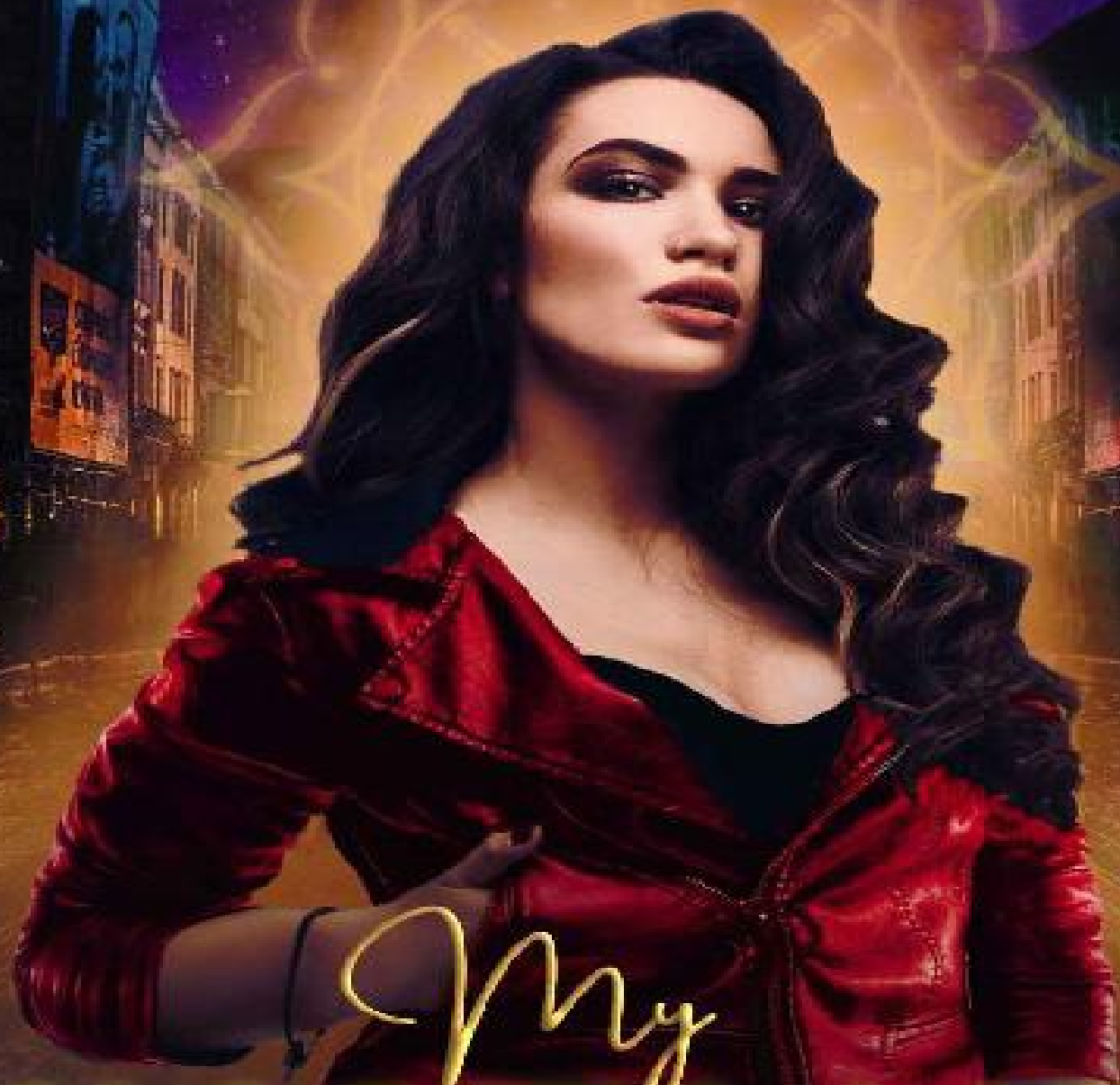


RAVEN VALE



My

INSTANT
KARMA

GODS ARE HIRING SERIES

MY INSTANT KARMA

GODS ARE HIRING SERIES

RAVEN VALE

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Thank you for reading!

Cupid's Last Arrow Blurb

Also by Raven Vale

About the Author

AUTHOR'S NOTE

*M*y Instant Karma is the first book in the standalone series, Gods Are Hiring. It's a steamy fantasy darkish MF pairing romance with some dark themes and laughs thrown in.

As hinted by the title and series title, there will be talk of a wide range of gods, myths, karma, reincarnation, and other spiritual topics. However, my books journey are about self-growth and love is the core theme of this series.

CONTENT WARNING

Language, spicy detailed love scenes, mentions of past PA, SA, alcoholism and self-harm, karmic retribution, death and violence, and hazing of the FMC that includes nudity.



Please, if you find a typos, contact me at [author.ravenvale \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:author.ravenvale@gmail.com).

PICKUP LINES

I sit alone at the bar, projecting my best *don't fuck with me* vibes while nursing my watermelon mojito. It's late, and the place is emptying quickly, which is exactly how I like it. To say I'm not in the mood to deal with another jerk would be an understatement, but an oblivious surfer wannabe strolls up to me anyway.

This leftover dud has a swagger that doesn't quite fit his barely average looks. Don't get me wrong, I don't only hook up with guys who are conventionally handsome. However, this guy's energy is pinging on my psychic radar, warning that he's someone to be avoided. Besides, he's just a desperate fish that's now realizing he's in the dried-up desert.

Desperation is never a good aura on anyone.

I'm not even his type, but I suppose I *am* a warm body, so I'm close enough.

I've watched him all night, circling the bar and striking out with a series of blonde bombshells in body-con dresses. He's making his eleventh hour, last-ditch effort with me—an average-looking, brown-eyed brunette wearing a modest blouse and jeans.

I don't quite fit in with this crowd of middle-class social climbers, but it's the closest bar to my new apartment.

I didn't even bother with makeup, not that I usually do much to paint my face. The only way I could demonstrate that I'm trying any less would be to wear flannel pajamas.

This guy must be hard up to approach the only woman here who obviously isn't looking for a hookup.

"Hi. I haven't seen you here before," he says with his best imitation of a

sex god, which he isn't nailing. *At all.*

I clear my throat, readying my voice for a smackdown rejection.

Instead, I stare at him, because he technically hasn't asked me a question, so why should I respond?

I refuse to make his intrusion into my personal space easier on him. I was going for the whole *solo* pity party thing, drowning my stupidity all by myself—yeah, in public. I get how stupid this idea is *now*, but I have a rule not to drink alone, as if that will somehow prevent me from becoming a drunk like my father.

Mr. Wannabe Swagger raises his eyebrows expectantly, waiting for my explanation of why I just miraculously appeared in his life—as if my very presence is for his pleasure. Ugh.

I sit very still. Perhaps, like a small-brained predator, he might not see his prey if they aren't moving. Maybe, just maybe, he will lose interest if I'm not reacting.

One can hope.

Yeah, I know that won't work.

Catching onto the fact I haven't replied, he asks, "Uh, is this your first time here?"

"No."

The poor boy is sweating now. I'm almost inclined to let him off the hook and send him on his way with a snarky comment.

Almost.

But he brought this on himself, so I wait him out. If he understood the basics of human body language, then he should have realized I'm not in the mood for this crap.

A tortured eternity drags out between us as he studies my stony stare.

In his opinion, he's scraping the bottom of the barrel and his unwelcome interest should flatter me as the lowly bar dregs I am.

Finally giving up, he blurts out, "You're a bitch."

Wow, and I didn't even say anything other than no. The one-word answer might be a record for me, if I don't include the guys who get mad just because I don't turn for their catcalls on the street.

What would this guy have called me if he heard all the other things I had primed to unload on him?

"Aren't you glad you dodged that bullet then?" I raise my glass to toast his successful evaluation of my personality, and I clink our glasses together

as he takes a moment to process what just happened.

Dude, this poser is slow.

The very least he could have done was entertain me with a fresh pickup line, or has the world run out of new material? With the regurgitation reboot of every film franchise, my guess is that the Muses have run dry. Tapped out. *Finito*.

As I ponder that question, the Don Juan imposter huffs and storms off. I'm sure he curses his nice guy status, not realizing that he just proved that's a fallacy by his rapid descent into name-calling.

What if I were just shy? I'm not, but that isn't the point.

I drain the rest of my mojito and toss down a wad of cash to pay my tab, then I call, "Keep the change!" to the bartender.

She nods with an almost imperceptible eye roll. She probably thinks I left a buck or two as a tip. I consider staying to see the look on her face when she sees the outrageous amount. I watched her put up with a slew of idiots hitting on her all night, and then stiffing her with crappy tips, so I kind of feel like she deserves a win tonight. At least one of us does.

My phone chimes, letting me know my ride is close. Slipping on my red leather jacket, I head out the front door to meet my driver. Luckily, I'm the only one outside.

Even the smokers have disappeared, likely having found themselves a lukewarm body for a disappointing one-night stand of paltry, mediocre sex.

Yeah, I know I'm bitter.

There isn't a car in sight. I recheck my app. My driver should have been here by now, and it's weirdly quiet for this usually busy street.

The bright streetlights dim and barely illuminate the sidewalk in front of me, and a buzzing sensation vibrates at the back of my head and down my spine—my intuition's way of telling me something is very, very wrong, like death knocking on my door.

I wrap my arms around myself and briefly turn my focus inward to see if I can perceive what's going on, but my psychic ability doesn't pick up anything specific.

I quickly scan my surroundings again, but I can't see anything or anyone on the dark street.

Even at this late hour, there should be a steady stream of traffic, but I haven't seen or heard any activity at all, not even a honk in the distance. There isn't even a breeze, which is odd for a coastal city like this one.

Another warning vibrates down my spine. From a few self-defense classes, my harrowing life on the streets, and my psychic knowledge, I've learned to trust my instincts. They are naturally better than most.

Besides, I have many legitimate reasons to fear for my life.

Movement catches my eye. A limo heads in my direction and then stops at the curb in front of me. Its back window rolls down, and an elegant-looking woman leans forward and smiles at me.

I glance around, wondering what she is looking for.

"Tessa Maat?" she asks.

My eyes bulge out, and fear steals my ability to react.

Fuck, I've been discovered. She knows my *real* name—my legal name. I thought I'd done a better job of hiding all these years.

This woman, from what I can see, is a high-class, wealthy socialite. I'm sure her lipstick costs more than my entire outfit, and I'm not exactly cheap with my clothes.

This woman's aura screams privilege and power.

What does someone like her want with me?

I finally gather myself together and ask, "What do you want?"

"To have a chat." The sultry siren beckons me closer with a manicured finger. "Come with me."

My well-honed instincts say this is a no-go.

"I'm good, but thanks." With quick steps, I walk toward my apartment. I'm only a mile away from my new place anyway.

Her limo keeps pace alongside me. "If you don't come with me, you'll die," she says.

I turn on my heel and project as much hostility as I can muster. Bullies often back off when confronted, and this woman qualifies as a bully.

"Is that a threat?" My fists clench at my sides. I give my surroundings a quick scan to make sure she doesn't have someone who's about to jump me, but eerily, there still isn't anyone around. I can't even hear any noise from the bar.

"Not a threat. It's what will happen if you walk home alone tonight. I have *seen* it."

She is referencing my profession as a psychic. Is she letting me know she hunted me down for Big Eddie? If not, how does someone in this new town know about my abilities?

Deflecting is my next defense, so I fold my arms over my chest defiantly.

“And you know this *how*?”

She flings the door open as the limo moves closer. “I’m Karma.”

It takes me about three seconds to lose my composure and laugh. “That’s rich.”

She just smirks without humor.

“*Karma*?” I repeat accusingly. “So what is this then? Are you here to threaten, beat, and/or kill me?”

“None of the above. Get in the car,” she orders, and her eyes illuminate with a red glow. I swallow my anger in exchange for fear. These aren’t some novelty contacts that can make someone’s eyes light up.

I shift my focus to my third eye. The ability to read someone’s soul drains me, so I hardly ever do this when I’m not legitimately using my psychic skills with a client, but I need to *see* her aura with no reality filters.

When I use my *sight*, most people appear as muted, wispy colors and small, blurry forms, but when I open my psychic senses to perceive this woman...

Pure freaking blinding light.

My mouth drops open. “*What* are you?”

“Get in the car, and I will explain everything.”

I contemplate my choices. I could risk walking home. Maybe I will die, or maybe I’ll be fine. I could run, lose *Karma*, stay in a hotel, and then skip town tomorrow, or I could stupidly trust this... *woman* and hear her out.

“What do you want with me?” I ask. Whatever she is, she is powerful, and it would be dumb not to ask what she wants.

Karma sighs as if I were a petulant child. “I *had* planned on saving your life, but if you’d rather die...” She reaches out to close her door.

“Wait.” I step closer, and I *feel* power wafting off of her. It’s like approaching a jaguar in the wild. I know I could die at any second, perhaps with a snap of her fingers. “If you are Karma, then why would you want to save me?”

I’m not the best human on the planet and I’m definitely not an innocent doe.

“I have a proposition for you, but I need to restart time again,” Karma remarks casually, as if stopping time is such a routine thing. “So if you don’t get in the car, I will have to leave you to your scheduled fate.”

I glance at my phone. The time hasn’t changed since I walked out of the bar.

She did freeze time.

I shake off my nerves and hop into the Karma-mobile.

This is probably a big mistake, but she tells the truth when she says my life is in danger. I know that much. I just hope she isn't the one who will end my life.

AN OFFER I CAN'T REFUSE

*K*arma is even more stunning up close.

In the small confines of the limo, I feel like I can barely breathe with her overwhelming aura. If she wasn't zapping and frying all my senses, I would find her quite attractive. She has sleek, black hair that falls to her waist like a cape, golden-toned, buttery skin, and sharp yet somehow feminine features. Beautiful. As it is though, I just want to bolt from the limo.

She inspects me as if she is evaluating my worth, and I don't really want to know in what ways she finds me lacking.

To avoid the look of disappointment, I stare out my window and notice cars moving along the road again.

Tired of her calculating assessment, I gruffly ask, "So you're *Karma*?"

She raises a graceful eyebrow, silently commenting on my bluster. "*Instant Karma*, to be more specific."

Despite my nerves, or maybe because of them, I burst out in laughter. When she looks like she is about to dish out some instant karma on my ass, I stop and shake my head. "I just didn't think that was a real thing, and a person—"

"Oh, I am real and different from Original Karma."

"Right." I think back to my brief interest in Zen Buddhism. "Because karma is about not learning from our mistakes."

"Exactly." She purses her lips. "However, the majority of people in this world *don't* learn from their mistakes, so I came into being to make the lessons a bit clearer and more direct."

"This is truly fascinating stuff, but what does it have to do with me?"

"I can't single-handedly enact all the justice for misdeeds, so I have an

army.” She waves her graceful hand, gesturing vaguely out the limo’s window.

“You have an army?” I ask, confused. “To dole out justice?”

“How do you think it gets done?”

“I don’t know. Cosmic shit?” I shrug. “God?”

“*Goddess*, and I *am* that... *cosmic shit*,” she says, her dislike for my label obvious.

“You are a goddess?” She nods, and I continue. “I still don’t understand why you stopped time and allegedly saved my life. Am I supposed to be an instant karma lesson for someone else?”

“Yes, in a way. I am offering you a job.”

I choke on my own spit because I’m suave like that. “A job?” I sputter.

“To be my feet on the ground, enacting justice to those who deserve a kick in the ass.”

I stare at her. This has to be a joke. “How does this work, exactly?”

“I have teams throughout the world, people who owe me for saving their lives, and they make sure justice is served.”

“A job would imply money. Do I get paid for this service?”

“Food and housing will be provided, as well as a modest stipend and access to vehicles. When you prove your worth to me, you will enjoy an expense account set up for special missions that require a bit more... *finesse*.” The limo stops at the curb outside my apartment, and she asks curtly, “Do you accept my offer?”

This is a lot to process. “Can I think about it?”

“No. Either you accept now or—”

“Will I die if I leave without accepting?” I glance out the window to see if anyone is waiting to murder me. This could all be a setup—her setup. If Karma wants to fuck with me, then this would be a great way to do it. Give me an ounce of hope and then crush me. It isn’t like life hasn’t done that to me before.

“If you leave without accepting, then the outcome of your death is likely unavoidable. However, no future event is ever one hundred percent certain,” Karma explains. “I have altered the timeline a bit, but probably not enough to ensure your safety.”

“So unless I want to die, I *have* to accept.” I glare at her. “Is this how you get everyone to work for you? Coercion?”

“That, and the understanding that your fate after death will shift. You

have racked up some negative karma points lately. Consider this a way for you to work them off.”

“So... it’s community service?” I quip.

“Exactly!” Karma grins. She knows she has me.

My shoulders droop in defeat. “What now?”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes. I will do your bidding, *Goddess*,” I reply with a bit of a bite.

She chuckles. At least I haven’t pissed her off. I need to remember she holds my fate in her hands.

“Good. Get out,” Karma orders.

“But you said I was going to die out there!” I argue, panic in my voice.

I hold on to the door handle, but the door opens on its own. Well, actually, it opens with Karma’s power.

I’m abruptly tossed to the curb, and I fall to the ground, my knees scraping on the concrete sidewalk.

I look up to see a man towering over me. He wears a dark hoodie, and shadows obscure his face.

I scramble to my feet to dart back into the limo for safety, but Karma and her ride have disappeared.

The hooded man steps closer, looming like Death himself. “There you are,” he says with menace, the blade in his hand glinting in the streetlights.

Great. I am going to die after all.

“Payback’s a bitch,” the man snarls.

Figuring I might as well go out as the smart-ass I am, I sass, “No, but apparently Karma actually *is*.”

A laugh barks out behind my attacker.

What the hell? Is there more than one hitman?

My hooded attacker spins toward the direction of the laughter.

Before he turns all the way around, he crumples at my feet.

I gasp. “What the—”

With my hooded would-be killer out of the way, I now see a chuckling man manically grinning at me. “Let’s go,” Chuckles snaps and walks toward my apartment building, expecting me to follow like an obedient puppy.

But I don’t follow.

What’s going on? Why would I obey this stranger?

“Let’s go!” Chuckles growls.

Instead of complying, I race down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

Glancing over my shoulder, I note Chuckles isn't chasing me. Before I can turn forward to see where I'm going, I collide with a solid object—correction... a very firm chest.

The chest's owner says, "But we insist, beautiful. Karma says you are *ours*."

"*Yours?*" I gulp.

His arms wrap around my waist, bracing me against him.

My hands press against his shoulders of steel, but I can't push him away, so I give him a once-over.

Sure, he's hot as sin—strong jaw, built like a boxer, dark, glossy hair, and intense, sky blue eyes set against a tan complexion. This guy is panty-combusting sexy, but I don't like his tone.

Locked in an odd staring contest in the arms of a stranger, I refuse to lose and blink first.

An ineffable look takes over his face, and Hot-as-sin breaks first by releasing me, then he grips my upper arm firmly and drags me back to his friend, Chuckles.

I struggle to get away, but I don't have a chance of breaking his hold. He is a solid foot taller than my five-three height. By the way his tight black tee clings to his chest and biceps, I know he doesn't skip out on gym days.

As we pass my unconscious attacker, I glance down, but I don't have a chance to see his face to recognize him.

After I'm hauled up to my apartment door, Chuckles holds out his hand. "Keys."

When I don't retrieve them from my pocket, Chuckles reaches in and takes his damn time searching for them. I jerk away, but Hot-as-sin holds me firmly.

Glowing at Chuckles, I get my first good look at him. He reminds me of an all-American football quarterback. I wouldn't be surprised to see him with a letterman jacket, even if he looks like he's in his mid-twenties. He's clean-cut, with dirty blond hair, an athletic build, and a five-foot-eleven frame, but there's an edgy glint in his gray eyes, like he isn't all apple pie and tailgate beers.

"Who *are* you?" I ask indignantly as he unlocks my apartment door.

They don't answer.

Hot-as-sin tugs me into my place and releases me with a nudge.

"Get your stuff," Chuckles orders.

“My stuff?” Admittedly, I have very few personal possessions since I left my last place in a rush. However, I don’t understand what’s happening, and just like with the guy at the bar, I will not make this easy for them. I’m not even certain they work for Karma.

“Toothbrush, hairbrush, clothing,” Chuckles intones and then wrinkles his nose. “*Ugh*, feminine products. Whatever it is that you can’t live without.”

Okay, that’s a good sign. They plan to let me live. They must be Karma’s guys.

I ask, “For how long?”

“For good.”

“But...” I look around at my place. I haven’t even had a chance to mark it with my energy.

He sighs exasperatedly. “It’s a furnished condo rental. This isn’t even your stuff, so what’s the holdup, precious?”

That has my blood pumping. “*Precious?* My life has just been turned upside down. Gods... *Goddesses* are real. I should have died tonight, and you are both acting like complete dicks.”

Hot-as-sin stops rummaging through my stuff long enough to pout and objects, “What did *I* do?”

“Dragged me down the street like a caveman!”

“Oh yeah.” He nods, smirks, and knocks a magazine to the floor like a damn cat.

“Will you stop that?” I snap.

“Get your bag and pack it,” Chuckles orders roughly.

“Fine!” I throw my hands in the air in surrender. “Where are we going?”

“To the barracks.” He gives me an evil grin.

I blink. “Barracks?”

“Where we live. Where you now live, with *us*.” Chuckles leers at me and then waggles his eyebrows for full effect.

“Does that Merv the Perv ogle usually work for you?” I inquire, still refusing to budge and pack.

Chuckles shrugs. “More than you uppity types want to admit, precious.”

Precious and uppity type? This guy has no clue who I am or the life I’ve led.

“This living arrangement will be a blast,” I comment sarcastically.

“Bonus. We are also your trainers.”

“Lovely,” I say through gritted teeth, then relax my shoulders since I

realize they are *trying* to push my buttons. I'm falling right into their trap. They are Instant Karma's agents, so this is what they do, right? Well, I suppose I'm about to find out what my job actually entails soon enough.

How *do* her minions enact instant karma?

Dammit, I'm officially a minion now.

Resigning myself to my new forced career, I pull my suitcase out of my closet and fill the recently emptied luggage with toiletries, various sundries—yes, including, *gasp*, feminine hygiene products—underwear, shirts, sweaters, jeans, and skirts. I grab a trash bag and throw all my shoes in it. I don't have much to call my own or anyone to explain my disappearance to. At least the rental is a month-to-month lease.

“Done.” I walk to the door, expecting them to follow.

Instead of dragging me out of the building like I expected, they check their phones. Seriously, what is with people and their phones?

“Are we going?” I snap.

Chuckles holds up a finger. It's not his middle one, but I am about to display mine.

“What's with all this hurry up and wait?”

“Clear,” Chuckles says.

“What does that mean?”

“Your would-be murderer has been arrested, so you can safely leave the building now.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip. *Death was my fate tonight.*

Hot-as-sin grabs my arm again.

“Don't manhandle me!” I protest.

“But I am a man, and I'm handling you.” Okay, he needs to be downgraded to Rude-as-sin.

“Stop it so she will stop whining for a damn minute.” Chuckles whacks him upside the head, and Hot-as-sin lets me go. Chuckles glares at me. “Prove to us you can follow directions.”

“Bite me,” I tell both of them. “Follow that.”

“Oh, I might do just that.” Hot-as-sin snaps his jaws at me. The gesture rides the line between being playful and a threat. A playful threat?

I hurry out of the apartment and onto the street, where I mutter, “What have I agreed to?”

BUNKING AT THE BARRACKS

I dozed on the long ride to the barracks. I'm not all that familiar with the area, but I believe we traveled to two towns south of where we were. Urban sprawl makes it hard to distinguish between cities anymore.

Now alert as we drive up the long driveway, I'm surprised when I see the barracks. They are the furthest thing from what I expected them to be. The building looks more like a palace than a house. A temple! Yes, that's its vibe. The massive, two-story structure looks like it's over thirty thousand square feet, and the entire estate has a few acres of immaculate but somehow natural landscaping.

"*This* is where you live?" I ask with all the disbelief I can muster. "The barracks?"

"Yeah," Chuckles grumbles, parking the SUV in the circular driveway and not in the giant garage. "You got a problem with that?"

His negative reaction seems odd, but with this gig, I'm sure there's a reason for hating the gorgeous mansion.

"No, I guess not. I just wasn't picturing *this*."

As they exit the SUV and head toward the giant front door, I grab my unwieldy suitcase and hurry after them. I suck in a breath when I enter the marble-covered foyer that's as big as my entire apartment.

I glare at their attractive backsides, since I sense they are intentionally walking much faster than I can with their longer legs just to get a rise out of me, and then I remember that I'm going to be living with these two stooges. I suppose that makes me the third idiot, and I better make friends—well, at least not enemies—with these two.

"What are your names anyway?"

“Oh, now she asks!” Chuckles huffs and throws his hands in the air dramatically.

Hot-as-sin frowns at me. “What are we to you, just a couple of good-looking meatheads?”

“You got the meatheads part right.” I smile innocently to soften the insult.

“Did you know that you have a bad attitude?” Chuckles asks.

“And that would be a rhetorical question.” I shrug. “Also, I requested your names.”

Chuckles chuckles once again. “Bad attitude and tenacious. I think you might fit in here with your snark.” He sounds sincere in his comment, a touch of a Midwestern accent popping through. “I’m Asshole Number One, and he’s Number Two.”

I burst out laughing. “So let me get this straight. You are an ass, and he is shit?”

“*The* shit,” Rude-as-sin, formally known as Hot-as-sin, argues.

“Keep believing that.” I pat Rude-as-sin on the shoulder.

He catches my wrist and holds my palm against his stupid muscles. “See? She can’t keep her hands off me!”

I wrench my hand back. “If you don’t tell me your names, you will forever be known as Asshole and Shit. Wait, you know what? Never mind, those names might fit you better anyway.”

“I’m Kurtis,” Chuckles says, giving in. “This asshole is Dante.”

Dante turns around, flashes me a sexy grin, and winks with his thick lashes, his vibrant sky blue eyes sparkling in the foyer lights.

Holy guacamole.

He has the whole So-Cal, model surfer thing down pat, complete with the swagger and laid-back drawl. The poser from the bar has absolutely nothing on Dante.

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” I mutter, quoting *Inferno*.

I divert my attention before I get caught being mesmerized by his gaze. Why are all hot guys such asses? I look over at Kurtis. Even just attractive guys are insufferable. Hell, that can be said about males in general. I mentally slap myself. Nope, *all* humans can be dickheads.

“So where’s my room?” I ask as I shake my luggage for emphasis.

“*Your* room?” Kurtis chuckles. Will I ever get his nickname out of my head? “Precious, you are sleeping with us.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Leave her alone,” another male calls out.

I glance up the stairs to find the equivalent of a covertly sexy professor’s assistant. He wears a soft yet masculine V-neck sweater with a white tee underneath and has clean-cut, brown hair and intense, chocolate-colored eyes. Standing at roughly six-foot, he also wears an air of authority—likely their group’s leader.

Is it a basic job requirement that all of Karma’s dudes have to be good-looking?

“We are just properly hazing her.” Kurtis playfully shoves my shoulder like we are old pals.

“Consider your job done,” the new guy states with no room for argument. He tilts his head in greeting. “I’m Evan. Welcome to your instant karma life.”

Dread hits me in the stomach. I don’t want this life.

“Thanks?” I close my eyes and wish myself away. Nope. That isn’t working, so that isn’t a thing instant karma agents can do. Bummer, that seems like a wonderful trick to have in one’s arsenal.

Evan descends the stairs, and my eyes snap open. He’s staring at me with the same intensity as Karma did.

It’s the same technique I use when reading a rich client and I’m trying to understand their strengths and weaknesses to manipulate them.

I don’t enjoy being on the other end of that piercing gaze.

I jut out my chin and straighten my back. “Got something?” I ask, irritated at his psychic scan of me.

“Nothing you don’t already know about yourself.” He grins, charm oozing off him.

However, charm has the opposite effect on me. It makes me wary.

“Karma said you had a natural gift,” Evan adds.

“Gift. Curse. Potato. Poison,” I say flippantly.

Dante, now Slow-as-hell, says, “But potatoes aren’t poison.”

“Green potatoes are,” I counter, “and you missed my point.”

Dante parts his luscious lips to argue, but Evan cuts him off. “You had a long day. Let’s just get to bed.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “Where to, bossy?”

Evan raises an eyebrow, dismisses my comment, and turns, leading us all upstairs. I expect Dante and Kurtis to veer off and head into one of the many doors we pass, but no. They bring up the rear a little too close for comfort.

Evan opens a door and flips on the light, but it barely illuminates the large

room. In the center is a massive bed that can easily hold five people, with silky, expensive-looking embroidered fabric making up the thick comforter and pile of pillows. To my right is a door to an ensuite bathroom. Dante and Kurtis bump me forward as they enter the room, then they kick off their shoes and remove their jackets.

“We usually sleep nude,” Dante says with a wicked grin.

I roll my eyes. “That’s nice for—”

“Is it?” he interrupts excitedly.

“It’s nice for *you*.” I look back down the hall. “Which one is my room?” I gesture behind me.

“You don’t understand. We all sleep together, as a unit,” Evan says in an authoritative tone.

I open my senses to the room, but I don’t feel any of their energy signatures claiming this room. Instead, I only feel the same energy that I sense throughout the building—Karma’s.

I plaster an overly pleasant smile on my face. “Have your little *team-building* exercise, if that’s what you want to call it. I won’t get in the way of your sausage fest. I suspect Dante needs to be the little spoon soon or he’ll cry.” I give him a wink. “It was a cute attempt, but I’m not falling for your prank.”

“Prank?” supposedly straightlaced Evan asks with a straight face. “Are you denying tradition?”

“I’m psychic, remember?” I sigh. “I might be overwhelmed and out of my element, but I know bullshit when I smell it.”

“Told you she wouldn’t fall for it.” Kurtis waves his palm at Dante. “You owe me twenty, dude.”

“But I thought that my ‘hot-as-sin’ looks would make her overlook the obvious ploy to get her in bed and do it anyway.”

My mouth falls open. *He read my mind*. “How?” I demand.

“How do you think karma agents know what needs to be done?”

He isn’t as dumb as he’s been acting.

“Nope. I’m not.” He laughs as he reads me again.

“Fuck,” I say.

“Oh. So that’s still on the table?” Dante asks, looking innocent.

I give him my best glower. “This is Karma’s room.”

“Not that she ever uses it,” Evan remarks.

“Are we done hazing for tonight?” I ask. It’s after three in the morning,

and I can't handle any more of their crap. "I'm tired."

Evan bows and shows me to my actual room three doors down the hall. "Until tomorrow."

My room is simple but nicer than most of my former apartments. It has a full-sized bed with expensive sheets, pillows, a fluffy comforter, a large dresser, a small desk, and a spacious closet. However, there's no ensuite bathroom.

Great. Fighting over the bathroom with these pretty boys means I will be lucky to get a decent shower. No wonder they call this place the barracks.

Once I'm alone, I strip off my dirty clothes and toss them on the small desk chair, then I grab my makeshift pajamas from my bag—a worn T-shirt that reads, "Spiritual Gangsta"—and slip it on.

I don't feel like a spiritual gangster though. Then again, I suppose I'm Karma's *henchwoman* now. I rub my face and crawl into bed. Fortunately, the mattress is made of heavenly clouds. Well, maybe not, but it damn well feels like it. Exhaustion hits me, and I'm out.



I wake to the sensation of a warm body pressed against me. At first, I move closer, loving the comforting feeling that makes me think of warm cookies and cocoa, but then my brain registers that I haven't invited anyone to my bed.

Being the big spoon in this configuration, I let go of the person's waist and shove against a solid, muscular back. It barely moves a millimeter.

Dante, aka Hot-as-sin, sleepily whines, "Why are you pushing me?"

"Why the hell are you in my bed?" Since he isn't moving away, I push myself to the other side of my small bed and fall off.

When Dante hears the loud thump I make on the hardwood floor, he turns over to see what's happened.

I stand up, revealing my skimpy outfit of a T-shirt and underwear. The moonlight filtering through the window is just enough for us to see each other clearly.

Ignoring my exposure, I growl, "What are you doing in here?"

His sky blue eyes seem to catch all the moonlight, and I almost fall for the puppy dog look he gives me. "Like you said, I needed to be the little

spoon soon or I'd cry. You don't want me to cry, do you?" He sulks.

I open my mouth to tell him that yes, right now, I kind of do, but he cuts me off, sounding forlorn. "Please don't answer that. It would wound me too much to hear you speak ill of me."

"Oh, yes. A stranger who you have been accosting all night *might* not like you, poor baby." I lean over and shove his hip to make him fall out of my bed, but it doesn't work. "Now get out. Haven't you heard of sexual harassment?"

"I have, but this *is* harassment central. It's my job, babe." He grins as he slowly sits up, the covers sliding down his perfect bare chest. If I stare at his lean muscles any longer, it will qualify as harassment. There might be drool involved too since, unfortunately, it has been far too long since I had a good hookup.

He grins and winks. *Dammit*, he must have read my mind again—although I suppose he could have just read the hungry expression on my face.

I cock my hip out and fold my arms. "I'm not in the mood."

"Well, let me know when you are, sweetheart." He pulls the covers back, revealing he isn't wearing anything while invading my bed.

My throat goes dry, and I piously avert my gaze. If I'm going to work with him in close quarters, then I don't need to have that delicious image in my head every time I look at him.

Thankfully, my intuition tells me that even though these guys are hazing me, they would never cross the line and force themselves on me. Dante could have been the big spoon and gotten handsy, but he didn't try that.

He saunters over and whispers, "You sure you don't want to taste my warm cookies and hot cocoa?"

I turn away. I can't let Dante see my flushed face, although he can probably *read* my involuntary interest in his... tasty treats.

I point to the door. As soon as I hear it click shut, I hurry over and shove the desk in front of it since the locks don't seem to keep out hot perverts.

Needless to say, I have a hard time falling back to sleep. Dante's masculine scent of sandalwood and cloves lingers on my pillows. Why does he have to smell so good?

Will the hazing ever stop? Or is my life now going to be an endless series of confrontations, battles, and harassment with these frustratingly hot guys?

THE MORNING AFTER

A fist pounding on my door wakes me too early the next morning. Well, it *feels* too early, but glancing at the clock, I notice it's already late morning.

"What?" I bark at the offending sound.

"Training!" Kurtis yells through the door. "Meet us downstairs in five. No need to change, *gangsta.*"

Kurtis didn't see my shirt, so is Dante a *break in and tell* kind of guy?

I shout, "Tell Dante to go to hell."

"Hey!" Dante retorts defensively. "How do you know I said something?"

"You are the one who broke into my room!"

"What makes you think I was the *only* one in there?" he asks, and I hear muffled chuckles.

I'm about to respond, but then I remember they are getting off on pushing my buttons again, so I shut my mouth. Kurtis mutters something, and they both walk away, heading down the hall.

Since they haven't allotted any time for me to shower, I slip on my jeans and a different printed tee.

Dante, Kurtis, and Evan are waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

Evan snickers at my shirt, which reads, "*Love and Light, Bitches.*"

"Nice." Evan nods.

"Felt appropriate."

"The rainbow sparkles are a nice touch," Dante adds. His smirk both irritates me and makes my face heat, remembering his naked body pressed against me.

"You ready?" Evan asks.

“Probably not,” I groan.

As we move toward the back of the building, I hear laughter before the front door slams shut. “Are there other people here?”

“We aren’t the only ones who work for Karma,” Kurtis answers with a frown.

Evan elaborates, “There is another team and a couple of solo operators.”

“How many agents?”

“Currently, there are nine of us, including you.”

“Enough about them,” Dante grumbles, showing an irritable side I hadn’t seen yet.

Is he jealous, or perhaps he doesn’t like someone on the other team?

“Yes, true. We need to give you the orientation.” Evan continues to lead us toward the back of the building, which opens up to a huge, modern kitchen. The far wall has floor-to-ceiling glass doors, which lead to the back half of the estate where there is a rock waterfall flowing into a stone-tiled pool, an ornate gazebo, as well as lounge chairs and a huge outdoor BBQ station with a wood-fired pizza oven. Well, aren’t they fancy?

Evan draws my attention back inside. “This is our community kitchen. You are free to eat whatever you find. If you need something special, then you will have to let one of the housekeepers know.”

“You have housekeepers?” I raise my eyebrows.

“We can’t do our jobs and waste time with cleaning the house and cooking,” Evan explains.

“So how many hours do you spend on the job?”

Evan sighs wearily.

“Never think of yourself as being *off* the clock, precious,” Kurtis cuts in.

I curse and press my lips flat. “Awesome.”

“Consider yourself on call at all times, even if you are sleeping,” Evan adds. “You might be needed at any hour of the day or night.”

“No downtime?” I’m whining, but hell, shouldn’t I be whining?

“We have downtime, but it’s never for long.” Dante looks at me with a wistful gaze. “Just make every moment count.”

“Okay,” I reply nervously, since his warning sounds loaded. There’s too much in his ominous tone to absorb right now.

“Do we get any special powers, like how Karma stopped time?”

“Technically, she slowed time almost to a stop, and yes, you will have a limited version of that and more when you are on a job.”

“But you said I’m *always* on the job,” I counter.

Kurtis, the all-American, chuckles. “Nice try, but no, only when you are with a target.”

“Is that what you call the people you are serving instant karma to?”

“Target or mark,” Kurtis answers. “Sometimes we spice it up by calling them an asshole.”

“But I thought that was *your* name,” I tease him.

“Only on Saturdays.”

“And every other Thursday,” Dante adds.

“Leap years.” Evan smiles.

They haven’t harassed me in a whole five minutes, and they are teasing Kurtis now. Life will be easier if I’m not the constant target of their taunts.

I feel my shoulders relax.

“Oh no, she thinks we are letting her off easy. We need to up our game,” Dante says in a calculating tone.

“Can we get through the rules and what my job entails, or maybe even a coffee before you hassle me again?”

“Sure,” he concedes. “I could use a coffee.”

The pot is already filled with hot java, as if it were waiting for us, and maybe it is. What do I know about a goddess’s house?

Evan shows me where the mugs and sugar are located, and then I open the fridge to see a wide variety of creamer options. I grab the caramel flavor and pour some into my cup.

Kurtis, the leading jackass, shakes his head disappointedly.

“What now?” I ask.

“Trent won’t be happy with you.”

I narrow my eyes. “And you waited to tell me that *after* I poured?”

“It wouldn’t be funny if I told you before you used it. Come on, you should know the game now.” Kurtis shrugs with a lopsided grin.

“I thought you said I could eat anything in the kitchen.”

“Unless it has someone’s name on it, *gangsta*,” Kurtis adds and finger guns me like a dork. “Were you raised in the wild?”

“*How* did you know about my life in forests?” I say with surprise, as if I actually lived in the jungle. “Did you read my mind again?”

The three of them look at each other for a half second in confusion.

With a lump in my throat for effect, I go on, “I was orphaned and feral from the age of three to nine, and then the monkeys adopted me. They were

kind, but all I knew how to do for years was swing from tree vines. At least the bear taught me how to dance. By the way, snakes and tigers are total jerks. But then, my life really took a turn when the aliens abducted me and downloaded all the information I would need, except for, apparently, kitchen etiquette for a karma group home.”

The guys shake their heads in amusement.

“I was kind of getting into the story.” Dante wiggles his hips. “I’d like to see your wildlife mating dance ritual.”

“An imagination will come in handy with our job. Speaking of which...” Evan points for me to sit on a chair at the kitchen table. “Now, more about this gig.”

Do I want to know? I wonder.

ORIENTATION

“*T*here is no way I can back out of the deal, is there?” I ask Evan as we sit down for my orientation.

“No. Sorry.” He sweeps his glossy brown locks back with one hand and sighs. I believe he actually feels bad that I’ve ended up here.

“I didn’t think so.” I exhale slowly, trying to steel my nerves. I’ve been in a lot of rough spots, but I don’t see a way out of this one... yet. “So how long have you been working for Karma?”

“At this location, I’ve been here the longest. About seven years now.” Evan nods to Kurtis. “You have been here six, yeah?”

“Yep, right after my twentieth birthday.” Kurtis scratches his neck in agitation, regret for his fate glimmers in his gray eyes.

I suppose anyone who ends up with Karma as a boss has a checkered past, not just me. I half-heartedly wonder what they all did to deserve this fate.

“Two years,” Dante volunteers with no enthusiasm.

“Just a mere babe,” I say.

Quickly stuffing down his emotions, Dante smirks. “No. *Now* you’re the babe, *babe*.”

“I bet I’m a few years older than all of you, so I don’t think you should call me babe.” I’m certain they are all in their mid-twenties. Sure, I’m only thirty-two, but it feels weird to hear anyone call me *babe*. I’ve never been fond of the cutesy endearment.

“That’s cool. I like older women,” Dante counters.

“Ugh,” I say, “I’m hardly an *older* woman.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Can you drop the whole *trying to get into my pants* act?”

“Who says it’s an act?” Dante asks, but there’s a twinkle in his eyes, and I assume it’s from incessantly teasing me.

“Whatever. I’m sure you aren’t at a loss for horny women and possibly men who would take care of any tingly dick urges you might have, so stop with this running sex joke at my expense. Besides, you know exactly how hot you are, and that’s actually a turnoff for me. You pushed this game too far, and now I never want to deal with all... *this*.” I wave my hand over his chest and groin area.

The sparkle fades in his eyes, and Dante actually looks a bit wounded. Perhaps he’s more sensitive than he lets on. Beautiful people often can’t wrap their minds around rejection, and I bet he isn’t enjoying the sensation.

“Yikes,” Kurtis says. “I think you just did your first instant karma job on one of us.”

Dante gives me one last glance and walks away. “Call me when we’re ready to head out,” he says over his shoulder and disappears from sight.

I knew Dante wouldn’t appreciate being blown off, even if it’s all a joke on me, but I wasn’t expecting that he would actually be offended and run off. “He can’t really be hurt by me calling him out on his antics, can he?” I ask.

“Don’t get soft on us now,” Kurtis says in response, but I notice his brief concerned expression after his coworker’s exit. “He’s just playing you... again.”

Evan ignores Dante’s soap-opera dramatics and sets a stack of papers down on the counter in front of me. On the top, it reads, “*Terms and Conditions*.”

I laugh. “Seriously?”

“Deadly.” When Evan sees that I don’t believe him, he taps the papers. “Really. Give it a read through. I will be back in an hour, and I can answer questions you have over brunch.”

Brunch. The instant karma bros eat *brunch*.

They leave me to skim thirty pages of fine print, and I note the headers.

Injuries on the job: Target-inflicted injuries will be covered as long as proper protocols are enacted. Any risk-taking behavior outside of commonsense restraint will be counted against the agent’s record.

Excessive Job Expenses: ...will be covered if approved by a supervisor.

Personal Obligations and Responsibilities: You forfeit all extracurricular activities for the sake of “the work.”

Ownership of Failings: Agent must be accountable for inadequate job

performance... Excuses for failures will not be allowed and punishment will ensue.

I shiver, wondering what punishments entail.

Intellectual Property: ...any innovations are immediately property of Karma and can be used by other agents for training and use.

Interpersonal Relationships: ...friendships and sexual relationships are permitted as long as they do not interfere with work.

Nondisclosure Policy: No one outside of the Instant Karma Agency (IKA) should become aware that “the work” is orchestrated by actual agents. However, publicity and promotion of a karmic event are encouraged. Posted videos, pics, stories, and GIFs must be tagged with #InstantKarma.

A goddess needs a following?

If the old gods needed temples, then I suppose it makes sense that the new gods use the internet. Karma wants all the attention, but not for her army of agents.

I don't like most of what is revealed in the contract, which I'm expected to sign with a “blood oath fingerprint.”

Evan returns alone, and I glance behind him to see if the other two are in tow, but apparently Dante is done messing with my traitorous libido, and Kurtis has better things to do.

“Where are the stooges?” I ask.

“On assignment, trolling on the internet.” Evan sits down next to me at the kitchen table. “A lot of work can be done on there, but it's not as satisfying.”

“God, I don't have to do that, do I?”

“*Goddess*, and no.” He smiles. “But it gives you hours you can log, and since we have to spend our time training you, we need to make sure we get our time cards stamped.”

“How many hours *are* we expected to work?” I ask, realizing my life as I knew it is gone.

“Depends on the quality of karmic justice you invoke. If you pull off a particularly poignant and publicized message, then you are rewarded with your time served for the week. However, that doesn't mean Karma won't call you in for a special job, even if you have worked all week.”

“It really is like community service, isn't it?”

“And sometimes it doesn't really feel like a punishment... for us.” Evan shrugs, looking melancholy.

Flipping through the pages, I say, “I noticed there isn’t any mention of retirement.”

“Yeah. I don’t think we get to quit.”

“We’ll die doing this job?”

“As far as I can tell.” Evan reaches out and pats my hand. “I’ve never heard of anyone going beyond ten years with Karma.”

With his touch, a spark shoots down to my lower belly. I shake it off, because he’s just another potential no-go fuckboy. I can’t get sexually entangled with my coworkers.

I jerk my hand back and straighten my shirt. “What happens now? When do I get my karma powers?”

“We have to perform a ceremony in the temple.” His brown eyes bore into me in an almost predatory way.

I study him. Is this a joke? I don’t know anymore, and it just might be true.

“Come with me. I’ll call in the guys. Remember, they are part of your team now. In a way, we are family. A clan.” Evan leans closer. “Do you understand?”

“So what does that mean?” I arch an eyebrow. “I’m *stuck* with you three?”

“Ouch.” Evan winces at my use of the word “stuck” like it physically struck him.

I wave off his antics. “Whatever. You can’t be that surprised I’m not enthused about this arrangement.”

“I know.” He grins. “But unless Karma decides one of us is needed elsewhere, then *we* are stuck with *you*.”

“Yeah, because I’m the problem child,” I say flatly, rolling my eyes.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

“I was promised food,” I say as my stomach gurgles.

“You might want to *acquire* your powers on an empty stomach,” he says in warning, then he texts someone, presumably Dante and Kurtis.

“Great.” I follow him down the hall to the back door. There’s an open gazebo behind the main building, and just beyond it, I see the ocean.

“Wow. Karma is loaded.” I note the expensive property with a view. “And she doesn’t even come here very much?”

“From what I’ve heard from other agents around the world, this is a dump.”

Dante and Kurtis wear ceremonial robes when they arrive and hand one to Evan on our way to the gazebo.

I frown because I don't have one.

They begin to chant what sounds like ancient Sanskrit—I recognize a few words from a Buddhist prayer that I know. All three men find positions in the circle, and Evan indicates for me to stand at the gazebo's entrance.

I wait patiently, studying the elaborate structure. With its gold leaf paint and intricate metalwork, it feels like a temple, especially with the men's baritone voices chanting like monks.

But they are far from monks.

“And now, Tessa Maat, you must release your past and be born into the new,” Evan calls out. “Shed your former role and become one with us.”

I look at each of them, waiting for my cue. When I stand there for a moment, Evan says, “Remove your clothing now.”

And become one with them? Ha! Evan lured me in with a bit of sincere talk, and now he's suckering me into another prank.

I turn on my heel and head back toward the main house. “I'm getting brunch. Who's driving?”

Evan yells, “Wait! We need to finish your ceremony. We have to commune! *Bond!*”

“You can frolic naked all you like, but I'm not falling for your joke.” I shut the glass door behind me as I enter the house, and a burst of laughter travels to my ears.

I sigh with relief. This is yet another test, an instant karma moment made just for me.

Yippy.

They want to make me the fool, but I won't let that happen. Well, not if I can help it.



Brunch at the local eatery ends up being what I need to calm my nerves. I order several mimosas, but most of them are quickly confiscated by the guys, and we are all in a good mood by the time our food arrives.

“I'm disappointed. I thought for a minute you were going to show us what you are working with.” Kurtis laughs.

“And how far were you going to take that prank?” I ask, more than a bit curious about the lengths they are willing to go for a proper hazing.

“As far as you’d let us,” Kurtis answers unashamedly.

“Even *bonding*?” I glare at him. “You were actually trying to trick me into having sex?”

“Bonding can mean a lot of things.” Evan says, as if I don’t know what the word means.

“We would have taken it as far as we could.” Dante pokes at his food as if it’s offended him.

“Is all this harassment part of my training? The sex ceremony? Getting into my bed? The feigned attraction?”

They are all quiet.

“No, really,” I scoff. “How long do I have to put up with your assaults?”

Again, nothing.

“Fine.” Giving up, I toast, “To more stupidity for the rest of my fucking cursed life.”

We eat in silence the rest of the meal until the bill comes. I pull out some cash, but they wave me off, and Evan places down a black card. *Crap*. Karma gives them exclusive black cards?

Evan grins at my intense ogling of the limitless credit card. “Only for agents who have five years of service and no marks against their record.” He winks. “Let’s see if you can get there. I doubt you can. You have a bit too much sass.”

A glass crashes against the flatware at the table behind us. The man grabs a woman’s arm and growls something in her ear. Her eyes are downcast, and she has the battered girlfriend vibe that I’ve unfortunately seen a million times.

I feel all three guys at my table tense. I open up my third eye and see their bright auras, then I watch as etheric cords reach out to read the couple. I’m surprised by the light radiating off of them. Although not as bright as Karma’s, the signature is similar. It’s *her* power and her magic they can tap into.

Evan nods, and the other two do the same. I am about to see my first job in action—a complicated one. How does one teach an abuser a lesson without causing more harm to the victim? I worry that might not be the point.

Evan hurries the server along to close our tab, and then we get to our feet. We have enough time to exit before the burly abuser and his victim leave the

restaurant.

“What are we going to do?” I whisper to Kurtis as we reach the sidewalk. He hushes me and says, “Watch. Stay out of the way for this one.”

I move down the sidewalk but close enough to witness their job.

Dante runs across the street to a convenience store and returns with a piece of paper in his hand.

As the couple comes out, the burly jerk has her by the upper arm, and he’s dragging her down the sidewalk.

Evan rams into him, knocking the man’s hold loose.

As expected, the man shoves Evan, but he isn’t a tiny woman to be tossed about. He’s six feet and two hundred pounds of pure muscle, and he shoves back. They begin to tussle, but Evan slowly draws him farther away from the girlfriend.

With the boyfriend distracted, Dante approaches the woman, and I strain to hear his conversation with her.

“You deserve better. I know you probably feel trapped, and you have no money of your own or not enough to survive on. If you promise to leave this man and find happiness in yourself, I will give you this winning lottery ticket.” He hands her a slip of paper. “And this is the number of a local women’s shelter.”

When she glances at it, she gasps. “Why are you doing this?”

“I see so much potential in you. You need to follow your dreams. You are an artist, aren’t you?”

She looks nervously over his shoulder, seeing the burly jerk still engaged with his scuffle. She hesitates. “Yeah, but…”

“No more of that.” Dante presses the winning lottery card into her hand and gazes at her with his intense, sky blue eyes. “Save yourself before it’s too late.”

She accepts the ticket and shoves it in her bra. “I’ll try.”

“Do or do not, there is no try.”

I bite back a laugh at the nerdy sci-fi reference. This tense moment isn’t the time to chuckle, but she smiles, getting the quote too. “Okay.”

With the conversation over, Kurtis runs over and grabs Evan’s shoulder to stop the fight. “Dude! Come on. We need to get out of here. You just dodged those murder charges. You can’t get arrested again.”

Burly dude’s eyes widen, and he backs away. “Stay away from me!”

Dante finds his place at my side, looking like an innocent bystander. We

watch Evan and Kurtis saunter off, then we follow them to our car around the corner.

“That was amazing,” I murmur. “Is that an example of what you do?”

Dante frowns. “I wish we got to do more of that, but yeah, it happens.”

“Do you think she will change her life? From what I’ve seen of humans, they *don’t* change.” It’s another reason I don’t perform real psychic readings anymore. I’ve given up on seeing the best in people.

“Judgmental much?” Dante asks with a hint of judgment himself.

“I’ve seen it too many times.” I shrug. “People get stuck in their same old story.”

“Is that what you do?” he asks with a cutting edge in his tone.

I don’t answer him and slow my pace to drop behind him. I don’t want to argue. I’m tired, and not just from the karma life.

I suppose I repeat the same mistakes, even when I hate seeing it in others, but now, my life is no longer my own.

Will I ever be able to become a better person when I’m trapped in a screwed up job, dealing out karmic justice with a bunch of professional pranksters?

DECISIONS

*B*y the time we return to the barracks, it's past two in the afternoon. The guys show me the living room, which is a cozy space filled with plush couches and a large screen television. There's even a gaming console—nix that, *several* consoles under the ginormous television.

I raise an eyebrow. "I thought there was no downtime?"

"It's a work tool, which kind of takes some of the fun out of sabotaging some douchebag's stats." Kurtis frowns. "Mostly, the solo operators use it."

I nod and sink into a cushy chair. "Was that whole situation at brunch really an instant karma situation with that abuser?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Evan explains. "It was also a dose of karma for *her*."

"You mean he's going to hurt her because of the lottery ticket?" I ask, my body rigid with concern.

"No," Dante answers quickly. "Well, not unless she shows him or tells him her plan. It was *good* karma for her and bad for him."

"A two for one?" I nod. "I didn't realize we did that."

"What?" Kurtis retorts, irritated at me. "You think all we do is dish out bad karma?"

"It seems to be what you have done for me." I roll my eyes and snuggle into the overstuffed chair. It's only my first day, and I'm wiped out. I curl up and close my eyes.

I hear Evan say, "You'll need to sign your contract before we endow you with your powers."

"Uh-huh," I murmur, falling further into the napping world. I have a passing thought that by sleeping in plain sight I'm leaving myself vulnerable

to them, but they broke into my room last night, so I don't think anywhere is safe anymore.



A few hours later, I wake up with a throw blanket covering me. Someone tucked me in, but I don't trust that's *all* they did. I check under the blanket for a weird surprise and find nothing. I get up, stretch, and follow the sounds of the guys talking in the kitchen. When I enter, they all stopped chatting and grin.

Yeah. They did something to me.

I turn around, retrieve my purse from the living room, and pull out a compact mirror. Yep, they drew glasses and a mustache with my eyeliner. *Real mature*. I find a makeup wipe packet and remove their *art*. I suppose I should be somewhat grateful they didn't place my hand in warm water to make me pee myself.

Fresh-faced and irritable, I head back into the friendly fire for more punishment. Speaking of which, I have a question.

Without preamble, I ask, "So the contract mentioned *severe* punishment, but it didn't say what that entailed or what warranted it." I want to add that it seems like I have been punished enough with these three, but I keep that to myself. If they bothered to read my mind, they would understand how I feel.

Evan and the other two stiffen. "We aren't sure. No one we know has ever done anything to deserve a 'severe' punishment."

"You mean no one has messed up?" I give them a suspicious glare.

"Sure, we all mess up in little ways, but the worst we have experienced is loss of our monthly stipend, or what we call time-outs."

"Time-outs? Like being sent to your room?" I scoff. "What are we, children?"

"Karma must think so. I don't like them." Dante pouts with what sounds like firsthand experience.

"Why did I sense all the tension when I asked about it?"

"There are rumors," Kurtis begins with a haunted look. It's more chilling on his usually cocky face.

Are they screwing with me again? When no one volunteers more information, I prompt, "Rumors?"

“Agents have just disappeared,” Evan says with a blank look on his face.
“Dead?”

The three shrug. *Are they messing with me?*

My senses fan out, reading their legitimate anxiety, and I gulp. “Has anyone *not* signed the contract?”

Dante leaps from his seat at the bar, shouting, “You’re not—”

I stop him. “Calm down. I was just curious,” I say, “Well? Have you heard of it happening?”

They all glance at each other without a reply.

“Let me guess... You’ve heard *rumors?*”

Evan nods. “Same thing, never heard from again.”

“Some speculate that Karma barter with Death for our lives, and if we decline, Death claims us. We are living on borrowed time outside of the rest of the world, because our lifeline was supposed to end on the day Karma approached us.”

“That man was meant to take me out of the world,” I surmise. “So now I’m no longer part of it?”

“Yeah, and that’s why we are supposed to have limited contact with the world except for our targets, when we are acting on Karma’s behalf.”

“Because we are only an extension of Karma’s will now.” I look down at my palms. A psychic mentor of mine warned me that my life line was broken, and that I had to be careful of my ways. Now, Karma has used my bad choices and questionable life path against me. I’m paying my dues with a half-life. Well, according to their theories.

“Are you ready to sign and get your powers?” Evan asks.

I glance at the kitchen clock. “Is there a rush? Or can we have dinner first?”

“A woman after my own heart,” Dante says as he peruses the contents of the fridge. “Greta left a cheesy casserole in here, or there is always take out.” He looks at me for my input.

“Whatever you guys want.” I smile. “Is it alright if I finally take a shower?”

Kurtis pinches his nose. “I was wondering when you’d finally get around to that.”

“Yeah, I don’t go ripe as fast as a guy does, so shush up.” I push his shoulder as I pass by to go upstairs.

I haven’t used the communal bathroom yet, so I don’t know what to

expect.

I grab clean underwear, a new top, and pants. I didn't bring a towel from home, as I was banking on them being provided.

My imagination envisions a dirty pit of a bathroom, but instead, it's the nicest bathroom I've ever used. There are a few sinks on the counter, and I suppose it makes sense to have multiples for shaving men to clean up at the same time.

There is a separate toilet room with its own sink. Convenient, but I still don't want to use it when they are in the main bathroom.

The shower stall is humongous, and several showerheads line the far wall. A glass brick wall barely obscures the view in and out of the shower area.

Communal showers?

I guess if I want privacy, I will have to plan for it. With their ability to read my thoughts, *do* I have privacy anymore? However, I notice they don't seem to read *all* my thoughts.

There are caddies for bathing products on the counter. One is empty and has my name on it. I run my finger over the label and sigh.

Do I want this life? It doesn't feel like much of one. I have always been independent to the point of ridiculousness, scraping my way through life since I ran away from home at sixteen. I used my psychic ability to make a buck. It was hustling, yeah, and not the most virtuous profession, but I've given good advice to those I thought deserved it. Was I playing out my version of instant karma then?

I try to lock the bathroom door, but there aren't any locks. Karma really is a bitch.

I strip off my shirt and pants and realize I forgot my shampoo in my room. Instead of going back, I inspect the caddies for something I can use.

Dante's caddy has a brand I like. I pull out the container and sniff the contents. His lovely aroma of sandalwood and cloves fills my senses.

The door opens. "Wow. Didn't expect to find you half naked sniffing my stuff."

I toss the shampoo down like it's a live snake, and I blush guiltily, but then I remember he knew I was about to shower and came in here anyway.

"What do you want?" I growl, not covering up my body since I'm wearing a bra and underwear. It's nothing anyone wouldn't see at the beach.

"I wanted to shower too." He moves closer, reaching around me for his caddy.

I don't move, holding my breath as he stands a molecule away from me.

"Do you want to share?" he asks. "I can help you with the hard to reach places."

"Nah, I'm good." Without showering, I scoop up my caddy and clothes and leave the room.

Tromping down the hall, I'm confronted with unfamiliar faces—in my underwear. *Awesome.*

"Well, what do we have here?" a wickedly attractive woman says with smug amusement. She is almost a photocopy of Karma, but she doesn't have the same intense allure or power of the goddess—not that this woman isn't trying, because she is, but she only gets a B for effort.

A tall, striking man strolls up behind her. "Looks like a walk of shame."

"Dante probably broke her in." The woman appraises me, and says, "Don't count on seconds, honeypot. He's a one and done kind of guy."

My skin itches with their assumptions about me. "Thanks for the heads-up, but I don't need it. I left him in the bathroom with his soap and his hand for company."

The two cackle, and she raises an eyebrow. "*You* turned *him* down?"

I sigh. Sure, I know Dante is way, way out of my league, like I'm not even in the parking lot of his team's stadium, but I don't need this crap. I glare. "Are we done with this catty bullshit?"

"*Meow,*" she says, and then saunters off. Her man follows, inspecting me as they continue down the hallway to one of the bedrooms.

Kurtis and Evan now reach the top of the stairs. *Great.* Apparently, I can't catch a break. I debate dashing to my room to avoid them, but it seems worse to do that.

Kurtis smiles as he takes in my flustered state and barely clothed body. At least I have the barrier of my discarded clothing to cover most of my body as I casually walk the last ten feet to my room.

"Dinner will be ready in half an hour," Evan says as I slam my door closed.

I am frigging done.

Deciding I'm going to stop the torment, I begin the exhausting process of completely shuttering all my outgoing energy. The technique usually blocks most other psychics, but it drains me. I'm not as good at defensive abilities as I should be because I usually take the simple route and avoid others who have a genuine gift, but I can't just avoid these people, so I need to concentrate

long enough to block them out now, at least for the next several minutes.

Shoving my things back into my luggage, I center myself again before I open my door. I don't see anyone.

I pick up my rolling suitcase, since I can't have the wheel noise give me away.

Using my lightest steps, I fly down the stairs and carefully open and close the front door. I just have to clear the insanely long driveway, and then I'll be gone.

I know why people vanish without a trace, and I have to do that now. I will have to secure another set of fake IDs and head to the other end of the country, possibly the world, where no one from my past can find me. I must also learn to ward myself against a goddess's eye. I'm still unsure if I can stay hidden from Karma, but maybe since I'm leaving before signing the contract, she will let me meet whatever fate awaits me. I'll take my chances. I've survived this long alone, and I can do it again.

Besides, verbal contracts mean nothing. She can't hold me to an agreement I gave under duress.

I only have the massive metal gate to get past now. I push on the wrought iron, but it doesn't budge.

I stare at the gate keypad, shaking my head and trying to remember what numbers Evan punched in earlier: 6-9-6-9?

The gate clicks and swings open.

Pervs.

I grab my bags and run. The highway and town are only a mile or two away. I open my phone app and request a driver. I'll get them to drop me at the bus stop, and I'll take the first bus out of town.

I'm breathing heavily from my frantic gait, and fear washes over me. This is a risky move, but I have to get out of there. I don't want to be a karma agent. It feels like a sad and lonely life. I will never truly fit in with those guys, constantly being harassed and pranked. Sure, I have emotional and energetic walls around me when I'm in public, but I'm usually able to let it down when I'm alone. Here, though, I can *never* rest and relax, since I will never be alone again.

THE ESCAPE

I reach the main road and glance behind me.

Have the guys sensed my absence yet? Will they be unaware until one of them checks on me?

The winter sun set a while ago, and the darkness allows me to skulk in the shadows. It seems a fitting representation for the way the rest of my life will go.

I expect this freedom I'm chasing will probably be a short stint. Karma or Death will find me and make me pay for declining the role of being a punching bag and deliverer of karmic justice.

I don't care. I'd rather live on my own terms for however long or short that might be.

I finally put my rolling luggage down, as I'm no longer worried that the sound will alert one of the karma agents.

My driver is almost here—five minutes tops. I slow my pace and catch my breath. I wonder if any of them will come after me, but I suppose it isn't their job to herd me back if I escape. My fate is my own now.

A chilling idea comes over me. What if they were told to kill me if I escape? That would account for their tension when I asked about not signing the contract. *Would they kill me?* I try to imagine it. Sure, anyone is capable of killing in the heat of the moment, but cold-blooded murder? Could Dante do that? Who am I kidding? His flirtation with me is a fabrication, and they are Karma's loyal soldiers. I'm just some jerk they have to train—an irritating obligation.

I speed up and keep to the shadows of the roadside trees. I duck into the bushes as a car drives by, but it isn't Kurtis or my hired car. I relax and

continue on my way. The car turns off into another driveway—probably a neighbor returning home, and I doubt the driver caught sight of me anyway.

Checking my phone, I see it has been twenty minutes since I was told dinner would be done in thirty. That means I might have ten minutes before my escape is discovered.

As I approach the neighbor's driveway, I hear a branch crack under a footstep. I turn to see if it's just some spooked wildlife or the neighbor checking their mail, but I don't see a thing. However, I do feel eyes on me.

I hurry along, speed walking now.

There is a crash through shrubbery, and then a blunt object hits my head. Stars swim in my vision, and I stumble.

I throw my arms up to cover my head and protect myself from further damage. I'm rewarded with a punch to the gut, and I dare to peek at my attacker. It looks like the hooded guy from outside my apartment yesterday.

He snarls, "You made my job easy for me. So easy." His casual glance at my phone makes me realize he somehow tracked me through it, so I toss it down. He shakes his head. "Too late now. You shouldn't take what doesn't belong to you."

"I'll give it back!" I plead. "With interest."

"Doesn't work like that." He grabs my throat and squeezes. "Boss said I could make your death as painful as I wanted to."

I remember this goon—Billy. He's known for being merciless. I thought I had been smarter, that I could get away, but I should have known Big Eddie would find me.

"If you kill me, you won't ever get the money back," I reason.

"You don't get it." He pulls me closer. "It ain't about the money. It's about his rep. We can't let you get away with it."

I feel the surreal sensation of metal sliding into my side. It registers as if it were happening to someone else. He jerks the blade up, and pain tears through my senses, blood gushing out of me.

I reach down as he steps back, applying pressure to the wound, but it does little to help because my hands are shaking too hard.

Billy says, "I was always wondering about that phrase, death by a thousand cuts. How many can you suffer before you die?"

As dizziness overwhelms me, I fall to my knees. I'm not sure if it's from blood loss or the thought of a thousand painful cuts. It could also be the nasty blow to the head.

He grasps a handful of my hair and drags me to his car, which is hidden on the side road. I scream as the pain overtakes my shock.

Opening his trunk, he lifts me up and tosses me inside the plastic-lined compartment—an easy cleanup for my bloody death.

I kick out and catch him on the hip, and he raises his fist to punch me in the face. I flinch, covering myself. A swirling sensation of fear and anger spin in my gut, and then I kick at him again. I make contact and feel him fall away.

There's a grunt as air is knocked out of someone, but it isn't me.

I open my eyes and don't see Billy. I don't see anyone. Struggling to sit up, I finally lean out of the trunk, preparing to leap out and run.

All three guys are standing over a prone, motionless Billy.

"Is he dead?" I ask.

Kurtis narrows his eyes on me. "We can't kill."

"I wasn't asking you to kill him," I reply.

"He's alive." Evan nudges Billy with his foot. "But we can't do any more to help you unless you agree to return with us."

Spots fill my vision. I'm on the verge of passing out. "But he knows where I am. He will just come for me again."

"We can make him believe he killed you," Evan says. "But only if you sign the contract."

Evan pulls the paper from his back pocket and holds it out.

Apparently, one can't escape one's karma.

Blood is already coating my hand, and I press my required bloody thumbprint to the paper.

"Shit!" Dante calls out at the sight of my bloody hands. When he moves closer, he sees that I'm sitting in a pool of my own blood. His hands grasp my wounded side when he discovers the source. "We need to stabilize her," he barks at the other two.

"I didn't realize how bad it was," Evan says apologetically.

My eyes flutter closed, and Kurtis whispers a curse. "Is she going to make it?"

"She looks as pale as death," Evan mutters, then orders, "Kurtis, grab his phone to get a pic. *Dante*, let her go for a second. Okay?"

There is a click of a phone's camera, and then I'm jostled into someone's arms.

"I'll take care of this guy. Get her back to the barracks." *Evan*.

“Stay with me, *babe*,” Dante says, “just so you can tell me not to call you that anymore.”

I try to push on his chest, but I can’t even feel my own hands.

“You haven’t sampled my cookies either,” he jokes, but I hear the concern in his playful taunts.

I must be badly off.

I slip into darkness, thinking I’m done for, then I dream of bright, glowing lights and a buzzing in my tummy.



I wake in someone else’s room, in someone else’s bed, in someone else’s T-shirt. The captivating smell of sandalwood and cloves fills my senses.

I look over and meet Dante’s soulful gaze. He has been watching me sleep. “Hi,” he says sleepily.

Damn all my traitorous parts. He is sexy, but I don’t need to complicate our already awkward work environment by being distracted by his magnetism.

I try to sit up and regret it. Pain shoots from my torso to my toes.

He places a gentle hand on my shoulder and presses me back down. “I don’t think you should move until I do another healing round on you.”

I trail my hand across my body to touch the spot where Billy stabbed me. The skin is closed. “You healed me?”

“Yeah.”

“And who stripped me down, changed me into your shirt, and put me in your bed?”

“Well, I couldn’t have you ruining my sheets with your blood.”

“Which again begs the question, why put me in your bed?”

“I’ve been trying to get you in my bed since you ran into my chest.” He boops me on the nose.

“Yeah, that whole twenty-four hours of not getting what you wanted must have been agony for you.”

“It was torture.” He nods solemnly. “But this wasn’t how I expected to have you in my bed.” His voice has a worried tone.

“I really appreciate you healing me, but it makes it creepier when you pretend you want to have sex with me after you just undressed me while I

was knocked out.”

“Well, okay, I see your point when you say it like *that*.” His brow furrows. “But why do you keep saying I’m pretending?”

“It’s obviously part of my hazing ritual. I can’t trust anything you three say.” I sigh. “I can’t tell if Kurtis is even that much of an ass.”

“Oh, he is.” Dante smiles. “You’ll realize that in time.” He gets quiet and then finally asks, “Is that why you ran away? Because of... my advances?”

“Yes and no. I didn’t want this life. I get that hazing and harassment are all part of my initiation. I can usually roll with snarky remarks and even outright attacks on my character, but my life has been turned upside down twice in the last month.” My eyes sting with unshed tears, and I sniff them back. “I don’t enjoy being out of control, and that’s all I’ve been lately.”

Dante strokes my cheek and makes me look at him with the nudge of his finger. His sky blue eyes pierce me, probably reading my soul. It feels so strange being in such an intimate moment with a stranger.

“I know how you feel,” he says, “Just hang in there. You will get your bearings.”

I nod, not trusting my voice.

Dante grins, showing off his dazzling smile. He holds up a finger as if making me hold that thought, and then he jumps up to retrieve a container from his desk. As he opens the Tupperware, his grin widens even more. The tantalizing aroma of freshly baked cookies fills the air.

I giggle. I never giggle, but maybe I’m just giddy that I am still alive. It could also be from the blood loss.

I reach out for the treats, but Dante pulls away the ambrosia of baked goods and asks seductively, “Are you sure you want to taste my cookies?”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes. “I almost died, and you are making me beg for cookies?”

“It’s just that you seem... *conflicted* about trying my cookies or my hot cocoa.” He reaches down and opens a thermos. The scent of steaming hot, chocolaty goodness wafts out.

“May I have your cookies and hot cocoa?” I say with irritation.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He sets the containers aside and crawls over me.

“Dante!” I whack him on the chest, and he falls back with laughter.

“All right,” he concedes. With his strong arms, he gently lifts me and helps me sit against the headboard, then he offers me a chocolate chip cookie.

I pause and wonder, “You didn’t put laxatives or something in this, did you?”

“What? You almost died, as you just reminded me.”

“You didn’t say no.”

“No, but thanks for the instant karma idea.”

“Just never use it on me.” Biting into the warm cookie, I moan. Does it taste better because I escaped death?

Dante’s eyes dilate, but I ignore the physical arousal cue. When any woman moans in bed, most guys probably find it arousing, so it has nothing to do with me.

To divert his intense attention from my moaning mouth, I demand, “Cocoa. Stat!”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hands me the thermos.

I study Dante as I sip the warm, delicious liquid, wondering what circumstances brought him to work for Karma. What debt does he need to shed? I can’t ask him and open that topic up, though, since I’m not ready to talk about my past—maybe ever.

“May I?” Dante points to my mostly healed injury.

I nod and set the thermos down. He gingerly pulls down the blanket and lifts the shirt he loaned me, exposing my midsection. I notice I’m wearing boxers. My underwear is long gone, likely soaked with my blood, and I blush, thinking of him stripping me down and dressing me in his clothes.

Above my hip, I have an angry-looking pink scar, but the wound is sealed. As I turn my attention inward, I feel pinching and bloating in the area, so it hasn’t completely healed.

Dante presses his fingers down slowly. “How does that feel?”

I suck in a breath with the pain. “Not good.”

“She’s not allowing you to heal quickly.” He frowns and doesn’t look at my face. “You are lucky that guy wanted to make you suffer for a while and didn’t hit your intestines or kidney.”

“Lucky?” I wince as he explores my abdomen with his fingertips. “So you should be able to heal me faster?”

“Yeah,” he mutters. “Do you suppose she wants to teach you not to run from her?”

“Apparently, she isn’t the only one who wants to teach me that lesson.”

He looks up quickly to catch my meaning. “That guy?”

“He’s just the messenger.” I shake my head and clamp my mouth shut. I

didn't mean to talk about my past.

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't push me to explain. Instead, he focuses on his hands, and they glow. My side buzzes with energy, and warmth and relaxation pulse through my body. It feels so good, I could melt into the mattress and form a puddle of goo.

When Dante stops, I whimper.

"Don't worry, I'll give you some more later."

"That felt good," I murmur as I slide down the headboard until I'm curled up in bed. I close my eyes, wanting to bask in the good vibes.

Dante doesn't move from his seat on the edge of the mattress. I don't even mind if he's watching me. I'm riding a high from the healing, and I don't really care about anything.

After a few minutes, he asks, "Why did someone want you dead?"

I groan. I *was* enjoying myself. Why does he have to ask now? "Long story."

"You aren't going anywhere, are you?" Dante counters.

"Shouldn't you know? You can read my mind."

"Not all the time. You are blocking me," he admits.

"Good." I open my eyes to finally look at him. "I forgot what being around another psychic was like."

"You knew a lot of psychics? Were you a professional reader?" His expression is open and earnest, but I'm not sure if it's a trap. I shrug off the worry. I have to live as if everything is a trap.

"Yeah." I narrow my eyes. "You?"

"No." Dante looks away, studying the empty wall. "Before Karma's upgrade, I was just intuitive. I could read people's body language and feel their needs, but not see the future or auras. I also couldn't hear someone's thoughts."

"And now, as an agent, you can?"

"We can see a few minutes into the *potential* future," Dante explains, "and we can read a *target's* thoughts."

"Wait, so the only reason you can read my thoughts is because *I'm* the target?"

He smiles and hedges, "But you have powers of your own."

"I wouldn't call them powers, per se. When I'm performing a reading, I can lock onto a potential outcome for someone. Unfortunately, I don't see much for myself or people close to me. However, I can usually see a person's

weaknesses and strengths, but the rest is hit or miss. I might see their past. With a client, I've had messages come through for them. It seems to come from beyond me, and I can sense when bad things are about to happen. I sense when death is close, but like tonight, I don't know what direction it'll be coming from. Sometimes I can pick up when someone nearby is going to die soon. I also feel mass tragedies. Those are the hardest."

"Damn." Dante sighs. "So it isn't a very reliable power."

"Not at all. Besides, with my psychic curse, I've seen so much ugliness in people that I kind of hate having it."

"People aren't all ba—"

"Save it!" I snap. "I don't need a pep talk about kittens and good deeds." I sit up and wince but push through the discomfort. I bump him with my leg so he will move out of my way, but he doesn't budge.

"Just rest," he orders. "I'll leave you alone for now."

TRAINING DAY

Some rest does me good, along with Dante sneaking back into his room to give me additional treatments.

This time, I finally crack my eyes open when Dante pops back in. I risk a careful stretch, but it doesn't hurt.

His searching eyes cautiously take me in, then his gaze drops to my neck. "Your throat has a lot of bruising, but I didn't want you to wake up with my hands around your neck."

"Considerate." I grimace, thinking of how I might have reacted to that.

"Do you want me to take care of it?" he asks, stepping closer.

I imagine how it would look to have bruises on my neck. It would draw a lot of unwanted attention. "Ugh. Probably should." I sit and pull my hair out of the way.

Dante's warm hands slide up to clasp each side of my neck, cradling my jawline. If it wasn't for the dull ache, I might mistake the gesture as a prelude to a kiss. However, with the memory of Billy strangling me and recollections from my past surge to the forefront of my mind, I begin to hyperventilate.

Dante pulls his hands away. "Are you okay?"

I calm my breathing. "I just panicked."

He nudges my chin up so I make eye contact. "Try to remember that I would never hurt you."

"Yeah, heard that before," I say without thinking.

He jerks back at my comment. "Should I go?" he asks, pity in his voice.

"I don't need your pity," I scoff and look away.

He bends his head down to catch my attention. "My dad used to beat me. I don't know who hurt you, but that was empathy, not pity."

“Oh.” I think about what Dante’s life might have been like. I hadn’t tried to read his past, I just assumed he was a spoiled playboy. I shake my shoulders to lose the tension I’m holding. “Try again.”

“Maybe it would help if you kept your eyes on me, reminding you it’s me and not some *other* jerk touching you.”

“Got it. You are a totally different kind of jerk.” I smirk, and he returns it.

Staring into his sky blue eyes is harder than I expected. I hardly know him, but I have been more open with him than I’ve been with anyone in years. We don’t even know each other’s stories, although now I suppose we have a good sense of our hurdles.

His fingers slowly crawl into place.

I suck in a breath, but it’s more because of the pleasing sensation than PTSD.

He pauses and gently strokes my neck, and I give a quick, subtle nod for him to keep going. His palms are now flat on my skin.

To keep myself grounded, I study his eyes. There are subtle variations of blues. His deep complexion and dark hair set them off with a stunning effect, and his thick lashes don’t hurt. He’s almost too pretty to look at.

“You’re an asshole,” I say with a frown.

He grins and pours the healing energy into my bruises. “Why now?”

“Those lashes. It isn’t fair.”

“Gift and a curse,” he says flippantly, but there’s truth behind his joke.

“How so?” I ask, and his eyes widen in surprise that I picked up on his meaning.

“One of the reasons my dad hit me. I looked like a girl. Well, before I hit puberty.”

“He sounds like a fucking sweetheart.”

“Then I suppose when girls started appreciating my appearance, I went overboard to compensate.” He sighs. “I’m not proud of what I did.”

I bite my tongue, remembering his advances have been part of my hazing.

He glances down, and his thumb brushes my throat. “The outer bruising is gone. How does it feel?”

I swallow and clear my throat. “Better. Thanks.”

When he pulls away, I mourn the loss of his hands. I can’t remember the last time someone touched me with such compassion and tenderness. Maybe never.

“Your suitcase is by the door,” Dante says. “If you want to take a shower,

I can make sure no one bothers you, not even me.”

“Thanks?” I raise a questioning eyebrow. “Why are you suddenly being so nice?”

“You signed your contract. The hazing is over.”

My intuition is telling me otherwise. “But is it though?”

“*Mostly.*” He chuckles. “But we don’t have to lay it on as thick.”

I’m able to take a shower without incident. The small reprieve is a blessing, but now I have to deal with the rest of my cursed life.

Dante and I head down to the kitchen to carb up for the day. Evan and Kurtis are waiting for us with a couple of plates of eggs, potatoes, and freshly baked bread. With the smell of the fresh bread, my life doesn’t seem as cursed.

Once I sit down, Evan starts in on a lecture. “Don’t ever run off like that again. You were lucky we were able to help you.”

“Thanks for mansplaining. I never would have been able to figure that out on my own,” I sass and then ask, “So what happened with Billy?”

“He has photographic evidence of your demise and a vague memory of dumping your body.” Evan shovels some eggs into his mouth.

“Implanting memories is a karma power?” I ask.

“Only used in extreme cases such as covering up karma agent screw ups,” Kurtis grumbles and gives me the stink eye. It’s like he’s taking me running away personally.

“What happens to me now? A punishment? Time-out?”

“Worse,” Evan growls. “Training.”

“Why is that worse?”

“You’ll see.” Kurtis grins wickedly.



They aren’t wrong. Training entails physical training. Ugh.

“Put these on.” Evan hands me jogging pants, a sports bra, and a workout top all in my size.

“Do I have to?” I whine.

“Do you want to escape with your life?” he asks. “Or get caught by a

pissed off target?”

“Does that really happen?” I ask skeptically.

“More often than I’d like it to,” Kurtis says.

Dante smacks Kurtis on the shoulder. “Then be smarter with your choices.”

“And I choose to be smarter and not get caught.” I start to walk away.

“Not an option.” Evan grabs my elbow.

I yank, but he doesn’t release his hold. “Let go!”

“Make me,” he challenges. I can’t believe he’s coming at me like this in the middle of the house.

Tugging on my arm again does nothing. Evan is six feet of solid muscle. My anger rises. I’m tired of being on this end of the dynamic.

I toss the workout clothes in Evan’s face. While he’s distracted, I stomp on his foot and punch his diaphragm with my free hand, knocking the wind out of him.

He releases me, and I step several feet away.

He charges me and brings me to the ground, his heavy body weighing me down.

I wiggle to break free, but he pins me to the hard kitchen floor with little effort.

My lungs freeze, and I gasp for air.

Dante sees my emotional state. “Get off her.”

“She needs to learn her lesson,” Evan snaps. “Your job isn’t to protect her.”

My breath comes in short hiccups.

“Stop it. Now!” Dante pulls Evan off me.

Evan knocks Dante’s hand away and spins on him, grabbing Dante’s collar. “What is your problem?”

Scrambling away, I watch Kurtis get in Dante’s face to back Evan up.

“Stop thinking with your cock,” Kurtis snarls.

“I’m not!” Dante shouts. “She’s been through a lot.”

He doesn’t reveal that it’s more than last night’s incident that has me rattled, and I appreciate that he keeps my confidence.

“Stop fighting.” I stand up, brushing off imaginary dirt. “I’ll be okay. I just wasn’t prepared to be attacked again.”

“Too soon?” Kurtis jokes angrily.

I suck in a deep breath. “Yes, it is, but I’ll get changed. We can do

whatever stupid training you have in store for me now that I know to expect bodily harm.”

“Did I hurt you?” Evan asks, his voice softer now.

“Nah. I’m just still sore from my injuries, but mostly, I was triggered since I almost died last night.” I glance at his body. “What about you?”

“You got in some good hits.” Evan smiles encouragingly. “But we need to teach you a few defensive moves and make them instinctive, and get your running speed up. Personally, I recommend getting out of a situation by not getting in one.”

“Like this?” I flip him off and walk out of the room.



When I return, Evan leads me to the back of the house and outside. “Ten laps around the perimeter,” he barks.

“How long is that?” I survey the estate in disbelief.

“The estate is roughly five acres, so... about three and a half miles.” He waves his hand toward my feet, indicating that I’m not running. “I will add a lap for every moment you delay.”

Surrendering to my fate, I begin a slow jog. When I come around to my starting location, Evan has me stretch a bit and gives me some water, then he sends me on my way. After the first mile, I’m winded, and sweat-drenched hair clings to my forehead.

At the end of my second mile, I’m dragging my feet. I haven’t exercised regularly in years.

“One more lap to go,” Evan informs me as I pass. “And fair warning, Kurtis is hunting you now.”

I come to a full stop. “What?”

“Kurtis will attack you somewhere on the trail. Evade him.”

“But—”

“No arguments.” Evan points to the trail ahead of me.

I don’t even have the breath to argue. My adrenaline begins to pump as I run, and the threat has cleared my head a bit. Kurtis thinks I’m getting special treatment from Dante, so who knows what he will do if he catches me.

I make it halfway through the track where the trees are thick and dense when I sense Kurtis’s energy. He’s ahead of me. I expect he will wait for me

to pass and then attack me from behind.

I'm wrong.

He charges right at me head-on. I dip and weave under his outstretched arms to avoid his intended bear hug. I make it another ten feet before I feel him on my heels.

I veer to my right, deviating from the well-worn trail. That move throws him off, earning me another second, but now I'm speeding along uneven ground.

Tree roots and fallen leaves obscure the dangers underfoot, and my step lands in a hole just big enough for me to trip and wrench my ankle. I tumble to the ground.

Kurtis is on top of me in the next second. "Got you."

My ankle throbs, and I push on his shoulders. "Great, now get off."

Instead of moving away, he makes himself more comfortable on top of me. "So you're screwing Dante?"

"What the hell?" I shove him again. "Knock it off!"

"You are supposed to evade me." Kurtis captures my wrists and holds me down.

"Please, let me go," I beg.

"Make me," he orders.

Fear then rage fill my senses. I feel a brewing tornado inside me, and I imagine it forcing Kurtis away from me.

A force explodes out of me, knocking Kurtis several feet away and into a tree.

I jump up and test my ankle. It's tender but I use it anyway, and I run, cutting across the estate instead of following the track to where Dante and Evan wait for me.

I collapse on the ground when my ankle finally gives out.

Dante rushes over to inspect the damage, already pouring healing energy into it before Evan says anything.

"Good job," Evan congratulates me.

"Screw you," I snap and swallow down the horrid mix of fear and anger.

Dante's eyes narrow. "What happened?"

Kurtis appears from the clearing and swaggers over.

"Nothing." I brush Dante's hand away from my ankle. "Lesson learned."

Kurtis acts as if he hadn't just attacked me. "She blasted me!" he says excitedly.

“Seriously?” Evan glances down at me. “How did you do that?”

“Asshole pissed me off,” I grumble.

“But how?” Dante prompts.

“I was scared and then raging mad. It felt like there was a tornado inside me, and then it burst out and hit Kurtis.”

Again, Kurtis’s face lights up like Santa Claus has entered the building. “She knocked me ten feet away!”

“Damn.” Evan rubs his chin, watching me.

“What? Is that not a thing you all can do?”

“No. Our powers have been a bit more subtle than that,” Evan explains. “If you’re not careful with your anger, you could hurt someone.”

Still on the ground, I sit with that daunting thought swirling through my mind.

Evan continues, “We need to find out what else you can do.”

“What do you mean?” I’m seriously confused. “Don’t you all have the same powers?”

“Yes and no. We all have the same powers, but to different degrees. With the blasting power, we can only use it to knock an object into someone’s path, but it’s more nudging what’s already in play. It’s like a light tap, not blasting people across a room.”

“Her power explains how we found Billy on the ground,” Dante says.

“That wasn’t you?” I look at each of their expressions. “I thought you knocked him out.”

“We just walked up and found him there, and you peeked your head out of the trunk. That’s why I didn’t realize how badly you were injured.” Evan shakes his head in disbelief. “Wait... that means you had this ability *before* your contract was signed.”

Kurtis curses. “What does *that* mean?”

“Don’t know.” Evan looks back at the barracks. “But let’s not talk about it with anyone.”

“What about Karma?” I ask. “Wouldn’t she already know?”

“Not necessarily,” Evan says. “She has been more and more hands-off with the dealings of her agents over the last few years. We only get texts and emails now for communication, and even those grow fewer as time goes by.”

I throw my hands in the air in protest. “So she makes the first approach to offer the deal for agents, but then she can’t be bothered with her own organization?”

“I suppose not.” Evan stares up at the sky as if he can find the answer there. “Enough talk. She might be monitoring you since your great failed escape.”

“So what if she knows about this ability? Can it really be a big deal?” I shrug.

Evan crouches down to look me in the eye. “I don’t think she’ll like it, and what she doesn’t like...”

I take the warning in, then I can’t help but ask, “Is this some kind of prank? Can you all do what I did?”

“No,” Kurtis answers unexpectedly. “We will circle back to this when it’s safer to do so.”

“What do you care?” I ask with an edge, remembering how he treats me.

“You’re my teammate,” Kurtis says. “That’s enough for me. Hopefully, you’ll remember that when we’re on a job.”

He storms off before I can reply. Man, he’s moody.

THE OUTING

*A*fter my second shower for the day, I meet the guys for lunch.

They made a massive sandwich for me, and I joke, “So you boys *are* more than a pretty face. It’s good that you know your place is in the kitchen.”

“Greta made them, but I’ll take the compliment.” Kurtis smooths his hand over his light stubble to show off his stupidly handsome face.

I roll my eyes. “By the way, unless I’m screwing you, it isn’t your business whom I’m having sex with.”

Dante tenses. “What now?”

“While Kurtis pinned me, he wanted to know if you tapped this ass.”

“Dude!” Dante punches Kurtis’s arm.

“I get that hazing is still part of my initiation, but can we stop with the sex angle? I’m fucking over it.”

“I can’t guarantee anything.” Evan glances at Dante and Kurtis. “But guys, we probably shouldn’t stir up her anger in case she enacts some justice on us again,” Evan says pointedly.

The two look out the window where I knocked Kurtis ten feet, and they nod.

“Prudent suggestion.” Dante nudges Kurtis, who sighs his acknowledgment.

“On to business,” Evan announces. “Tessa, you and I are going on a typical outing so I can show you how a workday goes.” He turns to Kurtis and Dante. “You two will stay here. Do your trolling thing.”

“That isn’t fair!” Kurtis throws his hands in the air in protest.

“Fine, you can go out, but not with us,” Evan retorts.

Furrowing his brow, Dante doesn't say anything as he leaves with his half-eaten sandwich.



After finishing lunch, Evan walks me out to their giant ten-car garage. He grabs a key from a hook and heads over to a blue convertible Corvette. It doesn't fit with his hot professor persona.

"This is your car?" I ask skeptically.

"Yeah, you can pick out a car of your choosing, and I'll have it delivered. You just have to justify your choice if it's expensive."

I venture a guess. "You justified this one to make old men jealous of you?"

"And the younger ones." He grins wickedly. "And today, I have the bonus of having a beautiful woman in it with me."

"Whatever," I scoff. "So how do you pick your targets, or are they picked for you?"

"For bigger jobs, we have names and places provided. Half the time, we just have to leave the house to find a mark to take down."

I slip into the leather seat, and a sigh of pleasure escapes me. It is perfectly crafted, molding to my body like an embrace.

The engine rumbles to life and vibrates through me. Once we clear the gate, Evan stomps on the gas, and I feel the thrill of acceleration.

It reminds me of when I had owned a vintage black '67 Impala like the one on *Supernatural*. The thing guzzled gas like a fish, but damn if it didn't launch me into euphoria when I'd open it up on an empty country road. Windows down, I would holler to my heart's content, letting out all the grief I accumulated up to that point.

Seeing my wide smile, Evan says, "Not a bad perk, huh?"

"I can have *any* car?" I ask, and when he nods, I say, "Then I want this one."

Evan laughs. "How about I let you borrow it?"

"I will allow it," I say haughtily.

His expression turns serious. "Tessa, we need to figure out why you have that extra power." He pulls into a strip mall. There are various stores, but the one that catches my eye and the one he parks in front of reads, "*Psychic*

Readings.”

I slap myself on the knee. “Hilarious. Seriously, though, what are we doing here? Are we about to serve some justice? Does she rip off her clients?” I rub my hands together like the evil henchwoman I am.

Evan shuts off the engine and turns in his seat to face me. “She’s the real deal. Of all people, you know some psychics have the juice. If we go in there, she might have answers to what’s going on with you. If you’d rather leave it alone, manage your abilities, and keep them quiet, then fine, but I don’t think you can just let this ride.”

My throat goes dry. This is that big moment where I choose my own adventure. Choose the regular, crazy life of a karma agent or find out what a big freak I am?

I open the door as my answer, and Evan hurries to catch up to me at the shop’s entrance.

When my hand touches the shop’s door handle, I sense the power of her aura. She has the goods all right—straight, uncut, and top-frigging-shelf potency—but would she be able to clue me in on what’s going on with me?

“Come on in already, Tessa,” she calls from inside.

I swing the door open and stop short when I step over the threshold.

Evan collides with my back, his hands capturing my hips so I don’t fly forward. “What’s wrong?”

“*Carmen?*” I whisper.

“*Madam Carmen* to you.” She folds her arms over her full chest. Carmen is an older woman in her sixties, wearing full, mystical reader garb of a silky, flowing muumuu, crystals, and charmed jewelry.

Weirdly enough, when I was a teen, she also seemed to be in her sixties. She hasn’t aged a day in a decade, and her soft, silver hair flows around her round, beautiful, warm-toned face.

She opens her arms to greet me.

“You *know* each other?” Evan asks in shock.

“I taught little Miss Thang how to read cards—not that she liked them much.”

“Why are you *here?*” I ask. “I thought you moved to Europe.”

Instead of answering me, she looks at Evan in disbelief. “She asks why *I’m* here.” She gazes at me, reading me like a damned open book. “What are you doing here, Miss Karma Agent?”

“You know about that?”

She nods, and her eyes gloss over, going into her reading mode. “Evan is worried about you.”

He confirms her statement. “She had powers *before* she signed the contract.”

“Oh, I know she did.” Carmen huffs and waves him off like it’s old news. She narrows her eyes on me. “If only you developed them all these years instead of pulling half-assed scams with your psychic abilities.”

“Then what is it? How do we control it?” Evan asks desperately. He isn’t just afraid for me, he’s also worried for himself and probably for Dante and Kurtis.

Carmen turns her powerful gaze on Evan. “Your energy is disrupting me. Leave.”

He clenches his fists but storms out.

“That man is wound too tight for his own good.” Carmen shakes her head. “He will break one day. Either the fracture will be his salvation or his destruction.”

I glance out the cluttered windows to see him pacing the sidewalk in front of the shop. “I don’t know what I’ve gotten myself into.”

Carmen straightens up and scoffs at me. “You have done what you always do—get yourself into trouble. This time, I’m not sure if you are going to make it out.”

My head rolls like a petulant child so my eyes don’t have to do all the work. I can’t help it. Carmen was my one safe haven my entire life. She’s like what I imagine having a loving grandmother might be like—not that I was lucky enough to have a living grandparent. “Dammit, you’re right. I keep digging deeper into the shit pile of life.”

“Follow me.” Carmen leads me back to her official reading room. The walls are painted black. The smell of sage and incense almost choke me, but, it feels like an embrace when I step into the small room. Her wards snap into place around me, protecting me.

“Do you remember how to set up a proper ward?” she asks.

With a shameful pout, I shake my head. “I recall the gist, but I haven’t done it in a long time.”

“Yeah, and look where that got you.” With her sufficiently chastising expression, Carmen says, “I’ll give you a set of instructions before you leave.”

I sit down at the reading table and study her as she shuffles her tarot

cards. “You are more powerful than you ever let on, aren’t you?”

“As you would say... *Duh.*” She chuckles. “Did you expect me to go around bragging and getting myself into messes like you do? Besides, it wouldn’t have done any good to reveal my power to a teenage runaway. However, I taught you what I could for as long as I could.”

I look away so I don’t have to see her disappointment and confess, “I didn’t always use your teachings with the best intentions.”

“Honestly, little one, I didn’t expect that you would. I know you did what you did to survive, and I knew that when I trained you.” Her voice softens. “Did you ever use it for good?”

“Sometimes.” My eyes tear up. I let my mentor down—the one person on this planet who believed in me. “Probably not enough.”

“The past is the past. You are on a new life path, just as I predicted.”

I remember the palm reading she had given me when we first met. “The break in my lifeline.”

“Yeah, but I saw *another* path.” She gazes into the ether. “No. There were many paths. You have always been an odd one.”

“You always said that about me.” I shrug.

“You’re shrouded too.” Her eyes almost turn solid white, but I realize it’s my own second sight witnessing her ability. “You had a lot of power as a teenager, but it was still budding then. Your abilities have been mostly dormant in your adulthood... You have been shutting down for years. Now, they’ve been triggered by direct contact with a supernatural being.”

“My meeting with Karma?”

“Yes, but she wasn’t the only one who could have approached you or triggered you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Death, Chaos, or Jealousy could have claimed you as theirs.”

“Other gods might have approached me?”

“*Gods* is a bit much.” She pshaws. “Supernatural entities, spirits—mostly, they’re megalomaniacal jerks.”

I chuckle. “Wow. Tell me how you really feel.”

“Meh. They all have their limits and failings, but they were all interested in you.”

“Because of my abilities? Why do I have them?”

Carmen gazes into the distance again. “All I can say is that I don’t trust Instant Karma with your abilities.”

“I don’t trust her.” I shiver. “I was getting the vibe that she’s a media whore.”

“Don’t slut shame.” Carmen laughs at her own joke. “But yes, I have been noticing what’s *trending*.”

“My real concern is that I could have hurt someone on my karma team. How do I understand and control my powers so I don’t harm people?”

“You might have to hurt people to discover what you can actually do.” Carmen idly shuffles her tarot deck again. “Push yourself, make a list of oddities, and look for connections. You were always good at pattern recognition as a teenager.”

I sit with that thought. I need to push myself, but in a controlled environment. “Okay, then what? It won’t do any good to know that I have these abilities if I’m just stuck in this contract.”

“Contracts end.” Carmen shrugs. “And karma agents have shelf life. I’d rather you were prepared to fight if it came down to it.”

“*Fight... her?*” My mouth drops open. “A goddess?”

“Don’t advertise that idea. Her loyal followers might betray you.”

“Can I trust Evan? What do you get from your knowledge of him?”

“He has questions. That’s why he came to me. However, that doesn’t necessarily make him a rebel. But you? You were born with rebellion in your heart.”

I grunt my dismissal of that assessment. “Can I come back to visit you?”

She frowns, and I know the answer isn’t one I want to hear. “We should keep our contact to a minimum until you are ready to talk about your powers and what you can do. It will be too risky to reveal your hand before it’s time.”

She finally stops shuffling the cards and flips the top one over.

The death card.

Sure, it can mean a lot of things, but in this case, I’m certain that the Reaper is likely to make an appearance.



After an embrace, I walk out of Carmen’s shop to face an edgy Evan. “Well?” His voice betrays his worry that I’m about to ruin his life. If I *am* some sort of wild card, I have probably already ruined it.

“I don’t want to discuss it out in the open,” I whisper.

“Tessa...” His voice is tight.

“Tonight, after I prepare a place.” That assurance seems to put him at ease—well, not at ease, but he drops the subject.

“So what next?” I ask jauntily. “Do I get to see you in action again? Going to rough up another abuser?” I hold out my hands like a boxer, playfully bouncing on the balls of my feet.

“I’ve got something for you.” He winks at me, and for a moment, it feels like a date.

We drive a few minutes through town to a mom-and-pop convenience store. Evan parks across the street. “Wait,” he says as I reach for the car door handle.

“Is there a lot of waiting around for this job?”

“More than I’d like.” He looks over at me. “It helps when I have pleasant company.”

“Is it mostly just the three of you?” I remember the two other agents from the day before. “Do you ever work with the others at the barracks?”

“I don’t, but there’s no rule about it.”

“Do you socialize with the others?”

“We have a bit. I’m not fond of most of them.”

“Do you like Dante and Kurtis?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t have hung out with them before this job, but I suppose I’ve become used to them. They have become like... *cousins* to me.”

“Only cousins.” I chuckle. “High praise.”

“Coming from me? It is.” He grins seductively. “I only give out praise when it’s deserved.”

I eye him. He’s very much the sexy professor type, with an extra dash of control issues, and I believe he’s hinting that he’s a dom in the bedroom. It’s probably hard for him to be paired with a womanizing surfer dude and a macho jock who both seem to be hard to wrangle.

“But do you trust them?” I ask with all seriousness.

If Evan doesn’t trust his team, then why should I share my secrets with either of them or him? People who don’t trust often can’t be trusted themselves. I should know. Besides, it might get me killed if I open up to the wrong people.

“I...” He hesitates. “I believe I do. They can be jerks, mostly Kurtis, but that’s the job description. We are all a bit broken.”

“Even you?” I’m surprised he’s admitting this to me—a virtual stranger.

“I have my flaws, my weaknesses, but if I give my word, I don’t go back on it. It’s the one thing I’ve done right in my life.”

I have a million questions, but I refrain from asking about his past or using my powers to read him. I can’t afford to play *I’ll show you mine, and you show me yours* secret past edition right now.

“Can I trust them with *me*?” I say it with emphasis so he will know I’m referring to my powers.

“They both already know *you*.” The intensity of his stare increases. “But I will back whatever you decide to do from now on.”

“Thanks.” I bite my lip as I think, then ask, “Even if that means cutting *you* out?”

His jaw tightens, and he slides his gaze back to our targets across the street. “I won’t like it.”

“Control issues?”

He darts his dark gaze back to me. “More than you would guess.” My mind flashes to him as a BDSM dom, ordering his lover around to serve his desires.

He grins as if he knows I guessed exactly what I did.

I raise my eyebrows, more than just curious to confirm my vision.

He shrugs his broad shoulders nonchalantly and turns his attention back to the storefront.

“Tease,” I mutter under my breath.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Only so I know what kind of S and M gear to get you for your birthday.”

“Anything will do. Never hurts to have a spare.”

My face flushes with heat. This conversation has taken a turn.

“Here he comes.”

“What?” I look over at the store. A man approaches with a ski mask over his face.

“But it’s still light out!” I scan the area to see if anyone else is seeing this.

The robber darts in and out quickly. I don’t hear a gunshot, so that’s good.

“Watch.” Evan flicks his finger, and the man’s wallet pops out of his pocket as he runs away from the scene.

With a phone pressed to his ear, the clerk peeks out of the store and sees the wallet on the ground in front of him. He snatches it up and is excited to

see an ID. I hear him telling the cops on the phone that he has the man's wallet.

"You did the little nudge thing and made him drop his wallet?" I ask, impressed with the subtle tactic.

"Simple and clean. We didn't have to get involved physically, but that man will pay. He will be linked to his other holdups too—one where someone was shot and died."

"Crap." I take a deep breath, thinking of all this job entails. "Do you like your work?"

"Only when it's something big like this—saving potential victims."

"Let's grab some takeout for the guys," Evan suggests.

I use an app on his phone to place our order.

As we enter the parking lot, we wait for a space to pull into because some genius needs to back his car into a space. These people never know how to back up, and this guy is no exception.

"Why?" I ask. "Do they think they are James Bond zipping out of the spot, even though they don't know how to handle backing in?"

Evan chuckles menacingly as he finally parks. We head inside to pick up our to-go order.

As we enter, a burned-out middle-aged man is yelling at the barista. "Are you an idiot? I asked for hot, not lukewarm."

"Sir, that is the hottest I'm allowed to serve," the barista explains. "It's a hundred and ninety degrees."

Evan nudges me with an elbow to get my attention, his hand subtly poised for action.

The under-caffeinated man turns around in an angry huff. Then, suddenly, his hand jerks upward, as if it had been bumped. The lid pops off, and the practically boiling coffee splashes all over him. Screaming and cursing about how scalding hot it is, he runs to the restaurant's restroom.

"People barely making a living wage shouldn't have to deal with assholes like him," Evan says casually yet loudly for the other patrons. "Hashtag instant karma!"

I nod, since I hate when people do that too.

We pay for our food and carry it out. The backer upper guy is returning to his vehicle at the same time.

“Watch and learn.” Evan hurries to start his Corvette and pulls in front of the offending car.

The guy sits for a moment, waiting for us to move. Evan makes several horrible attempts to back into a space next to the backer’s car, essentially blocking him in until Evan can figure out how to park.

Soon enough, the backer honks and yells out his window, flipping us off. “Move it, buddy!”

“But this is more efficient to hold everyone up and back into the spot!” Evan calls out.

“Don’t be a dick!” the man says.

“Funny, that was what I wanted to say to you earlier,” Evan says, then punches the gas and zips out of the parking lot before the man can register what happened.



When we returned to the barracks, Evan yells, “Food!”

“My favorite!” Kurtis says happily as he rushes to greet us. This offer of food has smoothed over his irritation at being left behind.

Dante strolls in and grabs his sandwich. “You two have fun?”

“Kind of boring really,” I say.

He brightens after that. “I have a gig tonight. Karma requested you come with me to train.”

“Uh, sure.” With apprehension, I look at our unofficial leader, Evan. “What time? I had something I wanted to work on tonight.”

“Ten, so you should have time, right?”

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“A party. Wear that cute black dress in your closet.”

“Did you go through my stuff?”

“Greta hung up your clothes after your attack. I asked her if you had anything to wear out. I might have peeked to check if you had anything that would work for the gig.”

“Hmm.” I huff. “Stop snooping through my stuff, creeper.”

“Fine.”

Dante looks chastised, so I leave him alone.

When Kurtis chuckles, I give him the stink eye.

“Does that go for me too?” he asks.

“No boundaries around here.” I throw my hands in the air, and I storm off to create one with magic.

LITTLE BLACK DRESS

During our car ride earlier, I asked about any available places nearby where we can have a private conversation, and Evan told me the lot next to Karma's is vacant.

It's a great location, since I don't want to create a warded space on *her* land—she might be able to sense my protective magic within her territory.

After scarfing down the takeout meal, I wander around the empty lot to find the best spot. I need something that's blocked by trees or a hill from the road and the barracks. I also require an open area to invite the guys to join my quest for understanding my powers—to test what I can do. Finally, I stumble across a sweet spot that will work for all my needs. It's out of sight of any prying eyes, because I definitely don't need the other agents discovering my sacred place.

I study the paper Carmen gave me and follow the directions to a tee. After I draw the proper symbols and sigils on the rocks surrounding the space, I chant the binding words and imbue it with my natural power. Like a flash of light, the ward snaps into place. I wait for a moment, worrying that I called the attention of the goddess, but nothing happens, and Karma doesn't appear.

I'm safe for another hour or two at least.

Well, until I'm back to work with the biggest flirt who actually tempts me.



Getting ready for our next gig, I open my practically empty closet and see

that the little black dress in my wardrobe isn't my original one. Dante must have bought this one and replaced mine. When did he have time to do that?

I slip it on, since it's all I have that will work. The neckline plunges a bit more than my breasts are accustomed to being shown off, and the skirt is shorter than I would normally wear. As I turn in my dress, watching in the mirror, I feel sort of sexy. It's been a long time since I felt that way. Surrendering to the show I'll give him tonight, I pull the tags off the dress and realize it wasn't cheap.

I leave my long brown hair down, so I can camouflage my cleavage when I feel the need. The *girls* aren't used to that much of a breeze. Fortunately, I have some dressy boots that look great with the outfit. I grab a shrug to keep me warm, and after a touch up of my sparse makeup, I head downstairs.

"Beautiful!" Dante inspects my outfit. "Nice fit."

"Where did my other dress go?" I ask.

"I'm holding her hostage," Dante answers, "for crimes against your beauty."

I play along. "Don't do anything to hurt her."

"Her fate is in my hands now," Dante says, matching my drama. "You will have to move on while she finds her own way in life."

I laugh. "So is *this* dress in danger of the same fate?" I spin to show him how it looks. "Do I look the part of this mystery gig?"

"That dress is dangerous, but not in danger. Not yet anyway." He moves closer and settles his hand on my lower back, pulling me to his muscular abs.

I don't push him away since he has a way of short-circuiting my brain with his flirty hotness.

"Tonight, you are my date." He leans in as if to kiss me but stops short. "Will you be able to play the role of my love interest?"

I swallow down my lust and feign disinterest. "Sounds tedious," I quip.

Dante grins as if he sees past my chill attitude, then he leads me out of the house and over to the garage and opens the door to a big, black SUV. I'm surprised by his choice in vehicles.

"Leg room." He points to his long, muscular legs. "This will be a hard assignment. You will have to put up with me hitting on you all night."

"But what experience will I draw from?" I ask innocently. "And, *for my role*, will I succumb to your boorish charms?"

"One can only hope."

I shake my head and ask seriously, "So really, what's the job?"

“My date,” he answers with concern. “Do you not want to go now?”

“No.” I feel flustered. “I mean, yes, I’ll go. I just thought you were teasing me. I can pretend to be your date tonight.”

His shoulders relax a bit, but I can tell something bothers him.

As he drives, I explain, “I thought you were doing another one of your jokes on me. No one is going to buy that you are dating me.”

“You never dated much, did you?” he asks, ignoring my comment.

“You mean when I was *still of this world*?” I say with a wistful tone, then I drop the joke. “No. I didn’t. I had a few, uh, I guess I’d call them... *relationships*, but they were all bad.”

“Relationships. Dating. They don’t all have to be bad experiences.”

“Maybe.” I bite my lip and don’t argue that my dating life always ends with a horrible finale for me. I don’t expect now will be any different. Dating and/or screwing my coworkers are disasters in the making, and I have had enough disasters in my life.

Is it my life anymore since Karma practically owns me?

“How about we just have fun tonight?” Dante eyes me, likely reading my thoughts. “Blow off some steam and *karma* someone’s ass by the end of the night.”

“Karma as a verb.” I smile. “Just relax? As friends?”

“I’d like us to be friends.” Dante smiles at me as he parks the car outside of a house filled with people and loud music. “I know it isn’t easy to trust, especially with the way Karma likes us to initiate her agents, but I’ve learned to trust Evan and Kurtis. Maybe we can find something good in this weird life together.”

Dante holds out his hand, and I take it. “I suppose I could relax a bit more,” I say.

He brings my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles, and my heart flutters over the silly gesture. Stupid, gullible heart.

His grin turns wicked. “Now let’s go kick karmic ass.”

Our assignment is a college party—a rager. Whatever. I never went to college. Fortunately, Dante and I can both pass for the tail end of college age with the dark lighting and the clothes we are in.

Most of the women, and probably the guys, wouldn’t care if Dante is too old anyway. He catches a lot of attention just by walking in, but I realize half of that is just his swagger. He has it, and he has that something extra that some people just seem to be born with—a charm that oozes out their pores, a

magnetism that could compel people to turn their heads to watch him walk by. Reluctantly, I have been compelled myself. It's a magic of its own.

Was it magic? I don't even know anymore.

I can't believe where I am or what I'm doing, and with a hunk of pure sexy.

"I'll get us some drinks." Dante smirks and boops my nose. "You stay here and keep that bewildered look on your face."

Schooling my dumbfounded expression, I press my lips together in irritation. "*Haha.*"

Dante leans down to whisper in my ear, his heat waking my body up with naughty urges. "Sweetheart, you're losing that charmingly vulnerable look." His hand brushes down my arm in a seductive caress. When he pulls back, he grins. "There it is again... *deer in headlights.*"

I cross my arms and inadvertently push up my breasts.

Dante glances down at my cleavage. "Perfect. Don't move," he orders and runs off toward the back of the house.

I hate parties. Nothing good happens at parties like these—I know from experience.

I scan the crowd, wondering what we were doing here and who our target might be.

Dante must run into a few more breasts he has to inspect on the way to get drinks, because several minutes later, he hasn't returned. I'm feeling abandoned in our *just have fun* evening, and I don't like the idea that I look vulnerable. As I learned the hard way with life on the streets, that often leads to trouble.

"Hey," a young man says as he walks up to me. "Did your friends leave you to hold up this wall?"

"Yup. If I move, the entire world will come crashing down." I nod solemnly. "Your friends leave you to hopefully explore places where no frat boy has gone before?"

He chuckles. "Something like that. I'm Ted."

I realize I might want a cover name, but if Dante comes back and calls me Tessa, that could be weird. "I'm Tess."

"Do you want something to drink?"

I scan the surrounding faces but don't see Dante. "Sure. I'll have whatever punch they are passing out for this event."

"Be right back," he says.

I mutter, “That’s what the last guy said.”

Suddenly, there’s someone right behind me. Too close. “Hey. Great job.”

“Huh?” I turn to see Dante’s blue eyes lighting up. “That’s our target?”

“Yeah. He preys on women who look like you—vulnerable. That’s why I left you alone.”

I bristle, both because he set me up and because I projected being a *victim*. I thought I’d rid myself of that weakness, but I suppose all that’s happened has shaken me to my core. “A heads-up would have been nice.”

“He would have sensed it.” Dante frowns, looking guilty.

“So what do I do now?”

“He will lure you away from the party and roofie your drink.”

My eyes bug out. “What am I supposed to do about it?”

Dante places a roofie in my hand. “Pretend to drink his and give him this. Begin to act out of it. I’ll do the rest.”

My worried glance tells him what I think of that plan. He disappeared on me already, so how do I know he won’t do it again?

He squeezes my elbow reassuringly. “I won’t let him hurt you. Trust me.”

Yeah, trusting someone with my safety *never* ends poorly for me.

Dante vanishes just as Ted returns. Dude, the man moves quickly.

Ted hands me the official cup of parties, the red Solo cup, and I hesitate, glancing down at the contents.

“Here.” Ted pours a bit into his mouth and hands it back to me. “See? All good.”

“Thanks.” I sip the drink.

“What’s your major?” he asks.

Whoops. I didn’t line up a cover story. “Oh. I’m not that interesting. What’s yours?”

“Microbiology.” He picks at his cup. “I’m a science nerd.”

“Nothing wrong with science.” I take another sip. “But I’m an art major. Not going to save the world with that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with art.” He grins. “The world needs both.”

My skin crawls. If it weren’t for the knowledge of what horrible deeds this man has committed, I might have found him appealing, but I do have a habit of attracting losers.

I down the rest of my drink, and he follows suit.

“Another?” he asks, and I nod, shyly. “Do you want to sit outside? It feels too crowded in here. Too loud.”

“Uh, okay.” I glance around but don’t see Dante. I hope he’s watching and not distracted with some cute sorority girl.

Ted leads me back to the punch bowl. The liquor in it alone could knock a lightweight on their ass, but I’m no lightweight. He scoops another serving for both of us but carries mine for me. If I wasn’t watching and didn’t know what to look for, I might have missed the moment where he spikes my drink.

We acquire two lounge chairs and set them by the pool. Before we sit, he hands me my cup, and we click them together. I pretend to take several drinks from my cup as we chat some more.

I stumble into him and then put my drink down. “I’m feeling woozy.”

He sets his drink next to mine and moves in close.

I go to step toward him but purposely roll my ankle, then I throw my hands out to steady myself. I allow my clutch to fly from my hand, landing several feet away. “Whoops, can you get that for me?” I smile as I sway.

“Of course.”

As he retrieves my purse, time slows down around me. It almost feels as if I’m drunk or roofied. It must be Dante giving me time to drop my drug into Ted’s cup.

Good. Dante has my back.

I dump the contents of the small vial into his cup and lace Ted’s drink. Sitting down on the edge of my chair, I grab my drink before Ted can turn around.

“Thanks,” I say as I set my purse on the side table with his drink. I offer another toast, and he takes the opportunity to make me drink more. I pretend to be drunk and close my eyes, but I actually am feeling off.

Ted downs his drink and says, “You look like you need to rest your eyes for a second.” He guides me back to lie down on the lounge, then he sways. “What the—”

He collapses on top of me, and within a second, Dante is pulling Ted off me. He throws him over a retaining wall that comes up to hip height.

When I look over again, I see Ted’s ass in the air and something sticking out of his backside.

Dante returns to me, and I ask, “What did you do?”

“Let him know what it’s like to wake up with something he didn’t consent to.”

“Jeezus, unholy mother of butt stuff...” I say then shrug. Ted probably deserves worse.

“Whoa!” someone yells. “Ted just got plumbed in the rear.”

Dante merges with the growing crowd and says loudly, “Looks like he tried to roofie the wrong person. Hashtag instant karma!”

There are a series of snapshots of the scene, and I hear someone ask, “He roofies?”

“There was that one girl, but no one believed her,” a woman says.

“Karma,” someone else says.

“*Instant* karma,” Dante corrects.

The crowd murmurs their agreement and disperses. Not one person goes to his aid.

Dante returns, kneeling down at my side. “You don’t have to play roofied anymore.”

“I’m not.” I pat his chiseled, stupidly handsome jaw.

“What happened?” His fingers brush my hair away from my face.

“I think he did something to my *first* drink.”

I feel a buzzing energy on my forehead from Dante’s healing touch, and my mind clears, but I’m still inebriated when it stops.

“How are you feeling?” Dante fusses with my hair, and I realize he’s still pouring healing energy into me.

Idly, I ask, “Is that the same hand you used on him?”

“No.” He grimaces. “Ugh. Let’s wash up, then I’ll take you back to the barracks.”

I’m feeling much better—better in the way where two drinks is good, but five, not so much. Fortunately, or miraculously, there isn’t a line for the bathroom. Instead of leaving me in the hallway, Dante brings me in with him and washes his hands.

“That was so gross,” I say, absently leaning against the wall for support.

“Yeah, but it isn’t as gross as what he does to his victims,” Dante says angrily.

“I know.” I want to reach out and ease whatever is upsetting him, but I don’t feel comfortable touching him like that.

His shoulders tense, and I can see every one of his muscles flex.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “This feels like more than a job.”

“It happened to my ex.”

“Oh.” Overcome with compassion for him, I clasp my hand over his that’s resting on the counter. “Was it the same guy?”

“No, but same MO. Your look—dark hair, dark, bottomless eyes I could

get lost in, and a heart-shaped, expressive face.” He sighs. “Women who were vulnerable, sensitive, and understatedly enticing.”

I don’t know what to say about how he describes me. “*Uh... That’s...*”

He desperately clutches my hand in his. “I’m sorry for how this job turned out. Damn that goddess.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t this the job?”

“She wanted me to involve you, and what I had to do to him? *Her* idea,” he says then almost yells, “Instant Karma made me do it!”

I laugh hysterically. Maybe it’s the drug and alcohol still in my veins or maybe it’s because with the absurdity of my life, that sentence makes sense. “I need to put that on a shirt,” I joke.

After a moment, my mirth breaks his anger, and Dante joins my laughter.

When I settle a bit, I ask, “The social media hashtags are her thing too, huh?”

He nods and frowns. “I was hoping we could have more fun before the night turned... *dark.*”

“The party isn’t over.” I take his hand and lead him out of the bathroom to where several people are dancing.

“You sure?” he asks.

“Dance or our fake date is over, pretty boy,” I taunt.

Once we start to move to the rhythm, I realize this is either a really good idea or a really bad one. The remaining alcohol in my system is still coloring my decision-making process, so if I were to take a wild guess, I would say an incredibly bad idea.

Dante doesn’t grind into me, allowing this to be a dance among friends, but as the bass rattles my insides, I get lost in the beat. First, my hand drapes over his shoulder, then my other hand slides down his strong pecs.

His hands find a place on my waist, and we move in sync, the distance between our bodies shrinking.

I don’t dare look up into his absurdly seductive sky blue eyes. Instead, I close my eyes and let the music sweep me away.

“Tessa?” He drops his mouth down to my ear. When I don’t respond, he calls my name again. “Tessa?”

“What?” I ask without looking at him.

His hand slides up around my neck, positioning me for a kiss.

My body is wondering why I’m fighting my attraction, but my mind and spirit are holding on to past lessons learned. Love and lust never end well for

me.

My hips betray me, and I press against him. His thumb traces my bottom lip, but I keep my eyes closed.

Once I open them, he will see the need in my eyes and act on it.

And I will *want* him to act on it. Our bodies are too close and yet not close enough.

A swirl of fear starts in my gut—fear of the pain when this turns out to be nothing more than a prank, or worse, when he sees the real me and rejects who I am.

Seeing his face every day after? No. I can't deal with feeling less than all the fucking time, and so what if we might last for more than a night? Then I will have to watch him trade me in for someone else after I lose my heart.

No. I can't do this. All these painful thoughts gain momentum, and a blast of energy shoots out of me.

A guy crashes into us, and I tumble to the floor, the impact waking me from the trance I'm in.

Dante scoops me up. "You okay?"

Fortunately, he doesn't do the macho thing and get mad at the poor guy who I psychically shoved.

"Yeah." I brush my skirt down. "Maybe we should go."

He studies my face, searching for something he doesn't see. I've walled up sweet, flirty Tessa and locked my heart away again.

THE CLUB

“*Y*ou ready?” Evan asks me after breakfast. I nod, and Evan sweeps his arm out. “Lead the way.”

Both Dante and Kurtis appear confused as I head toward the backdoor with Evan in tow. “If you don’t want to be a part of my situation, then you should stay here. Curiosity killed the cat and all that,” I tell them.

Evan is already a step ahead of me, and Dante follows me.

Kurtis curses and hurries to catch up. “Let’s aim for not getting killed,” he mutters.

“Stop being such an asshole, and I’ll consider it.” I arch an eyebrow.

He grumbles, and Dante punches his shoulder. “Dial it back, dude.”

I lead them all the way to the other lot without another word, my nerves rattled from a restless sleep.

Should I even trust these guys?

I barely know them. Sure, the last few days feel like an eternity, but even people you love and trust often betray you. It’s unlikely, however, that I will figure out what my powers are without some help.

When I was here earlier, I rolled a couple of logs into the center for seating. Evan claims the spot next to me, and Dante narrows his eyes at Evan and then sits across from me next to Kurtis.

“What’s going on?” Dante asks, glancing between Evan and me.

“Yeah. Why are we all the way out here?” Kurtis picks at the bark under him.

“I warded this small area from supernatural entities,” I announce.

“How the hell do you know how to do that?” Kurtis barks out the question. “I thought you didn’t know anything about gods and goddesses.”

“I knew that paranormal stuff existed, just not that there are living gods walking around Earth!” I snap back. “I’m not a complete newb when it comes to metaphysics. I am a trained reader.” Taking in a deep breath, I compose myself. “My teacher gave me this spell.”

Fortunately, Kurtis seems to be appeased by my explanation.

“I happened to speak with my mentor yesterday.” I keep it vague since it doesn’t seem like Evan wants them to know about his visits to her before. “She advised me to discover all my abilities and catalog them, and maybe from that list, I would see a pattern revealing *what* I am.”

“Why should we listen to this teacher?” Kurtis asks.

“Because now that I know gods and goddesses are real, I have a feeling my teacher is more than a mere human with some impressive psychic abilities.”

Evan’s eyes widen in surprise at my conclusion about Carmen, but he doesn’t comment.

“If she is something more, then can you trust that she has your best interests in mind?” Dante asks as he wrings his hands together.

“No. I can’t trust anyone, not completely.” I shrug. “No offense, but present company included.”

Evan and Dante don’t argue, but of course Kurtis does. “Then why are you telling us and bringing me into this?”

“Because I need help to discover where my power comes from or what I can do. My teacher insinuated that Karma harms her people. It tracks from what you told me, and is it true that there aren’t any older agents?”

They all sit quietly, absorbing what I have said.

Then Evan pipes up. “No matter what Karma’s big picture is, she was very insistent on getting you on the payroll. I was surprised when we were told to go after you when you tried to escape. She wants you more than I have ever seen her want someone before. Now, with your unusual abilities, it makes me wonder what she wants with you.”

“Maybe it isn’t for good,” Dante muses. “If I’m honest, I don’t like half the stuff we do. She wanted me to do that job last night, get it trending on social media. Sure, the guy deserved it, but I feel like the predator now.”

“It’s like she feeds her power with the attention.” Kurtis surprises me in that he’s hopping onto the same thought train I have.

Evan takes control of the meeting. “First, we discover what you can do.”

“Wait a second. Tessa has a point,” Dante says. “I haven’t known anyone

who's worked past their ten-year mark. What happens to us? Do we get traded to Death or something worse?"

Now it's time for me to play devil's advocate. "Maybe she lets us retire. Maybe it isn't a nefarious mastermind plot or selling us to Death."

All of us shiver, and I can tell by their expressions that they don't buy her altruistic side either.

"I'll start researching what happens to our *retirees*." Evan stares at each of us in turn. "We all keep this to ourselves. If you agree, we meet here at night to help Tessa, unless we have been requested on a karma job."

We all nod.

"Do we start figuring it out now?" Dante asks.

I smile at his enthusiasm. "Well, we know I can do the blasting thing."

"But is it moving air, energy, or both?" Evan asks.

"Felt like a blast of wind." Kurtis rubs his neck like he's reliving the moment.

"And the visual and physical sensations are like a tornado inside me."

"Can you *see* it?" Dante inquires, intrigued.

"Yeah," I say, my thoughts lost in what it means. "It felt like my emotions, fear and anger, were taking form, but last night it felt more electric in nature."

"Noted. Is there anything else you can do?" Evan asks.

I hesitate, worrying this is all a bad idea to include them in my self-discovery quest.

"Hey," Kurtis says reassuringly, "I know I'm an asshole, but I won't rat you out."

He sounds sincere, so I share, "I can sense death."

"How?" Evan asks.

"If I brush past someone, I can sense if they are going to die soon. Or if I'm doing a reading, I've seen when their end is coming, but I rarely get the vision if it's a long way off. It happened a couple times, but it was blurry, like a potential event."

"Power number two, predicting death," Evan counts.

"Anything else that comes to mind?" Dante leans forward, staring at me like he wishes he could read my mind.

"Other than my intuitive abilities, I don't think so. You all had some psychic abilities before working for Karma, right?"

"Yeah, to varying degrees and better at some aspects than others," Evan

says, rubbing his chin. “But were your psychic abilities strong?”

“Most of the time, yes. Strong enough to perform accurate readings.” I think about what I have done and learned over the years. “But I didn’t practice defensive magic before, except for the ghosts.”

“*Ghosts?*” they all exclaim.

“You don’t see them?” I’m surprised by their reaction. “Or sense them?”

“No. You need defensive magic for ghosts?”

“Well, most of them don’t attack, but it’s hard to concentrate on anything with them popping up and getting in my way. I finally learned how to block out their energy.”

Evan’s phone beeps, and he glances at it. “I got a job. You want to come along, Tessa?”

“Maybe we should work on her physical training,” Dante says quickly.

“Are we doing the running attacking thing again?” I ask, worried the answer will be yes.

“No. Just *standard* fitness.” Kurtis arches his eyebrow.

“Hard to decide. I think I’ve had enough karmic justice for a day or two. I choose torture number two.”

When we head back to the barracks, Evan peels off toward the garage. Instead of exercising outside, Dante ushers me inside. “I booked the gym for us today.”

“Booked?” I question.

“Yeah. We can book special times for training, or if one needs to work out in peace.”

“It can be a hostile environment if you get a lot of agents in there at once,” Kurtis explains.

He opens the door to a spacious gym, which is big enough to include a sparring area, stationary bike, treadmills, and weight machines for legs and arms. It even has a punching bag.

“Warm up on the treadmill,” Dante orders.

I step up onto the platform, but all the buttons overwhelm me.

He grins and pushes the start button for an easy walk, then he grabs some waters and puts it in my holder. “Stay hydrated.”

“Yes, sir!”

They both chuckle.

“What?” I narrow my eyes on them.

“Evan would have loved that,” Kurtis says, jogging on the treadmill

beside me.

I pause for a second, remembering my flash about him. “You mean his BDSM thing?”

Dante tenses. “How do you know about that?”

“Maybe they went to a sex dungeon yesterday,” Kurtis jokes.

Dante turns his head sharply to see my reaction.

I don’t respond and study the treadmill controls. “Um... How do I make this go faster?” I click the button and begin to jog.

Kurtis busts out laughing at Dante’s stricken face. “You are killing him with suspense. Please let him know you are a dominatrix and not Evan’s submissive.”

I eye Kurtis challengingly. “How do you know I’m not a switch?”

Dante turns up his treadmill to a full-speed run.

I had my fun, but I need to let them know I’m not actually *playing* with Evan. “I had a vision of him as a dom. I didn’t know it was real until you said the sir thing.”

Dante slows down his running speed. “You were fantasizing about him as a dom?”

“Ugh. Not like that. I had a psychic vision. Sometimes, things just pop into my head about people. I can’t control it.”

“You seemed to know about the lifestyle.” Kurtis raises a curious brow.

“Enough about my sex life,” I reply. “Besides, I know about a lot of subjects, but that doesn’t mean anything. I know about politics, but that doesn’t make me a politician.”

“But are you politician curious?” Kurtis asks.

I throw my sweat towel at him.

“Fine, I’ll drop it, but I might not be able to stop myself from bringing it up again when Evan is around.”

I roll my eyes. “Kurtis, how do you know about Evan’s proclivities? Is it from personal experience?”

Dante finally smiles.

Kurtis just winks. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I shrug dismissively. “I’m sure my imagination is better than the real thing.” I glance at Dante. “Is it just treadmills today?”

His cheeks are flushed, and I wonder if it’s because of the conversation or his work out. “We will work on some defensive moves in case someone grabs you.”

For the next hour, Kurtis and Dante attack me. I'm proud of myself because I don't panic once. I impress them with the skills I learned from self-defense classes and my life on the streets, which I haven't mentioned to them. They don't need to know everything about me.

We all work up a sweat, and I'm down to my sports bra and leggings.

Dante and Kurtis peel their sweaty shirts off, and I have a mini heart attack.

Sure, I have been inadvertently copping feels, and I already had that brief glimpse of Dante's nakedness the first night when he snuck into my room. However, seeing them both in the daylight in all their golden-skinned glory is too much. My mouth goes dry. I don't think I can defend myself now that I'm fully distracted and perhaps want them on top of me.

"Break time?" I clap to break their spell over me.

Dante has a devious glint in his blue eyes. He caught me ogling them, and both of them circle me now. "Nope."

"No fair."

"Life ain't fair, precious," Kurtis growls. "There can always be more than one attacker."

I spin to keep them both in view.

As soon as my eyes leave Dante, he lunges for me, tackling me to the ground. I scramble, breaking free from his hold, but Kurtis crashes into me, sending me back to the ground.

Both dogpile on top of me, trapping me on the mat.

Dante pins my arms and torso, and Kurtis uses his body to anchor my legs.

I wiggle to get free, but they just laugh. Maybe it's their playful intent, but I don't feel swirling fear and anger in my center. "Okay! Enough! Safe word!"

"There are no safe words here!" Kurtis chuckles.

Just as we shout, Evan walks in. "Seems like I missed all the fun."

"It's not over," Kurtis says.

Evan studies the tableau and contemplates joining and crushing my bones into the ground. "Not quite my scene."

Dante, Kurtis, and I bust up laughing.

Evan catches onto our inside joke. "You know, it's bad karma to talk about someone's sex life behind their backs."

Dante and Kurtis finally relent and crawl off, sitting next to me. I

grumble, “Dang. Four hundred collective pounds hurts. I’m sure you flattened me into a human pancake.”

“Don’t talk about my sex life anymore,” Evan says.

Kurtis sobers and replies, “Yes, Master.”

Evan cocks a brow and grins wickedly. “Such a good pet.”

Kurtis bolts from the floor and chases Evan around the room.

I look at Dante. “Are they always this entertaining?”

“Nah, I think you bring out our playful side.”

“Come on,” I say, watching Kurtis tackle Evan to the ground. “I’m sure that’s an exaggeration.”

“Sure, we poke fun at each other, but it feels lighter now.”

“Hmm.”

Evan and Kurtis jog back to me.

“Now, it’s break time.” Evan tilts his head in the kitchen’s direction. “I brought food.”

There’s a wide variety of Chinese dishes in their tubs, and they pile their plates high—boy, these men can eat—then we head to the living room.

The two of the other agents I ran into before are already in here, and all four of us stop in our tracks. Tension buzzes in the air.

Okay, good. I’m not the only one who doesn’t particularly care for these two.

“What’s up, himbos?” the woman says. “And bimbette.”

“Yeah, girl power,” I say sarcastically.

Kurtis sniffs the air. “It smells in here. Maybe we should go somewhere without assholes.”

“Honey-butt, you can’t get away from yourself,” the woman retorts.

Evan leads us down the hall to a room I haven’t seen yet—the formal dining room.

It’s immaculate and obviously meant for Karma’s theoretical visits.

We sit feeling a bit deflated.

“Lovely people,” I comment.

“Chara is a dick, and William’s a brat. We just avoid the rest of the household,” Kurtis explains.

“Noted.” I wave my chopsticks at them. “There’s *history* there?”

All three of them clamp their mouths tightly shut. My instincts tell me all three had a round with her. “I don’t care that you sampled that *lovely* woman, but just know that if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I’m *not* that person.”

They don't comment and look chagrined.

"She dumped your asses, and now you're pouting," I surmise.

"I dumped her." Dante shoves some noodles into his mouth.

"That explains her one and done comment."

"She *said* that to you?" Dante huffs. "It wasn't like that. I just realized it was a mistake."

"Because you are coworkers?"

"No, because she's *messed up*."

I don't ask what that means, but I wonder how messed up someone has to be for Dante to think so.

I eat my food, wondering how screwed up I seem to them. I might not be messed up in the same way as Chara is, but I have a full set of baggage, overflowing with pain, poor decisions, questionable morals, and trust and abandonment issues galore.

"Has anything come up for a job tonight?" Evan asks.

Dante and Kurtis shake their heads.

"Which reminds me, here's your new phone." He pulls a brand-spanking-new phone from his pocket and tosses it to me. "Yours fell into a puddle when that thug attacked you."

I catch the new phone, open it up to contacts, and see it's already programmed with their numbers under Hot-as-sin, Chuckles, and Hot Professor. I smile to myself then frown. "Billy somehow tracked me with my old one anyway."

"That's how that thug found you?" Evan frowns.

"He implied it, but I got that burner *after* I got my new ID and left my last town." I poke my food. "So... I'm not sure how Billy found me, even when he was outside my apartment."

"I have a bad feeling," Evan says.

"Karma leaked your location," Dante theorizes. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

Evan clenches his fist around his chopsticks. "No more talk about this unless we are in our secure location."

"The club?" I smile as I label our warded circle.

"I like it, and since we will be going at night, it makes sense."

"What time are we meeting at the club?"

Dante's phone pings as does Evan's. "Crap. We got another job for tonight."

“Looks like you and I get to play, precious.” Kurtis waggles his eyebrows.

FEAR

I'm nervous about being alone with Kurtis in my warded circle where no one can see us. He's rough around the edges and has already been aggressive with me, but I determine this is a good time to feel him out one-on-one before I reveal any more secrets about my powers.

Besides, if anyone is going to trigger me into discovering another power, it's probably going to be him—not to mention I can blast him away from me if I'm properly provoked.

The moon is just bright enough that we don't have to use flashlights to walk out to our spot. The city lights illuminate the mist from the ocean, creating a beautiful ambient glow.

Kurtis appears softer in this lighting, but I can't be fooled into thinking he's truly a friend.

Once we step into the circle, we sit down on the logs.

"I feel your anxiety," he says.

"Is that your superpower?"

"Nah, but my intuition has always been good at picking up on fear."

"Did you abuse that ability?"

"I suppose I did, and that's why Karma came for me." He snaps a branch and tosses it into the sandy dirt.

"You don't like me much, do you?" I ask.

My mind flashes to his fondness for Dante, but especially for Evan. I file away his possible interest in them for future reference.

"I don't like change," Kurtis finally says. "You shake up our dynamic."

"Well, for the record, I don't like this whole deal either."

He sighs loudly and releases some of his tension. "Yeah. I almost lost my

mind when I got recruited. This whole situation is fucked up.” Kurtis winds himself up again and grips the hair at the nape of his neck. “Do you ever feel like you are just barely holding on?”

“Only just every freaking day of my entire miserable life.”

“Oh. You don’t seem to have many cracks in your armor.” Kurtis looks at me, maybe truly seeing me for the first time since we met. “I guess we all have our demons.”

“If it’s too much to help me, I get it,” I tell him, offering him a way out. “No hard feelings if you don’t want to get tangled up in this.”

“I’d rather help you figure out why Karma wants you so badly than do her bullshit.” He fiddles with his fingers. “Fuck, it’s crazy. When I was a kid, I would have sworn this was the best job I ever had. Messing with people? Sign me up. But now? It got old real fast.”

“Do you think Karma sets us up?” I ask. “It seems like she might have been behind my attacker. If she hadn’t interfered, maybe I would still be on my own.” I don’t admit the more accurate description: *on the run*.

“I wouldn’t put it past her. I mean, it’s how she operates with our everyday jobs. Why wouldn’t her own agents be trapped the same way?”

We both sit silently for several minutes, letting that horrible thought sink in.

“Do you want to figure out if you have more powers?” Kurtis asks. “Or the extent of the powers you know about?”

“I suppose we should try.”

Without warning, Kurtis lunges at me.

My breath catches in my throat, but my earlier training has done me some good, and I evade his grasp.

Then somehow, he has his arm around my neck, and the other one pins my arms to my body.

I kick out and make contact, but it isn’t enough to loosen his grip.

He drops us to our knees so I can’t kick him again, and his chokehold on me tightens.

My fear response kicks in. Even if I had no trauma in my past, I should be scared. Kurtis is strong, and he’s slightly unstable.

“I’ve got you now, precious,” he whispers in my ear.

Swirling anger and fear rages inside me, and this time, I allow it to expand. I’ll teach Kurtis not to mess with me. My entire being feels like it contains a hurricane.

I unleash it.

Kurtis is thrown twenty feet, and a flash of light shoots out from my body too.

Stunned and a bit drained, I sway as I kneel on the ground. A moment goes by, and I realize Kurtis hasn't moved at all.

In case it's a trap, I cautiously approach him in a slow crawl. When I get closer, I see a dark pool of blood under his head.

"Shit!" Panic overtakes me.

The guys didn't teach me how to heal.

I don't know if that power will work since I'm not officially working on one of her *jobs*, and I'm still in training. I curse myself for agreeing to test my powers without someone to supervise.

I place my hand on his chest. Kurtis is breathing, but barely. I roll him onto his side and inspect him for injuries. His pretty blond hair is dark with blood, and I see a gash on his scalp.

I rip off my long-sleeve T-shirt, shivering from the chilly evening air and the thought that he might die because of me.

Using my teeth and fingernails, I rip the fabric into bandages. I tie them over his head to stop the blood flow. I pull out Kurtis's phone and text Dante and Evan.

Meet me at the club ASAP. 911

Kurtis stops breathing.

What do I do?

My hands tremble.

I recall the sensation of Dante's healing in an attempt to reverse engineer how to do it. When he used it on me, I imagined the energy being pulled into his body and then flowing into mine through his hands.

I now know I can direct energy, so I just need to do that in a different way, right? Use the energy to heal and not blast.

I scoot closer to hold Kurtis's head in my lap and apply additional pressure to the wound.

Fear rises inside me again, and with it, I realize it's just another form of energy. I visualize channeling the energy down my arms and into him, and I feel something move inside me, but it isn't the same as Dante's healing.

Dammit, I can't use my fear.

I have to use the proper intention with magic. That's Magic 101. I latch

onto the feeling of harmony and love. I've had little of that to draw from, but the glimmers of it seem to be enough, and I begin to buzz with an energy similar to Dante's.

I focus my intention to bring him back to life.

With my mind's eye, I see a ghost-like image of Kurtis hovering just above us, an etheric cord linking the specter to his body.

Kurtis's soul quickly slips away. I chase after him, but then I realize I'm not in my body anymore.

I sense there's a place up ahead that I don't want Kurtis to go. Not yet.

A wild thought comes to me as I see his etheric cord stretch thin, leading all the way back to his body. I reach out and yank on it as hard as I can. Pulling Kurtis's ghost with me, I tumble back into my physical form.

Kurtis sucks in a breath, and I feel his pulse under my fingertips.

Did that really just happen? Or did my imagination make up the entire trip?

I wonder about that for over ten minutes as I drain my energy to heal the damage I caused. Otherwise, he might just slip into death again. The bleeding has stopped, but he's still concussed. There might be internal bleeding on the brain.

I hear a car screech to a stop, followed by the crashing footsteps of two men.

Dante finds us first. "Tessa?" He appears confused by me holding Kurtis in my lap. My top is gone, and my hands and stomach are covered in blood. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head.

Evan runs toward me, and both of them fall to their knees on either side of Kurtis.

"I knocked him off me," I say, desperate for them to understand. "I didn't mean to hurt him like this."

Evan touches Kurtis's forehead. "He has a concussion." His hand glows as he works.

"Is he going to be okay?" I ask. I feel hollow and have nothing left inside me to create tears.

Dante touches my shoulder. "It looks like you sealed the wound right away, so he should recover." He rubs my goosebump-covered skin. "You're freezing."

He pulls his long-sleeved shirt off and slides it over me. "How did you

heal him? We haven't taught you that trick yet."

"I don't know." I let him help me thread my arms into the long sleeves. I feel like a child, but I'm comforted by the nurturing act.

Dante is not the playboy right now. He's my caretaker, and my heart melts a bit for him.

"We should get him to the car and take him in through the front door. We can cover our tracks by making it seem like this happened on a job." Evan braces himself, then picks Kurtis up.

Dante helps lift him up onto Evan's shoulder.

I follow the guys to the street, and they put Kurtis in the SUV.

I stand there without motivation to move anymore. Kurtis still hasn't stirred. He's just another person hurt by my actions.

When I don't get in the car, Dante takes charge and guides me into the front passenger seat.



As we burst through the front door, Chara's coming down the stairs. Her eyes widen. "Is he alright?"

"Like you care," Dante growls.

We hurry up the stairs to Kurtis's room and set him on the bed. Evan inspects the damage in the light.

The gash has sealed, and only crusted blood remains. Dante runs out and returns with a rag and a bowl of water, then Evan cleans off the blood.

Dante takes a turn to heal him, tutoring me during the process. "Imagine the cosmic energies being drawn into your body and then focus the energy on the problem area."

"I sent him energy," I say, my voice sounding thin. "Except I used my feelings of love and harmony."

Evan abruptly stands up and faces me. He presses his hands to the sides of my head and psychically scans me. "Dammit. You pulled from your *own* source. It drained you. That's probably why you're still shivering."

I look down at my shaking hands peeking out from Dante's borrowed shirt.

"Get a hot shower and bundle up in bed," Evan orders and works on Kurtis again.

I nod, wandering down the hall and heading to the showers.

The hot water starts right up, and I strip down. I'm smeared with blood. When I step under the spray, the shower floor streaks with crimson—Kurtis's blood... blood I spilled.

I shiver uncontrollably. I can't get warm, even though the water is blistering hot. My skin turns an angry red from the intense heat.

I don't know how long I'm in here, but when I hear the door open, I don't care.

"Tessa?" Dante calls. "You've been in here a long time."

I don't respond.

"I'm coming in, okay?"

He curses when he steps into the shower and pulls me from the stream. "You're burning your skin off."

I glance down to see my angry red skin.

Dante wraps a large towel around my still shivering body, cocooning me, then he sets me down on the vanity.

I pull the towel tighter and curl in on myself.

With another towel, Dante dries my hair and then my dangling legs. Softly, he asks, "What's going on? If you are upset about Kurtis, he's going to be okay. He's awake now."

I nod but say nothing. I can't even pinpoint what's going on with me. My mind feels trapped, bouncing around an empty abyss. Am I finally having my long overdue nervous breakdown?

Dante rubs my back to stir me. "Can you walk to your room? Or should I carry you?"

I lean against his bare chest, as if I'm a piece of space junk being pulled in by his gravitational field. Understanding that I'm no longer functional, he picks me up off the counter, and I wrap my legs around his sides.

Shoving my door open, he sets me on the edge of my bed. "Shirt? Pants?" He pulls a sweater out of my drawer.

I don't even have the energy for all that. I shake my head and crawl onto my bed with the damp towel still around me. I don't make it far, collapsing on top of the covers.

Dante pulls the covers down underneath me and then places them over my body. Next, he carefully draws the towel off me, like a magician might, and tucks me in.

When he pulls away, I shiver again and groan. I feel as if he's stealing the

warmth of the sun from me.

Instead of leaving, he sits on the edge of the bed and covers my hand with his. “Do you want me to stay?”

I squeeze his fingers.

Dante slips into bed next to me, still in his jeans, but he’s shirtless from when he donated his shirt to me earlier.

He pulls me tightly against him, and I latch onto his heat like it’s an anchor. The touch of his skin ties me to the world. We are entangled, and I stroke his back with my thumb. My breasts press against him, but it doesn’t matter since it feels like we are one body.

His hands caress down my back and up to my head over and over. He’s sending me healing energy. When his warmth and healing penetrate my frozen state, I confess, “I’m messed up.”

“We all are. It’s the human condition.”

My tears leak out. Why do I feel like I can finally be vulnerable for the first time in my life? And with him?

Dante tightens his hold. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure it all out, and if not, life still goes on or it doesn’t, and we find out what awaits us in the afterlife.”

“You think there’s an afterlife?”

“Seems dumb for us to learn all these lessons for only one go-around.”

“Suppose so.”

“You ever have visions of past lives during a reading?” he asks.

“I saw stuff, but I often thought what I saw was a metaphor for what was going on in their lives.”

“Maybe.” His fingertips brush my temple. “But I’ve had memories of other places that don’t make sense.”

“Me too.”

“Does it ever seem like you just *know* someone you just met?” he asks. From his tone, I know he’s searching for a certain answer, but I doubt he will like my response.

“Yeah.” I sigh. “It isn’t always a good thing.”

“No. I guess not.” Dante runs his hand down my side and up again, this time for comfort only. “It can feel like finding your home. Your safe space.”

“I’ve never had much luck with finding safety in a home.”

Dante brushes his cheek over my forehead. “I know what you mean.”

“What does it feel like? Finding a safe place?” My voice sounds childlike

and hopeful. Would I recognize it if I found it?

“Do you feel safe now?” he asks.

I stop stroking the soft skin on his back. I feel safe, but I don't know Dante. It makes no sense to trust anyone, especially a stranger. “Uh, yeah. I suppose.” I pull away because I'm falling into a dangerous situation.

He cradles my cheek and makes me look at him. “Hey, it's okay. I'm just here, keeping your demons at bay for a little while. No need to panic.”

I gaze into his piercing eyes and feel like I'm being seen for the first time. He's viewing all my broken pieces, and he hasn't run away... not yet anyway.

His thumb sweeps along my cheekbone. “Do you want some clothing now that you are feeling better?”

“I don't want to move.” I tuck my head under his chin. “Can we just sleep like this?”

“Just think of me as your warm cookies and hot cocoa.”

I smile and fall asleep, naked in the arms of my first safe place.

THE MORNING AFTER

The next morning, the brush of warm breath against my neck wakes me up. Dante's arm drapes over my waist, and I'm now the little spoon.

I don't move, wondering what in the hell happened to me last night, and now that I opened myself up to Dante the playboy, I need to shut this down before I get hurt.

Points in my favor? Nothing sexual has happened... yet.

It's both a curse and a blessing, which seems to be my theme lately.

However, getting emotionally—scratch that—getting *romantically* invested in Dante is just a bad idea.

I hardly fall for anyone, but when I do, I land hard and usually end up with something broken.

We can be friends, but is that still too close?

I shift to the edge of the bed and Dante's hand slides off my side. He grunts, and I sense he's awake before I turn to check.

He studies my face, reading my apprehension. "You okay?" he asks softly.

"Better this morning. Thanks." I clutch the sheets to my naked breasts.

"Alright. See you downstairs?" He rolls out of bed and then stops before opening the door. He doesn't turn back to look at me as he says, "You let your guard down last night—maybe for the first time—but it doesn't have to be weird between us."

"Uh, okay," I mutter, flabbergasted that he read me so well.

I sit alone in my bed, with his sandalwood scent lingering in the air, still embracing me with his kindness.



My stomach drops when I see Kurtis at the breakfast table. I can't look him in the eye.

"Hey, precious?" Kurtis calls. "Not even going to call me a dumbass for that stunt I pulled?"

I snap my gaze to his. Is he really taking the blame? I've never heard a guy do that.

"I guess we now know you can toss me around like a rag doll." Kurtis shrugs.

"Are you okay?" I look for signs of permanent damage.

"Evan fixed me up. I have a bit of a headache, but I probably still haven't learned my lesson." He knocks on his head and winces. "Hardheaded jock. I collect concussions."

"Dude, that isn't a good thing." Dante rolls his eyes.

"I'm fine." Kurtis waves him off. "Perhaps a kiss will make it all better?"

"Forget it." I grimace. "Seems like you are back in your standard asshole mode."

Evan clears his throat. "I don't suggest Kurtis and Tessa go to the club on their own again."

"Come on, I can play nice!" Kurtis pouts.

"But I apparently can't," I reply with a guilty frown.



They spend the next several days getting me in shape, which mostly includes me alone on a treadmill. No one wants to risk working on my defensive moves and have me knock them into any more trees. I haven't returned to the warded spot either with or without the guys.

At this point, I'm going through the motions, and putting up my usual protective walls so I won't be hurt when this all falls apart.

The image of Kurtis dying in my arms torments me. Besides, I don't think my energy has truly returned from when I drained myself trying to heal his injuries.

Occasionally, I pass Chara and William in the halls. We don't interact other than a nod in greeting.

I discover the other team consists of a woman and two guys. Dante begrudgingly introduces me to Trent, Steven, and Heather. They do little more than mutter a greeting and move on. Apparently, my sparkling personality doesn't inspire them to speak to me.

I go on some jobs, usually with Evan. We have a few group outings, and I fall back on my smart ass side to get me through it. Even though I'm sure the guys sense I'm not completely okay, they don't mention it. Perhaps all karma agents have a difficult adjustment time, and this is mine with an added bonus of my scary power.

Dante has been called away quite a lot to do solo jobs, more than the other two, which is fine by me. I need to create a bit of distance after our weirdly intimate night.

Fortunately, I don't have to be the awkward one for a change, that is... until one night when Dante catches me on the way to my room.

"Do you have a minute?" he asks, looking shyer than I ever thought possible.

"Uh, yeah, what's up?" I stop and stare up at him, intending to keep the conversation in the hallway.

Dante glances around at the other doors. "In private," he whispers.

I swallow hard and then lead him to my room. It's a mess. In my depression, I have neglected my space. I quickly grab a bunch of my laundry and toss it in my hamper for Greta to wash. I still feel weird about that service. It feels wrong to let a stranger fold my undies.

As I sit down, I watch him expectantly and indicate my desk chair for his use.

"Have you been avoiding me?" He doesn't sound angry, just disappointed.

Apparently, my evasion has been noticed. "You've been working solo a lot, if you remember," I hedge, brushing him off.

"Yeah, but you keep your energy closed off and hardly say anything to me when I am around."

"I hardly say much to anyone. It's kind of my jam."

Dante ruffles his thick, black hair, and the lighter brown highlights catch the light in the room. "Yeah. I suppose."

"Look, we had an intense moment when I had my meltdown," I say, trying my best to sound rational. "I appreciate you pulling me out of that dark place, but I don't understand what you expect from me now. I'm not going to

chase you around like a puppy, begging for your attention.”

“I didn’t say I wanted that!” he replies with a bit of heat.

“Then what?” I throw my hands in the air. “Are you just annoyed that I didn’t have sex with you? Not used to being denied entry?”

“*What?*” He stands, his hands clenching at his sides.

I’m pissed that he said it didn’t have to be weird, and now he isn’t letting me just be me—withdrawn but safe.

“Seriously?” He steps closer. “That’s what you think?”

“Why else would you want to talk with me privately in my room?” I narrow my eyes at him. “Fine. Let’s get it over with. One and done, right?” I pull on my pants, but he stops me.

“Why are you acting like this?” There’s a fire in his gaze. He’s angry that I’m calling him out, but instead of yelling at me and lashing out, he pulls me into a hug. “I want nothing you aren’t willing to give, so if you don’t want my friendship, then I will leave you alone. I believe, at the very least, you need a friend.”

I allow the embrace because, damn, it feels so good to be held. With my psychic senses, I don’t pick up any creepy vibes.

He releases me. “You aren’t happy with this job, but it doesn’t have to be all bad living here.”

I take a couple of deep breaths. What’s going on? Does he really want to be my friend?

“Why are you pulling away?”

I deflate and say, “I’m not good with friendships... or any kind of relationships.”

Confession time. He has seen my brokenness, so why not tell him the truth?

Avoiding his eyes, I admit, “I was afraid of how I opened up to you. I don’t want to get hurt again.”

“Okay. I understand.” Dante sighs. “What if I’m honest with you?”

“Novel idea.” I manage a smile.

“*It is.* People aren’t honest. They lie, mostly to themselves, and yes, I’m guilty of it as well. However, I’ve been asking myself what *I* want, because I know I don’t want to hurt you.”

I can’t believe he’s thinking that deeply about me. “And?”

“I want to get to know you. I want to be a better person. I think those two things can happen at the same time, and if or when you are ever interested in

snuggling again, then I would like that.”

“You want to... *snuggle*?” I ask skeptically.

“Highly underrated by young men everywhere.”

“And that’s where we draw our line... just to be clear about our intentions.”

“I wouldn’t object to more than snuggles, clothing optional.”

I guffaw at that one. “Noted.”

Dante steps to the door. “And for the record, it was only ‘one and done’ with Chara. With you, I doubt I could ever stop.” He shuts the door behind him before I register what he said.

CLUBBING

We arrive at our secret warded circle, aka the club, and place small glow sticks around so we can see each other. It's a particularly dark night without a moon, and even the city lights are muted.

Evan starts the meeting in his usual assumed leadership role. "I found out a few things from the other karma houses. The agents who hit the ten-year mark get transferred to one of three locations."

Feeling a heaviness in his words, I ask, "Why do I feel like there is a but in there?"

"But... no one hears from them ever again. A couple of people told me they tried contacting their old teammates and couldn't reach them."

"Maybe they get new phones?" Dante offers.

"Maybe." Evan's face clearly expresses that he doesn't believe that for one second. "However, I did some research, and there weren't Karma-owned properties in the cities where they were allegedly sent."

"How do you know all her properties?" I ask, impressed with his investigative skills.

"I've done some digging and discovered the names of Karma's shell companies. She has properties all over the globe, mostly estates like this one, to house her agents, but none are registered in the cities where the 'retired' agents were scheduled to go."

"What do you think happens to them?" Kurtis asks.

A strong impression floods my mind, just like the insights I often have during a reading. "Death," I say without meaning to speak.

"They die?" Kurtis asks me. "You said that like you know something."

"It was one of my psychic reader moments. I don't know what it means,

but it felt different from a regular death premonition.”

“Okay.” Kurtis rubs his arms to warm himself. “I’ll play devil’s advocate now. Let’s say that you’re wrong. If they don’t die, then what happens to them?”

“I suppose that’s what we need to find out, for all our sakes. It will eventually become our fate.” Evan turns to me. “Have you discovered or thought of any other abilities you might possess?”

“Not as much as I should have.” I bite the inside of my mouth, feeling guilty. They have risked themselves to help me, and I haven’t done much on my end. “I’ll read the books you gave me on mythology and supernatural entities.”



Once back in my room, I don’t want to read the books. I don’t want to know what’s wrong with me or what’s different. I have already been different my whole life. It’s a major reason I ran away from home, but not the only reason. My father wasn’t someone you would consider for father of the year... unless it was for the worst.

Now, I’m confronted once again with the notion that I’m a freak.

The only comforting thought is that the guys make me feel less freaky with their abilities, even if most of them are bestowed upon them by Karma.

“You ready, precious?” Kurtis calls through my door.

I toss the book I’ve been skimming onto my bed and step into the hall with my hands on my hips. “Yeah, I’ve been waiting for you boys to finish your manscaping.”

“It’s called shaving,” he says, exasperated. “But I can show you the manscaping later under candlelight.”

Evan exits the bathroom, freshly shaven. “Don’t do it. It’s a trap.”

“You don’t say?” I drop my jaw in mock surprise.

I shove Kurtis out of my way. “Thanks for the unappealing offer, but I’ll pass.”

“You sure?” He pulls on his waistband and looks down the front of his pants. “You won’t believe what miracles I can accomplish with a razor and some body hair.”

“As ridiculous as that is, the answer is still no.”

Dante joins us in the hallway. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I do.” I eye Kurtis critically. “I’m missing *nothing*.”

Dante steps between Kurtis and me. “Enough about Kurtis’s nether regions.”

“Hold up, that’s not all!” Kurtis says excitedly, like a sales pitch. “Did I mention I’ve been working on my back hair?”

We all moan our disapproval.



I call shotgun as we approach Dante’s SUV. Evan grumbles, since I have stolen his usual place in Dante’s car, but I’m not riding in back with Kurtis when he’s this frisky with the pubic hair topic.

I was instructed to wear my little black dress again since Dante deemed it the only officially sexy thing I have in my closet, but they didn’t give me a clue as to the destination. The guys are looking particularly sexy too, wearing shirts that hug their tapered waists, impressive chests and biceps, and tight jeans that show off their assets. Not that I’m looking. Their hair and faces are groomed to perfection, and the air is filled with lovely masculine scents, but not too overpowering.

“What’s the job?” I ask Evan.

“Club hopping,” he grumbles.

I’m right there with him on that sentiment.

“Probably hit some regular bars too,” Kurtis says, gazing out his backseat window.

All three of them look unenthused.

“Not your favorite job?” I probe to understand their sour moods.

Evan shakes his head. “Mostly, it turns out to be a bunch of petty stuff.”

“I don’t mind dancing and window-shopping the fine asses.” Kurtis knocks his head against the glass in irritation. “But since I can’t really do anything about it, it’s lame.”

Dante tries to lighten the mood. “Tessa, maybe we can have a dance or ten?”

“Since it’s for the job, I guess I can shake my groove thang.”

“You don’t have a *groove thang*,” Kurtis argues. “I would have felt it when I body-slammed you.”

“If you mean a penis, then no, I do not have dangly bits, but I was talking about my ass, you dork.” I look down at my ample breasts, which are practically on display. “I suppose my boobs can shake, so quit limiting me by my gender. It’s sexist.”

Both Dante and Evan suppress a snicker, but Kurtis’s face reddens.

For a second, I’m not sure if he’s embarrassed or angry, but then he says, “Sorry. Shake whatever you groove with.”

“I will.” I turn back to look out the front window.

“Now that’s settled,” Evan grouses, “this is mostly a free-for-all tonight. Improvise, but promote hashtag instant karma as much as you can.”

“Ugh.” I roll my eyes. “So vain.”

“I don’t know what it’s about, but she’s the boss,” Kurtis says with resignation.

“It’s about modern world worship,” I reply, surmising this from my studies.

Evan nods his agreement. “We only have one designated target at the club Top Shelf at one o’clock.”

“Long night.” I glance down, happy that I’m wearing my comfortable dressy boots and not high heels.

“Pace yourself with the booze,” Evan adds.

“Is that directed at me?” I ask defensively. “I bet I can hold my liquor better than you punks.”

“It’s for all of us, *including* me,” Evan says, his words loaded. I sense that there have been incidents in the past.



We pull up to the valet at the first destination, a club called Marco Polo. We hop out and bypass the long line of people waiting to get in. The bouncer smiles at Evan as Evan slips the man something. I assume it’s a bribe to get us in immediately.

“They just let us in?” I whisper to Dante.

“Yeah, have you *seen* us?” He points to his stupidly handsome face.

“I have, but they don’t usually let guys like you in, even if they throw cash.”

“They do when we have connections, money, and... it’s a gay bar.”

I glance around and yes, it's a total sausage fest full of mostly young gorgeous men from the most masculine to the most feminine. Most of them eye my teammates with interest. At least I won't have to worry about guys hitting on me here. I see a few other women besties with their gay friends, so I'm not completely out of place.

"Let's get a drink." Dante points to the bar, and we follow. The hot barman instantly rushes over to take Dante's order. He proceeds to obnoxiously flirt with Dante, who takes the compliments with a winning grin, paying the bartender with a generous tip.

"What do I do?" I glance around. I'm not going to lie, the view of all these sexy men is arousing, even if they wouldn't spare me a glance. The air is electric.

Dante looks down at me and smiles. "Want to dance?"

Why the hell not? I might as well enjoy my short karma life with an innocent dance.

I follow him to the dance floor, downing my drink in one go, not wanting to spill it everywhere. I leave it on an empty table, and Dante does the same.

We move in time with the thumping beat, and the watered-down drink settles in. The music is so loud it rattles my teeth, but I do my best and bounce to it and rock my hips. Dante tries to follow my lead, but he has a hard time with my punk rock moves. I use my frantic movements to keep him at a distance. Besides, it's burning off a nice chunk of my nerves and angst.

The music shifts to a more sultry beat, and Dante takes full advantage of the slower song. He pulls me close by my waist, our hips press together, and we move like it's a mating dance. My arms come up to rest on his shoulders, and his hands slide down to my hips.

I dare to look up at his face and get lost in his eyes.

He stares at me like I may offer him the key to seven minutes in heaven, or maybe he's trying to determine if I will slap him silly for his forwardness.

Is he trying to make sure I'm alright with this contact?

A man with perfect skin and hair circles closer and tells Dante, "Drop the fucking trashy hag, and you can do that with me."

Rude.

"Watch your mouth." Dante glances down at the man's tight pants. "And I bet my date's groove thang is bigger than yours."

The man actually looks at me for the first time.

I grab my crotch over my skirt, and in a voice just a bit deeper than my

normal one, I say, “Fuck off.”

The man rushes off, his face red with embarrassment because of his gross behavior. He shouldn’t make assumptions.

Dante leans down and whispers, “Good job.”

I grow flustered at his closeness and compliment. He doesn’t move away, his lips lingering on my neck, just barely grazing it.

My breath catches, and my pulse races.

I feel someone press up behind me. Any closer, and I might *accidentally* elbow them.

Sending out my psychic vibes, I sense it’s Evan.

He surprises me with a forward move, brushing my hair away from my neck and nuzzling me. “Ready to go, sweetheart?”

Dante curses and pulls me away from Evan’s touch. “Didn’t we just get here?”

“Yep. We did, *but...*” Evan shoots an exasperated look over his shoulder at Kurtis, who sulks by the exit. “We’ve done enough here.”

As we wait for our car at the valet on the curb, Kurtis crosses his bulky arms over his chest and looks downright pouty.

When we all pile into the car, Kurtis starts up immediately. “It isn’t your business.”

“It is,” Evan says evenly, but irritation simmers in his tone.

I glance over at Dante, but he acts unaffected by the conversation, as if it’s one that’s happened before.

“You had three drinks within an hour,” Evan says through gritted teeth. “I don’t care what you are going through. You can’t get drunk *and* do your job.”

“Maybe I don’t want to do my fucking job!” Kurtis shouts.

Dante tenses at that.

“I wasn’t able to be *me* before Karma got her greedy hands on me, and now I’m alive but not living!”

I turn around to say I understand his anger, but Evan speaks first. “None of us are living the lives we want to.”

Kurtis glares at me. “Tessa and Dante have been *living*.”

Dante protests, “It’s not like—”

“It’s *not*?” Kurtis interrupts him and scoffs, “So you aren’t dry humping on the dance floor and sleeping with each other?”

“Just sleeping! Once!” I snap. “And that was only after I had a meltdown when I healed you, draining my life force.”

“Why the hell would you have a meltdown?” Kurtis argues. “I just got knocked unconscious and cut my head open! I call bullshit.”

“You died!” I yell. “I had to pull you back.”

“What?!” all three exclaim in full volume.

“You didn’t say that before,” Evan says quietly.

“How did you do that?” Dante asks, daring to look at me even though we are in heavy traffic.

I shake my head. “I don’t understand it. I saw his soul drifting away, and then I sort of, maybe... left my body, a little bit, I guess... and pulled his etheric cord to bring him back.”

“*What?*” Evan curses. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I don’t know.” I hunch my shoulders as if that could get me out of this conversation. “I had my meltdown. I felt like I was losing my mind, then I didn’t want to think about causing someone’s death again.”

“Wait, again?” Dante asks.

Evan cuts in, “No. Back to Kurtis’s death. How did you know how to do that?”

“It just felt instinctual,” I answer. “Like breathing.”

“A bit more complicated than breathing.” Dante shakes his head.

“You must somehow have death magic,” Evan agrees.

“What does that mean?” I shiver at the idea.

“We’ll have to investigate,” Dante says. “We know death personified is real, just like Karma is, but it doesn’t make sense that you would have an ability like that without working for Death.”

“Death has agents too?” I ask.

“We’ve heard stories,” Evan replies.

“Chara has seen one, or so she *claims*.” Dante growls like he can’t stand to say her name.

“Alright, enough of this talk for now,” Evan orders. “We aren’t warded.”

“Actually, we are,” I say. “I painted the warding symbols on the undercarriage.”

Dante’s eyes widen. “But Karma might have sensed the magic.”

“Maybe.” I nod. “But I thought it was worth the risk of discovery. She hasn’t confronted me yet.”

Evan sighs. “We don’t know how pissed she’s going to be when she finds out we are hiding stuff from her. Let’s assume it’s going to be bad.”

“How bad could it be?” I ask.

“I’ve seen her lose her temper,” Evan says. “Once, when I was new. It was downright scary. Let’s try not to draw more attention to ourselves.” He looks pointedly at Kurtis and then at me. “No more stunts in public or warding on Karma’s property.”

Both Kurtis and I huff. “Fine.”

Dante pulls up to the next club, and none of us move to get out. We’re not in the mood for this now. I worry our justice might be delivered with a heavier hand than necessary tonight.

“Can’t stop the wheels of karma,” Evan announces and steps out of the SUV.

THE TARGET

*M*aybe we can stop the wheels of *Instant Karma*, I think to myself.

After a long, irritating night of doling out stupid karmic justice, we end up at a trendy nightclub for hipsters and social media influencers. Sure, it's beautifully set with a quasi-steampunk vibe—hard machinery clashing with lush velvet couches. They even have a low-key Cirque du Soleil performance going on, a burlesque show that might have been interesting to watch.

Instead, Dante pulls me in the other direction to a quiet alcove, which is probably meant for semi-private make-out sessions. I'm unsure of what's going on since he has a serious, almost angry look in his eyes as he gazes down at me from his intimidating height. Even in heels, I have to crane my neck back.

"Are you mad about the car?" I ask.

"What?" He looks confused. "No. It's about the job here. I have to... see that woman in the red dress?" He's practically stumbling over his words.

"Yeah. I see her." She's stunning, perfection barely encased in a minidress. "Is that the target?"

He nods. "I'm supposed to approach her, and uh... get close."

I study him carefully, trying to understand why he's being weird about telling me. "Does that mean flirt or *fuck*? Does she make us have sex with people?" I ask, somewhat scandalized, wondering what it means for me.

His eyes widen at my question for half a second. "Well... it's... uh..."

Now I'm worried. How far do we have to take our jobs? "What aren't you telling me?"

"I don't want to do *anything* with her." He rubs his face and then musses

up his hair in frustration. “It feels like cheating.”

I blink. “On who?”

“*You*, of course!” He sighs like I’m dense.

“But we aren’t together.” My brow furrows.

He turns away and gazes out into the crowd. “Well, even so, it feels wrong,” he says just loud enough for me to hear.

“This whole karma gig feels wrong,” I agree. “Hey.” I tug on his hand for him to look at me again. “Do what you need to do. I get that you feel weird doing what Karma asked you to do. Unfortunately, this is the job, right?”

“But I don’t like it.” Dante squeezes my hand in his then lets go, heading over to the VIP section of the club.

I casually watch him as I try to blend into the wall. He approaches the table, and with his charm and good looks, he’s quickly offered a seat with the movers and shakers clique. He sits next to the attractive brunette and flirts. I can’t read their lips, but I’m well versed in body language. She’s into him, and he’s cuing that he’s feeling the same. After several minutes of signaling their attraction, light touches and smoldering gazes come into play.

Something deep inside me squirms uneasily.

Dante hasn’t even looked anywhere else other than her for fifteen minutes. There hasn’t been even one glance at me, and I don’t know why it bothers me as much as it does. I don’t have a claim on him, and I don’t want or need his attention. Do I?

My blood feels like it’s turning to ice, and my limbs are going numb.

A man speaks from beside me, startling me back to the room. “I said, that sucks,” he repeats. When I look at him with confusion, he nods toward Dante and his new love interest. “Didn’t you come in here with him?” the man asks.

I give him a once-over without answering. He’s in his early thirties with brown hair and brown eyes. He’s good-looking, but not in a way that stands out from anyone else in a crowd. He’s just averagely handsome, with an average fit build and average height. However, there’s something about him that feels different, but I can’t put my finger on it. Then I realize he noticed me earlier.

I point toward Dante. “Oh, we aren’t *together*.”

“But you showed up together, and you seemed to have an intimate conversation right before he dumped you and ran over to that minor league celebrity.”

I bristle as he assumes I’ve been dumped, but I have to keep our cover, so

I play along before the man gets suspicious. “It’s, uh... complicated. And how did you notice all that?”

“When a mesmerizingly beautiful woman steps into the club, I take notice.”

“Ha-ha.” I brush him off. “Really though?”

“Really.” His gazes sweeps up and down my body. “Is it that hard to believe that I find you very attractive? You deserve better than a guy who plays you like that.”

I glance back at Dante. He’s whispering in her ear just like he did with me. My cheeks flush with frustration. I have to remember that I’m just another conquest to Dante. The thought ices my heart. His intimate, passionate moments are just a role he plays. Once he has sampled me, he will lose interest.

“Want a drink?” my potential suitor asks when he sees my empty hands.

“Uh...”

What do I care what Dante does? I’m not a jealous person, but it feels like I’m fighting a losing battle, like all my emotions are amplified.

I don’t see Evan or Kurtis anywhere, and I was instructed to improvise at this club. I can’t watch Dante anymore, so I nod. “Sure. A drink would be good, but I’m buying my own.”

He grins, and it brings out his dimples, which make him cuter, but I rarely go for cute guys. “You are under no obligation to me if I buy you a drink. By the way, I like an independent woman.”

“I like a man who knows his place in the kitchen.” I smirk.

“As long as you bring home the bacon, I’ll cook it.”

I chuckle as we head over to the bar. My eyes keep straying over to Dante, no matter how often I chastise myself. As our drinks are delivered, I’m caught in the act of spying.

“So are you going to tell me about your complicated, non-relationship with the playboy?” Dimples asks.

“Do guys like it when women talk about another guy?” I raise a skeptical eyebrow.

“Not typically.” Dimples moves closer, brushing our knuckles together—a strangely intimate move. “But I’m not your typical guy.”

Dimples maneuvers us toward the open floor, where I have a clear view of Dante and his mating ritual.

“How *atypical* are you?” I hold up my hand to stop him from

commenting. “No. Let me guess, your name is John or Mike. You had a pleasant childhood, with only a few negative incidents. You were on the baseball team in high school, had a high school sweetheart, lost your virginity to her, and then broke up during college because you drifted apart. Then you found another girlfriend, and she was nice, but when you considered marrying her, you just couldn’t see yourself spending the rest of your life with her raising the two kids you planned on having. She cheated on you anyway with a friend. Now, disillusioned with your dead-end job, you go to clubs and see if you can pick up a slightly damaged woman on her rebound.”

I rattle off all that with my psychic sense, but the whole thing rings false when I say it out loud. There *is* more to him, something he keeps hidden—darkness.

Dimples waits patiently through my analysis of him, and he grins when I finish and asks, “So... are you only a *slightly* damaged woman on the rebound?”

“I’m in the discount bin.” I look over at Dante, and my heart pinches at the sight of him touching Miss Influencer. “I think I’ve been written off as an entire loss.” I down the rest of my drink in one shot.

“Damn, girl.” Dimples reaches out to caress my shoulder.

I swing my gaze back to him, and I’m taken aback by how close he is.

“You really like *him*?” Dimples tilts his head in Dante’s direction. “Enough for you to feel like trash?”

I shiver, drained by my churning emotions. I’m jealous, and sadness has engulfed me. I’m beginning to feel my will for life slip away. It makes no sense that I’m reacting so poorly to Dante’s seduction of his target. Something’s wrong, but my mind’s too fuzzy to figure out what.

“You don’t need someone like that.” Dimples strokes down my back and over my ass, cupping it and pulling me closer. I don’t stop him. I lean into him like he’s an unstoppable gravitational force.

What’s going on? Why am I allowing this stranger to touch me? Am I finally and truly broken?

“Come with me,” Dimples says, and I realize he hasn’t given me his name.

“Who are you?”

“I’m someone who can take your pain away. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

It does. It really does.

Dimples grasps my hand, and I let him lead me to the back of the club.

Everything is blurry, like I'm in a dream, and every moment I spend with this man pulls me deeper into a trance.

He brings me back to the office area. There's a storage room, and he guides me inside.

"How broken are you, sweetheart?" he asks, his voice soft and seductive.

I ponder about the level of my brokenness, and I feel my insides crumbling. So many screwed up things have happened in my life, so many battles and so many losses, but why do I choose now to breakdown?

"What happened to you?" Dimples asks. His voice is full of need, like he's aroused by hearing my sad story.

"It's my fault my mom is dead." I never admitted that out loud to anyone, so it's strange that I finally admit it to a stranger in a closet. Sure, I had many clients who told me too much, but *I* am not like that.

"And then what?" His fingers trail down my neck and dip between my breasts.

"My father abused me. I ran away from home, but things weren't much better on the streets."

Dimples presses up against me as if this turns him on, and his hardness confirms he is.

A buzzing in the back of my head warns me.

I push him, but he doesn't budge.

Something's incredibly wrong.

I gather up all my strength, which isn't much at the moment, and I open my third eye—my second sight. I don't like to do this, because seeing into people is a dangerous gift. More often than not, I don't like what I see.

I don't like what I see now.

Dimples is a swirling black and red mass. He doesn't even have a proper aura. He doesn't glow like a normal human.

When I look closer, I see dim lights inside him. My instincts tell me they aren't his. I look down and see my aura being siphoned into him. He is literally draining my soul. *Shit*, that's what the other lights are—souls. People he has drained.

"You are delicious," he whispers. "So full of pain and power. You will keep me fed for a while."

My knees give out.

He catches me, bracing me against the wall. "You are so pathetic. There is so much inside you, and you didn't try to claim it."

How dare he berate me? He knows nothing of my life or my journey. Being broken and getting up and hoping for a better day *is* strength. I have been beaten down all my life, and I'm not about to go out like this—drained by a true energy vampire.

Rage churns inside me, and all the hatred I feel for the evil I've faced in my life rises to my call.

Righteous anger.

I psychically reach out, like I did for Kurtis's soul, and pull on my life force. Slowly, I draw it back inside myself.

"How?" Dimples takes a half step back, but he doesn't let me go. Now, he appears to be the one mesmerized.

I don't answer him. Instead, once I retrieved my soul from his clutches, I focus on grasping the soul fragments trapped in his energetic body.

Dimples falls to his knees as if I'm pulling out his batteries, and in a sense, that's exactly what I'm doing.

I collect the eight souls and hold on to them.

"What are you doing to me?" he asks in sheer disbelief.

"They weren't yours to take." I feel myself expand like a balloon, swelling with power, then I grab hold of his soul and pull.

Dimples cries out, and there's a snap when he's ripped from his physical form. Now, he's just a husk on the ground, shriveled and quickly turning to dust.

I hold the souls in my arms, captured by my will. What do I do now?

I remember what happened with Kurtis when his soul left his body. I feel the same place that called to him calling to me now. I slide down the wall and sit, propping myself up and closing my eyes.

There's a pressure on the top of my head, and I feel a pop. I hover above my body, then I hurtle through space with the souls in tow. Within a flash, I'm standing at the portal I glimpsed when Kurtis died. It makes no sense, but I recognize it. This is the transitional point for souls, the tunnel between life and death. When the souls are ready to come back to the physical plane, they are birthed through here.

I release the nine souls. The eight souls Dimples stole are transparent wisps, but they nod to me and float through the door.

Dimples, still dark and foreboding, comes flying at me. We are both in spirit form, but I wonder if that might be worse for me if I lose this fight.

I hold out my hand, and without making contact, I shove him through the

portal. I wait a moment to see if he will return, but there's nothing. I move closer to look through and see two beings made of pure light escorting all nine souls away.

Then I'm hurtling through space and back into my body.

When I open my eyes, Dante's face is all I can see. I think I'm hallucinating until he speaks.

"Tessa! Are you okay?" He glances behind him at Dimples's shriveled, decomposing body. "What the hell happened?"

Kurtis and Evan come into view and move closer.

"The band's back together!" I say weakly.

Dante strokes my cheek and then touches my forehead, as if checking my temperature. "Seriously, what happened?"

"Yeah." Kurtis looks nervously at the corpse. "What did you do to him?"

"He was draining my life force, killing me."

"So you killed him?" Kurtis asks.

"I wasn't trying to." I shake my head, and it's too wobbly. "It was self-defense."

Evan curses. "I heard stories of energy vampires, but I thought they were a myth."

"I think we can safely say anything that we thought was myth could actually be real in some way," Dante replies, then he asks me, "Can you stand up?"

"I think so." I let him help me to my feet. I'm unsteady, but I manage. He puts his arm around my waist, and we make our way out of the club.

"I thought you were with your social media hottie," I say.

"When I saw you leave with that guy..." His voice trails off.

"Did you get *it* done?" I ask.

"No," he says with a tight jaw. "It doesn't matter."

"But what if Karma punishes you?"

"Let her." Dante pulls me to his side. "Some things are more important."

I'm pleased that someone thinks I'm more important than punishment, but then it hits me. "You didn't think I could handle myself."

"It's not like that."

"Isn't it?"

Evan cuts in. "We are protective of all new recruits."

"When you aren't harassing them?" I narrow my eyes. "Or is it just the women you think are weak?"

Kurtis laughs. “You *killed* me with your powers. You threw me twenty feet. Believe me, we don’t think you’re weak.”

Both Dante and Evan nod their agreement.

“You should have seen how I was with these two,” Evan explains. “I didn’t let them out of my sight for months.”

“True story, precious.” Kurtis grins. “And even after all these years. He didn’t let me out of his sight tonight.”

“If you are usually a helicopter mom, then why did you *all* leave me alone tonight?”

“Because we know you can handle yourself,” Dante says.

“Okay, fine, then why did you come after me if I can handle myself?”

Dante tenses beside me. “Because *I* couldn’t handle seeing you wander off with his hands all over you.”

We are all quiet after that confession, and the ride home is strained.

I’m overwhelmed with all the feelings and fears I had at the club. Which feelings are solely mine and which were magnified by the energy vampire? I shudder to think that all those feelings *are* mine, but I have a habit of stuffing down my feelings. It’s how I survived.

I need all my defense mechanisms since I still have to survive whatever this new life is. My instincts tell me Karma wants me for a reason, and now with what happened tonight, and what I can do, I might have a better idea why.

I glance over at Dante as he drives us home. Should I tell him what I did? How I delivered souls to the afterlife? Can I trust *anyone*?

If history is an indicator, I can’t, and I know nothing about these guys.

Also, Dante being jealous over me is ridiculous. He was practically making out with that woman when Dimples had his hands on me. That woman registers on Dante’s hotness meter. I am, if anything, a convenient hookup if he can convince me to have sex with him. Then he could just pop over to the next room and get his rocks off with a warm body. Or perhaps he wants me because he simply doesn’t enjoy being denied, and I’m a challenge. When I give in, he will get bored, and he’ll be done.

Worse yet, maybe he’s trying to seduce me as a job for Karma. If he was ordered to seduce that woman tonight, then it’s in Karma’s wheelhouse to order him to get close to me to win my loyalty and trust. Truly, it’s the only thing that makes sense, because Dante finding me attractive in the way he’s claiming is silly.

I rub my arms as the chilling thought settles in.
What if *I am the target*?

THE SHOP

On the drive back to the house, Evan's phone beeps. He pulls it from his pocket and curses.

"What's up?" Dante sounds nervous. It's awfully late for a casual text. Maybe it's a booty call?

"Karma is coming for a visit within the next couple of days," Evan says with a clenched jaw.

"That can't be good," Kurtis mutters.

"No. Unless it's for a recruit, her visits usually mean someone will be *transferred*," Evan explains.

"And they are never heard from again," I say, and they all nod.

I don't like the timing of this at all. Does Karma know about my incident with the vampire? Did she know I escorted souls to the afterworld? Does she intend to use my powers?

When we arrive at the house, I rush through the front door and race up to my room. I slam it shut and lean against the cool wood. I hear footsteps quickly coming down the hall before stopping at my door. I recognize the gait—Dante.

"Hey, you okay?" he asks through the door.

"I'm fine. Just exhausted." I try to sound tired and not scared or angry, but I'm all three.

"You don't sound alright." Damn psychics. Yeah, I see the irony. "Would you like me to stay with you tonight?"

I have to keep my distance. With every moment that passes, I'm becoming more certain that all three men are only winning my trust so Karma can exploit it. "I don't think I want you near me with the smell of that woman

on you.” Actually, it’s not a lie. I don’t think I can handle it. It’s partly the reason I can’t let him in.

“Oh.” He sounds defeated. “What if I showered?”

“Dante, can you just let me deal with this alone? *Everything* that happened tonight is all too much.”

“I didn’t *want* to be with her.” His voice has lost hope, and it’s barely audible through the door.

“Maybe.” The part of me that wants Dante thrashes around in my chest. “But the moves you put on her looked exactly like the moves you use on me. I know I’m nothing special, just a notch on a belt, but it still stings to see it so blatantly displayed.”

“Tessa!” It sounds like his head hits the door in frustration. “Please, don’t think that.”

“Leave me alone. Believe it or not, almost being drained to death by an energy vampire is very exhausting. I don’t have the strength to deal with this too. It isn’t all about you.”

“I... I hope you feel better tomorrow.” Dante leaves for his room next door.

I check the lock, then kick off my shoes and rip off my sexy black dress. In my mind, it’s garbage anyway. It will always remind me of tonight—the emotions, the rejection, and the feeling of my life being sucked out of me. I throw it in the trash bin instead of the hamper.



The next morning, I wait for the guys to begin their exercise routine before I venture out of my room. I sneak down the stairs and out to the garage, where I grab Kurtis’s BMW keys and slip into the car’s leather seats. It’s quieter than Evan’s muscle car, and I don’t think I can handle smelling that woman’s perfume lingering in Dante’s SUV.

I make it all the way to Carmen’s shop before Evan texts me in our group chat.

Evan: T, where are you?

Tessa: Out.

Kurtis: No shit.

Tessa: Needed to clear my head. Be back in an hour or two.

Kurtis: Don't you dare scratch my baby.

Tessa: I won't, precious.

Dante: Be careful.

I don't reply, tossing my cell on the seat and walking up to Carmen's psychic reader shop, but the door is locked. I glance inside, but I can't see her. The lights are on, and the store sign is blinking open.

Maybe she's with a client. I hop back into the car and decide to do the next item on my agenda first.

Fortunately, I have enough cash stashed away to disappear without the trace of a credit card. I need to prepare for that.

The small city we live in still has almost every kind of boutique shop and big box store. I pull into an electronics store which specializes in gadgets to spy on cheating spouses. I buy three listening devices for the cars, three for their bedrooms, and trackers for each guy. I toss all the packages into the store's outdoor garbage can. I install the tech in Kurtis's car in the parking lot before I even pull away, checking if it works. The info is already streaming into my new burner phone.

I head back to Carmen's shop to see if she's free.

When I arrive, the door is still locked. It has been over an hour, and it isn't unheard of for a session to go over two hours, but something buzzes in my head that it isn't as benign as that.

I bang on the door. It's not cool, but I'll deal with the consequences if she's mad because I disturbed a reading.

She doesn't pop her head around the corner to scold me. *Hmm*. I open up my senses and try to read what's happening in the shop, but the old crone has done a masterful job of warding against prying psychics. I should have guessed that. I could walk away, but I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if Carmen is in trouble and I didn't even try to help.

I curse and look around for security cameras or a witness, but the area is

clear of both. I grab a rock from the landscaping and smash it through the window, then I shove my hand through and unlock the door.

Good, no alarms. I didn't think she would be the type to own one, but you never know. I keep hoping that she will come crashing around the corner from her back room to yell at me, but no such luck.

Running back to her reader room, I find it empty, then I quickly scan the shop. Other than the damage I caused, nothing seems out of place or looks suspicious. However, I know better than most that appearances can be deceiving. I open my third eye to see what's underneath.

Most emotionally valuable items have an aura or faint cord to their owners, especially stuff they regard as precious above all else, but I can't detect anything that Carmen treasures.

I reexamine what's in the shop. It feels like something is off from when I visited with Evan. Accessing my eidetic memory, I recall how things were and notice old tomes are missing, as are some of her trade tools. On its own, it might mean nothing, but the place feels vacant, like a hotel room—no attachments, no history, no connective threads.

Perhaps it was like this when I was here before and hadn't noticed because Carmen's energy is overwhelming. Even people who aren't sensitive to the world would perceive the power around her. She fills up spaces with her presence.

I dig around her desk-like sales counter. Stacks of papers and books litter the area.

I'm about to leave when a book falls off the shelf.

Picking it up, I read the title, *The Karmic Cycle of Death*. Opening the cover, I see a handwritten note.

T,
Knowledge is power.
- M.C.

Madam Carmen.

I don't see anything else calling, so I need to vacate my illegal break-in. I wipe my prints off the door handle and shut the door with my sleeve.

Tossing the book into my oversized bag, I rev the engine and make my

way back to the barracks.

My phone chirps.

Evan: We went out for a couple of jobs. Take as much time as you need to recoup today.

Convenient, but hopefully, not too convenient to be a trap.

When I arrive at the estate, the guys are gone. I place a tracker on Evan's car since they took Dante's SUV.

My oversized handbag conceals my purchases and my newly stolen book as I race up the stairs and crash into Chara. Great.

"Whoa!" She stumbles back and glares at me. "What the hell?"

"Sorry. I have to pee."

Her eyes narrow. "No, you don't. What's up with you?"

"So your power is a bladder lie detector?" As soon as I say it, I know it's true, at least the lie detector part.

It would have been nice if the guys gave me a heads-up on her powers, but if they are all in on conning me, then it makes sense that they didn't.

"Yeah." Chara crosses her arms. "So why were you in such a hurry?"

"I don't want to see my team." Not a lie.

"I thought you were all chummy. What gives?"

"I had a rough night, and if I don't want to talk to them about it, then I really don't want to talk to you about it."

Chara softens her stance and confesses, "Sorry I laid into you on your first day here. It's just... I don't like the guys, and we have to haze the newbies. It's part of the initiation."

"I get it. Whatever." I shrug. "It's a shitty job."

"You definitely have to have the stomach for it, but there are worse jobs."

I don't trust this newfound camaraderie, but I will take advantage of it. "Hey, speaking of which..." I see my chance to steer the conversation where I want it to go. "Is it true you met a death agent?"

"Yeah. We fought over a target," Chara says, happy to share her juicy story.

"What?" My eyes bug out. "Who won?"

"He did, obviously," Chara grumbles, a bit irritated by losing. "They are the bigger guns, aren't they?"

I frown, thinking it over. "But how did you both have the same target?"

"I'm not sure how Karma gets her names. She told me to target this guy

at a grocery store. I had a pic and everything. Time and place. My target showed up, and I was supposed to set him up to get caught hitting on me so his girlfriend would catch us. Then, I felt this presence walk up behind me. I turned, and the presence was a pleasant-looking guy, but he radiated danger. My skin erupted in goose-bumps..."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Nothing like that. The death agent told me, '*He isn't yours to take.*'"

"He said exactly that?" I remember those are the same words I said to Dimples, the energy vampire just before I killed him.

My hands go numb with anxiety.

"Yeah." Chara shivers, recalling her brush with death. "Freaked me out. I had been caught by another agent, but I didn't know who he was. I thought maybe he was another instant karma agent, but then the death guy strolled over to the man and closed his eyes. I swear it felt like the man's soul was literally sucked out of his body."

"Do you think this death guy was an agent like us?" I ask.

"Probably. I mean, Instant Karma radiates an intense energy that's kind of overwhelming. I would guess Death himself would be more like that. Still, the man I met was more powerful than any karma agent I've met."

"I guess that makes sense," I agree. "Death is older and more prevalent than the concept of karma, which would equate to more raw power."

"That tracks. In the years I've been working for her, I've noticed my power increases as the notion of karma grows. It's becoming commonplace to hear the concept being used on mainstream television, books..."

"And social media," I add, knowing the goddess's pressure to hashtag our jobs. "So the more the idea of karma spreads, the more powerful she becomes."

"Making *us* more powerful," Chara says cheerfully.

"Wow. True." I plaster on a smile for her. "Thanks for sharing your story and talking with me."

"No problem." Chara saunters toward the stairs. "And don't let those guys give you any more shit."

I mutter, "Working on it."

I run into my room and ready the bugs for each of their rooms. I pull my lockpick kit from my hidden compartment in my suitcase. Then I strain my ears and open my senses when I step into the hallway, but I can't feel anyone else's energy in the bedrooms. Most are out with their jobs, and I sense that

Chara is now with William in the kitchen.

I try the door handle and find Dante's room locked, so I swiftly use my picks on the tumblers. The door clicks, and I race inside.

I glance around to see if there's anything incriminating lying around. Although, I didn't think they'd be that careless—Dante in particular. If he's supposed to seduce me, then he wouldn't have stuff out for me to find if he got me into his bed.

I check his drawers, under the bed, and the back of his closet, but there's nothing I shouldn't find. But I suppose I don't know what I expect. I unscrew a lightbulb, attach the listening device, and screw it back in. I feel like an asshole, but I remind myself that if I don't investigate them, then I'm only setting myself up for disaster.

Once upon a time, I was trusting. Okay, sort of trusting. I let my guard down and hoped that not every person was a dickhead. I was let down every single time, and on several occasions, I was almost killed for trusting someone. So trusting three guys I've only known for a couple of weeks is just reckless.

Next, I break into Kurtis's room, then Evan's, setting up my devices. Now, each time someone speaks in their rooms or car, it will record to my new cloud account. I just have to install a device in Dante's car tonight, and I will be set to discover where their loyalty lies and maybe their plans for me.



I'm running on the treadmill when the guys return.

"Wow. She really is messed up if she volunteered to run," Kurtis jokes.

"I haven't complained in three whole days." I glare at him. "Now that I'm not winded just from stepping onto the treadmill."

I have quickly built up my endurance, and I'm pleasantly surprised by how strong I am now.

Dante slowly approaches. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yep," I say without looking at him. I can't have them suspect me of anything or make them aware of my suspicions of them. I must keep Dante at a comfortable arm's length to do that. The incident with the social media girl is a perfect excuse to push him securely back into the friend zone without raising alarms.

“Tessa?” Dante calls, trying to get me to look at him.

“Yes?” I answer coolly without making eye contact.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“I’m not mad. I just realized what’s really going on. That’s all. No biggie. We can still be friends... coworkers, but don’t push for more than that.”

“I didn’t want to be with her.” His aura pulses with irritation.

I slow my pace and give him my full attention. “It doesn’t matter. We are coworkers.”

“But—”

“Sex can be fun and casual, but unfortunately, not in our situation.” I jump off my treadmill and head out of the gym. “No means no.”

As soon as I’m in the hallway, I fall back against the wall, and tears sting my eyes. I was falling for Dante’s charms. I like him, but even if it turns out he isn’t betraying me with Karma, he’s a player. His moves are so slick that I forget they are moves when he uses them on me.

In a few days, he will find someone else to pursue. I’m not special—not to him, and not to most people.

Except, for some reason, I am important to Instant Karma. I just need to find out why and for what purpose.



I grab a glass of water and a snack in the kitchen.

Evan strolls in with his cocky swagger. “Better?”

“Yeah.” I sip my water. “The fresh air cleared my head. All empty now.”

He grins at my joke. “I was thinking we could *meet* up tonight.” He inclines his head toward our sacred space on the land next door.

I take a beat to answer. I have to keep up appearances, but I don’t want to talk with them about what happened. I still haven’t told them about sending the souls to the afterlife and don’t know if I should. “I guess.”

Evan moves closer, sucking up all the oxygen. “What’s going on? Why are you so rattled?”

“I almost died from an energy vampire. Can’t a woman be a bit rattled by that?”

He frowns and nods. “Dante told me you were mad about his job last night with the influencer.”

“It’s more complicated than basic jealousy.” I shake my head. “I don’t need a one-night stand or even a two-night stand. Not at my job.”

“I get it, but I don’t think he’s playing—”

“Save it.” I brush past him and head up to my room.

Evan calls, “Meet you at ten?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

QUESTIONS

I'm not looking forward to meeting with the guys. I wait until the last minute to walk over to our secret location, arriving just after ten at night.

However, only Evan is waiting for me. That makes this meeting more intimidating. Next to him is a camping lantern on the lowest setting, so there's just enough light to see each other without drawing unwanted attention.

"Hey," he says as I enter the warded circle. The protective barrier snaps into place around me.

"Are the other two coming?"

Evan grins at my distancing language. Damn, he's perceptive, but should I expect anything less from a karma agent?

"The *other two* aren't coming." He studies me for a second as if reading my mood and then asks, "You didn't really want to see Dante, did you?"

"If he lays off trying to have sex with me, then I'll be fine with him." That's technically true... *mostly* true.

"Sorry to break it to you, sweetheart, but I think it's a bit more than just sex," Evan says with a softness that makes me believe there's more to his statement.

My concern is about the "bit more." What if they are working under Karma's orders to mess with me?

To stop the conversation about Dante, I concede, "Maybe, and maybe he believes that. He probably never actually had to wait to get into someone's pants, so it's throwing him off."

Evan just shakes his head but doesn't argue anymore. "Enough of that. It

isn't my business anyway, unless it affects the job."

The more we talk about my sex life, or lack thereof, the more irritated I become. "Complications are what I'm trying to prevent. You should probably tell Dante to back the fuck off for the sake of the job."

He nods. "Alright, back to why *I* wanted to talk."

"You mean it wasn't to lecture me about Dante's sexual *needs*?"

Evan glares at me, but there isn't much heat behind it. "It wasn't. What happened with the vamp?"

"I told you." I don't give any signs that I'm lying, but Evan picks up on the fact that I'm withholding anyway.

"You told me you pulled your energy back, and then you drained him." He leans forward on his seat. "But *how*?"

Screw it. I should just tell him. He might help me through this no matter if he's on my side or not. If Karma wants my powers, she might have him help me along, and I can use that to my advantage.

"I don't know exactly how I did it. When I felt my life force draining away, I opened my third eye and saw it being sucked into him. So I pulled it back, and then... he died."

"Were you trying to kill him?" Evan asks. His face is a stoic mask, but his voice gives away some of his worry.

"Not consciously." I shrug. "But maybe on some deep level, I was protecting myself by eliminating the threat. Self-defense."

Evan nods thoughtfully. "I suppose when we are threatened, our instincts take over."

"Are you worried that I'm going to go on a killing spree?" I cross my arms over my chest.

"What?" he blurts. "No. I... It just scared me."

I have never seen him so flustered, even in the face of giant guys ready to stomp his ass. "You mean *you* are scared *of me*... of what happened to Kurtis and now the vamp."

"Yeah, a little. You're powerful, and we don't even know what you can do. How powerful *are* you? What if—"

"I blow you all up? Suck your souls from your body?" I finish for him.

"Yeah, and you might hurt yourself, or maybe an innocent person."

"So far, I've only hurt people who have attacked me."

"Good point." Evan quiets, staring at me for a long while. "Was there more to any of those attacks?"

“What do you mean?” I narrow my eyes on him.

“How did you bring Kurtis back from the dead? And why didn’t you tell us about that part?”

I’m not going to confess my afterlife portal visit when I’m still questioning their loyalties, but he suspects I’m holding back information. I have to give him something to appease his curious mind.

“I think it must have been an extension of my karma powers combined with my psychic ability to sense souls and death. I could see him outside of his body. I kind of... redirected him back.”

It’s close enough to how it went down. I don’t need to confess how *far* out his soul traveled.

“Have you had any luck figuring out what you are from the books I gave you on supernatural beings and gods?”

“No. Nothing quite fits. I mean, there are death and psychic elements for a bunch of the gods, but all the descriptions are vague,” I say with a frustrated voice. I don’t mention the book I found at Carmen’s shop, which is hidden in my secret compartment in my luggage. I’ll read it tonight after this meeting is over. “Do you have any ideas?” I ask.

Let’s see if he will offer information.

“Not much. I have confirmed there are several death agents in every city, but there’s usually no contact between them and us,” Evan explains. “Chara actually spoke to one, but apparently that was because they had the same target.”

“What is your take on Karma and Death having the same target? Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“It really does.” He rubs his chin, which is just beginning to show stubble from this morning’s shave. “But we don’t understand the mechanics of how Karma chooses targets.”

“In a way, the incident with Chara would suggest that Karma is closely related to Death,” I surmise. “It makes sense if the Indian traditions are based in truth and that reincarnation is real. Original Karma would help set up one’s next life. Part of the cycle.”

“Or as some suggest, we choose our lives based on our karmic path of learning lessons,” Evan adds.

I hedge my bet and ask, “Does Instant Karma just feel like a parasitic god to you, especially when you consider her media ploys?”

“Parasitic?” His eyes go wide.

Crap, maybe I shouldn't have gone there with him. "Uh, maybe that's a bit strong."

"Maybe, but you have a point." Evan frowns and hangs his head. "There are theories that most of the gods were created by the needs and energy of their followers. We have a god of war because we have glorified conquering others. We have a goddess of love because we were in love with the idea of love, and death because we fear death. It's a way for us to barter, and in some small way, negotiate our fates. It's a way for us to feel in control, so we manifested entities to fill these roles."

"Then we needed immediate retribution for bullshit people and now we have Instant Karma," I conclude. "It's our fast-paced, instant gratifications that's created a need for such a goddess."

"The gods gain power from our thoughts and attention," Evan explains. "Even quantum physics theories suggest our attention can shift reality. I would say we are feeding Instant Karma energy every time we do a job. Every time someone even wishes instant karma on someone else, *she* benefits from it."

"In most stories, the gods are selfish and petty, or at least they end up that way. They look down on humanity." I recall my limited knowledge of Greek and Norse gods.

"Yeah, most really didn't help humans, instead helping themselves, at least according to legends." Evan's shoulders slump. "I... I don't know what to do."

"About what?" I ask. Maybe he will confess what Karma has planned for me—if he knows.

"I suppose there isn't much *to* do." Evan wrings his hands together. "We are stuck in this job. You experienced the consequences of leaving Karma's employment. We'll be killed."

"Yeah. There isn't much we can do, so perhaps we should just let learning about my powers go. So what if I have a bit more oomph than most agents?" I wave it off like it's of no concern. "If Karma is going to use me for her will, then that's that."

As I say it, I fear that I'm actually going to give up. How can I compete against a goddess? Why do I always have to fight? *Do* I have to fight? Should I just give in to my crappy life instead of constantly struggling like I have been up to now?

Evan stands up, walks over to me, and pulls me into an embrace. It's odd.

He hasn't been touchy-feely before.

Instead of soothing me, all I wonder is what his motives are.

"I'm sorry," he whispers into my ear.

"For what?" I feel a pinch as a needle sinks into my neck. My vision blurs, and my body gives out.

INTERROGATION

I can't focus. Not only is my vision fuzzy, but my brain is fuzzy too. I try to move, but my body doesn't respond.

Pausing, I take a moment to remember what happened. I also need to assess what's going on now. They tied my wrists behind me, my ankles are zip-tied together, and I'm sitting on the ground, propped up against a log.

My head wobbles as I tilt it back to see Evan, Dante, and Kurtis glaring at me.

"What the hell?" I manage to say.

"Who *are* you?" Evan asks.

"What?" Now I'm very confused. Do I look different?

"You don't look different," Dante says. "Should you?"

Oh, apparently I said that out loud. I'm fucked up.

"What are you doing to me?" I ask as I squirm to break free, but all I do is fall onto my side.

Evan straightens me back to a sitting position. "Who are you?"

"Tessa?"

"I looked into you," Evan growls. "You don't exist. Tessa Maat is dead."

"You used the wrong name."

"What?" Kurtis blurts in surprise.

"I have had a few names in my life—most illegally acquired," I answer like that's a normal thing.

"Why?" Kurtis leans down to get in my face. "*Who are you?*"

"I had to get away from my past a few times." I furrow my brows. "Wait, why were you looking into *my* past?"

"Because you're fucking dangerous," Evan snarls as if he's about to

attack me. “Besides, the only connection to your past, Carmen, had her shop broken into, and she’s missing.”

“That isn’t my fault.” I wince, caught in a lie. “Well, the broken window is, but it’s because I was worried.”

“Then you installed listening devices in our rooms,” Dante says, his voice devoid of emotion.

Crap. They caught me. “Um...”

“Why did you do it?” Dante presses.

“How do you know *I* did that?” I counter.

“Kurtis’s car has a tracker. We know you went to The Spy Guys and Carmen’s today.”

“Oh.” I tilt my head back, wanting to give up. The drugs are pulling my emotions and thoughts forward, and I don’t like what it stirs up—hopelessness. I didn’t even get to find out what I needed to know.

Evan snaps his fingers in my face to regain my attention. “Why are you spying on us?”

“I need to know where your loyalties lie.”

“Were you doing this for Karma?” Dante asks, his voice gaining an edge.

I shake my head and instantly regret the swishing motion. I’m ready to vomit.

“I told you we couldn’t trust her,” Kurtis says with pure disgust.

“Me?” I laugh. “What kind of game are you playing? I know I’m all drugged up, but you aren’t making any sense.”

“Do you work for Karma?” Evan asks.

“Duh, we all do,” I slur.

Evan captures my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Did she send you to test our loyalty?”

“What?” My eyes widen. “No. You’re the ones who are going to betray me.”

“Then why are *you* trying to gather evidence against us?” Kurtis throws his hands in the air in protest.

“Not for her!” I yell. This all has gone completely sideways.

“We can’t trust her,” Kurtis mutters. “She’s the one who started making us question our loyalties.”

“But she’s right about Karma using us,” Evan hisses.

“I bet Karma senses our misgivings and sent her to betray ourselves,” Kurtis argues.

“I’m not spying for Karma,” I state flatly.

“We are going to have to kill her,” Kurtis suggests, “and make it look like an accident.”

Dante shoves him. “No!”

“Then what are we going to do with her?”

“Do whatever you want. Go ahead and try to kill me, but just know that I thought you were going to betray me,” I explain. “It was the only damn thing that makes sense here.”

Dante crouches down and his voice comes out icy. “Why would that make sense?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “About you trying to get close to me.”

Dante curses, stands up, and demands, “Is it completely out of the realm of fucking possibility that I might *actually* like you?”

His frustration rattles me. “Uh, yeah. It was that, or you didn’t like being told no.”

“Those are the only two freaking viable explanations, huh?” Dante paces, throwing his hands in the air and muttering to himself.

Evan ignores Dante’s tantrum and continues his questioning. “Why would you think we are betraying you?”

“Story of my cursed life. Why else would you risk going behind Karma’s back for *me*? We don’t even know each other.”

“Exactly what I said,” Kurtis grumbles. “We don’t know her. This is a test, and we failed. Now, we’ll die. Karma will be here in a few days to give us a permanent retirement.”

Evan rubs his face and curses under his breath. “Tessa, what happened to Carmen?”

“I showed up at the shop, and she was gone. The lights and open sign were on, but no one was answering. I was worried that she was hurt, so I broke the glass to get in.”

“The spyware was for you to see if you could trust us?” he asks.

“And now, I’ll never know if I can.” I pout, my head swimming with the drug.

Evan cradles my face, forcing me to look him in the eye. “What else are you keeping from us?”

“I *can’t* trust you.” I don’t want to cry, but then I feel hot tears on my cheeks. Fuck this drug, it’s making me cave. I can’t trust *anyone ever*. I am and will always be alone.

“We can’t trust *her*.” Kurtis knocks Evan aside and holds a knife to my throat.

“Go ahead.” I lift my chin to give him access. “You’re just going to tell Karma everything so she can use my abilities against my will. I don’t want to be her puppet. I shouldn’t be alive anyway, *right?*”

When Dante sees the knife against my throat, he lunges toward me. “Kurtis! Stop it!”

“Back off!” Kurtis presses the blade harder against my skin, about to cut me. “You’re her puppet. Would you really rather die than confess that you’re spying on us for her?”

I glance at Dante’s stricken face. He’s poised to stop Kurtis, but I know it will be too late if he tries.

They probably think the drug will keep my powers at bay, but I can feel my gift swirling stronger inside me every second. “Just so you know, I would never betray you. I needed to know if you would betray me. That’s all.”

Using my power that controls air, I stir some dirt into a tiny dust devil at my feet to prove my point, and they gasp.

“I’d rather die than actually be her puppet, so do it. End me.” I close my eyes and wait for my life’s cord to be severed. I have seen the portal to the afterlife, so I’m not afraid. However, my body trembles with fear, knowing it will be left to rot, but that’s the nature of things.

Kurtis steps back. “Shit, I don’t think she is working against us with Karma.”

“I told you,” Dante snaps.

My eyes pop open and look around. “I told you to kill me.”

“We aren’t doing that!” Dante snatches the knife from Kurtis and cuts my restraints.

“She might have horrible plans for me,” I protest. “Even if you are working for her to spy on me, you must see this is for the best.”

“No. *We* don’t,” Dante argues. “If she has nefarious purposes for you, then you might be the only thing that can stop her.”

I can’t trust them. All of this could be a ruse. I grab the knife from Dante’s hand, tumble away from him, and bring the knife to my own throat.

All three of them yell, “Tessa! No!”

“I won’t let anyone use me anymore.” I move to cut my jugular, but the knife flies out of my hand.

All three of them used their magic on me—to save me. I don’t

understand.

I see the blade glinting in the pale light and crawl for it. I'm so tired, and I only see one way out. I have come close so many times, and the drug removes all doubt now.

I reach out for the blade, but a body lands on top of me, preventing me from moving.

"Let me go!" I yell.

Dante flips me over and pins me down with his body. Holding my face so I have to look into his eyes. "I'm not letting you go. Not ever. You can trust us, you stubborn woman."

Tears pour out of my eyes. I want to believe him, but I wanted to believe everyone who has betrayed me before. "But..."

"No." His hand cradles the side of my face, his thumb brushing away my tears. "I'm here. Whatever may come, we're here for you."

"But we don't know what's coming for us."

"It doesn't matter. None of us want to be used anymore. The other night broke my heart. I only wanted to kiss you, no one else."

He presses our foreheads together, his lips hovering an inch from mine.

"Well, this just got awkward," Kurtis grumbles.

I had forgotten about them, but the poke at our intimate moment brings me back to the situation. I turn my head to break Dante's power over me, and he receives the hint and lifts off of me.

The drugs are still coursing through my system, though, and I can't stand on my own.

Dante helps me to my feet, pulling me against his chest. "Promise me no more talk of dying."

At this moment, I make up my mind. I will try to trust one more time. I'm sure this will be a mistake, but I tell them all I can. I might as well surrender to having my heart metaphorically ripped out again.

"Well then, I suppose I should tell you everything," I announce.

Kurtis curses.

THE CONFESSION

“*W*hat do you have to tell us?” Evan asks.

Still unsteady from their interrogation drug, my head wobbles when I try to look at him. Dante presses my body against his chest, and it’s the only thing keeping me upright.

“Maybe we should let her sleep this off before we get into *everything*,” Dante suggests.

“No. She might change her mind tomorrow,” Kurtis protests, rejecting the idea.

“Unfortunately, Kurtis is right,” Evan agrees.

“It’s fine. I’ll tell you now. So... I’ve been to the afterlife portal, where souls go,” I blurt out as fast as I can. “That’s it.”

“Oh, that’s it?” Kurtis exclaims. He claps his hands together and wanders dramatically in a small circle. “Well, I’m *completely* satisfied. You?” He looks at Dante and Evan in disbelief.

“Kurtis, shut up,” Evan barks. “Tessa, explain.”

“When Kurtis died, I followed his soul to the portal between life and death. I pulled him back before he could go through.” I pause. My words are still slurred, and I’m having a hard time remembering what we are talking about.

“What happened to the energy vamp?” Evan asks.

“When he was draining me, I opened up my third eye, saw what he was doing to me, and then saw the souls he had taken before. I grabbed them from his being—draining and killing him. Then I took them all to the afterlife portal and sent them through, including the vamp.”

Dante’s hold on me tightens. Whether it’s due to concern for me or fear

of me, I can't say.

Kurtis's mouth drops open. "Holy karma balls."

"Yeah," Dante and Evan say in unison.

"I wasn't *trying* to kill him, and I don't even know how I found the portal again, but maybe once I saw it when I followed Kurtis, it was instinctual."

"Or you are a psychopomp," Evan says with certainty.

"A *what*?" Dante asks, clearly disturbed, but he doesn't push me away.

"A Greek name for those who guide souls to the afterlife," Evan explains.

My energy wanes, and I sink lower in Dante's hold.

"She needs to recover," he tells the other two. "We got enough of an explanation for now."

Kurtis grumbles but consents by heading back to the house. Dante lifts me into his arms in a bridal hold. My arm flops down and sways as he traverses the uneven terrain.



Next thing I know, I'm in my bed with Dante standing over me.

"Did I just have a bad dream?" I ask, my voice weak.

"I wish. It felt like a nightmare." He pulls the desk chair over and sits down. Interesting, he sees the need to create distance now. "How are you feeling?"

"Top of the world." I smack my tongue to the top of my mouth. "And as dry as my wit."

Dante chuckles, but he helps me sit up enough to drink some water I have in a bottle next to my bed. "Just a sip. I'm worried you might throw up."

My head is slowly clearing, but it's still foggy.

"Thanks for drugging me, by the way." I flop back onto my pillow. "Great way to woo a woman."

He winces, and then I remember his ex was roofied. I don't apologize though.

At least my methods of finding out if they were trustworthy didn't involve kidnapping. He should know better than this.

"I argued against such drastic measures," Dante explains his actions. "However, Evan and Kurtis thought you might hurt us."

"Is that how you see me? Dangerous?"

“Not really, but... well, you killed Kurtis.” Dante shrugs.

“How many times do I have to say that I didn’t mean to?”

“But you felt the need to spy on us?” he asks, sadness dripping from his tone.

“You don’t trust me. I don’t trust you,” I snap. “Can’t we just leave it at that?”

“No.” His jaw flexes with irritation. “I can’t. Sure, we all have to be cautious, but we are a team, and we need to have each other’s backs. I have your back.”

“Why should I believe that?” I roll my eyes and huff. “I get it. We are in a fucked up situation. Just know I wouldn’t hurt you, even if you betrayed me.”

“I’m *not* going to betray you,” Dante says forcefully.

“I thought you were going to let me rest.” I glare at him pointedly.

“I was, but now that you’re talking to me again. I’m afraid you won’t hear me if I don’t say what I need to say.”

I wave my hand to signal him to get on with it. “What is that?”

“I know you don’t want me bothering you anymore, but here’s my last attempt to get you to be with me—”

“Oh? Is this my *last* chance to hook up with you? How benevolent of you to warn me, *oh, hot one.*” I shake my head at his arrogance.

“No. I meant I won’t pester you for your affections anymore.” Dante sighs. “But you won’t know if this is a one-night stand deal or just a fling until you give me a chance. Doesn’t that make sense?”

“Perfect sense, as long as you aren’t going to dump me with next week’s trash. After tonight’s drugging, I’m not sure what you will do to me next.”

“I wouldn’t have let him kill you.” Dante takes a deep breath. “Back to us. You know, nothing in life is certain. We are constantly taking risks with our hearts and our lives. Is it really that hard to just see where this goes?”

“In theory, you’re right, but I *know* how this goes.”

He narrows his eyes. “A psychic premonition?”

“No. Past experience—always the best indicator.”

Dante rubs his face in frustration, then he gazes down at me like he’s digging into my soul. “Who hurt you?”

“Who *didn’t* hurt me?” I counter.

Dante curses softly. “Well, I suppose you should just give up on love completely,” he says with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“Are you suggesting that’s what you’re offering me?” I frown. “*Love?*”

“I think it could be. I’ve never felt this way before.”

“Well, I don’t know if my heart works like that anymore, or if it ever did.” I close my eyes to ground myself, since I’m sure I’m about to lose it.

But part of me feels like the connection between us is inevitable. I’m drawn to him like no one before. Is it love? Or the beginnings of it?

What if he truly feels the same?

His hand almost reaches out to take mine, but he holds back. “The pain you feel when you think of the people in your past suggests you still have the capacity for that emotion. Why do you insist on denying love?”

“I don’t know why.” I turn away. Dammit, why is he calling me out like this? “I’ll think about it.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“*Ha*. Because you live here?”

“Yeah, *and* I’m keeping an eye on you tonight. The amount of drugs they dosed you with could have put down a horse.” He sets his hands on mine and begins to heal me with his Karma-given power.

I’m well past exhaustion, so I just let it happen. I’ll need my strength for what’s coming.

I doze off to the buzzing energy cleansing my body of the toxins, wondering if Dante’s correct. Have I made it a habit of denying myself love?

PRAYER

I wake to Dante snoring at the foot of my bed. At some point during the night, he grabbed a blanket and pillow and crashed on my floor.

My entire body aches and my head is pounding, so I chug the rest of the water left on my side table.

Then I remember everything that happened the night before, all the way to Dante's plea to see where this will go.

Ugh. He has a point, but that *isn't* the point.

Pulling the covers back, I try out my legs by standing, but it exhausts me to do just that, so I lean against the bed.

Dante hears my scuffling and jumps up. "Hey, I've got you." He helps me to sit back on the edge of the bed. "Not feeling much better?"

"Worse. Of course you didn't ask me, but I really don't do well on medication—*any* medication. I seem to be allergic to most things. For some reason, I can handle booze, but that's it."

"Sorry." He grimaces. "Are you hungry? Aspirin?"

"I just said no meds, but maybe some toast and more water?"

"Be right back." Dante slips out of my room with a guilt-ridden backward glance.

I stare at my suitcase just inside the closet. The closet door is ajar. When the guys caught on to my spying ways, they must have searched my room. Did they discover Carmen's book in the hidden compartment? Is my money stash still concealed?

I roll off my bed and stumble to the closet, my legs still feeling like jelly. I unzip my suitcase and open the false backing. It's all still there. I remove the book and reseal the secret compartment. Crawling back to the bed, I'm

able to make it under the covers before Dante returns.

He brings me water *and* juice, as well as a stack of lightly toasted bread that comes with butter, peanut butter, and jam on the side.

I can't help myself, and a wide smile splits my face. I can't remember anyone bringing me breakfast in bed before.

Dante looks proud of himself. "I thought you might be hungrier than you realized." He sets the tray down over my lap. There's a flower as a garnish.

Handling it as if it might explode, I pick it up questioningly.

"The beginnings of an apology?" He shrugs.

"Hmm." I sip the water and then some juice.

"Freshly squeezed," he says.

"Greta?"

"Yeah. I told her you weren't feeling well."

"Understatement." I butter my toast. Since he's eyeing my food like he's hungry as well, I point to the toast. "Go for it."

Dante smears some peanut butter and jam on a piece of toast and sits down next to my feet. "Thanks."

"It's the least I can do," I say with a bit of humor.

He takes his last bite, and his phone chirps. Glancing at the message, he frowns. "I got a job from Karma. Should I have one of the guys stay with you?"

"No." I wave him off. "I could use some more rest. I can text the group chat if I need anything."

"Okay." Dante hesitates, then he squeezes my ankle through the blanket. "Seriously, let us know if you need anything. We all kind of feel bad about last night."

"Just *kind of* bad?"

Dante cringes. "Okay. A lot." He runs out of the room, throwing, "Goodbye," over his shoulder.

I eat two pieces of buttered toast and drain the juice.

Then I pull Carmen's book out from under my pillow. *The Karmic Cycle of Death*.

Flipping the pages quickly, I scan them to see if there are any loose papers or notes in the margins. There aren't any hidden notes, but I notice some pages are dog-eared and then flattened back out, leaving a crease behind.

I study these pages. The first marked page talks about karma and death

being close in nature, which is something I suspected. The book explains that karma and death are parts of the cycle of souls. We are reborn to learn lessons and grow as beings. When we don't learn, we come back to the physical realm, live another life, and see if we can learn it then. It often takes many attempts, and as we learn, we grow as a soul, we move on to bigger lessons, deeper pains, and more complex situations. We have to master each emotion, and only then will we rise up the karmic rank. When we reach enlightenment, we don't have to reincarnate in a human form anymore.

It would be nice not to come back to another painful life. I wonder where I am on this karmic path. I have experienced deep pains, and I'm Karma's agent, for goddess's sake!

Am I arrogant to think I have grown? I haven't overcome my pain, and I haven't learned how to deal with it. I've dealt with my pain by avoiding future pain.

Dammit, maybe Dante has a point. Even if it isn't with him, maybe I should open myself up and learn how to love without being broken.

I keep reading. It explains how we often pick the same situation repeatedly in the same life, choosing an abusive partner to fill the void of an abusive parent. Also, we don't overcome that karma until we choose not to be the victim—until we pick a partner who won't actively hurt us.

Have I chosen an abusive cycle? I suppose I have. My parents were screwed up, broken people, and I had a series of messed up people fall into my path. I tried to care for them, but it always blew up in my face.

Am *I* the problem? Did I set myself up? I can't take all the blame, but I often ignored warning signs. I wanted to believe people are good, but then I became tangled up with their problems. They might have had a good heart, but they were broken, and now, because of their abuse, am I broken too?

Do I have to stay that way?

No. I *don't*.

I keep reading.

I can break patterns, learn to have healthy boundaries, and heal myself.

I skip to the next section—*death is a transition not an ending*.

I witnessed this transition. I felt the welcoming peace on the other side of that portal. A huge part of me wants to go through, return to my true home, and rest, but I know it isn't time yet. I suck in a breath, thinking how close I came to taking my life. I wasn't afraid, but I think I would have been disappointed if I crossed over without finishing my lesson on Earth.

I continue reading.

We have more control over our death than we realize. Every choice we make, everything down to turning left or right, brings our end closer or pushes it further away. Subconsciously, we are dancing with death at every moment. It's closer than we want to acknowledge. If we called to death, it would greet us. We are in constant negotiations with it.

I stop, and my eyes widen with comprehension.

Can I call for Death? Would Death answer without killing me? Can I negotiate?

What would I negotiate for?

THE PAST

I hear Dante's car as he returns, and I haven't decided whether or not I'm going to tell him about my realization. It doesn't help that my head is still muddy from the drug, and I haven't left my bed.

I must decide quickly if I want to include them in my plan. I really can't say I trust any of them completely, nor can they really trust me.

However, I need to embrace hope and faith. I need to change my narrative. I have been stuck in a loop of distrust, and the untrustworthy have shown up to answer that call.

What if I believe in someone?

Dante knocks, and I call him inside.

"Hey." Dante offers me a smoothie. "It probably isn't the tastiest thing, but Greta told me it's packed with nutrients to help with almost any ailment."

"Thanks." I take a sip, and it's not that bad—green and pungent—but I probably wouldn't drink it again on purpose.

Dante hangs his head. "I'm sorry for the drugged interrogation. I'm sorry I've been pressuring you into something with me. It isn't cool."

My eyes widen a bit. "Why the change of heart?"

"You mean about us?" I nod, and he explains, "It isn't a change of heart, but I realized you might not like me like that."

I chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Dante appears confused.

"It never occurred to you before that someone wouldn't want to bone you?" I ask with a smile.

"Come on, it's not like that. I don't just want to fuck around, and I'm not *that* arrogant." He sits down on the edge of the bed next to my knees. "You

did nickname me Hot-as-sin in your mind. I took that as a sign of attraction.”

“That was supposed to be a private thought,” I mutter, then I turn serious, remembering the book I just read. I must change my tactics. I need to be honest with myself and Dante. “I think you are extremely attractive, but I believe you’re way too far out of my league on an attractiveness scale.” He goes to protests, but I stop him. “I’ve had some horrible relationships, if you could even call them that. Some guys have forced themselves on me, and I’ve had some hit me. The last one? I didn’t even want to be with him at all, but he threatened me because he wanted to use my powers for his own gain against my will. He kept me prisoner. Fortunately, I was smarter than him. Then I stole a shit ton of his money—mostly gained by use of my gifts, I might add—and I escaped. That’s when Karma found me.”

“Whoa.” Dante’s mouth drops open. “That’s why that thug came after you?”

“Yeah, mostly because of the money. Big Eddie wanted to send a message to anyone else who was thinking of screwing him over. He also wouldn’t want me to live and use my psychic abilities to help his competition.”

“That guy, Billy, had the whole gangster vibe.” Dante rubs his chin. “Organized crime?”

I nod. “Anyway, ever since I was a teenager, I had a string of bad relationships, where I’ve been cheated on, hit, berated, etc.” With a shrug, I add, “I’m damaged goods.”

“Not damaged, maybe wounded, but wounds can heal.” Dante touches my knee over the blankets. “As far as me being out of your league, I’m really not.”

“Well, only as far as *looks* go...” I smirk, letting a bit of levity slip into the atmosphere.

“Ha-ha.” He grins widely then pulls out his phone. “Look at this pic.”

I peer at a picture of Dante. He’s still attractive, but not in the blinding way he usually appears to me.

My brow crinkles in confusion. “You don’t look the same.”

“Evan took this picture of me.” Dante swipes his phone and shows me another pic of himself. “This is a pic you took of me when we were playing tourist on the job a week ago.”

He’s vibrant, and his eyes light up the screen. The pictures almost appear to be of two different people.

“What happened? Why are they so different?” I ask.

Dante holds up a finger for me to hold that thought, then he swipes the screen to show me another pic from that same day, when we made a karmic day of irritating obnoxious people.

I glance at the picture, but I don’t recognize the woman at first. I snatch the phone away from him. “Wait, is that *me*?”

“Through *my* lens.” Dante swipes to another pic. “But look, this is the picture Kurtis took of you. Call it the experimental control shot.”

I stare at it. I’m better looking than I remember from my time in the mirror. “I don’t understand.”

“I think cameras pick up how we see the person or object.” He frowns. “*And* I think from all the abuse you suffered, you have developed some body dysmorphia.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“When you have a distorted image of yourself.” Dante frames my hands with a light touch while I still clutch his phone.

I blink at the picture that shows a different image than the one I have of myself.

He gazes deeply into my soul. “You are beautiful, inside and out.”

I sit for a while, thinking about how many times someone told me I was nothing—that I was ugly and no one would ever really love me. It’s too many times to count. It cracked me, and I let their venom seep into me. Even when I told myself I wasn’t broken by this person or that person, I absorbed their negativity and their hate, and I let it tell me who I am.

I feel the sting of tears, and I let them fall. For the first time, I’m not crying because I’m sad or happy. I’m crying because someone has shown me the truth. Even if I wasn’t aesthetically attractive, someone sees beauty *in* me. The pictures show someone different from whom I have been brainwashed to believe myself to be.

Dante pulls me into a hug. I clutch his shoulders and hold on like I’m drowning.

I’m not ugly.

I’m not unlovable.

I’m not nothing.

What if I can have happiness and I am valuable? Could I love and be loved in return?

What other truths have I been convinced not to see?

Dante's voice cuts through my tears. "You're even pretty when you ugly cry."

I laugh and lightly whack him on the arm before pulling away from our embrace.

He helps me wipe my wet face.

"Thank you for helping me see that *I'm* way out of *your* league."

Dante's face drops, and I laugh hard. He quickly joins me.

When our laughter dies off, Dante captures my face in his palms, glancing back and forth between my lips and eyes. I know he's asking permission. My heart races, and my palms sweat. Am I ready for this leap of faith?

I lean forward and press a sweet kiss to his lips.

He returns it, then he deepens the kiss. My lips part, and he takes the invitation.

Dante kisses me with more urgency, and I run my hands up his torso to his broad shoulders, then down over his biceps. His hands slip from my face to caress my neck before he kisses a trail down my jawline, following his exploring fingers.

I fall backward onto the bed, and Dante crawls over me. He noses my shirt down my shoulder so he can nibble along my collarbone. His hand cups my breast, and he drags a thumb along my hardening nipple.

My body responds with undulations, trying to connect each point of my body with his.

He has yet to allow his body to fall onto mine, and I'm going mad with the lack of contact. I run my hands down to his waist and try to pull him on top of me, but he doesn't budge.

When I resort to grabbing his butt to try again, he laughs, which is adorable, but I'm in the mood for more.

"Tease," I say as a challenge.

"I wouldn't want you to think I'm *easy*," Dante says innocently as he gazes into my eyes, then he gives me a peck on my nose.

"Well, if you aren't easy, I hope you are at least *cheap*," I joke.

"Hmm." He thinks about that. "Well, I was hoping it would cost you your heart, which goes for about a million dollars on the black market."

I gulp at the idea of giving him my heart. Quietly, as if I'm not sure about confessing, I tell him, "But I think I've already lost it."

Dante raises his eyebrows, surprised by my confession, then he smiles

sweetly. He presses his ear to my chest. "I think I found it. Finders keepers." He looks into my eyes and promises, "But I'll keep it safe."

My heart swells with emotion, and I pull him into a kiss. His body finally presses down against mine, and his weight helps keep me grounded when I think I should be floating away.

I can't get close enough to him. Our clothes feel rough and heavy, and I arch into each of his touches. I move to unbutton his jeans, but he catches my hand, then he slows his kisses to a stop and smiles at me.

"What's wrong?" I ask, wondering briefly if I already messed this up.

"Nothing. Just enjoying this."

"Hey, *babe*," I tease. "I thought we were going for a full monty."

"Wow. You either run cold or extremely hot." Dante kisses the sensitive spot just under my ear.

"Just like any other faulty *plumbing*," I joke.

"Tessa, no more putting yourself down," he warns.

I huff. "Okay."

"Is it alright if we take this part slowly?" he asks, blinking bashfully.

I press my hips into his and feel his hardness even through clothing and blankets. Nothing is wrong with *his plumbing*. "So... nothing's wrong?"

"I want to be with you when you are clear-headed, and I want to make it special."

"Special?" I never had anyone want to wait and make something special when it was a sure thing. "You aren't changing your mind?"

"No." He looks downright upset at my asking such a thing. "I wouldn't do that, especially with everything we went through to get to this point."

"Never had to work for it before, huh?"

Dante shakes his head, grinning. "No, I have never *wanted* someone this much. Besides, you probably don't have enough energy to enjoy everything I want to do with you."

Damn, that just makes me want him more. "You're giving me a serious case of blue ovaries." I fake wince, grabbing my hip as if I'm in pain. "I don't know if I can survive it. I might die if I don't come." I feign a swoon.

He smirks. "I'm not falling for that line."

I check in with my body and find he's right. I'm still recovering from their interrogation drugs. "Ugh!" Then in a playfully seductive voice, I purr, "What do you intend to do with me when I'm better?"

"All kinds of naughty *and* nice things." He kisses me passionately for

another full minute, making my head spin in a good way. As he does, his hand accidentally bumps the book under my pillow. “What’s this?” he asks, but I give him credit, because he doesn’t automatically try to pull the book out to see what I’m hiding.

“I think I figured out what to do.” I pull out the book to show him the cover.

Dante’s eyes widen, then he glances around the room. “Maybe we should talk about this at the *club*? And get the guys too?”

THE PLAN

*A*lthough it isn't necessary, since his last healing session removed all the ill effects of the drugs, Dante helps me to the bathroom to freshen up. He stands guard outside, allowing me some privacy just in case anyone needs to use the facilities.

During the last healing session, my heart raced the entire time he had his hands on me. I'm only now regaining my normal heartbeat.

After I rinse in the shower, I dry off and wrap a towel around my body. I stare into the mirror. This isn't the same woman I stared at yesterday. It isn't just Dante's interest in me, I have shifted my perception of myself. The book also convinced me to let go of past traumas, and I want to change my patterns.

I open my third eye and look at myself again. I'm glowing. I have never glowed like this before.

I'm able to look past my imperfections and see them as part of me rather than flaws. The scars are part of my story—the good and bad. I have a couple good ones, like the one from riding a bike for the first time when I learned a value lesson—pay attention.

I need to pay attention now. That means listening to everything that's said in my meeting with the guys and paying attention to what feels right and wrong. I have to trust my instincts. All of this is too important to mess up. If Karma knows I'm working against her, she will retaliate. She might allow my past to catch up to me again, and I might not survive this time.

I still have no guarantee I can trust the guys, but in life, there are no absolutes. They could switch teams at any point.

And Dante? Well, I need to move beyond my past. I like him, and he

likes me. If I don't begin to put myself out there and see what becomes of us, then all my abusers have won. Maybe we will both realize we just need each other for today, but tomorrow might be different.

Karma is coming soon, and dread washes over me at the thought. We might not have a chance at much happiness anyway. It's the same even without our particular situation. Life is fleeting, and love is complicated.

Goddess, love? Do I love Dante? I won't know until I allow myself to feel. However, I will regret it if Karma harms Dante or any of them because of me.

I shake off my worries. I have to keep moving forward. I can only be certain of my uncertainties, so I brush my teeth and untangle my wet hair.

Opening the door, Dante steps out of the way and bows. "All clear, my queen."

"I'm glad you recognize that I'm no princess."

"I would never call you that!" He waves the idea off like a pesky gnat. "Perish the thought!"

Kurtis peeks his head out of his room. "I wouldn't either. Although, I *will* still call you precious, precious."

As I walk by, I palm his entire face. "Shush now."

Kurtis knocks my hand away. "Well, you might not like the other names I could call you."

"I don't think you'd like what I'd do if I don't like them." I wink with just a touch of deviousness.

He looks a bit worried about our banter. "Gulp! Noted."

"I'll be ready in five." I slip into my room to change, leaving Dante to chat with Kurtis.



No one is home, so we all walk over to the warded circle in the next lot together. Dante appears overly cautious about my ability to walk.

I bat his hand away. "I'm mostly recovered."

Once we enter the circle, Evan says, "I hope we can all trust each other now."

"I do too," I agree.

Kurtis frowns. "So why did you call this meeting? To blast our asses for

the crap we pulled last night?”

“I suppose that’s still on the table, but no, we need to open ourselves up to the belief that we are all being honest. I had a revelation and wanted to run it by you to make sure I’m not completely out of my mind.”

“We probably aren’t your best gauges of insanity.” Kurtis points at himself and the guys.

“Probably not, but you’re all I have at the moment.”

Kurtis shrugs. “I’m nothing if not convenient.”

Evan rolls his eyes. “Can we get to the big revelation, which might change our lives or kill us?”

I hand Evan the book from Carmen’s shop. “It talks about a lot of stuff, and I haven’t read it all, but I think we should contact Death.”

“Why would we do that?” Evan narrows his eyes.

“And how?” Dante asks.

I shake my head. “I should talk to Death and ask him some questions.”

“Very sexist of you to think it’s a dude,” Kurtis says snottily.

“Good point.” I smile. “Ask *them* some questions.”

“What kind of questions?” Evan flips through the book.

“Well, seeing as Karma is an offshoot of Death, maybe *they* would know how to get out of our contract.”

“*If* we can get out of our contract.” Evan sounds hopeless.

“Dying might be the only way out,” Dante adds solemnly.

“I considered that,” I say, “I’ll discover the consequences first, *before* I mention you three.”

“No!” Dante yells. “You can’t risk yourself like that.”

I reach out and hold his hand. “Karma is coming within a week, which probably means one of us is being *sent* away, never to be heard from again. It’s most likely me.”

“We don’t know that,” Dante argues, but when I say it’s going to be me, I feel the ring of truth inside the words.

“I think it is, but even if it’s not me now, it will be one of us at some point.”

“She should do it,” Kurtis states firmly.

“Why are you jumping on board with her now?” Dante snaps.

“Because none of us are happy.” Kurtis sighs. “I kind of hope it *is* Death coming for me next, but if there is some way out...”

“Then I’ll find it,” I say with a certainty that I don’t truly feel.

“There’s still the issue of making contact,” Evan says, ever the leader. “Do you know how to do that?”

“I have some ideas. The first thing to try is prayer.”

“*Prayer?*” Dante repeats with more than a little doubt.

“Well, if you want to get a god’s attention, it’s rumored to be an old standby.” I shrug. “At least it’s a first step.”

“But what if you don’t get his—*their* attention?” Dante asks.

“I will have to take more drastic measures,” I whisper.

Dante understands what I mean, his fists pumping at his side in frustration. “No.”

“What?” Kurtis asks.

Evan answers, “She means to court Death.”

“Huh?” Kurtis asks, then catches on. “Oh... shit, no. There’s no guarantee you will survive a near-death experience. I mean, with my death, you were the only one there, right? I didn’t see Death, did you?”

“Was it only me here though?” I frown. “I can’t be sure I was the only soul with you. I was kind of panicking when I killed you.”

“Enough.” Evan’s eyes flare with fear. “I don’t want to hear about you trying to provoke Death to get them to show up. Try a prayer, and let’s pray that’s enough for Death to meet with you.”

I nod, but I don’t promise to stop at prayer if that fails. The only problem is, where should I pray? If I pray inside my warded circle, it’s unlikely Death will hear me, but if I pray outside of the circle, Karma might.

I decide a silent prayer away from her estate is my best shot.

Evan glances at his watch. “Time for work.”



All four of us drive into town in Dante’s SUV. I spend most of my time staring out the passenger window, with the occasional glance to check on Dante while he white-knuckle grips the steering wheel.

I reach out and stroke his bulging bicep. “It’s going to be okay. We will figure it all out, and if not, life still goes on or it doesn’t.”

“Quoting my words back to me isn’t helping.”

“But it’s true.” I smile.

Dante takes in a deep breath. “Yeah, but if something goes wrong... I

don't want to wait a lifetime to find you again."

My eye swell with his sad words. How have we arrived here? Have we waited a lifetime or lifetimes to find each other in this life?

Kurtis mocks Dante's sadness and melodramatically says, "Yes, precious, I've waited so long for you to come along and turn my life to utter chaos."

I chuckle despite myself. "You haven't seen nothing yet."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Kurtis mutters.

Dante pulls into a massive parking lot. He jumps out of the car and paces back and forth. We are at the large shopping mall, complete with major stores. We could get lost in here for days, and there are plenty of assholes ripe for their dose of instant karma.

Evan looks at Kurtis. "Lay off him a bit, okay?"

"Whatever. We are all doomed." Kurtis hops out and heads straight for the entrance.

I let my head fall back onto the headrest and then look at Evan out of the corner of my eye. "He's not wrong."

"No, he's not." Evan rubs his scruffy stubble, which is unusual for him to have. "But we don't need to be reminded of it."

I get out of the car and slam the door harder than I mean to.

Dante snaps his gaze to me. "You okay?"

"Just tense." I'm worried I'll mess everything up with what I'm about to do.

Dante snatches my hand for us to walk into the mall together. It's such a mundane, normal relationship thing to do, and it feels... odd. He smiles down at me and squeezes my hand affectionately.

If I brush aside everything else going on, this could be a nice outing with my sweetheart, but the job looms in the back of our minds.

Evan passes us. "I'll catch up with Kurtis. Text us in an hour to give me an update on your location."

I left my phone in the car. The move is strategic. If I make contact with Death, then I don't want my phone to pick up any compromising conversations. Spyware is a real thing, and I'm certain Karma uses some form of it to pick her victims. Why not use it to keep tabs on her agents?

We enter the mall through the food court, and my senses are assaulted. I enjoy pizza, Chinese food, burgers, fried chicken, saucy burritos, and cinnamon rolls, just not all at once. The conflicting aromas make me speed up to a power walking pace. Dante, with his long legs, is even having a hard

time keeping up.

“Why are we racing?” he asks.

“I guess I’m sensitive to all the smells.”

“I guess I don’t have to worry about enduring a certain bath shop when dating you.”

“Ugh.” I crinkle my nose. “You’re safe with me.”

Dante pulls me into an embrace. “And you’re safe with me.”

I enjoy the hug for a moment, then ask, “Did you get any specific targets for the mall?”

“Yeah. In about an hour, we have to come back here.”

“Lovely.” I flatten my lips in distaste.

“Until then, it’s a free-for-all.”

We make our way around the mall. Since he has more experience, Dante’s better at this whole gig. He watches as a jerk almost knocks an old lady down the escalator in his rush. Dante catches the man’s shoelace in the grate, and the man loses his mind when he panics, thinking that he’s going to be swallowed whole by the machine. After a war with his laces and a bit of damage to his shoe, the escalator grinds to a halt, and the man has to be rescued by the mall maintenance crew.

Dante walks by, and casually, so the jerk can overhear, says, “Serves him right for almost hurting that older woman. Instant karma!”

I glance back and see shame written on the man’s face.

We haven’t run into Kurtis or Evan yet as we make our circuit. However, a horde of mommies with their strollers parade by us. I liken it to a herd of stampeding buffalo.

“You ever want kids?” Dante asks.

“Never felt drawn to the idea,” I confess.

“Me neither. I always worried I would pass on my parents’ crap to my kids.”

“Ditto.” Not that we are probably allowed to have kids being agents, but it’s nice that we are on the same page.

We create a few more acts of karma with spilled drinks and thwarting shoplifters.

Dante checks his phone. “We should make our way over to the food court.”

“I’ll meet you there. I need to use the bathroom.” I point to the conveniently located facilities.

“Don’t ditch me.” He kisses me as he rushes to locate our next mark.

“As if I could!” I say to his retreating backside. I smile, watching his fine assets in his jeans.

I hurry into the bathroom and make sure no one is inside any of the stalls. All clear. I press my hands together in a prayer position. Mentally, I call for the being, the god of death, to hear my call, and send the message that I want to negotiate with them. For good measure, I add that I’m an agent for Karma, and I have questions that might concern them.

I splash some water on my face and then hurry to catch up with Dante, hoping this is a good idea.

I find him eyeing a heavysset man eating a burger. His uniform suggests he’s a mall janitor.

“What’s the sitch?” I ask.

He looks confused. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen any sign of him behaving poorly.”

A school-aged girl walks by the janitor’s table, and a stack of hundred-dollar bills drops out of her pocket.

“Oh, here it is,” Dante says hopefully.

Instead of pocketing the hefty sum, the man calls the girl back and hands her the money.

Dante and I look at each other, trying to understand what to do next, but then we hear a cough. The man’s choking, and his face turns red, quickly turning blue.

“What do we do?” I ask, gripping Dante’s hand.

“Good karma?” He flicks his finger, and the man spits out the offending bite of food.

A few people wander over to check on the man. Dante and I blink, and then there’s a woman standing in front of me, but she’s too close.

“Why did you do that?” she asks, irritation dripping off her.

Dante furrows his brow and tries to step between me and the woman.

She turns her glare on him. “That wasn’t *your* target, *insta-karma agent*,” she says, her voice holding distaste, but she has a bubbly attitude.

“Are you Death?” I ask. Maybe my prayer worked.

“An agent, a psychopomp, an angel, a reaper... We go by many names.”

She isn’t what I was expecting for an agent of death at all. The reaper looks to be no more than twenty years old, wearing a tight, sparkly pink top, a white and pink plaid schoolgirl miniskirt, white Doc Martens, and her

blonde hair in frigging pigtails. She's as cute as a button, if I'm being honest.
Glamour Reaper Barbie.

I glance at Dante. "Give us a minute?"

He grimaces and walks away, but he still stays within view.

"Hi. I'm Tessa. What's your name?"

She glances around as if she shouldn't tell me. "Megan."

"Megan, I need to talk to your boss," I inform the bedazzled agent. She appears to be nonthreatening, but anyone with any instinct could feel her power.

She bites her lip and studies me. "I don't know why your *kind* would bother him."

Him... Good to know. I'll have to razz Kurtis later.

"Look at me with your sight." I ask, "I'm not your average karma agent, am I?"

She narrows her eyes and arches a perfectly manicured eyebrow after registering something about me.

"Yeah, so what?" she asks, popping pink bubblegum.

"You obviously don't think much of Karma or her agents." I sigh. "Here's the deal... I want to talk to Death about my placement. Was I supposed to be one of you?"

She laughs. "You don't know a single thing, do you?"

"Nope. I will admit full ignorance. Please enlighten me," I say with complete openness.

"Not my place. I will convey your request, but don't expect a response."

"Got it." I tilt my head toward the janitor. "Was that man your target?"

She nods. "Karma needs to watch herself."

"Why would she go after your targets?" I muse. "This isn't the only occasion. What's her game?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" The adorable death agent smirks and disappears.

Dante rushes to my side. "What happened?"

I tap the phone in his pocket and shake my head, then I mouth, "Later."

He frowns but lets it go for now, then he texts Evan and Kurtis.

Dante: Job done. Meet at the car.

We beat the guys to the car, and we both place our phones outside where the windshield meets the hood.

After Dante gets in the SUV, he turns to me. “What happened?”

“I asked to speak with the boss.”

“Shit.” He rubs his mouth. “I didn’t think you would be able to get a hold of Death.”

“So far, just a death agent.”

His concern is starting to worry me.

“Why are you this worked up?” I ask. “I thought you knew the score?”

“I do. I can still be worried.” Dante catches me studying him and shakes his head. “I’m on your side. It’s just...” He takes my hand and places it in his lap. “What if Death takes you from me? We just got to the point where you will give me a chance.”

I take in a deep breath. Our *relationship* is great for my personal growth and healing, but it’s making it hard to deal with the reality that we might not have a future. “I appreciate what you’re saying, but I suggest we wait on our relationship and see what Karma has in store for me.”

“No, we can’t stop living.” Dante glances up and sees the guys approaching. “And it’s not that I don’t trust Evan and Kurtis, but you should keep this development to yourself... just until you know its results.”

I bite my lip. I suppose the more people who know about my plan, the easier it will be to get caught.

I nod as the guys get in. Dante pops out and grabs our phones from the hood.

Evan notes the precaution and then asks, “Everything alright?”

“Yeah. Job is done,” Dante answers curtly. “And we couldn’t take any more of the food court.”

All technically true, but I worry why he suddenly feels the need to shut the guys out.

THE HOTEL

*A*fter we have lunch at a *real* restaurant, not at a sad mall food court, we head back to the barracks. I peel off from the group to read my book in my bedroom. I'm hoping there are a few more gems for me to gain some insight. Fortunately, my cat nap and my Karma-enhanced self-healing kicks in, so I'm feeling like my usual self.

An hour later, Dante knocks on my door. He hovers shyly near the entrance once he slips inside. "Uh... I..."

"Dante?" I sit up. He's never this bashful.

"I thought you and I could spend the night alone. I booked a room at a nice hotel."

"Presumptuous." I cross my arms. "Maybe you missed your sex window earlier when you gave me blue ovaries."

He smirks, hearing my playful tone. "Did I?"

"Well, I might need some convincing to give you another opportunity."

Dante stalks across the room, and my pulse thumps wildly. His eyes are as hypnotic as a jaguar's as he homes in on his prey.

I scramble up against my headboard and grab my pillow.

Dante pounces, his legs landing on either side of mine, his arms bracketing my sides.

My body flushes with the blazing heat of an inferno—Dante's inferno. Yeah, I went there.

He leans in to capture my lips, and I'm rewarded with the sweet balance of his seductive yet rough kiss.

"Okay, damn. You convinced me," I pant.

He waggles his eyebrows. "So sexy times are back on the table?"

“Ha-ha.” I inhale his sandalwood and cloves scent and moan. He hasn’t even really touched me except for a kiss, and I’m ready to explode.

“So... do you want to pack an overnight bag?” he asks.

I nod vigorously. “Now?”

“Why not?”

Yeah, why not? We are both adults and Karma doesn’t forbid interpersonal relations with her employees.



Dante and I run into Evan on our way out.

He eyes our bags and then shakes his head. “Have fun.”

“Plan on it. Oh, do you have any handcuffs we can borrow?” I taunt.

“I don’t loan them out. If you are wearing them, it’s because I’m putting them on you, sweetheart.” He winks and saunters away.

“Damn, that turned me on.” Dante chuckles. “And his swagger?”

“On fire.” I wave my hand as if I’ve been burned.

I love that I can be open with Dante like this. So many of the guys I dated were overbearing, jealous types who couldn’t handle this sort of banter.



We check into an upscale hotel. I don’t know why I expected a seedy motel. Maybe it’s because even though we’re allowed to be intimate, it still feels a bit illicit, like we are breaking some ethical rules. I suppose I still also don’t expect someone to spend good money on me.

As we enter our room, Dante immediately takes our phones and locks them in the closet safe.

While he does that, my mouth drops open at the sight of the beautifully furnished suite. Dozens of roses in vases are placed all around the room, some petals are even sprinkled on the luxurious bedspread, and electric candles flicker on the nightstands and dresser.

I see a card in the closest bouquet, and I expect it to be an *enjoy your stay* sentiment from management, but no, it’s a note from Dante. I glance up at him before opening the tiny envelope. “Did you do all this for me?”

His chest puffs out in pride that he has delighted me. “I came by earlier

and got it ready.”

I begin to freak out. I’ve never had anyone try this hard to make me happy. My heart feels like it’s going to rupture, and I’m going to drown.

What if *I* let *him* down and not the other way around?

Dante sees my panic and races to my side. “Tessa, we take it one day, one night, and one moment at a time. Understand that you aren’t under any obligation to do anything with me tonight or ever. I just wanted a special night alone with you in case...”

“In case this is our last chance?” I hang my head and fiddle with the card.

“Enough negative talk,” Dante announces and encourages me to open the envelope with a nod.

I open the card and read the inside.

My Tessa — I waited a long time for someone to make me feel the way I do with you. I recognized you the first moment we met, when you looked up into my eyes. My soul said, “There you are,” and you stole my heart.

Holy shiitake mushroom. This is more than I bargained for. How can someone like him want me this much?

I think back to the moment I looked into his eyes. I felt the spark of recognition too, although I have done everything in my vast powers of denial to ignore our connection or trivialize it.

In my defense, I had just been approached by a goddess and attacked by Billy the hitman. I wasn’t looking for love or a connection at that moment.

“You are awfully quiet.” Dante rubs the back of his neck nervously.

My eyes widen. I’ve been knocked speechless. “It’s... I...” I take a breath and center myself. “I was thinking about how I recognized you too. I... It kind of scares me though. What if I mess it all up?”

“If we are both truly honest with ourselves and with each other, can we mess it up?” he asks.

“I guess it makes it harder to,” I agree.

Dante pulls me closer and kisses my temple. “If this *is* all too much, we can just watch TV and order room service.”

I tilt my head back and slide my hands around his neck, drawing my fingers through his silky black hair.

Dante leans down and claims my lips, and I gasp as my body awakens to

his grazing touches down my curves. My knees are weak as he shows me what kissing is supposed to be like.

All the fools I kissed before were bumbling boors.

My blood is on fire, and it lights up all my erogenous zones. I'm panting, and we haven't even made it to the bed.

Holy big O, Batman.

"Batman?" Dante asks.

I giggle, which is so unlike me. "Shit, did I say that out loud?"

"Yeah. It was cute," he says in a deep, gravelly voice, mimicking the masked vigilante.

My ovaries explode. "I can safely say that you rev my batmobile," I say breathlessly.

He grinds his hips into me, and his hardness pokes my stomach. "Same here."

I slowly unbutton his shirt and push it off his shoulders. I need to pace myself, or I might spontaneously combust.

My hands skim the hard planes of his chiseled chest and the contours of his powerful arms.

He scoops my shirt over my head and tosses it on a chair. Then his fingers follow the line of my bra, from straps to cleavage, causing goosebumps to appear and my nipples to harden.

He kicks off his slip-on shoes. I unbuckle his belt and unbutton his jeans, then he shoves them down and tosses his clothes onto the chair too.

I take a moment to appreciate the pronounced bulge in his underwear, licking my lips and tugging on his waistband.

"Hey, you have more clothes on than I do," he complains.

I glance at my offending pants before I push them down my curvy legs and step out of them.

Dante has seen me in far less. He's seen me naked. He even held me all night while I was nude, however, I never felt so exposed before now. My soul is bared for him to see.

He gazes at me with longing, like a starved man desperate for forbidden fruit.

Do I have that same look on my face?

His hands cradle my head, and he kisses me again, cherishing me and this moment. It's sweet and painful and expansive and vulnerable.

He trails his kisses down my neck and along the tops of my breasts where

the bra cups stop.

“Please, take it off.” I arch my back.

Dante swiftly unhooks my bra and tosses it aside. He takes a nipple into his mouth and sucks, cupping my ass with his hands.

I groan, needing more, running my hand along his hardness.

He moans in my ear. “You will be the death of me.”

“As long as it’s a happy ending.” I chuckle.

Dante picks me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist. I’m pressed against his manhood with only our underwear between us.

He throws the covers back and settles me down on the bed. I let my legs fall open, and he takes the invitation, leaving a trail of nibbles and kisses from my ankle to my hip.

I squirm when he hovers over my underwear, the only thing left to remove on my body. His fingers loop under the strip of elastic before sweeping them off.

There’s a twinge of self-doubt as Dante takes a moment to gaze at my nakedness, but he quickly pushes my worries aside with his next words, “Goddess, you’re beautiful.”

He dips down, and his tongue swipes through my center.

I believe the sound I make in response isn’t quite human. His mouth makes me feel things I never have before as he works my pussy, skillfully paying attention to my every gasp and twitch.

I have no doubt his goal tonight is to satisfy my every desire.

I whimper. “I’m going to catch fire if you keep that up.”

“As long as I can burn with you,” he says, and then he takes me over the edge.

His thick fingers sink into me and my breath hitches with the stretch. Damn, it’s been a while.

“Come on my tongue, sweetheart.” He encourages, “I want to feel your cunt clamping down on my fingers, then I want it milking my cock next.”

“Fuck, Dante,” I hiss.

“That’s it, babe, give it to me. I need to taste your pleasure.”

I shudder with my release, crying out his name. I swear I’m having an out-of-body experience.

When I return to my body, I’m hungry for more, and I glance down at his still covered cock. “Off,” I order.

“Yes, ma’am.” He salutes and drops his underwear, and then he salutes

me with his hard, thick member.

Taking a moment to appreciate his body, I say, “I don’t think I’ve ever been with someone so fucking gorgeous.”

I reach out to touch him, and he presses into my hand. I give him a few strokes, and slide his slippery precum over the head and he bucks into my grasp. I want to see him come undone.

“I feel the same way about you. You’re too gorgeous for words.” He leans over my body and gives me a kiss. His cock is hot and silky as he rubs it over my stomach. I can’t wait to feel him inside me. “You’re a fantasy come true,” he whispers over my lips.

I don’t argue with him. I take it as a good sign that I’m accepting myself for the first time.

“I need you,” he says huskily.

I need him too, more than he knows.

He pulls out a condom from the side table.

“I’m on birth control,” I say. “And I’m clear.”

“I am too, but I haven’t had sex with anyone in two years. I’m a bit worried I won’t last a minute inside you bareback.”

“What? You haven’t been with anyone in two years?” I ask in shock.

“I suppose I’ve been waiting for you.” He kisses me again.

Sure, it sounds like a line, but I sense the truth in his words. He has been waiting for something more than a one-night stand.

Dante looks at the condom. “You sure?”

I nod, and he tosses it back on the side table.

Nestling between my legs, he enters me slowly—torturously slow. The entire time, he holds my gaze, leaving me nowhere to hide. He is *with* me. I’ve never had anyone be so present.

It feels like coming home, a *real* home, and a safe place. I want to cry.

Once Dante is fully seated inside me, he begins to move with precision and care. Studying my reactions, he ensures I enjoy every second and every inch.

I kiss him roughly, then gently tell him, “You know, I won’t break.”

“I know, but I’m worried I might.” Despite his words, Dante takes the cue and builds the momentum and intensity.

Each time his hips meet mine, he grinds to create perfect friction on my clit. He guides one of my breasts up to his mouth and sucks and nips my rock hard nipple. Sliding his hand down, he adds extra stimulation to my clit,

rocketing me higher.

I'm grabbing onto his shoulders, digging my nails into his skin and holding on for my life. With each thrust, I meet his hips with mine, teetering on the edge of passing out.

His breathing comes out ragged, and I sense that he's close. "You want to come on my cock?" he asks.

"Yes, please." I nod.

"You want my hot cum in your pretty pussy?"

"Yes, Dante, I need it," I beg.

"Goddess, you're perfect." He rams into me and shatters my world. "Come, my love."

I shout as I arch off the bed and I'm thrown into the cosmos. My pussy clamps down on his thick cock, milking him dry.

"Tessa!" he cries out, burying his face in my neck.

We both shudder with our bliss.

He collapses on top of me, being careful not to crush me with his larger frame. "Tessa?" he murmurs into my hair.

I draw little circles over his back with my fingers. "Hmm?"

"I know you aren't ready to hear this, but I want to confess three words to you." He lifts himself enough to look me in the eye.

Strangely, I don't have the panicking sensation I would normally have with what he's hinting at, but I joke anyway, "Is it, going to shower?"

He grins. "Nope."

"Holy big O, Batman?" I guess again. "No, wait, that's four words."

He kisses me to get me to stop talking.

"Tessa, I love you." Dante searches my face for a clue as to how I will react.

He's still inside me, and I don't want him to leave. I realize I have never made love before.

"Dante..." I pause for dramatic effect. "*I know.*"

He shakes his head and chuckles at my quoting one of the best sci-fi movie lines in history.

I love that he doesn't get mad that I didn't say it back. He's being so vulnerable and accepting of my limits, which makes me feel comfortable enough to say it back. "I love you too."

His mouth crashes down on mine, and I forget what year it is. I barely remember my own name when I come up for air.

His grin lights up my entire field of vision. “Maybe we should check out the shower?”



We thoroughly wash each other down in the shower.

When we’re both freshly towel dried, he asks, “Room service?”

We pick out some items and snuggle into the bed in our fluffy robes while we wait for our food.

Dante has a chagrined look on his face. “I intended to eat *before* I jumped you.”

“I jumped you,” I correct him.

“Jumped each other?” he amends.

I kiss him on the nose. “I think I prefer to eat after anyway.”

“Good, because I worked up an appetite trying to hold back and last more than two seconds inside your delicious pussy.”

“Has it really been years since you’ve been with anyone?” I ask skeptically.

Dante blushes. “Yeah. Since I made the mistake of hooking up with Chara.”

“Did you get a room for her too?” I ask, more curious than jealous.

“What?” He laughs. “You are the first person who I have done anything like this for.”

“Oh.” I squeeze him in a tight hug. “You are the first person who really cared to do anything like this for me or make sure I enjoyed it.”

“Well, at least we have that as a first, and... I’ve never told anyone I loved them before,” he confesses.

“Really?” I sit up. “Me either! Even when I thought I was into someone, I didn’t say it.”

Dante claims my lips again, like a man possessed. Wow, this guy can kiss.

We settle back into the bed and talk about our lives before becoming Karma’s agents.

“You *actually* lived on the streets?” he asks.

“Yeah. I couch surfed when I could with acquaintances, but that’s dangerous too. I had a few guys who wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Dante curses and pulls me tightly against his chest. “I wish I could have been there for you then.”

“We were different people.” I shrug. “You were from an upper-middle-class family. You wouldn’t have even noticed me, or if you did, you probably would have thought I was a delinquent. To be honest, I was.”

“Maybe I would have.” He gazes at me. “But I would like to think I would have *seen* you.”

“Perhaps. Thankfully, Carmen saw me. She helped me get a skill set with reading tarot cards and develop my *sight*. I got gigs for parties and at festivals, making a *legal* income. Carmen was the first and only person to tell me I was worth anything. If it wasn’t for her, I might not have made it to my twenties.”

“Damn. Your parents weren’t there for you at all?” he asks.

“I don’t want to go too deeply into it, but they were selfish, and I was always either an afterthought or a nuisance.”

“My parents pretended to be good people, but they weren’t loving. My dad was an outright dick to me, but everyone thought he was great. My mom never defended me. I’m happy to hear Carmen helped you.” Dante squeezes me, and I soak up all the love and compassion he offers me.

“She was the only good thing to happen to me on the streets,” I say, remembering how rough it was to be on my own.

“You don’t know what happened to her now?” Dante asks, concern for my mentor in his voice.

“No, but maybe I should check her shop again,” I suggest. “If she’s okay, she’s going to be pissed at me for breaking her window.”

There’s a knock on our door when the food arrives.

Dante suggests sitting at the bistro table on the balcony to eat. The ocean is lit up by the moon and city lights. The place he’s picked for us is off the charts romantic. Who am I kidding? The whole evening has been.

We tell each other funny stories from our pasts and compare favorite movies.

Then Dante asks, “I hate to turn the night into something heavy, but I was wondering if you could elaborate when you mentioned before that you killed someone.”

I’ve been waiting for this question since I let it slip, and since I’m feeling wide open emotionally, I decide I might as well tell him and get it over with. “It was my mom.”

His eyes widen, but he lets me tell the story at my own pace, waiting patiently for me to continue.

“I was sixteen. My mom and dad fought a lot... not just with words. One night, I was tired of the constant fighting and stepped between them. My father hit me so hard I saw stars, and he gave me a concussion. It wasn't the first time he hit me, but I had enough of them. When I finally got to my feet, I snuck off to my room while they continued their fight. I packed a bag, stole some cash from their wallets, and ran off.”

I take a breath, because this is the part that crushes me. “From what I heard in reports and from my father, my mom realized I was gone in the middle of the night. She got in the car to search for me and... she died in a car accident. Head-on collision.”

Dante doesn't offer me hollow words of condolence. He just pulls me into his lap and wraps his arms around me. I cry tears I've held back for years.

“I was caught by the cops a few days later. When they brought me back home, my father beat me like never before. I almost died, but I ran out into the yard. When the neighbors realized how bad off I was, they called the cops. I was admitted to the hospital for my injuries, and my dad was arrested. I worried he was going to finish me off when he made bail, so just before I was released, I escaped and lived on the streets for a few years.”

“*That's* why you lived on the streets?” Dante asks.

“Yeah.” I shrug off that huge part of my life. “My mom... If I didn't run off, she would be alive.”

“No. It wasn't your fault,” he says with the kind of confidence that stops people in their mental loop.

“But—”

“They were the adults.” Dante brushes the tears from my cheeks. “Being in an abusive home... It isn't ever safe. You were just trying to find somewhere safe to exist.”

I nod, but I still feel guilt for causing her death.

“Tessa, it seems that the odds were heavily stacked against you for success,” Dante says thoughtfully. “Your parents didn't create a safe environment, you did what you had to for your survival, your gifts were used against your will to bring in money for shady businessmen, and now, Karma took advantage of your circumstances—or perhaps even had a hand in making them.”

My skin crawls with the truth in his words. Sure, a lot of the pain in my

life can't be blamed on anyone else, but there have been far too many strange incidents that caused me to fall deeper into trouble no matter how I tried to avoid it. Even when I tried to go legit, something always went terribly wrong. Now that I know about the gods' power and the direct involvement of their agents, I suspect some of my life has been manipulated.

Can I reclaim my life?

Exhausted and content after hours of talking and kissing, we eventually fall asleep in each other's arms.

DEATH

I open my eyes with full awareness that someone besides Dante and myself is in the hotel room. Their presence is overpowering. I'm certain this intense, heavy energy woke me from a deep sleep.

I glance over at Dante, but he doesn't move at all. Not even a breath. Is he dead, or has time stopped?

Oh shit! I bolt upright and cast my gaze around the dark room.

Death stands at the end of the bed, looming over me. He has to be eight feet tall, and he's decked out with classic grim reaper apparel—a hood shadows his face, an oversized robe hints at a skeletal hand that holds his scythe, and there's an hour glass tied to his belt. The device is halfway poured through, except the sand isn't flowing now.

I press my fingers to Dante's neck. He's warm to the touch, but there's no pulse or breath.

"We are frozen in time," Death says. "Do not concern yourself with him."

"You came," I choke out.

"Yes, even though it was ostentatious of you to summon *me*." His voice sounds hollow *and* expansive at the same time. He seems to suck up all the air in the spacious room.

"I apologize if I offended you." I pull the covers close, concealing my naked breasts. "But I didn't know what else to do."

"Tessa Maat, what do you want from me?" he asks without emotion.

"I hoped for answers to what I am, and what I can do about my future."

He stands there silent for a moment. Will he answer me?

"Your name, Tessa," he says, "means harvester, which also means *reaper*."

My eyes lock onto his scythe.

“Yes.” I sense a creepy grin stretch over his face, even if he doesn’t really have one. “Psychopomp, death doula, shinigami, angel of death, spirit guide, ankou. Santa Muerte, death agent... However, the most accurate classification for you is the concept of Yama from Hindu scriptures.”

Remembering Carmen’s book, I whisper, “The death king of karmic justice.”

“Good. You have been studying.” I almost hear the praise in his reserved voice. “Yes, King Yama was real. You are his direct descendant. Legend says he was the first man to die. He became the guardian, judge, and ruler of the dead within his culture.”

“That’s how I can *do* what I do?”

“Yes. You can deliver souls to the afterlife and pull them back if you wish it,” Death says. “You are naturally gifted with my agents’ abilities.”

I shiver and look around nervously, expecting Karma to show up and catch me.

“You need not fear anyone hearing our conversation, not even Instant Karma can eavesdrop on us.”

“Do you know what she wants from me?”

Death sighs. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a wearier sound.

“That one has big ambitions. She encroaches on my territory and souls far too often, especially as of late. As her name grows in recognition, she grows in power. She pushes her will and forces people like you and your lover to harm others. Your natural ability will strengthen her power by enacting the zenith of instant karma—death.”

“She wants me to *kill* people? Someone who wasn’t meant to die yet?”

His silence is my answer.

“Did she set up my life so I had to work for her?”

“You know the answer to that. She has been using such tactics for quite a long time.” He nods toward Dante.

I glance at my love, wondering how he has been set up to work for Karma. I can only imagine what a “long time” is for Death. I push on for more answers. “Should I have been your agent instead?”

“There was a possibility for that outcome. However, I do not meddle with the Fates’ realm. Well, not in *that* context.” He sounds somewhat amused with himself.

So the Fates are entities too. *Great*. How many supernatural beings are

there?

“What happens to Karma’s agents?” I prompt. “I heard they disappear.”

“Karma drains them completely.”

“What?” I breathe deeply to stay calm. “She *drains* our souls?”

“In the end, and every day you work for her.”

“Is there any way for me to break my contract?” I ask desperately.

“Seeing as she coerced you into it?” Death tilts his head in thought.

“Maybe, but you probably won’t like what happens.”

“What happens?”

“I will claim you.”

“Delivering my soul to the afterlife or to work for you?” That makes a big difference.

“I would offer someone like you a choice.”

“What about Dante?” I stroke his bare shoulder, gazing at him and worrying about our future. “What about our teammates?”

Death takes a moment to answer. “Are you asking for this one to be your partner?”

“Only if he wants it too,” I say.

Death’s energy wraps around Dante’s frozen form as if weighing his soul. “He was not meant to be one of my agents.” He pauses for a moment, as if thinking. “However, considering your request, before I could consider this one worthy of my work, he must face his shadow side.”

“What about *my* shadow side?”

“You have had nothing but shadow, all while keeping a grasp on your light. You continuously fight against the full force of humanity’s darkness. With this one’s encouragement, you are now fully embracing your light as well as your dark. A death agent must be in balance. However, this one in your bed is not balanced. The most devastating reason he’s not ready is because his heart and soul have suffered from performing his acts for Instant Karma.”

“Doing our karma jobs ruins our souls?”

“Instant Karma is not a proper goddess. She abuses your souls to power herself.”

“You don’t think he can heal and balance himself?”

“All human souls can heal, given enough incentive and time.” Death’s hooded gaze turns toward me again. “Tessa, do you want someone who never puts someone else before himself?”

“Never?” I frown. “That seems like a blanket statement. He has shown me kindness and put my needs first.”

“What would you do for him in return?” Death asks.

That feels like a loaded question, and coming from Death, that’s not good.

I bite my lip as I think, then say, “I would do what someone does for the one they love.”

Death nods slowly. “Good answer. You have grown much since your youth.”

My youth? Has Death taken a particular interest in me too?

I blink, and Death vanishes. Dante exhales, indicating time has resumed.

I brush his hair from his forehead with my fingertips and trail a line down his strong jaw.

Dante cracks open his eyes as he senses my erratic emotions. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you trust me?” I ask in response.

“Yeah.” He looks worried and sits up, his eyes scanning the room. He picks up the residual energy. “You okay?”

“I am. We’ll talk later.” I kiss him lightly on the lips. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Dante pulls me into his arms, enveloping me with his sandalwood-scented love. Pressed against his solid chest, I get lost in the beat of his heart.

EPIPHANY

*E*piphany is defined as a manifestation of a divine or supernatural being, or as a moment of sudden revelation or insight. I had both during my visit with Death.

Dante and I sleep in and then quickly pack our things before the hotel's check-out time.

After we shut the doors to his magically warded SUV, Dante turns to me. "Can you talk to me about what happened?" He doesn't turn the car on, instinctively knowing I need his undivided attention.

"I think so." I pause, thinking of how to explain what happened. "Death was super intimidating, but he didn't say I couldn't share our conversation."

"I can't believe I slept through it." Dante rubs his disheveled hair, and it sticks out catty wampus.

"Death stopped time, like Karma does," I explain. "He said Instant Karma manipulates conditions for us, more or less forcing us to work for her. He suggested she is going to have me kill people." I let the words hit us full force.

"Karmic killings?" He shudders. "I feel bad enough for the stunts we pull on people, but that?"

"I don't think Death is pleased about her upping her game either," I mutter.

"Did he give you any options to get out of her contract?" Dante asks, desperate for an answer.

I grimace. "If a karma agent wants to break their contract, we can, but then *he* claims us."

"We die?" He tightens his grip on my hand.

“Well... maybe,” I hedge. “He said that since I was a descendant of a Hindu death king of karmic justice that I would have an option of working for him, but I have to be balanced between light and the dark to work for him. If I work for Karma much longer, I won’t be able to be his.”

“What? You are karmic death royalty?” Dante shakes his head in disbelief. “So you really are my queen.”

“I guess so.” I shrug.

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, the other option is that we allow Karma to drain our souls of light until we die in a few years anyway.”

“Awesome choices,” he says sarcastically. “So that’s what happens to us.”

“Yeah. Karma agents *retire* to feed her power with our entire souls.”

Dante takes my hands in his. “Tessa, you have to save yourself. Don’t let Karma drain you. Don’t let her use you. Jump ship now before she shows up.”

“But what about you? Us?”

“I need to know you are safe. That’s all that matters to me,” he says in a protective tone.

I need to explain the rest of what Death said. “But—”

Dante interrupts, “It’s okay. I know the score. I’m not a descendant of death royalty. Besides, I have probably been drained for too long. When you showed up, I could only feel a glimmer of light that’s still left in me.”

“You don’t want to come with me?” I ask, withholding the possibility of Death allowing Dante to work for him for the moment.

“Of course I *want* you, but it doesn’t sound like it’s an option for me to switch teams. I won’t sacrifice your well-being for my needs in the hopes that we can live a few more years together. In a perfect world where we lived normal lives, I would never let you go, but it isn’t like that. It sounds as if our souls are in danger of being permanently damaged.” Dante pulls me into an embrace. “As much as I want you for myself, I could never forgive myself for hurting you. I *need* you and your soul to survive and thrive.”

“But what if you could balance your light and dark?” I ask. “What if then you could work for Death too?”

“I don’t like the idea of doling out death.” Dante pauses and then continues, “But I suppose it’s part of the natural cycle of life. He doesn’t seem to mess with nature like Karma has us doing.” He brushes a loose lock

of hair from my face and gets lost in my eyes for a moment. “If I could be with you, then I would do what I could to balance myself and become a reaper, but I doubt that’s possible for me anymore. Besides, I worry I don’t have enough time to make that happen if Karma *retires* me during her visit.”

“I don’t want you to be *retired*.” I kiss him sweetly on the lips as tears fall down my cheeks. I avert my gaze and ask, “What do you think the guys will do when they find out about what Death said?”

“I don’t know.” Dante leans his head back and stares at the car’s ceiling. “If the choices are Karma eating their souls or dying now with their spirits intact, then they will probably choose death. I fear Kurtis is pretty damaged already. He has practically been begging for his time to end for a while now.”

I rub my bleary eyes, thinking of Kurtis’ pain. “I should tell them so they can decide what they want to do.”

Dante nods. “We should all prepare ourselves for Karma’s visit.”

“Can we swing by Carmen’s shop?” I ask, since we aren’t too far, and I’m still concerned for her well-being.

Dante agrees and drives me over. My skin itches as we pull into the parking lot, and my eyes narrow when I see Carmen’s shop is now empty.

“What the—”

I jump out of the vehicle before Dante has finishes parking the car and run up to the empty windows and peer inside. It’s completely fucking empty. There isn’t a trace of her, not even a magical residue.

I rush into the shop next door, with Dante hot on my heels. The woman behind the counter of the small boutique startles at my sudden entrance.

“Hello, I was wondering when the psychic reader closed up. Did you see Madam Carmen moving her stuff out?”

“Who?” The woman appears to be confused as if I were speaking a foreign language. “What psychic?”

“Next door.” I point to illustrate which way, like the woman is a complete idiot.

“Never had a psychic in the plaza.” She shrugs. “That unit has been empty for more than a year.”

I race back to Carmen’s shop and look for the repair where I broke the window to get in, but the glass looks old and original.

“Are we at the right place?” I ask, doubting my sanity.

“Yeah. Evan took us here the day we figured out you were spying on us.” Dante touches the glass. “This glass *was* broken.”

“I don’t understand.” I lean against the door. “How is this possible?”

“How is anything we know about possible?” Dante glances around. “We should go.”

I agree.

When we get inside the safety of the SUV, he asks, “What is she? A goddess?”

“Uh... I don’t know what she is.” I rub my arms, which have gone numb. “Something more powerful than I expected.”

“What is her interest in you?” Dante asks, almost to himself.

“I hate to be paranoid, but...”

“But it seems divinity is out to get you,” he finishes.

“Seems like.” My breaths become shallow and fast.

“Slow down.” Dante reaches out and strokes my back.

A calm wave crashes over me, easing me out of my panic attack, and I quickly regain my composure. “I don’t know if it was stupidity or ignorance that made me think I could ever just have a sweet little romance with you.”

“I prefer to think of ours as a passionate and well-endowed love story.”

I bust up laughing—not at him but at the entire absurdity of my life. “Well, as *girthy* and *amorous* as my love life is...” I eye him. “I hoped that once in my life I could be okay and happy for an entire day, but Death’s visit shook me up, and now, Carmen is an unknown player in all this.”

“Hey.” Dante pulls me into a hug.

I’m glad we haven’t started driving so I can have this quiet moment, and that Dante doesn’t give me some empty promises, just comfort.

INNER CIRCLES

Dante and I meet the guys at the sacred circle.

Before we can even start, Kurtis grimaces. “I don’t want to know the details of your love session last night. Well, unless they are extra spicy.”

I glare at him and don’t comment on his remark. My spidey senses indicate that he does want to know and is covering up his interest.

Instead of calling him out, I dive right into the meat of what I need to tell Kurtis and Evan. “I had a visit from Death himself.” I point at Kurtis, and say smugly, “And it turns out Death is masculine, by the way.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Then please proceed with masculine pronouns.”

“Thank you for your permission,” I reply without any heat behind it, then I hesitate. I don’t want to be the messenger of bad tidings.

“What is it?” Evan asks, worry coating his words.

Dante steps in and helps me get it out. “Karma has been draining our souls, and when we retire? Well, it’s the last feast for her, and we are snuffed out permanently.”

“Fantastic,” Kurtis says flatly.

“I was beginning to guess as much.” Evan sits down with less controlled grace than normal.

“Can we do anything about her eating our souls?” Kurtis asks.

“We can break our contracts,” Dante says. “But that means Death claims us.”

“But our souls aren’t destroyed?” Kurtis asks.

“Yeah, and *that* is the upside. Damaged, but not destroyed.” Dante shrugs.

Evan quietly watches me during the entire exchange. “Tessa, what aren’t

you telling us?”

“Because of my innate abilities, I *might* be offered a job with Death,” I confess.

Kurtis crosses his arms. “Well, I don’t want to do that job.”

Evan is quiet before he then says, “So does *he* know why Karma is coming in a few days?”

“He didn’t say.” I look at all of them. “But I’m guessing it’s to either *upgrade* me to karmic death jobs or to retire one of us here for good.”

“Both bad.” Kurtis kicks the dirt.

I open my third eye to see his aura. Other than the brief glance I got the night we met, I haven’t made it a habit to consciously *read* them again. I scan Kurtis’s energy. With Karma’s powers, his aura is much brighter than most humans’ would be, but when I look closely, he’s riddled with several dim patches. He has a Swiss cheese soul. Can it be healed? Maybe in the afterlife.

I turn my gaze to Evan. Surprisingly, he’s worse off, although he doesn’t outwardly show his pain like Kurtis does.

I brace myself and turn to Dante. There are definitely dark spots, but not as many as Kurtis and Evan. Odd.

Then I remember Death’s ability to weigh a soul. Can I do something like that? My *judge of the dead* ancestry might suggest I can. I visualize a scale, like the Egyptian god Anubis, except it isn’t a heart tested against a feather.

In my mind’s eye, I watch as pieces of Dante break off and land on either the light dish or the dark dish. It’s very close, but the darkness outweighs his light. Although, I’m pleased to see the newest pieces are fresh and end up in the pile of light.

His feelings for me...

“Tessa? What are you seeing?” Dante asks.

I snap out of my vision. “I was checking your auras for Karma’s damage.”

Evan’s voice is soft. “What did you perceive?”

“There were dark spots, like missing pieces of your souls.”

Evan and I lock eyes. He knows what I saw in him.

“Well, we all need to process this information and decide for ourselves what our fate will be.” Evan shoves his hands in his pockets and walks back to the house.

Kurtis frowns. “I suppose I should thank you. I finally know what’s wrong with me, but it doesn’t make what I must do any easier.” He walks off

before I can think of a proper reply.

Dante hugs me, and we don't speak for a long while. My eyes keep gravitating to where Kurtis and Evan walked away, wondering if I can do more for them.

"I want you to be the one who reaps me," Dante says, breaking the silence between us. "I want you to be the last thing I experience in this life."

"*What?* No!" I push out of his embrace. "Aren't you going to fight *with* me?"

"How?"

"I didn't want to tell you before we talked with the guys, but when I hinted this morning about you maybe coming with me..." I pause, since I don't know what's possible. "Death didn't make any promises, but he weighed your soul last night. I asked if you could come with me, and he said he would consider having you work for him if you could balance your light and dark. I just looked at your soul—"

Excitedly, he asks, "And?"

"You need just a bit more light to be balanced."

"How can I gain more light before it's time to break my contract?" Dante deflates. "I can't, not when this job actively drains it. Karma is due in a few days. If it's my end..."

I sigh. "I don't know if we have enough time." I grasp his chin to make him look at me and hear my words. "But a lot of the light I sensed was new."

He's contemplative, and his eyes widen. "Because of *you*."

"I can't take credit. You had to shift whatever was going on inside you."

"Fine, maybe, but..." Dante grins widely. "You triggered me into wanting to be a better person."

"Were you *that* horrible before?" I ask.

His shoulders slump. "I wasn't necessarily good. In my life before, I would blow off friends and lovers and use people to feel better about myself." Then he quickly adds, "But I don't intend to be that person anymore."

"Are you sure you aren't using me without meaning to?" I step back. "Fix the broken woman and make yourself the hero?"

"I'd like to think we are *healing* together." He pauses, and I watch him think. "I don't believe I'm trying to be a hero or fix you. I'm trying to be happy and be someone worthy of you. Worthy of love."

The words ring true, and I relax.

“But I need to do some soul searching and see what’s left in here.” He taps his chest. “I need to discover what kind of person I truly am and what path I should take.”

THE CHOICE

*A*s we return to the house, Greta and a team of housekeepers I've never seen before are polishing every surface. The barracks are always clean and immaculate, but now, it shines so brightly it's almost hard to look at anything directly.

Dante sighs as we pass the busy workers.

We head upstairs and stop in front of our rooms.

"No matter what happens—" I hold his hand to keep him with me for as long as I can. "I want to thank you for everything. For caring about me, for helping me see how my past messed up my perception of myself, and for the wonderful time last night. It was probably the best evening of my life."

"Probably?" He grins playfully.

"It was," I say, rolling my eyes. "You know exactly how much pleasure you gave my body and heart."

"Yeah. Mine too." Dante gives me a peck on my forehead.

Even though I'm not much of a hugger, I wrap my arms around him in a rib-crushing embrace. He returns the hug in kind, and then we slowly part ways to enter our separate rooms.

We both need space to think about our futures, our pasts, and what we really want.



I sprawl on top of my bed and stare at my ceiling, allowing my mind to wander. I try to visualize what might happen to all of us. Unfortunately, my

imagination keeps coming to disastrous conclusions during a confrontation with Karma.

There's a knock on my door, and I open it to find a box on the floor outside my room. Bringing it to my bed, I pull the top off and find an evening gown inside. A note sits on top.

Karma likes us to dress up for her formal visits, and I know you don't have anything appropriate in your closet.

— ***Dante***

I pull out the dress. It's one of the dresses I offhandedly commented on during our mall outing from the upscale wedding shop with a gorgeous selection of formal gowns. This particular silky black dress has a high-low hemline with a plunging neckline, and it twinkles like the night's sky with its sparkles.

I strip down and slip the dress on. It fits perfectly. I have to give Dante credit for knowing how to pick out clothing for a woman. I try on my black, strappy high heels to finish the look, then I pick up my phone to text him.

Tessa: Thanks for the sexy threads.

Dante: Can't wait to see how incredible you look in it. I will have a hard time not stripping it right off you and exposing your luscious skin.

My face flushes with the memory of how it felt to be with him last night. I know we need our time to figure out what to do, but I also realize we might not have a tomorrow.

Tessa: Why wait? I could use help to get it off now.

A second later, my door bursts open, and Dante gazes hungrily at me. "Let me see you."

I give him a slow spin.

He shuts the door and moves closer. "I finally get to see you in those fuck-me heels."

"You've been eyeing them in my closet like a perv, huh?" I ask.

"Total perv." He grins devilishly. "Not going to lie."

"You aren't into foot fetishes or something, are you?" I arch an eyebrow

at him.

“Just *your* feet.” His hands trail along my arms and then to the straps on my shoulders. “I will worship the ground you walk on.” He kisses my shoulder. “But not in a weird way.”

“Oh, yeah, totally not in a *weird* way.”

I giggle when he swiftly moves behind me to admire the low back of the dress. His fingers follow the line down my spine to the zipper at the top of my ass.

At the nape of my neck, the dress straps are held in place with a delicate chain. Dante unclips it and pushes the straps forward so the front of my dress falls free from my breasts. He slides his hands over my shoulders and takes each globe in his hands, kneading me gently. “Whoops. Have to make sure that doesn’t happen when you wear this out in public.”

Dante moves around to my front and admires his work. He kneels and strokes me from my toes up to the hem, just above my knees, before he slips his hand under my skirt. Briefly skimming across my center, he moves both hands to my ass.

“I don’t think that’s how you get to the zipper,” I say playfully.

“Hmm. I think you might be right, but it’s fun trying.” He kisses my upper thighs moving closer, adding little licks.

“True.” I open my stance, hoping he will ease the throbbing between my legs.

In one movement, he stands and brings his hands around my waist to open the zipper at my back. The dress falls to the floor, and he finally presses his lips to mine. I moan with the broken tension, even if I wish his mouth was on another part of me.

“On the bed,” Dante orders.

A thrill zips through me and directly to my clit.

I comply and hop up onto the bed.

He picks the dress up and places it neatly on a hanger, then he turns and heads toward the door. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

I chuckle and then moan as I caress myself, slipping my hand under my lace underwear. “Nah. I’m good.”

Dante turns back and shakes his head when he sees what I’m doing. “I *was* kidding, but now, I just want to watch.”

“I don’t think so.” I huff. “I expect more from my personal valets.”

“Yes, miss?” He plays along. “How may I *service* you?”

“Maybe I can service you?” I quirk my eyebrow. I move to unbuckle my high heels strap.

“No,” Dante says with a low, needy voice. “Leave them on.”

I’m naked other than my panties and heels, and Dante’s eyes me like he’s going to devour me.

“Come here,” Dante points to the spot at his feet.

I’ve never been one to be a submissive in bed, but with him, I feel like I can trust him enough to allow myself to let go and play along.

As I stalk over to him, he unbuckles his jeans and frees his hard cock.

“You know what I want?” he asks, his voice heavy with lust.

I kneel before him, my hands sliding up over his thighs and looking up through my lashes. “You want my lips around your dick, taking you down to the hilt, and swallowing you down my throat.”

“*Fuck, Tessa,*” he hisses, just from my words.

My hand skims over his silken rod, and I lick the precum at his tip.

His hips jerk, then he rips his shirt over his head to expose his gorgeous chest.

My free hand caresses his six pack and his eyes dilate as he watches me take him into my mouth.

“You are the most beautiful and amazing woman I have ever known.” He gently strokes my cheek then slides his hand into my hair and fists it just enough for me to feel the tension. “Touch your pretty pussy for me again.”

Oh, shit. Dom Dante is pretty hot.

I work my mouth on him and slip my hand down to rub my clit. My need amps up and I find I’m working his cock with more enthusiasm as I near my own orgasm.

“No. I need to cum in your sweet cunt.” Dante says as he pulls away from my mouth. With his strong arms he picks me up and turns me so I’m over the side of the bed, ass up.

Goddess, I love doggie style.

He rips off my underwear and sinks his cock into my slick pussy. “So ready for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Dante.”

He works his cock to the hilt as he strums my clit to the point I may explode. Once he’s pumping into me with long, glorious strokes, he captures my throat and pulls me backward, bending me like a bow. “I need to look into your eyes when I come.”

With my head practically tucked under his chin, I look up and our eyes lock. His hand around my throat gives me enough pressure to know it's there. He's claiming me, body and soul. And surprising myself, I don't flinch away from any of it.

Another few pumps and strokes of my clit, and my pussy is clenching around his cock. I'm seeing spots from an orgasm that has my whole body vibrating and trembling.

"That's it, baby, give it to me," he growls. His hips stutter and his release fills me.

He lets go of my throat and he eases me back to the bed. Then his head falls between my shoulder blades and gives me a kiss.

If I'm going to die today, then at least I was able experience love and pleasure with Dante.



After cleaning up, we are cuddling in each other's arms, blissed out and exhausted.

"Taking a moment to figure things out on our own didn't go as planned," he says with a laugh.

"*Pshaw*. Introspection is overrated. I didn't have the fortitude to think about my future that hard."

"Says the most stubborn woman I've known." He pinches my ass. "You don't give up that easily."

I smack his hand away. "I'd like to think of myself as headstrong, but bossy also works." I smile defiantly.

"But..." Dante says in his serious voice.

It's obvious what he's getting at. "I know we need to sort ourselves out for the sake of our souls." I sigh.

"Yeah. Nothing big." He waves it off.

"I feel the need to throw another *pshaw* at you." I smirk.

"Granted."

"*Pshaw*." After our chuckles, I ask, "Doesn't it feel like everything is out of our control?"

"It does, but if that were true, would Karma need to manipulate anything? She's not all powerful. Maybe none of these gods are."

“You have a point. Although, Death seems to be a hard hitter.” I maneuver to look up into his stunning blue eyes. They are clearer, almost like arctic blue ice, but there’s nothing cold about them as he looks at me. “Could I contemplate with you next to me?”

“We could have break times from our introspection and... *talk.*”

“Communication of all variations,” I add with a wicked grin. “Bodies can talk.”

“I’d love to talk to your body some more.” Dante runs his hand leisurely down my side. “But first, we nap.”

“Granted.” I curl into him and tuck myself under his arm.

I allow my mind to wander and drift to sleep.



I’m more relaxed when I wake with Dante shifting to his side. I don’t mind that I’m the big spoon again.

We can risk a snuggle or two without the world falling apart. With a yummy smelling sexy teddy bear, it seems kind of like a crime not to tempt myself just a bit, but I also want to be more prepared for Karma’s visit.

I sneak out of bed for a second to retrieve Carmen’s death book, and as I crawl back next to Dante, I wonder what kind of supernatural being Carmen is. What was her angle in befriending me as a teen and showing up again now?

Is she an ally? Or is she pretending to be my friend for her own gain?

I center myself, drawing upon my psychic reader training, and ask again. My instincts tell me Carmen isn’t *trying* to harm me.

I flip through the book. I have a habit of doing this with nonfiction, especially with metaphysical books. I just stop flipping *randomly*, and there’s almost always an answer I need on that supposedly random page. Synchronicity is often at work when we pay attention.

I stop on a page about Karma, but this isn’t the Instant Karma that I know and barely tolerate. It’s about *Original* Karma.

I ease back to read, lazily stroking my fingers through Dante’s thick, dark hair while he sleeps. He croons with the contact, and my heart swells with joy. Simple things...

Turning back to my book, I read.

Karma has not one, but many definitions and different meanings. There is an ongoing debate whether karma is a theory, a paradigm, a model, a metaphor, or a metaphysical construct.

According to this, there's room for more than one karma entity...

Causality means that good or bad actions have consequences. The law of karma operates independently of any deity or any process of divine judgment. The karmic effect of a deed is determined not just by the deed, but also by the nature of that person, and by the circumstances in which they committed it.

Wait, what? Does that mean Instant Karma isn't supposed to be involved in enacting immediate revenge? It also sounds as if even the Original Karma isn't supposed to be directly involved in the consequences of our actions.

Karma agents take none of that into account, though, when we enact karmic justice on our targets. Is Karma breaking the rules or is she reinventing them to fit her godhood?

Still sound asleep, Dante rolls over and flings his arm over my lap. I stare at him, admiring how he looks so peaceful and trusting. For this moment, he's mine, and I am his.

Dante mumbles my name in his sleep, pulling me closer into an embrace. Even in his dreams, he wants me. My face hurts with the wide smile stretching across it.

Then old fears needle their way back into my consciousness. *How long will this happiness last?*

I shake my head in an attempt to rid myself of my foreboding thoughts. I might not even survive a confrontation with Karma or Death. Death hasn't guaranteed a position in his ranks, and Karma might have her own path for me, one which I might not be able to escape. She might try to use my love for Dante against me.

I hear Evan and Kurtis in the hallway, muttering about something. Their voices are anxious, and Kurtis is definitely defensive.

Reluctantly, I pull away from Dante's sleepy embrace so I can check on the guys.

I quietly open and shut my door, running to catch up to them as they

descend the stairs.

They are arguing over the damage to their souls, and they haven't heard me coming up behind them.

"She isn't wrong about me," Kurtis hisses. "I have felt myself change over the years."

"That's no reason to die," Evan argues.

"Hey," I say, and they practically fall down the stairs when they jump. "Sorry." I grimace.

"What do you want?" Evan asks exasperatedly.

I bite my lip, thinking about how I should respond. Apparently, it's true—the messenger of bad news is persecuted. "Sorry. I was just checking on you."

Evan squares his shoulders, regaining his composure. "I don't feel like talking with you right now."

"This isn't my fault!" I snap.

"I know." Evan sighs. "But we're going to have to deal with *her*, and that's probably because of you showing up."

I nod and don't stop them as they continue down the stairs. When I turn around to go back into my room, Dante is leaning against my doorjamb, watching me.

"Don't mind them." He pulls me into a hug. "It's all a lot to take in."

"So... do you need time to yourself?" I ask, hoping the answer will be no.

"As much as I would love to spend every moment with you, I think I need to work alone today." I try to pull away, and he hugs me tighter. "It has nothing to do with you and me. I just need some space to think."

"I suppose I need to do the same." I give him a quick peck on the lips and disappear into my room alone.

BLOCKED

I've never been someone who worries about if a guy will choose me, but only because I always assume they won't, so... no worries.

I'm worrying now though. Dante is under my skin, and he crawled his way into my heart and my bed.

Instead of falling back into sexy times with Dante again, I decide to go on a drive to clear my head and attempt to make a plan to take down a goddess. I pick up my phone.

Tessa: Can I borrow a car for the day?

Evan: Take mine. Just be back by five for Karma.

Tessa: No problem. Thanks.

On my stroll to the garage, I'm happy that I haven't run into anyone, but once I'm inside, my luck runs out. Heather, one of the karma agents, is picking up her keys off the rack. I haven't talked with her much, or at all really. It's strange that I haven't seen much of the other agents other than my teammates.

Heather turns and narrows her dark brown eyes. "Tessa," she says with a mysterious tone, flipping back her long, bleached-blonde locks. "I was wondering when we would finally get a chance to talk alone."

I swallow my apprehension. This talk could be about anything or nothing at all. "Oh yeah? I'm sure you know where my room is."

She grins wryly. "I do, but your males always seem to hover about, waiting for an opening."

I burst out laughing. “*My males?*”

“It isn’t that funny.” Heather crosses her arms. “I know you’ve slept with at least one of them already.”

I refuse to bite. It isn’t the first time it’s been insinuated that I’m a slut just because I am friends with males. “Is that what you want to talk to me about?”

“No.” Heather steps forward, closing in on my personal space.

My senses are on high alert. What does she want from me? Did she overhear my conversations about Karma? About my powers? Has she followed us out to the sacred circle in the lot next door? What?

I put on my apathetic expression and prompt again, “Then what did you want to talk about?”

“Something’s going on, and I think you’re behind it.” Heather eyes me for a reaction.

“What’s going on?” I look confused, but again, not overly interested.

“With Karma,” she grumbles. “Why is she coming here? My instincts say it’s about you.”

“I’ve been doing my job,” I say wearily.

Heather pauses, thinking over what I said. Likely, she’s weighing it for the truth. “Maybe, but something’s going on. I’ve heard things.”

My attention is piqued again. “Oh? Like what?”

She glances over her shoulder to check if anyone is around. “That there’s going to be a major shift in our barracks. Someone’s going to be retired... Maybe more than one,” she whispers. “Evan is the one with the most seniority, so...”

“It’s probably going to be him,” I surmise for her. “But rumors are just rumors.”

“She rarely comes out to have a special dinner if it isn’t for something like this,” Heather says, as if that will convince me.

She needn’t bother. I’m already convinced that one or all of our team is going to be retired, aka killed, aka have our souls consumed by a greedy start-up god.

“Well, I’m new, so I don’t know much about all this. I barely know how to do a job on my own.” I shrug and grab Evan’s keys from the hook. “Let me know if you hear anything else inconclusive,” I say flippantly as I turn over the Corvette’s engine and open the garage door with a press of a button.

Heather frowns at me as I race out and down the long driveway. Once I’m

at the gate, I suck in a breath and punch in the code.

The gate doesn't open, so I punch it in again, thinking that in my frazzled state I've messed up.

But no. It isn't working.

I text the group message thread.

Tessa: My code isn't working at the gate. Did it change?

Evan: No.

Kurtis: WTF!

Dante: Not good.

Tessa: Is our code the same for the other teams?

Evan: Each team has a different code.

Tessa: Do you know any of them?

Evan: No.

I back up and turn around to park his car back in the garage. Heather passes me with a confused expression.

I yell, "Forgot something!"

She nods, accepting my simple lie without probing.

I slow my car and watch in the rearview mirror as Heather punches in her code and zips through the gate.

I text them again.

Tessa: Looks like it's our code. Or me. Heather just left.

Dante: I'm checking with Greta to see if they changed it and forgot to tell us about it.

My heart rate speeds up, and my breathing comes close to hyperventilating.

We are so dead. Karma is trapping us inside, torturing us with the knowledge that this is our last day.

What if Death doesn't offer me a way out? Or if he doesn't want Dante

after all? What will become of Evan and Kurtis? I'd feel like I was the one who killed them, even if I didn't, but I brought their punishment years sooner than it should have been.

I park the Corvette and just sit with a dazed expression. The fear of being trapped overwhelms me. I fly from the car and race to the perimeter fence to jump it, grabbing the metal fence.

It zaps me.

I cry out with the jolting pain, and I'm thrown to the ground. The energy fries all the nerves in my body.

When I can stand, I race to the back of the property to the ocean access gate we use to get to the sacred circle in the neighboring lot.

I slowly hold my hand up to the metal, and I feel the buzzing electricity just by hovering my hand closely.

Shit. We're locked in.

Running as fast as I can, I race to find the guys inside the house. "Dante! Evan! Kurtis!" I yell, trying to keep the panic from my voice. There's no need to alert the other agents or the staff about our conundrum.

They zip around the corner and enter the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" Dante runs up to me, captures my face in his hands, and studies my crazed eyes. "Are you okay?"

Only then do I realize I'm shaking so hard my teeth rattle. "We're trapped," I whisper.

Dante hums his agreement. "Greta said they didn't change the codes."

Kurtis curses. "I'll double-check the gate." He runs out of the room before I can argue. Maybe I did mess up the simple 6-9-6-9 code.

"Are the fences usually electrified?" I ask, my eyes flitting back and forth between Evan and Dante.

"No." The muscle in Evan's jaw flutters with agitation.

"They are now," I say. "And the back gate."

"We're so screwed." Dante's hands release me to rub his face.

"She wanted to make sure we would be here tonight." Evan's voice is hollow. "Not that she couldn't just hunt us down easily enough."

"But she's sending us a message. She owns our fates," I say.

Kurtis shuffles despondently into the kitchen. "The code isn't working, and the fences are electrified." He is dirty, and his hands are burnt.

I glance down at my clenched hands and see they are burnt too. I'm also disheveled.

Dante immediately tries to heal my hands now that he sees their condition. After a minute of trying, he shouts, “Damn her! She’s withholding her powers.”

Evan tries to heal Kurtis and concurs, “Mine too.”

Then I have a thought. My powers seem to work outside of the normal parameters. I focus on healing my hands. The sensation of energy swirls inside me, and my hands mend.

“How?” Dante’s jaw drops open.

I shake my head. I don’t know for certain, but I believe I am drawing on my own natural powers.

Once I finish healing my palms, I walk up to Kurtis. “May I?”

He nods his consent for me to touch him, and I pour my healing energy into his hands. When I’m done, we lock eyes.

Kurtis breaks down and forgives me for the doom I’ve brought with me. “I appreciate knowing why I’ve been so messed up. I felt the emptiness for a while, but I thought it was my imagination. If it weren’t for you, I would have just slowly been drained, never knowing why I felt so horrible.”

Kurtis pulls me into an embrace. I resist for a second, but then he pulls me closer to his chest.

I can’t believe we have been through so much in just a few weeks. I feel so close to him after our rocky start. I won’t let any more bad things happen to Kurtis if I can prevent it.

Will I be able to stop a goddess?

KARMA'S

*A*s we stand in the kitchen, stunned into silence over being trapped, we all receive a text from our boss.

Karma: I expect you to be prompt and presentable for our dinner tonight.

A chill runs down my spine. She wants us to dress up and play nice for the barracks.

After we read the text, I grimace at the guys. "Perhaps she might even make an example of us as a dessert."

Kurtis attempts to lighten the mood. "I'd rather have pie."

"I'd rather escape," Dante says.

"*Death* sounds better by the minute." Evan raises an eyebrow at me.

We keep our comments vague since we still don't want to have our conversation leaked to Karma or the other residents. We don't know how much Karma actually knows or why exactly she's coming to see us, but disciplining us is probably the correct guess. Instant Karma knows enough to check up on us and block our escape.



Alone in my room, I slide on my new dress. I smile when I think of how Dante undressed me and our lovemaking that followed, but it's the sleepy way we snuggled into bed that makes the warm fuzzies invade my consciousness.

I put my hair up in a classy updo and apply some spare but strategic makeup—eyeliner and lipstick. No mascara for me since I don't know if I'm going to be crying. I won't give Karma the pleasure of seeing it running down my cheeks.

I'm buckling my strappy high heels when there's a knock at the door. "Who is it?"

"Dante."

"Who?" I ask with sincere confusion in my voice. "I don't know anyone by that name."

He opens the door, not caring if I'm ready or not. I'm happy to see the other two aren't standing there and watching, even if I'm dressed.

"Excuse me, sir. That's very rude. You know, there could be a force that rewards bad behavior like that."

"As long as the reward is seeing you bent over like that." He smacks my ass as I try to adjust my shoe strap.

"Hey!" I yelp.

From the hall, Kurtis grumbles, "Really? That's just torture."

"Dante, I could give you some pointers on ass slapping," Evan adds.

"Guys!" I stand upright and glare at them since they watched Dante smacking my ass. "We don't really have time for this."

Evan glances at his watch. "We have thirty minutes. That's enough for the basics and an orgasm or two."

"Oh, so we get to have Tessa's initiation ceremony after all?" Kurtis grins and waggles his eyebrows.

"She's *my* initiate," Dante growls in warning. "All mine."

My eyebrows shoot up at him claiming me in front of the guys. It feels significant, even though our fates are all unknown and possibly doomed.

We quiet at the proclamation, and I use the moment to take in these gorgeous men in tuxedos. All of them are handsome enough to be movie stars, and it feels as if we are ready for the red carpet.

"You guys look damn good," I say.

"You'll pass." Kurtis winks at me. "Your groove thangs look great in that dress though. Dante's a lucky... *mentor*."

As I exit my room, I nudge Kurtis aside. "Shush."

I suck in a deep breath, feeling the weight of what's about to happen. Our lives are going to get out of hand soon. I understand their need to have a last laugh, but part of me refuses to let go and have fun.

“Wait.” Dante’s hand clasps my shoulder.

I glance up at him and then at the other two.

Dante tilts his head toward my room. “Guys, give us a minute?”

They nod and walk down the hallway as Dante pulls me back into the sanctuary of my bedroom.

“What’s up?” I ask, then I think to myself, *Everything*.

“I don’t know how tonight is going to go, but if I die, I need you to transition my soul.”

I shake my head, refusing to think so negatively. “No. You aren’t going to die.”

“I might.” Dante brushes his warm hands over my neck and down my shoulders.

“I *won’t* let it happen.” I set my jaw.

“If we don’t have the power to stop her, then remember my last wish.”

Closing my eyes, I pray for a better outcome. “We’ll see.”

Dante kisses me with several years’ worth of passion. I’m dizzy by the time he finishes paying tribute to my lips and soul.



Dante and I catch up with Evan and Kurtis in the kitchen. Several servants, many of whom I’ve never seen before, work to prepare for Instant Karma’s arrival.

“Get out!” Greta waves us away.

We oblige and seek refuge in the den before we have to head to the formal dining room.

Chara and William are already there.

“So I hear we have you losers to thank for this visit,” Chara says, giving us all the evil eye.

I have a spell to bounce it right back on her, but I don’t have the energy to waste. “Your guess is as good as ours.”

A bell chimes loudly throughout the house, rattling me to my bones.

“It’s time,” Evan announces.

Our procession to the dining room is more like a funeral march than a rally to dine with our patron goddess, Instant Karma.

Chara sneers at me. “I hope you’re happy.”

I was happy with Dante... for a few hours. Too bad I couldn't have some more time to experience that new feeling.

"None of us will be happy with what's about to happen," I mumble as we enter and find our seats. There are place holders with each of our names. I'm pleased to see my team is seated together—Evan, Kurtis, Dante, and then me. At least I'm the farthest from Karma's chair at the head of the table.

The other members are on the other side—Chara, William, Heather, Trent, and Steven.

I pull my chair out to sit down, but Dante stops me. "Wait for *her*."

We all stand at attention, waiting for Karma to arrive.

We blink, and *she* is suddenly at the head of the table. "Sit, my dear servants."

I bristle at the idea of being her servant, but I suppose that's exactly what we are—her minions.

We all settle into our seats.

Once we do, Instant Karma smiles at the agents across from my team. "I so rarely get to interact with my people anymore. That's the downside of my success." Her gaze turns to us. "However, sometimes it's imperative that I find the time to check in."

Her overwhelming power hits me full force when she looks directly at me. My assessment of her power wasn't exaggerated when I first met her. She has juice and plenty of it.

There's no way I'm going to win in a fight against her.

"Tessa?" Instant Karma calls.

I snap out of my daze. "Yes?"

"How have you been adjusting to your new life?" she asks casually as Greta and the other help serve our first course—soup.

"I... am adjusting as well as can be expected."

Karma eyes me for a moment too long.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair.

Finally, she looks over at Chara. "How are you and William doing?"

"We are good. The solo operator status suits us just fine." Chara glares at me. "We're able to be more efficient with our work, but also rely on each other for support when needed."

"Excellent." Karma smiles.

Heather, Trent, and Steven all report they are doing well, then Karma turns her attention to Evan.

“And you? How are you doing?”

Evan maintains his composure as he answers, “I have been busy with our work and also training Tessa.”

“How have you found Tessa to be as an agent?” she asks. “Has she been leading you astray?”

“What?” He blanches. “No.”

“Tessa is a willful soul. She would be a challenge to the most faithful,” Karma says as her heavy gaze lands on Dante. “Wouldn’t you say she might even tempt the most callous hearts?”

“I wouldn’t say she tempts.” Dante cocks his head in subtle defiance.

“Oh, I think I might.” Karma stares at me.

“I have just been trying to do my job,” I quickly add.

Karma grins wickedly. “But you don’t know what I want from you, now do you?”

She’s correct. I really *don’t* know.

“What *do* you expect from me?”

“I expect you to do as I ask without question, or there will be karmic retribution.” Karma sips her soup as if she isn’t threatening me.

“What would my retribution entail?” I arch my eyebrow. Will she confess her plans to everyone at the table?

“I might have to *retire* your teammates early.”

The guys all snap their heads my way, and I dare to look at their expressions of dread. Those of us on this side of the table know it’s a death sentence, not retirement.

“You would kill off your agents just to manipulate me?” I ask.

Chara and her side of the table gasp.

Someone whispers, “What?”

I look at the other agents. “Retirement is a deceptive word for dying and having Karma eat your souls.”

“Is this true?” Chara asks Instant Karma.

The goddess doesn’t respond to her and instead glares at me. “Everyone out except for Tessa and her team.”

There’s a moment of hesitation where the five other agents are frozen with fear, and then they come to their senses and rush out of the room. I can tell by the footfalls that they don’t go far, probably hoping to hear more of Karma’s secrets.

Karma flicks her hand, and the doors to the dining hall slam shut.

She stands up, and her form appears to stretch, making her tower over us. The room darkens, and the air seems to lose all its oxygen.

I'd be lying if I said I'm not scared. I know the only way out of her grasp is death, but I have been conditioned by the nature of life to resist dying as much as I can.

I gasp for air, but she only allows us enough to keep us alive.

"Is this how you want your life to end?" Instant Karma asks. "Do you really want to watch your friends and lover die just to defy me?"

"So I can dole out untimely death sentences for you?" I growl out. "No matter what I do, I will die, either with my soul intact or severely damaged by the acts you will force me to commit. Then you will gobble up whatever's left." I suck in another breath. "But you don't even have a right to issue retributions to humans! It's against the laws of karma."

Dante's eyes bulge at my claim.

"You aren't meant to kill. That's Death's job." I narrow my eyes. "I won't cheat him and do it for you."

"That's where you're wrong. You've helped kill someone for me before." Karma smirks, gloating that I'm her puppet.

A psychic knowing floods my senses. She has gone against cosmic law and killed before. I realize I know one of her victims.

"Did you..." I begin, not really wanting to know for certain who she means, but I have to hear it from her.

"Yes, your mother."

Without thinking, I launch myself at the goddess who towers over me. It's a useless and stupid move. How can I harm something like her?

She flicks me away, and I crash into the wall.

"Why?" I ask, tears falling from the pain.

"I had to get you on my team. Your mother's death set off a chain reaction that changed the course of your life." Karma arches her brow flippantly. "It wasn't like your mother didn't deserve her karma."

"How dare you?" I scream. "You don't get to decide life and death, especially not to get what *you* want." My vision is blurry, and it turns red. "You aren't even a real goddess!" I spit.

Apparently, that's the last insult she's willing to indulge.

Instant Karma rushes at Dante, pinning him against the wall by his neck.

His face turns purple when he can no longer breathe, and he grasps at her hands to pull them away, but it's no use. She has the strength of a goddess

even though she's only a half-assed one.

I jump onto her back, wondering if I can weaken her like I did with the energy vampire, and I focus on seeing Instant Karma with my third eye.

I open my eyes with my enhanced perception and squint against the harsh, blinding light emanating from her. My astral hands reach out to pull on her energy and steal it from her.

Karma rages with anger and maybe even fear. I grab a bit of her power, and with it, I pull more into myself.

Kurtis and Evan both crash into Karma, but she's no slouch and flings them away without visible effort.

Karma reaches behind her and grabs me, pulling me in front of her, then she pins me against the wall next to Dante.

I yank on her power again. She flinches and tosses Dante aside to focus on me.

For some strange reason, my panic subsides. Maybe it's because Dante is no longer in her clutches.

Since I can't breathe, I see dark spots as I begin to pass out. It will be over soon. This is how I'll die, but maybe if I die now, she will let the others go unharmed.

Then Dante jumps up, grabs a chair, and smashes it over Instant Karma's back.

She doesn't even move a millimeter. With a flick of her finger, she smashes him against the table and he flips over it to the other side.

I can't surrender to death now. All I can think about is getting to Dante and seeing if he's alright. I doubt he will be. He hasn't reappeared over the table, recovering from that fall. His back cracked hard against the table. Would my healing ability be enough to heal whatever injuries he has?

I tug on her power again, but it's too little too late. I slump in her grasp, my arms dangling at my sides.

In my altered out-of-body state, I watch my body fall to the floor when she lets go of me.

Instantly, I'm at Dante's side, watching his life essence slowly separate from his body.

"No!" I cry out, but my voice is only in astral form. "Where are you, Death? You said you would give me a choice!"

Oh no. Does this mean I have to deliver Dante to the afterlife as he requested?

Sensing another presence, I turn to see Death standing next to me in all his ominous glory.

“Tessa Maat, what is your choice?” Death asks.

“Are you going to offer Dante the same?” I ask instead of answering. “And what about Kurtis and Evan? None of the agents really belong to her.”

Another entity appears. As she materializes, I realize I know her all too well.

“Carmen?”

“Actually, the name is Karma... *Original* Karma.” She now looks more of East Asian descent than I remember, but her features are similar. She wears a beautiful, intricately embroidered gold sari.

This is all too much, and my morbid sense of humor cracks a joke. “The OG Karma.”

She grins, somewhat amused with me, just as she usually is with my sense of humor. “You are correct, Tessa. None of you belong to her. *Instant* is a misguided start-up and a petty god.” OG emphasizes the word *Instant* like it’s an insult.

Like a spoiled child, Instant Karma snaps, “*I am not!*”

Apparently, Instant is aware of their presence and chose to ignore Death and OG Karma until the insult.

“Well, she sounds mature enough to be a grown-up goddess...” I roll my eyes, feeling daring now that the other two gods are here to back me up.

“You are nothing but a worm!” Instant yells aggressively, but she slowly backs away from us.

OG Karma ignores Instant’s outburst as if she were irrelevant. Right now, with Death offering me a way out, she is. “But Carmen, why were you in my life growing up?”

“After Instant killed your mother, I was doing what I could to fix the imbalance she created.”

“Why are you here now?” I ask.

“To see that you are able to make your decision freely, knowing all the facts, with your karmic cycle back in your hands.”

“That was you!” Instant screeches. “*You made* me confess about her mother!”

OG Karma smirks. “Yes. It seemed fitting that you should experience some karma yourself. Tessa and her powers were never for us to control. They are in Death’s realm.”

“Seeing as you have encroached on my territory, I think it’s about time I put an end to it.” Death sounds downright cheerful with his usually flat voice. “Instant Karma is about to be no more.”

“What?” both Instant and I ask at the same time.

Death’s sickle appears in his hand. He sweeps out swiftly and slices Instant into two pieces. Her brightness cracks, and light ruptures from the split.

I flinch away but make myself watch as she dissolves and dissipates into thin air.

After a chilling, quiet moment, I ask, “Is she really gone?”

“Hopefully, for good.” Death shrugs then he turns to me. “Gods aren’t easy to kill if their believers stay true.”

“Wait a second! Why didn’t you strike her down before?” I ask.

“Because I needed a human to believe without any doubt that Karma wasn’t supposed to dole out instant karma as she does, especially when it comes to death. I needed a human who knows the truth about the gods. A human with the innate magic of karmic justice.”

“You were the chink in the armor that allowed him to cut her down,” OG Karma adds.

I’m completely floored that I was able to help bring down a goddess, but it makes sense that if gods are made with human’s beliefs, they can be destroyed the same way.

“As for you, Tessa, what do you want to do?” Death asks. “Would you want to use your talents for me?”

I glance at Dante’s body on the floor, his soul now hovering outside of it.

“Uh, what about Dante?” I ask Death.

“Tessa, don’t give up your chance at life for me,” Dante’s spirit says. “I don’t want to leave you, but I’d rather have you live on and maybe find happiness.” He turns to Death. “May she deliver me to the afterlife?”

Death is silent, but then Karma asks, “Oh, so you don’t want to work for me, huh?”

Dante’s eyes widen, and he glances back and forth between Karma and me. “What about Tessa?” he asks.

“You must make this decision for yourself and not based on your relationship,” Karma says. “She will have her own path from here on out.”

I hold out my etheric hand, and Dante takes it. We gaze into each other's souls, fully bared.

“Whatever you choose, I will support your decision,” I say. “I want you to be happy. Maybe Karma can be that for you.”

“And I only want you to be happy,” Dante agrees.

Then we both remember what has happened with the fight, and in a blink, we are checking on Evan and Kurtis. The guys are dying too.

“What about them?” I ask, desperate to save them.

OG Karma looks at Death with an arched brow, then she says, “I can offer them a way to heal.”

“Can we all work for you?” I ask.

“Tessa, you’re an agent meant for Death. It’s in your essence,” Karma says. “But I will take the other three.”

I look at Dante. “You could heal. You could be with your friends.”

Dante is in front of me in the next second. He presses his forehead to mine. “I don’t know if I can live without you in my life. Perhaps I should heal in the afterlife. Maybe we can be together in our next incarnation.”

If I had tears in the astral form, they would pour down my face. Dante’s willing to die if he can’t be with me.

Kurtis’s and Evan’s astral forms pop up next to me, and they glance down at their broken bodies.

“So, this is retirement?” Kurtis asks with sarcasm. “Not impressed so far.”

“It isn’t *retirement* if you want to come work for me,” OG Karma says.

“Carmen?” Evan shakes his head in shock. “What’s going on?” He looks at me.

“Original Gangster Karma,” I explain, like it should be obvious.

“*Dude.*” Kurtis bows. “Pleasure to meet you, your goddessness.”

Karma grins at his silliness. “Well, we need your answers now. Evan and Kurtis, would you come with me and learn the true meaning of karma? Do you wish to heal your souls?”

I bite my lip, hoping all three will choose to heal with her. I only want the best for them.

“Or if you refuse my offer, you’ll go to the spirit realm, halting the accrument of karma,” the goddess explains. “However, when you reincarnate, you will have a rough life trying to balance yourselves.”

Kurtis and Evan exchange a meaningful look.

“Seems like working for you is a better option than coming back with a Swiss cheese soul,” Kurtis says.

“Go with her,” I encourage all three.

“Tessa,” Dante says, “I love you.”

“Then go heal and know that I will always love you.”

Suddenly, the room seems to collapse in on itself.

Looking at the deities for understanding, I see a flicker of the universe in Carmen’s eyes and in the shadows of Death’s hood.

Everything turns dark.

THE END

When I regain consciousness, I'm back in my body. Miraculously, I don't hurt, not even a bruised throat from where Instant Karma squeezed the life out of me.

I tentatively wiggle my fingers and crack open my eyes.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. I'm in my room at Instant Karma's barracks. I jolt upright, confused.

Was the confrontation with Karma a dream?

I look at the other side of my bed, hoping Dante will be there, but I'm alone.

Fuck.

If he chose the afterlife, I hope he isn't upset that I wasn't able to take him there. At least, I don't remember delivering him to the portal of life and death.

What about the others? Kurtis and Evan? Are any of them alive?

I push off the bed and run into the hallway, crashing through Dante's door. I'm terrified I will find the room empty, but I have to check.

Dante is lying in bed, but he isn't awake or moving. I rush to his side to see if he's alive.

He's breathing, and I kiss the corner of his mouth in sheer joy.

"Dante?" I call.

He blinks his eyes open and gently smiles when he sees me. His hand reaches out and cups my jaw. "Tessa."

I lean down and kiss him again.

Dante chuckles. "I'm Sleeping Beauty."

I shake my head. "With your dark hair and red lips, I would say Snow

White.”

“Come here, Princess Charming.” Dante pulls me down on top of him.

I luxuriate in his warm caresses for a moment, then I have to break the spell and ask, “What’s going on? Am I crazy? You remember confronting Instant Karma and dying, right?”

He sighs. “I do. I was wondering the same thing.”

“Why would we still be here, of all places?”

“Why would *I* be here?” he asks. “I was ready to move on if I couldn’t have you.”

We both sense a presence at Dante’s doorway, and we turn our heads to see who it is.

“Carmen!” I jump off of Dante to focus on the goddess. “What’s going on? Why are you here? Why are *we* here?”

“I will explain everything. Meet me in the dining hall in a few minutes.” Carmen grins reassuringly. “And the name is Karma.”

“Yes, Karma,” I say obediently, then she disappears.

I glance out the window and see it’s morning now. Dante and I are both still dressed in our fancy outfits for Instant Karma’s dinner. I turn to Dante. “I’m going to change my clothes.”

He nods, and I rush into my room. Picking up the first thing I see, I throw on my new custom T-shirt and comfy jeans. Karma didn’t say it was a formal meeting. I look in the mirror, expecting to look like death warmed over, but I’m fresh-faced, and my hair doesn’t even need to be brushed.

When I come out of my room, Dante is waiting for me with a wide smile on his face. I look down at his shirt and laugh.

We both have on shirts that read, “*Karma made me do it.*”

I guess we both remembered I wanted to put that on a shirt.

I grab his hand, and we race downstairs and into the dining hall.

Everyone’s in there—all the other agents, the support staff, and even Evan and Kurtis.

I rush over and hug them both as tightly as I can.

“You’re here?” Evan asks as we disengage.

I’m about to answer when OG Karma suddenly appears.

“I’m sure all of you are wondering what happened,” Karma says. “Last night, Death vanquished Instant Karma in retribution for claiming his territory. I am Original Karma, and I’ll be running things from now on.”

There’s a murmur of excitement and confusion.

Original Karma stares at all of us in turn. “Most of you need to heal from the damage your soul accrued while you worked for Instant. I will aid you on that path. I will keep many of you as agents, but not working deeds to cause harm. Instead, you will help maintain balance in the universe.” Karma nods toward me. “However, Tessa will work for Death. She will remain here with you while Death trains her in the new position.”

“Death?” Chara asks. “And you are Original Karma?” Her voice conveys she doesn’t believe anything that’s going on. “And Instant is *dead*?”

“It’s true,” I say. “I witnessed it.”

There’s another rumble of voices, mostly muttering to themselves.

“You need not worry,” Karma goes on. “I will ease you into the new way. Your contracts for Death to retire you will be delayed until the timing of what would have been your natural demise before Instant Karma interfered with your lives.”

Another wave of confused mutterings fills the room.

“Yes, she manipulated events to gain your employment,” Karma explains. “All you need to know for now is that I will be back after I have met with the other instant karma agents around the world and informed them of what has transpired and what to expect moving forward. Please, take a few days to relax.” With that, Karma disappears.

Evan shakes his head. “That all was very *deus ex machina*.”

“We *are* dealing with gods.” I shrug. “They knew they needed to clean up the mess they allowed to go on for too long.”

“Careful,” Kurtis warns. “They might decide your insolence won’t be tolerated.”

“They know it’s true. Instant killed my mother and manipulated me for years. I don’t know what she did to get all of you here, but it sounds as if she did something to all of her employees.” I take in a deep breath. “I’m just glad you all survived.”

“It’s thanks to you,” Dante says. “Death and Karma might not have had mercy on us if it wasn’t for your petitioning them to do it. I will have to lavish you with my appreciation many, many times.”

I flush, my cheeks heating.

“I should start right now,” Dante whispers in my ear, and the heat from his body warms me in all the right places.

“But not right *here*,” Kurtis grumbles, “because I won’t avert my gaze if you get naked and get busy.”

I giggle as Dante pulls me out of the gathering and up to his room. As soon as he shuts the door, he claims my lips and pins me against the wall. His hands are everywhere, and I'm wondering if he has grown another pair.

"Dante?" I whisper.

He pauses and gazes into my eyes.

"Thank you for loving me," I say, happy tears forming.

With his thousand-watt smile, he says, "It was your karma."

THE END

???

If you prefer MF romances, then stop right here, and know that Dante and Tessa live out many years together in happiness.

If you wished for Tessa to end up with all three guys, then hop through this portal to an alternate reality where the story continues and Tessa gets all three sexy men.

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A fake engagement with the God of Love?

I never expected to owe my life to a god, let alone, Cupid aka. Eros.
After a near-death experience, I've been conscripted to be his indentured employee.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Raven Vale writes magical, steamy romance. In her character-driven adventures, she explores the boundaries of human potential and the bonds of love.

Although not verified, Raven Vale exists mostly on the Earthly plane.

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