

ANGELA, KARINA, &  
RANDY ALCORN

The  
Ishbane  
Conspiracy  
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## *Note to Readers from Randy Alcorn*

The main characters in *The Ishbane Conspiracy* are eighteen, nineteen, and twenty years old. It's a book about young people and the struggles thrust upon them by their culture and the enemies of their souls. But while it's a book *about* youth (and their families), it's not just a book *for* youth. This isn't a "youth novel." It's an adult novel with main characters who happen to be young. It's as much for people in their thirties, fifties, and seventies as for people in their teens and twenties.

How can adults and teenagers enjoy the same book? The same way both enjoy many of the same movies. *October Sky* was about kids. *Remember the Titans* was about high schoolers. Yet most adults loved both movies. The central characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are children, but countless adults read them over and over. *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* have teenage main characters. Yet grandfathers enjoy them as much as grandchildren, and often more. No one thinks of them as teen novels. Likewise, *Lord of the Flies* is a story *about* boys, but it's not just a story *for* boys.

Of course, we're not foolish enough to consider *The Ishbane Conspiracy* a classic, but the point is valid—a story can have main characters who are young without being exclusively or even primarily a book for youth.

I receive many letters from teens and even preteens who have read my "adult" novels—*Deadline*, *Dominion*, *Edge of Eternity*, and *Lord Foulgrin's Letters*. Interestingly, these young readers rarely talk about the teenagers in those books (such as Carly in *Deadline*, and Ty or Gangster Cool in *Dominion*). Rather, they connect with the main characters, who are adults. Often their favorite character in *Deadline* is a young boy, Little Finn. Their favorite in *Dominion* is an old man, Obadiah Abernathy.

Similarly, *Dominion* is centered on the lives of African-Americans, but is not an African-American novel. Most of its readers aren't black. The primary characters in my novels tend to be men. But women read them as much as men do.

Just as the young can enjoy reading about the old, and whites about blacks, and women about men, *the older can enjoy reading about the younger*. This is one of the great benefits of reading a good story—entering into another person's world and coming away with a better understanding of real people. My daughters and I hope that parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts will gain from *The Ishbane Conspiracy* a greater understanding of the battles our young people fight and the joy they seek. I expect even more young people will read this novel than my previous ones. But I hope no fewer older people will read it, because it is for them as much as any book I've ever written.

My daughters Angela and Karina helped me write this book. It was my first collaboration since writing a book with my wife, Nanci, fifteen years ago, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I can't think of two people I could have worked with who would have been more qualified and skilled, both spiritually and artistically. We read and discussed books on fiction writing, brainstormed characters and plots, stimulated one another's thinking, prayed together, had lots of fun, and shared the frustrations and mind-numbing hard work of disciplined writing. Angela and Karina are true coauthors, not token ones. This is their book as much as it's mine, and they have my deepest respect.

Angela, Karina, and I—along with their mom Nanci—are pleased to offer this book to our Lord Jesus. We pray He'll use it to make readers of all ages aware of the spiritual battles we face. May our eyes be opened to the strategies our accursed enemies are using to sabotage the lives of young people. And may we also see in a new light the King's joyful alternative.

*"Sometimes the best way to see a thing  
is to look at its opposite."*

A. W. TOZER, *THE PURSUIT OF GOD*

DECEMBER 31, 3:25 A.M.

The moonlight cast an eerie shadow through the bedroom window. Jillian Fletcher kicked the mass of blankets to the side of the bed. She lay awake, weary, but unable to close her eyes. She appeared safe and snug in her nice home in the suburbs, but her heart ached for something she could never quite identify. Tonight a foreboding presence seemed to occupy the room. She wondered if she'd watched one too many horror movies with her friends.

A chill worked under Jillian's skin. She had the feeling she was being watched. She got up and shut the blinds, then spread two fingers between them and peeked out. She looked at the dark elm tree outside her second story bedroom. Was someone in the tree, watching her? For a moment she thought she saw the glimmer of eyes. She stifled a scream, then when she could see nothing, shivered and backed away. She went back to bed and pulled the covers over her, as if they were a warrior's shield protecting her from falling arrows.

The digital wall clock moved toward midnight.

"Another pointless New Year's party," Jillian Fletcher said, yawning, drained from last night's sleeplessness.

"The only people who aren't drunk are boring...or taken," Brittany said. "If this doesn't pick up soon, I say we leave and find a real party."

"Or we could just go home. I'm so exhausted."

"After this spine-tingling excitement, you'll be asleep before I get you home. You need to get a life, Jillian. And I'm just the one to help you do it. Back in a sec."

"Can't we go home?" Jillian said, her voice trailing off behind Brittany, who was already halfway across the room.

Jillian scanned Adam Brotnov's huge downstairs family room. There must've been fifty kids. The drinkers were over in their corner. Ty Lott and David Richards tilted back their beers, laughing too loudly at nothing. Apparently Adam's parents didn't have problems with underage drinking—or didn't think it was their business to come downstairs and check the place out. Jillian watched Ty light a joint. She wondered what her mom would think if she knew her perfect little daughter was at this kind of party. Most parents didn't have a clue. Mom was one of them.

Adam approached Ty.

"If you're going to smoke weed, go outside, away from the house." Ty and David laughed their way up the stairs and out the door. Jillian guessed they wouldn't be back. She felt relieved. Mom wouldn't smell it on her clothes.

There were three downstairs bedrooms. One had all the coats. Another was a make-out room, but it was full. Tired of waiting, some had gone out to their cars.

The third room had a group thing going, with a circle on the floor. Jillian guessed it was a game of Dungeons & Dragons. She drew closer to get a look. The door was slightly open. She smelled a sickening sweet incense. It was a New Age thing, with lights out and candles burning. Two girls and a guy were turning up tarot cards, then interpreting them. One of the guys was Ian Stewart, Brittany's old boyfriend.

Jillian felt something brush her ear. She jerked around.

"Let's go in," Brittany said. "It'll be fun." Jillian didn't want to, but she followed Brittany, who immediately sat in the circle. Jillian stayed back by the door, crouching down, trying not to draw attention to herself.

"This is the Magician card," said Skyla Stokes. She was a friend of Brittany's. She sat on folded legs, facing most of the kids. She had this wild Joan of Arc haircut that made Jillian wonder if the hairdresser sheared it with dull hedge trimmers. She was a four-point student and into Wicca. Some of the kids called her "Sabrina" behind her back, but for Skyla it was serious stuff. She was part of a campus coven of thirteen, mostly seniors. Brittany had told Jillian that Skyla put a curse on Corrie Ward just before her skiing accident left her paralyzed.

Skyla looked at one of the boys and said, "Okay, you drew the Magician—that means you have a mastery of words and matter. You have hermetic wisdom."

"What's hermetic wisdom?" the boy asked. Everybody laughed.

"You're a mediator-communicator," Skyla said. "You're a master manipulator of the material world. You can work miracles and do illusions. You are Hermes, god of orators and liars, merchants and thieves. Okay, now draw your other card."

He drew.

"The ace of swords," Skyla pronounced.

"What does it mean?"

"It's about the brutal aspect of power. It's about violence and consuming heat."

"Ooh," was the general response, partly joking, but Jillian sensed she wasn't the only uneasy one.

"Who's next?"

Someone Jillian couldn't see drew a card.

"You're the priestess," Skyla said.

Jillian stood on tiptoes to see her—it was Tara, a girl from youth group. Her dad was on the church board.

"You have the spiritual and intellectual face of the anima," Skyla said, "the feminine nature of the soul. You have primordial feminine wisdom, with the balancing forces of nature. You know the ancient healing arts, magic, and spiritual mystery."

"I *do*? Cool," Tara said. More laughter. The crowd seemed captivated. Though it unnerved her, Jillian was riveted too. Skyla's mysterious voice, the darkness broken by flickering candles... well, at least it wasn't boring.

"Draw your next one," Skyla said to Tara. She turned it up.

"The Death card!" somebody called. The room rumbled.

"Whoa. Look out!" said Ian Stewart. "Violence, brutal power, death—everybody be careful driving home!"

Laughter erupted. Brittany's laugh was the loudest. And she looked right at Ian.

Jillian sneaked out the door, hoping Brittany didn't see her. Brit would tease her, tell her she was paranoid. Maybe she was. Death and violence weren't entertaining thoughts. Not with what had happened to her dad.

Jillian walked aimlessly around, hearing the occasional laugh, but noticing the vacant troubled look on a lot of faces. Were people really having fun, or were they just pretending to? Were they as lonely as she was? She didn't feel at home here.

The party was supposed to be a celebration, but why did she feel so vacant? And why did everyone else look so empty too? Only one semester of high school left. But what would be next? She wanted to go away, anywhere. Do something different, anything. Find whatever it was she was missing. But how? Where? Jillian didn't know what was wrong. But whatever it was, she felt powerless to change it. What did she have to look forward to? She sighed. Her want list was topped by two items. She wanted a boyfriend. And she wanted to move to a new house. She needed a new person and a new place. Yeah, that was it. Her prospects for happiness boiled down to two questions—who and where?

Jillian got some punch and sat in a chair by herself, away from the traffic, staring at the room as if it were a galaxy far, far away.

Suddenly it went pitch black. An eerie silence was pierced by screams. Guys were taking advantage of the opportunity to scare girls and pretend they weren't afraid. Jillian crossed her arms and wrapped them tight, pulling back from the darkness into her chair. The lights popped back on. Kids cheered.

After twenty minutes, Brittany and several others finally emerged from the room.

"It was cool, Jillian. The lights went out at the perfect time. You really should try the tarot cards. We've got to get some."

Jillian nodded, not saying what she really thought. She rarely said to Brittany what she really thought.

Brittany ruffled her friend's hair, then Jillian playfully poked Brittany's stomach.

"Ow! Careful with the abs. Those exercises are killing me; the price you pay for perfection." Her eyes darted. "Hey. There goes Ian."

Jillian followed Brittany's gaze to the corner couch by a big punch bowl, where Ian Stewart was greeting another guy. They slapped hands.

"You still have it for Ian, don't you, Brit? That's why you wanted to go in that room."

"My interest was purely metaphysical," she said. "Well, okay, maybe I wanted to reconnect with Ian. We got pretty close... you know, before I... had my problems. He backed off then, like I had leprosy. I don't blame him. I was a little messed up. Hey, you see who's talking to him?"

"I see him. Who is he?"

"You don't remember Robbie Gonzales?"

"No! That's Rob? He looks so different with short hair. Guess I haven't seen him since he graduated last year. He goes to Portland State, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. I heard that's where Ian wants to go next year."

"I wonder if Rob still drives that pimped-out banger car, the black one? He looks... nice."

"He looks *buf*. If I wasn't taller than him, I'd be interested."

"Well, I'm not taller than him, and I *am* interested." Jillian felt instant redness, realizing she sounded more like Brittany than herself.

"Honey, there's nobody in this room you're taller than. Okay," Brittany whispered, raising an eyebrow. "Let's do a bathroom mirror check, then we'll mosey on over their direction."

"I'll go, but I'm not going to flirt."

"You say you're interested, then you say you're not going to flirt? Make up your mind, sweetheart. I know where I'm headed... right back into Ian's life. Rob's there for your taking."

"I'm not going to throw myself at him."

"Don't get self-righteous. You've gone conservative on me ever since... well, you know." Jillian teared up instantly. "You're talking about Dad?"

"I didn't mean it that way. I meant since your dad's... change. You know. When he got religious and stuff. At first you hated it, but then you started to buy into it. And then..."

"And then he died," Jillian said, a single tear cutting through her makeup, and exposing the underlying freckles.

"Oh, man. I'm sorry, Jill. I didn't mean to bring up your dad."

"No, don't say that! I *want* people to bring him up. Sometimes a few hours go by where I don't think about him, and I feel awful."

"Do you think he'd want you to feel that way?"

"Probably not."

“Right. He’d want you to move on with your life. He’d want you to go talk with Rob.” Jillian laughed at the leap in her friend’s logic. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Let’s see that face. Nothing Bobby Brown Essentials can’t repair. I’ll get you back in the mood.”

Brittany grabbed Jillian’s right hand and tugged on her to follow. In a lighter moment, Jillian would have bounced along next to her. As number one flier for Kennedy High’s cheerleading squad, she was known for being “spirited,” without crossing that fine line to “bubbly.” But her dad’s death in the car accident last spring had taken its toll. Right when she thought the wounds had started to heal, fresh pain would cut through her again.

She’d been reading the Bible once in a while and attending a church youth group, more than anything because she knew that’s what her dad would have wanted. But except for her friend Lisa from school and Greg and Kristi, the youth pastor and his wife, Jillian hadn’t made any real friends at church. She had a new faith, sort of, and yet . . . she didn’t really own it. She wasn’t sure she wanted to. Not after what God had done to her dad.

They marched across the room beside a ten-foot hors d’oeuvres table. Brittany’s straight cinnamon brown hair hung nearly to her elbows, and it swung like a pendulum from one side to the other. Something about it always made Jillian want to laugh. They were such opposites.

Five minutes later they emerged from the bathroom. Brittany led the way, wandering through the crowd, accidentally-on-purpose meandering near Ian and Rob, who were sitting on a couch, engaged in heavy conversation.

Brittany picked up a ladle from a punch bowl five feet from the guys, then looked at Jillian and said in a loud voice, “Yeah, that’s true, isn’t it!” She laughed hard and long. Jillian stared at her, then saw the commanding look in her friend’s eyes, and suddenly started laughing herself.

“Brit?”

Brittany, her face full of surprise, turned and looked at Ian. “Ian Stewart? I didn’t know *you* were here.”

Ian grinned. “Didn’t you see me in the tarot room? I was hoping we could talk. I miss hanging out with you. Seems like it’s been months. You remember Roberto?” “Of course. Hey, Robbie. Love your hair.”

Rob laughed, like he wasn’t sure if she was kidding.

“Jillian, remember Rob Gonzales?” Brittany asked.

“Sure. Hi, Rob,” Jillian said. He nodded and smiled.

Ian pulled a vacant love seat over to face the couch. “Sit down,” Ian said. Brittany sat next to Ian on the love seat, leaving Jillian standing there, gazing at the space next to Rob. “We didn’t mean to interrupt,” Brittany said.

“No problem. We were getting too serious for a party anyway, right Rob?” Jillian sat down carefully, trying to leave the perfect amount of space.

The four talked and laughed. Within five minutes Jillian was amazed at how natural it felt, how comfortable she was with these guys, especially Rob. It was like being with old friends.

Brittany pointed to the smoky quartz on the chain around Ian’s neck. “What’s the stone? It’s new, isn’t it?”

“It’s an Osiris crystal. Got it last month.”

“What’s Osiris?” Jillian asked.

“An Egyptian god.”

“You believe in God?” Rob asked.

“I believe in gods. I can’t narrow it down to one god as opposed to another. I don’t think we’re alone. I think there are a lot of outside forces that influence us.”

“Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do.” Brittany sang the *Twilight Zone* theme. “Still reading all your metaphysical stuff, Ian?”

“When I’m not playing basketball. And when I don’t have a beautiful girl at my side.” “So how do you like Portland State?” Jillian asked Rob.

“Some of the profs are from another planet—speaking of the *Twilight Zone*—but some are pretty cool.” His dark brown eyes sparkled. “Besides doing a ton of studying, I’m involved with a campus Bible study group. Plus there’s an awesome church nearby. Sometimes I make it out here on Sundays to my home church.”

“How’s campus life?” Jillian asked.

“Fine, as long as you stay away from the drugs and booze and the . . .” he looked at the floor, “other stuff. But I really like it. I’ve met a lot of great people. I’ve been trying to talk Ian into coming next fall, staying in the apartments, maybe being my roommate. I’m sure the basketball coach would like to meet him.”

They talked and laughed about everything. Jillian tuned out the rest of the party and lost herself in conversation.

“So how’s your senior year going?” Rob asked.

“Got senioritis, of course. I’m really looking forward to getting out. Mom says I shouldn’t rush it. But I want to get out there, do something. Cheerleading’s going great, church youth group is good. Even work’s kind of fun.”

“Where do you work?”

“I’m a waitress at Red Robin. Just Thursday nights and an occasional weekend. I get great tips.”

“Red Robin, huh? Maybe I’ll stop by sometime.” Rob seemed to blush, then turned towards Ian. “When’s your next basketball game?”

“Friday night, home against Grant. They’ve got a 6-7 center, but my man’s 6-4, so we’re even. We faced off in a summer clinic. He’s decent, but I can handle him. Should be a good game.”

“Maybe I’ll come check you out Friday,” Rob said.

“Great,” Brittany said. “Then you can see Jillian do her cheerleading. She’s a . . . what do you call it? Glider?”

“Flier,” Jillian said, not smiling. She wanted to strangle Brittany, who was already asking Ian about the meaning of the Osiris stone. Jillian and Rob gradually leaned back and caught each other’s eye.

“You mentioned your church,” Rob said. “Tell me more about it.”

The more she talked, the more she wanted to. He seemed genuinely interested. “11:59!” someone shouted.

“What?” Brittany asked.

“It’s almost midnight?” Rob said. “You’ve got to be kidding. Last I looked it was 10:45!”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” Ian said.

“I guess,” Jillian said. “This started out as one of the worst New Year’s parties I’ve ever been at. Now . . . it’s like one of the best.”

“What do you mean, *one* of the best?” Ian asked, his arm around Brittany.

Twenty kids gathered around a computer, where full-screen digits counted down the seconds. When it showed “11,” Jillian heard the deep breath.

“Ten, nine, eight . . .” kids shouted in unison.

Ian and Brittany turned to each other and pressed their lips together. Jillian looked nervously at Rob out of the corner of her eye.

“Seven, six, five . . .”

Rob moved a little closer to her. She hoped he wasn’t close enough to see her freckles through her make-up.

“Four, three, two . . .”

“Happy New Year, Jillian,” Rob said.

Streamers flew, balloons popped, noisemakers fired, someone beat on pans and someone else turned up the music. Jonathan from the jazz band blew his trumpet. Everybody laughed.

Jillian felt something she hadn’t felt in months. Maybe it was hope. For the first time since her dad’s death she actually felt like celebrating.

Rob stepped up to the table, filled three punch glasses and handed one first to Jillian, then Brittany, then Ian. He filled his own glass and lifted it up in the center of their little circle. “To four friends, and to the year ahead of us . . . whatever it may bring.”

The four glasses clanked, Ian’s a little too hard, spilling some punch. They all laughed and drank up.

A cell phone rang. Five people reached for theirs, but drew blanks. Ian pulled his phone from a big pocket on his cargo pants and held it up to his ear.

“Yeah, Ty? Right. Still at the party. Wait. Slow down. I can’t understand you, man. You called 911? What do you mean? Why?”

Ian waved his long arm for quiet. People stopped what they were doing and gathered by the couch to listen. “David? He was just drunk, man. I’ve seen him that way lots of times. Wait . . . what did you say? I can’t understand. Start over. Say it really slow.”

While everyone in the room listened breathlessly, Ian’s face turned white.

“David’s *dead*?”



# Letter 1

My dearly demoted Foulgrin,

So you've just returned from a long visit to the House of Corrections? I trust you found it therapeutic. Beelzebub has made me your parole officer. He instructed me to watch you carefully.

When I heard you had the gall to call yourself "Lord," why was I not surprised? Even when I supervised you centuries ago, you were my most arrogant agent.

Don't bore me with your excuses. You claim your uncomplimentary references to Beelzebub were a trap set for your old understudy Squaltain? I'm uninterested in politics.

I'm a no-nonsense demon. I equip subordinates in the fine art of deceiving and destroying human vermin. Keep your mouth shut and do your duty. Your previous experience with three of these four young vermin should prove helpful.

Let's get some things straight. First, Lucifer gave me the title "Prince"—I did not assign it to myself. Second, I welcome this new assignment no more than you. *Your* demotion got *me* reassigned from a top administrative position. To be transferred from directing the American politics department to baby-sitting you is a major downward career move.

I won't play games, Foulgrin. I have a job to do. I'll do it as efficiently as possible so I can quickly return to Beelzebub's inner circle. Your former secretary Obsmut is now at my service. He's assured me he knows your tactics well. He can read between the lines of your communication. Put aside your ego. Let's get some work done.

I read your initial dossier on Jillian Fletcher. You whine that you don't grasp the language and emotions of this young female. You complain you don't understand her taste in clothes or music. But in order to defeat the enemy, you must *know* the enemy. You must study her, her friends, and her family. This will give you the edge so you can take her down.

What always matters is the bottom line. Is she moving away from the Enemy or moving toward Him? Whoever or whatever draws her toward Him must be at the top of your hit list. Eliminate her any way you can.

Despite your failure to understand Jillian, you say you're confident you'll succeed. You've seen her up close, due to your years assigned to her father, Jordan Fletcher? I have his file in front of me. You failed miserably with him, Foulgrin. Is it your intention to do the same with her?

The reports show Fletcher's life and death were a defeat for Erebus. Many were touched by his conversion. The Enemy even used this sludgebag's memorial service for His ends. Fletcher left his family a Christian heritage. But there's a dark lining in every silver cloud. First, his fatherly influence is gone. Second, the girl blames the Enemy for taking him from her.

New Year's is one of my favorite seasons. It means Christmas—or as we prefer to call it, the "winter holidays"—is safely behind us. We've buried the manger under mountains of toys, videos, and designer clothes. But there's always the threat of the Carpenter rearing His head and being seen for who He is. The Enemy has this annoying habit of enabling some of them to see through our blanket of materialism. They grasp the terrifying significance of His invasion of the dark planet. As long as the Carpenter stays in the manger, it's tolerable. But if they see Him crucified and risen, beware. All heaven could break loose.

The New Year always raises hopes in these bloated bags of chemicals the Enemy calls His image-bearers. We dash their hopes until they become cynical, resigned to eking out their miserable existence. Then they die and victory is ours. The New Year inspires innumerable resolutions broken before the frosts of February. All their efforts at self-reform

divert their attention from the Enemy's offer of lasting supernatural change.

The atmosphere of the party sounded delicious—drinking, drugs, fornication, materialism, gluttony, pretense, deceit, and even the occult. A demon's dream party. Increasingly typical, I'm glad to say. That the vermin died from alcohol poisoning is icing on the cake. We've cultivated a youth culture of death and self-destruction. The more the better.

Remember, though, the Enemy has a way of using our victories as warning shots across their bows. There's always the danger He'll use death to turn their thoughts toward what lies beyond it. And what they can do to prepare for it.

I want full reports not only on Jillian, but also on the other three young bipeds. Meanwhile, keep them busy. Their parents believe ceaseless activity will keep them out of trouble. What it really does is keep them from pondering what's missing in their lives. They'll never turn their attention to the Enemy. Not as long as we can lock them onto our long lineup of alternatives.

Anticipating your first report,

*Prince Ishbane*