or weed

Ger\_Bear1: but not old like some of the other creeps on here haha

jj\_da\_sk8r: that's dope

Ger\_Bear1: are u really 13?

jj\_da\_sk8r: yea

Ger\_Bear1: what are u doing on aol?

jj\_da\_sk8r: haha all my friends use it now

Ger\_Bear1: it's a cool place to meet new people

Ger\_Bear1: best is when u can meet up irl though

jj\_da\_sk8r: that sounds fun

Like it's equipped with an electrical charge that is tied to the thoughts in his brain, to the excitement filling his veins, the arrest monitor strapped to Gerald's ankle buzzes and stings.

A bead of sweat rolls into his eye as he forgets to blink.

Hurriedly, he types a response.

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No matter how many times Santi scours his brain for an ounce of recollection, he draws a blank.

He simply does not recognize this man.

Forget the skull that's been bashed in by a heavy, bronze Kafka bust, and forget the blood and pink matter that has smeared across his face. This is a man that Santi has never seen before.

As he stands in the luxurious apartment, alone with the decomposing corpse, nothing seems amiss. The place stinks of substandard human blood, but nothing else. Nothing demonic. No curses, no magic, no spells.

Bending low, Santi examines the corpse once more. This time, he lifts the skull and gently turns it so that the open wound is facing him. He sniffs it. He opens his mouth, and drags his tongue across it.

Zilch. Nada.

His senses pick up nothing.

He drops the head back to the floor with a thud, and proceeds to search the corpse's pockets for a wallet. He finds an ID with, once again, information that he doesn't recognize. It seems the man is an investment banker. Santi knows the company listed on his business card, as they're in the pockets of his father's mob—but aside that, he seems to have been an ordinary guy.

Is that what happened here?

Santi stands. He gives another grim look around the room, and peeks into the other areas of the apartment. The kitchen, where two glasses sit on the counter half-full of pale brown liquid that was once whiskey over rocks. The bathroom is clean. The living room is tidy aside from a corpse, a pool of blood, and a soiled Kafka bust. The bedroom is host to a painfully obvious scene including a bed with jumbled sheets, a belt cast aside on the floor, and the faint scent of Jamie. Santi quickly closes the door.

It seems to be a rather open and shut situation. The asshole brought Jamie home, overtook him, and then paid the ultimate price. Eradicating the corpse and calling the whole thing a suicide would be a piece of cake, and typical work for the mob.

But something about it all still rubs Santi the wrong way.

He finds a small jar of thyme sprigs in the kitchen and empties it out. Then, kneeling by the corpse once more, he whisks out a sharply clawed finger and punctures the neck before dragging his claw slowly through the flesh. Cold, black, coagulated blood oozes out, and Santi collects as much as he can in the small jar.

With a flick, his finger is clean and the claw is replaced by a standard human fingernail. He tucks the full jar into his inner pocket, and waves a hand slowly over the corpse. A substance that is pitch black, yet undulates like flames,

begins to envelop the corpse and the blood surrounding it. Within moments, it is gone.

As far as he knows, none of it had ever happened.

After his solo private investigation, Santi heads to the Garden of Eden and his arrival is jarring. More so than ever before, attendants scramble to cater to him and lesser demon patrons flee in the other direction as if he's infected with the plague. He can't say he's particularly displeased. He smiles as an entire crowd of demon patrons collects their things and abandons his favorite booth window overlooking the boulevard strip and the bay beyond, and as he orders a drink and sits down, he can't help but let out a heavenly sigh.

Why hadn't he beaten his father black and blue earlier?

Had he known what luxurious privileges it would've led to, he would have been doing it from the day he grew an inch taller than his father. Weirdly enough, he knows that his father is relishing in it, too. Santi would rather not think much about that part though—simply put, both parties can agree that it was a long overdue confrontation.

Relish as he may in the fruits of his labor, it's not the reason why he came out to the resort. No, he's here for a more selfless—or is it secretly selfish as well?—reason. Within minutes, this reason makes itself known as a tall head of sandy blonde hair weaves around the bar to retrieve empty glasses and wipe the stools and countertops. Santi downs the rest of his drink and heads over, and as soon as he's caught in Jamie's field of vision, the boy darts off in the opposite direction.

Santi's knee-jerk reaction is to run after him, but he stops himself. Given all that's happened, it would probably scare the shit out of the kid. It's not as lighthearted a chase as the other time they frolicked through the magical Garden of Eden. With a huff, he watches Jamie's slim figure slip inside the swinging kitchen doors, and instead leans against the bar.

"A drink, sir?" the bartender asks with a bow.

Santi waves his hand. "No. Tell Jamie that I need him in my office in ten minutes." He raps his knuckles against the countertop before pushing off it. "That's not a request."

Compared to the glitzy, crowded, overstimulating public areas of Eden, the office quarters extending out behind the resort are an entirely different story. The walls are built of solid oak, lined with stained glass lights, real crystal chandeliers, and a dizzying maze of corridors interrupted by seemingly unmarked doors. Jamie's cautious steps are fully absorbed by the dark, forest green velvet rug beneath his feet, and no other sounds seem to exist in this fortress of business

and bureaucracy. Fingering the hem of his suit, Jamie inches along down the hall where he's been instructed to go.

He comes to a stop in front of two heavy-looking solid wood doors. As he reaches for the knocker, held in the fanged mouth of a bronze serpent, he closes his eyes and gathers himself. What's done is done, he reminds himself gravely. It's time now to face the consequences of his childish actions. With a resolute exhale, he brings the knocker against the door three times.

The appearance of Santi's face alone, which appears a few moments after he's knocked, is enough to make Jamie weak in the knees. He shuffles inside the room, hardly able to make eye contact with the other. He's barely able to squeak out a pathetic *thank you*. He moves to the center of the room, standing dejectedly, feeling as though he's being put on trial.

"You can sit down," comes Santi's voice. Gentle, as expected.

Jamie fidgets. "I'll stand."

There's a sigh, and the fleeting scent of a cologne far too expensive for Jamie to even recognize wafts over as Santi passes by and goes up to the broad desk stood before tall windows overlooking a rose garden. Santi leans against the desk, looking Jamie over for a few moments.

He, too, finds it hard to make eye contact—but for other reasons. The bruises have developed swimmingly, and the cuts have started to scab over. It's no wonder he was trying to hide himself by doing dishes for the bar.

"First things first: it's taken care of," Santi says carefully. He knows that he doesn't need to elaborate any further. The twitch of Jamie's posture shows that he understands exactly what is being said as well. "End of conversation. No one will ever be looking into the circumstances of his death. On paper, he's not even dead. Alright?"

A sullen nod. "Thank you, sir," Jamie says quietly.

Santi looks him over. The black eye on the boy's face glares at him. "I can't believe you're working," he murmurs.

Jamie says nothing.

"I mean, I can't believe they're *letting* you work," Santi corrects himself. "Who's your manager?"

Jamie scratches the back of his hand. "It's in my file. But it's nobody's fault—they tried to send me home. I begged them for a shift."

Santi juts his chin out in disbelief. "Why?" He unfolds his arms and puts them on either side of himself, gripping the edge of the desk. "You should be at home, getting some rest."

"I *need* to be here, working," Jamie argues, with more determination and bite than Santi had anticipated. "I'm the only one to blame for this, this stupid mess—" he gestures at the wounds across his face, "—and I'm going to be the only one to blame if I can't make rent at the end of the month."

Santi's jaw practically hits the floor. "*Rent?*" he echoes. "For chrissakes, Jamie, I'll give you a month of paid leave at triple your salary if that's what you're killin' yourself for."

For the first time since entering the room, Jamie's eyes flicker up and meet Santi's. But within the next moment, they've fallen back towards the floor. "Not only my rent," he says quietly. "Rent for three properties."

"Okay, what, so you've got real estate investments or something?" Santi says, still in disbelief. "I'll make sure you get whatever amount you need—promise, alright? You. Need. Rest."

Seconds tick by in silence, and Jamie refuses to give in. His nervous fingers have finally calmed, but now they intertwine with each other more pensively, and his gaze seems similarly lost in thought. His expression is forlorn.

"...My sisters," he eventually says, his voice far away. "I need to pay rent for my sisters. One lives in an apartment. The other two share a dorm at college."

Another piece of the puzzle has fallen into place. Santi leans back, and slowly, he starts to see the boy in a new light. His dejected stance isn't so much about shame. His determination and work ethics aren't necessarily that of a clueless goody two-shoes. The bruises and scarring across his face aren't the hapless consequence of blindly following a boss's orders. There is rhyme and there is reason. The brightest lights, as they say, often have the darkest shadows. For a shooting star, so cosmic and so dazzling, the shadow must surely be some of the deepest depths imaginable.

Santi frowns. "So that's who you're working yourself to death for."

He won't press any further, and he gets the sense that Jamie isn't in the mood to divulge any more. Not now, anyway. He simply shifts his left foot, and offers a subtle nod. Again, he is able to look Santi in the eyes—and this time, his gaze holds. He nods again, with more confidence this time.

"Right." Santi reaches behind him, snatching up his official Eden Enterprises checkbook that he had located just in time within his neglected office files. He picks up the pen atop his desk and scribbles onto the first blank check, then tears it off. "Take this, then."

As Jamie reaches out to examine the check, he catches sight of the amount written on it and immediately recoils with a gasp. The thing flutters daintily to the ground, and Jamie leaps away from it as if it's dangerous. "You're crazy!" he shrieks. "S-Sir! Mr. De Luca, sir—you're crazy, sir!"

"Wh—can you quit it with the 'sir' shit?" Santi groans, stooping down to pick up the check. "Just take it, goddammit." He tries to push the thing into Jamie's hand, but the boy dodges quickly, and soon they're playing a childish game of cat and mouse. Jamie tucks his hands firmly into his underarms to escape the possibility of any check being placed in them, twisting round to avoid getting caught, and Santi tries to stick the paper into a pocket or fold where it'll

stay. It's futile, and eventually, Santi resorts to locking an arm around Jamie's waist, gripping him tightly so he can't weasel away, and shoving the thing into his suit pocket with a huff.

"Christ—I know you'd never do that with a manager," he grunts, letting the boy go. He blows a curl out of his face. "Or, I hope not, anyway."

As Jamie stumbles forward, hands still tucked under his arms, he stoops as if he's keeping something hidden. He doesn't turn around. "Thank you...sir," he says quietly, practically whispering. There's a pause. "May I go now?"

Santi blinks. Maybe he hurt him amidst the tussle. "Are you okay?"

A weak voice. "Yes. Fine."

Aghast at the idea that his desire to help may have, in fact, hurt Jamie further, Santi darts around to the boy's front to check his face. The last thing he was expecting to see, however, was his green eyes wide and staring through the floor as his entire visage was flushed pink.

The poignant smell of his sickeningly sweet blood hits Santi, once again, like a truck at full speed.

"Oh," he breathes. It's all he says.

Jamie blinks. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "Sorry for this, and sorry for what I did at your house, too—I'm so sorry."

Though he knew this had been coming from the very moment he stepped into the room, Jamie's face explodes in red nonetheless. He covers his face, and because of his strict professionalism, refuses to turn away and simply cowers into himself instead.

"How many times can I apologize to you before I start sounding like a broken record?" he whimpers, muffled behind his hands.

"You don't need to apologize."

"I certainly do—after all, I've ruined it, haven't I?" Jamie goes on, voice still small. "We were starting to develop a perfectly beneficial corporate relationship, a *friendship* even, and I've gone and thrown everything out the window. All because of, of—I don't even know—what, a stupid crush? Heart flutters like a little girl? It's disgusting to even say out loud. I need to go, now."

Santi eyes him. *Heart flutters like a little girl*. It's so innocent that it hurts. The image of Jamie pulling petals off a daisy humming *does he love me, does he love me not?* flashes through his mind. He frowns.

"It's not disgusting," he says calmly. "I just—look, I don't want you thinkin' that you've got feelings when you're really just appreciative of everything I'm doin' for you. That'll land you in some *hot* ass water, if you meet the wrong person."

Jamie doesn't move. His hands still cover his face. "And I don't think you're the wrong person."

Santi blows out an exasperated sigh. His eyes search the ceiling for an explanation. "You know how bad of a power dynamic that is, don't you? I'm your boss. Like, your boss's boss's boss's boss. If it were someone else, he'd con you for everything you've got." He starts counting on his fingers. "Let's see: use you, keep money from you, abuse you, put you to work, hurt you...christ, Jamie, the list goes on. You'll get yourself killed, catchin' feelings like that."

Moments of silence tick by as Jamie seems to finally register his words. His hands eventually peel, gingerly, away from his face and come to rest back at his sides. His cheeks are still flushed, and his eyes gaze intently off to the side, near the corner of the carpet.

"...But it isn't *someone else*." His eyes pull forward. They lock with Santi's. "It's you."

Green. Dazzling green. Haunting green. Transcendent green. Hypnotizing green. Heartache green. Lush green. Yearning green. Every spectrum of green is somehow condensed into a single hue, and Santi witnesses them all.

He takes a deep breath. "Jamie," he begins, lowering his voice, "Look, we...you should think about this. I mean, *really* think about this."

"*We?*" Jamie echoes. "I've already thought about it. What are you saying?"

Santi shakes his head and twists one of the rings on his finger. "Nothing. I'm saying nothing."

The thing that worries Santi the most then is not the tension between them, but rather, the complete lack of it. He knows that if he swung his hand out, Jamie would take it. If he says, *it's not just you*, then Jamie would smile.

It's a terrible setup, and it's everything that Santi stands against. Add the glaringly obvious demon aspect into it all, and the immorality of it increases by tenfold. Despite that, Pierre's words and mocking gaze haunt him from beyond his underworldly grave: *and what would it take to convince you, o righteous one?* Righteous and word and in spirit he is, but here now, in real time where it matters most, he is slipping off his pedestal. He is looking temptation right in the eye, and like all the demons before him, he is embracing it.

He can't say no, and now, he's made it too obvious. The enticing tilt of Jamie's head shows that he's already caught on. He knows that the choice he made in Santi's bathroom, the touch he invited onto his lips, the irreversible act of fate, had not been a mistake.

The realization spells out a specific kind of doom that is unidentifiable, foreboding, yet tantalizing all the same.

"I want you to go home," Santi says abruptly.

Jamie doesn't miss a beat. "Why?"

"You know why. You look like hell."

Jamie eyes him. "I saw your dad today. His face is as colorful as a christmas tree, too, worse than mine. Everyone's talking about it."

“Yeah. You can believe all the rumors. They're true: I did it.”

In an action that might normally be imperceptible in any other circumstance, Jamie edges forward. But here, the half-inch makes all the difference. A subtle spark of starlight fizzles under his foot as he takes a curious step forward. “That wasn’t because you were upset at what happened to me, was it?”

Santi folds his arms over his chest. “Jamie. I'll give you thirty minutes to wrap up your shift and get your things. Then I want you to go home, and stay out of Eden for a week.”

The boy stiffens. “A week? That’s long.”

“Too bad. Get some rest.”

Jamie’s eyes divert elsewhere in thought once more. The edge of the desk on which Santi leans. The brass name plate. The open collar of his shirt. The golden cross which sits between his collarbones. “Okay,” he finally gives in. He pauses. “How will you make sure I’m resting at home?”

The kid is insane. “I’ll call you,” Santi grunts.

Green eyes unblinking, Jamie doesn't budge. He peers up at Santi, saying nothing. An unnervingly welcome shiver slowly rolls down Santi’s spine as he gazes back and somehow realizes, *that’s not the answer he wanted*.

Before he can think much of it, Santi drops his crossed arms in defeat. “I’ll drop by and check on you.”

*Ding-ding-ding*. Jamie’s face is instantly lit with that million dollar smile of his. Jackpot. The coins come spilling out of the slot, and it takes everything within Santi to not reach forward and grab them.

Jamie’s bright smile dims to a grin, but it lingers on his face as he spins around and leaves the room to do exactly as he’s told.

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Tan, pale cream, mocha brown, slightly sunburnt, freckled, rich olive, deep ebony, golden amber, ivory.

The shade doesn’t matter. The skin is always supple. Always sweet.

Roses—fresh, fragrant roses atop a bed of curly, thorned stems. The scalp must surely smell as sweet. As pure.

Eyes closed in slumber, or perhaps in bliss, in contentedness, are the purest pleasure. On this particular night, dark black lashes curl above hooded brown eyes. Beautiful, youthful black lashes. Kissable eyelids. Eyelids that flutter under the soft touch of mature, skilled lips. Guidance.

On this particular night, a basketball jersey.

Arms, shoulders, collarbones exposed. So delicate still. Gerald Ringer inhales the scent of skin through the screen. He salivates. He tastes it, sweet, tangy with salty sweat after a game on the court with friends.

On this particular night, tawny brown. It appears so soft, through the screen. Gerald feels it under his fingertips.

*Click.*

Debussy. Clair de lune. Through jagged, unkept blinds, moonlight streams through the window and onto Gerald's computer desk. He hides, he shifts away, so that the graceful symphony cannot spy on him, nor the dead fly next to his mouse, nor the empty cans of Dr. Pepper, one of which leaks a sticky brown. So grotesque. So filthy, so foul, so opposite to the angel which blesses his computer screen.

*Click.* He is all that matters. *Click-click.*

Gerald's hand moves on its own. It has been for the past ten minutes. Or maybe thirty, or maybe hour and a half. Hard to say.

His labored breath fogs the screen with devoted prayer.

*Oh, please.*

*Sweet angel.*

*My god, so beautiful.*

*Dear lord.*

*Shit.*

*Christ in heaven.*

Surely, just one touch and he would ascend to the Kingdom of Christ, would he not?

`jj_da_sk8r: this is a pic of me after the game`

Prayer falls into obscenity.

*Fucking christ.*

*Shit.*

*Jesus, oh, god sweet angel.*

*Ah, unh, oh fuck.*

*My god.*

`Ger_Bear1: we should play together sometime`

`jj_da_sk8r: you play?`

As damned as the stupid thing is, the ankle bracelet cannot detect Gerald's indulgences. It will never know of the enlightenment he can reach through the glass, through the pixels, through the cables and the wires. It cannot feel this angel under his fingertips, the innocence he grips tight despite the sweat, the tears, the semen, the Dr. Pepper.

His defiance of the band of plastic and wires which keeps him prisoner to his own home makes Gerald laugh with glee. He is absolutely giddy. He wipes his tears. He wipes his hand on his boxers.

jj\_da\_sk8r: maybe i can come over

Ger\_Bear1: that sounds cool :)