

From Chapter 2 (page 52)

Professor Ellis Barlowe sat on the porch of an elegant, but slightly decaying Edwardian-era house, his long, lean frame draped into an Adirondack-style chair as he studied a book perched on his lap. He was framed, like an icon, by an arched window behind him. Still dressed in his busy-knit gray sweater, now buttoned up tightly against the faint chill of early evening, he looked rather benign now, at rest, his face untroubled and clearly absorbed by the work he was reading; and enveloped in a puzzling haze. But he looked now like the man Evan had been seeking: Thoughtful, peaceful, perhaps even capable of some warmth or understanding.

Evan stood paralyzed on the sidewalk before him, uncertain whether to keep walking or attempt a conversation. This could be his opportunity, or then again, he might be brushed away as brusquely as he had this morning. He had just decided to cross the street and move on, when Barlowe looked up, and focused his gray-blue stare at him, his brow wrinkling in a foreboding way.

“Hi,” Evan offered, feebly, even waving his hand in an awkward little way. Barlowe stared at him a moment longer, the expression on his face not changing.

“Mr. Claver, is it?” Evan saw now that he was holding a cigarette in his left hand, thus explaining the cloudy haze that surrounded him. He took a long draw, as he waited for Evan to reply.

“Yes, sir. I thought I’d just...take a walk down this way...”

The professor blew out a cloud of smoke, squinting through it. “Are you feeling better now? No more fainting spells?”

“I’m fine, really, sir.”

“Where are you from, Claver?”

“Pittsburgh. Well, a suburb, subdivision, Forest Grove, it’s...Pittsburgh,” he repeated again, feeling like a true idiot now.

Barlowe took another long, thoughtful drag on his cigarette. “Did you come about the room, then?”

“The...room?”

“Yes, the room I’m renting out. I’m sure they explained everything to you in the housing office. Five hundred a month. Not negotiable.”

Evan stared up at the house, astonished.

“Could I...see it?”

“Well....” Barlowe stubbed out his cigarette and rose to his full height. “I generally prefer a female student. The girls tend to be neater and quieter. But here we are a

week into the first semester and no one has signed on. You seem like a sober enough fellow, so perhaps you'll do." He ushered Evan inside, into a foyer lined with books.

Not just books, but *books*. Evan gaped about: It was as if he had wandered into the town library. Maybe it *was* the town library.

"Before we purchased this house, it had been a used bookstore. We bought it on the condition that all the books be left in place. It seemed like an appealing idea, at the time..." He sighed, then shook his head, as if in disgust. Evan, meanwhile, pondered the use of the pronoun *we*.

Off the foyer were four rooms—three were filled with books, the fourth was a homey sort of kitchen, with a refectory-style table, a large farmhouse sink and a sunporch projecting into the back yard. Evan saw the hint of a vast garden beyond.

Barlowe led Evan up a winding chestnut staircase, lit by an ornate stained-glass window at the top, an abstract design which glowed in shades of pale green and amber gold. The second-floor hallway was also lined with books.

"The books do make a good insulation," said Barlowe, continued. "I wish I had thought of it, when I lived in Maine." He pointed at the end of the hall. "Those are the children's rooms. You'd have your own bath, but it's in the hallway, over there."

"You have children?"

"My grandchildren. They live with me, but they're out now, with Beverley."

How could he have *grandchildren*? If he only left the monastery about a decade ago, and had been there for over twenty years...Evan frowned.

"Beverley is your...?"

"Housekeeper. My wife is deceased. Here you go." He pushed open the door to a small, dismal room, not unlike the retreat-house cell. The walls were cloaked in a beige-green damask paper that might have been installed in the 1950s, and a large brown-bordered crack ran across the ceiling. There was a sputtering radiator, a single, twin-sized bed, a nightstand, a small desk and chair and dresser and nothing else. Not a single book or bookcase in sight. A window looked directly into the neighbor's window, only six feet away.

Evan gave him a look of dismay. "You want \$500 a month for *this*?"

"It's what I need to get, to make my mortgage payment."

Theo, with a *mortgage*?

"What will it be, my boy? Yes or no?"

"I'll take it," Evan said, suddenly. "I'll...make it work, somehow."

"If it's worth it to you," Barlowe murmured.

And now Evan looked at him: Really *looked* at him, the man he had been spiritually connected with for the past three years, now made real, only a foot or two away. He studied this tall, thin, tired older man, who still reeked of tobacco smoke: the grim set

of his mouth, the eyes behind the spectacles so gray and light they seemed vaguely vacant rather than menacing now. He was not a completely unattractive man, but still... He tried to square this with the vision of Theo the beautiful archangel, the noble man he had seen on the wall of Benedetto, but he *couldn't*. It just wasn't the same man.

"Yes, sir," he said. "It will be...*incredibly* worth it, to me. I would be...*honored*, to live here, with you."

Barlow frowned at him, his lip curling as if about to make some dismissive remark. But instead: "Rent is due the first of the month. I'll need a security deposit, as students your age can be destructive—"

"I don't see much here to be destroyed, frankly," Evan suddenly blurted out. And surprise of surprise: Barlowe actually smiled, a little. A little maliciously...

"Yes, it's a bit Spartan, isn't it?" *Spartan* came out as *spah-tin*.

"Spartan? It's positively *monastic!*"

Barlowe's smile dissolved, his face tightening in disapproval.

"You're not going to be one of those little hermits, are you, locking yourself up and never coming out?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Because I won't permit that. I expect you to be a fully functioning member of the household, and the college community. We are involved in the life of the town as well, with philanthropic organizations, food drives, free clinics...I have a large garden out back, all the food except what's needed for the household goes to the indigent. I expect your involvement in all that, your help. There's more to university life than study and parties, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Your room includes two meals."

"I already have the college meal plan, I would eat there."

"We expect you at breakfast with us. The boarders *always* eat with the family in the morning."

"All right."

"Beverley will not be doing your laundry. She is not to wash your sheets. You will wash them yourself, in the machine downstairs."

"I understand." Evan felt a blush creeping up from his neck. How did he think he would dirty them?

"There is no connection with the, ah, Internet."

"You're not wired for cable here?"

Barlowe gave him another disdainful look.

“Bring me a certified check...First month’s rent and a \$250 deposit...and you can move in at your convenience.” He paused. “Do you have any questions?”

“Just one. About...Sundays...”

Barlowe frowned and cocked his head.

“Where’s the church?”

“The Methodist Church is at the end of West State Street...”

“I meant a *Catholic* church.”

Barlowe gave him a blank stare. “I have no idea. Maybe the next town over...”

Evan stared back at him, in disbelief.

He wandered back to the college at dusk, now in a daze. He did not think about the financial mess he had just immersed himself in: His parents had already paid for a full semester of room and board, and he wasn’t sure they could get any of that back or would willingly pick up the bill for an expensive rented room. The deposit would eat up most of his ‘entertainment fund’.

But the opportunity to live with Theo/Ellis! To actually *live* with him, side by side, break bread with him every morning...Eventually some kind of bond would have to form between them. It had to. And then...perhaps, the true Theo would emerge and reveal himself. And maybe then, Evan thought, his own life’s plan would take shape.