

ADDALEE ACKERS BOOK ONE



The
Hunted

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
REBECCA ROYCE

THE HUNTED

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BOOK ONE

REBECCA ROYCE

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*To Patty Woodard for years of knowing you and your help with
my books! And for telling me that redheads can wear red
lipstick.*

CHAPTER

ONE

The bus dropped me off in front of the prison. I might have been born inside its walls, but it wasn't like I remembered the experience, and I certainly hoped no one in there remembered me. When I was a baby, they took me from my mother to live with my cousins on 8th Street for the next five years. Afterward, Mama got herself together and took me back.

For a little while, anyway.

An armed guard tower loomed over the industrial building surrounded by a tall, barbed-wire-topped fence. The building seemed imposing and intimidating, as it was likely intended. Then again, as a tiny, blonde, brown-eyed girl, even if I got caught breaking the law—*caught* being the operative word—I wouldn't be sent inside those walls to serve my time. They no longer used the building for a women's penitentiary, as they did when Mom had me. No, now the building only stored men.

They spent years renovating it and moved the men inside and the women out.

I knew way too much about the place of my birth.

But I hadn't been inside since I left, and although I'd given it no thought ahead of time, my nerves bounced at the idea of going back inside.

It's not like they can keep you. The voice that was always with me spoke in my head. *They aren't going to be like, Oh, Addalee, sorry we shouldn't have let you leave at a week old. You're now stuck here again.*

I smirked. Sometimes my demon could be really funny. Other times, not so much. I steeled my shoulders. I never addressed her when I was in public. It looked crazy before everyone knew about possessions, and now it made others wary of me. Not that I blamed them. Thanks to that funny fiend inside of me, I was the most powerful person in any room. Most people didn't have the sense to know that, which was a shame. Eventually someone was going to be hurt who didn't deserve it, and then that would be my burden to bear—along with all the other stuff I emotionally lugged around that wasn't my fault either.

With that thought I headed toward the doors only to be waylaid by a loud, sudden shout. “Addalee, wait up.”

I smiled even as my demon groaned. We had very different feelings about Ryker. I loved when he was around, while she thought about sending an army of demons to possess him...so that he might get lost in himself and never bother her again. So far, she held off, but only because I said please.

“What are you doing here?” I turned to regard him as he rushed across the parking lot to catch up with me. Dressed casually, like he always was, in black jeans and a green t-shirt, he'd changed into his Converse shoes today. They were his *fancy* sneakers. His blond hair always hung over his green eyes despite him cutting it once a month. He hadn't updated his look since he was sixteen, even though he was twenty-six.

Ryker Williams, my best friend. Also former stepbrother, which we could hardly count since our parents wanted to be divorced almost as soon as they signed the marriage license. He was a step up from me, as he never spent any time living in a jail.

Also, he wasn't possessed.

Yet.

She knew I wanted her to leave him alone, not that I had any real power over her. I never would, but she usually indulged me. We both knew eventually our relationship would end with me either dead or her back in Hell. Neither one of us was looking forward to that eventuality.

“What are you doing here?” I tugged at his shirt, and he grinned at me. During our six months of being stepsiblings, people had mistaken us for being blood relations., probably because of our blond hair. Folks didn’t look very far past that.

He nodded toward the prison. “You didn’t think I’d let you go to Ashgate without company? You’re not doing this alone. Face it, you need me.” He took my hand the way he had since we were children living next door to one another. Ryker liked physical touch to ground him. Hugs. Hands. Caresses. Once, I thought maybe it meant more than it did, but I’d been foolish back then and believed happy endings could happen to people like me. That maybe I was deserving of it or something.

I quickly learned that wasn’t the case. These days, I was grateful for his friendship for as long as I could have it. People like me—with demons along for the ride—didn’t keep friends very long.

“I’m not going to be in danger. That assistant DA—Cruise Winters—he hired me to come, and he’s meeting me here. I’m not going to be overrun or anything.”

Not while you have me, you’re not. On your own? You’d be dead, and they’d be fucking your corpse before your body hit the ground.

Ryker shook his head, unaware of the conversation in my head. Despite knowing about my possession, he stuck around and didn’t call the hunters after me, but we never discussed how my thoughts had changed since it happened.

“It’s not about you being attacked. This is a big deal. First, I can’t believe that you’re doing this. Second, I can’t believe you’re doing it *here*. And third...I want to make sure these guys treat you right. Looking like you do, I’m worried they’ll try to take advantage of you.”

I didn’t want to dissuade him from being my friend, and I found it sweet that he’d come along. I needed him more than he did me these days. Ryker was on track to an actual career, unlike me, with a future pretty similar to my present. But there wasn’t any way anyone would take advantage of me, not

unless my demon thought it would be funny. *Sometimes she does like to torment me.* Sadism was part of her deal.

“Thanks for coming, then.”

“Addalee Ackers?” a voice called, and we both turned toward the sound. The voice sounded deep, intoxicating, the kind I might like to listen to for long periods of time, and I figured it must be Cruise. I’d never met Cruise Winters before, only having texted with him on occasion to set up the test of my skills. Or my demon’s skills, rather, since I didn’t have all that many myself.

As the youngest member of the district attorney’s office, Cruise was just out of school. They’d assigned him to take care of the demon issue in the prisons, and it was clear to me over text that he was a) in over his head and b) didn’t want to be the guy in charge of demons.

He also, as he stared at me, wasn’t thinking particularly highly of me, either.

Oh, don’t fool yourself, Addalee. He wants to fuck you. They all do.

I ignored her words. She was constantly convinced everyone wanted to fuck me, despite loads of evidence to the contrary.

No, I figured Cruise could see the poverty and trailer trash all over me. I wore jean shorts and a white t-shirt that didn’t cover my stomach but instead showed off the belly button piercing I got the day I turned eighteen. My sneakers had holes, and my blonde hair was long, straight and hung past my rear end.

I probably should’ve cut my hair to a more professional length years ago, but I hadn’t, because what was the point? Even if I tried to dress more conservatively, he would’ve smelled the poverty on those clothes just as easily, but I would’ve had the added bonus of feeling crappy for bothering to make any effort. This way? I don’t have to give a shit what he thinks.

He already knew I was possessed, so he was bound to judge me for that, too. Good looking, dark-haired Mr. Winters for sure already thought he was better than me. That's fine. He couldn't survive my life if he tried.

"That's me." I lifted my hand and waved at him. "Cruise?"

Maybe there was a more respectful way I could have addressed him, but I was certain he was going to call me Addalee, and I wasn't going to call him Mr. Winters if he called me Addalee. We would at least be on an equal footing.

He lifted a hand and waved back before he sort of grimaced then lowered his hand. "That's me."

I walked toward him, Ryker right next to me, and kept my planted smile firmly in place. I wasn't happy, not really. Happiness wasn't an option since the possession, but no one knew that, and I faked it, so really, what did it matter?

"You're right on time."

I tended to be. "It's polite. Lateness is a bit of an affront to me."

"Good to know." Maybe he was surprised I used the word affront? He gave no indication. "Who is this?"

"Oh!" Yes, that had been rude to both of them. "Sorry. I'm used to all the people I know knowing all the people I know. This is Ryker Williams, my brother. Well, he used to be."

Ryker put his hand out to Cruise. "Not her brother."

"Are you coming on this...test?" We hadn't discussed it ahead of time. Someone like Cruise, who probably had Post-it notes for his Post-it notes, wouldn't care for it at all. How did I know that? I judged him by his briefcase and the neatness of his expensive suit. They said tidy and organized to me.

"She doesn't go anywhere without me very much." Ryker shrugged. "So, unless I'm banned or something, yes, I'm going."

I resisted an eye roll, but just barely. That was so much ridiculousness. I rode the bus there *by myself*. I lived on the streets *by myself*. I ran from the hunters *by myself*. Ryker came

and went as he was able or interested, meaning Ryker was in some kind of pissing contest with himself. I didn't say anything, though, as it likely wouldn't be of interest to Cruise.

Cruise laughed. "Most people run away; they don't ask to go inside. Okay then, come on, you two. We'll go inside and see if you can do what you say you can do."

"Why did you decide she had to test here?" Ryker asked from behind me as I dealt with the machine. It wanted me to sign in and give it my fingerprints. After both Ryker and I finished, with a beep, the machine agreed we were who we said we were.

Cruise stared as we passed through the scanner that told him we were also weaponless. I wasn't, actually. I had one inside of me, but maybe it was better not to mention that at the moment. He turned to look at me.

"Your print says you've been here before, Addalee?" He paused. "Do people call you Addie?"

"No," Ryker and I answered at the same time. Addie was a name for someone with a future and a house that had grass in the backyard. I knew why I didn't like the nickname, although I wasn't sure why Ryker didn't. Finally, I answered for myself. "I was born here."

I hoped to avoid discussing it, so I should have figured we'd end up talking about it openly in a hallway. *That's just how life goes.*

Cruise's expression seemed hidden. I'd read his thoughts pretty well until then, or at least, I thought I had.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

"You don't have an arrest record," he pointed out.

I blinked. "Yes. That's true." I wasn't sure why it mattered.

"Most people who are born inside end up back inside. The statistics are really high, like ninety-eight percent. It's impressive that you didn't."

Or you're just lucky and haven't gotten caught yet.

“Well, the day is still young.” I smiled again. “Where are we going?”

I followed him down the hallway toward a waiting room sign. Other than the sign, the room was empty, giving no indication who waited there or for what.

“Have a seat.” He motioned toward a table, so I sat down in one seat, Ryker in the other. Ryker smelled remarkably good, I noticed, carrying a sandalwood scent today. *He must have changed soaps. Or maybe his girlfriend didn't like his soap, so he changed it. Or maybe it was her soap, and he just used it.* I swallowed. *No, too masculine to be hers. She's a vanilla girl.* She drowned everything in the sugary sweet scent. Maybe it was a small miracle Ryker didn't smell like vanilla, considering she used him, too.

I forced myself to bring my focus back to the room. There is only here; there is only now.

Any second, it could all end for me. Ryker could have a future—nice that he found someone, if that's what she was.

Even if I was pretty sure I was allergic to her perfume.

“We need to know if you can really do what you say you can do.”

It made sense, but still I had to ask, “Why would someone lie about this? I outed myself to law enforcement as being possessed to take this job.”

“True but—as I'm sure you know, since you never would've turned yourself in otherwise—being possessed is not something we can prosecute. We can't even hold you accountable for things you do *while* you're possessed. Anyone who is possessed currently has to have their sentences nullified, even before the law went into effect. Maybe you have lots of reasons to lie. We can get that demon out of you, if you want. We can...”

I lifted my hand. It was better if I addressed it before my demon did. “I don't want you to do that. We've discussed that.”

“Every possessed person says they don’t want to get rid of their demon. I’m starting to think the demons make you all say that.” He shook his head. “But, legally, I have to believe you. So, no, Addalee, no one will take your demon without your consent. Let’s hope the hunters are as polite as we are. Otherwise, maybe you just need the money and you’re not possessed, and you’ll lie through the whole thing.”

My fake smile again. “Well, there is that possibility.”

“I don’t like how you’re talking to her.” Ryker squeezed my knee under the table. “She’s possessed. It’s not something she’d lie about. Trust me. And the hunters aren’t after Addalee. No one is going to hurt her.”

Cruise and I made eye contact. Of course the hunters were after me. He knew it, I knew it, and keeping Ryker in the dark about it was a kindness I offered. He was my friend, and he had enough worries, between taking care of his mother and managing his vanilla-coated girlfriend. He already cared too much about me as it was. The poor guy was going to have an ulcer before he was thirty.

“Be that as it may, I have to make sure you’re real. The government determined at least one possessed person is in the group. I’m not telling you how many, just that there is at least one in the group. It could be all four, three, two, or one.”

I was poor, not stupid. “I followed it the first time you explained.”

“Good. Then we’ll know if you are right or you are wrong.”

I lifted my hand, like I was in class, before asking, “What if *you’re* wrong?”

Cruise opened and closed his mouth. “We’re not. We’re certain those we say are possessed are possessed. You’re not the only possessed person who has helped us.”

“No, you misunderstand. I’m sure the one, two, or three, or whatever you say are possessed *are* possessed. But what if you think it’s only one but it’s two, because one of the people you’ve gotten to do the experiment is possessed, and you just

didn't know it? I mean, that is the kind of thing a demon would find funny.”

He stared at me for a long second then left the room without answering. I sighed and sat back in my chair.

See? This is why I picked you. You just naturally make everyone around me nuts.

“No, you picked me because I was sad, pathetic, and available.” I closed my eyes the second I realized I said it aloud.

There was no way that Ryker didn't hear me. He touched my shoulder. “Look at me, please.”

I did and found his gaze almost painfully kind. “You are not, and never would be, sad and pathetic.”

Does he notice my smiles are fake? Probably not. I gave him one anyway. “Just ignore me when I talk to her. It gets confusing in here sometimes, that's all.”

“I'd really love it if she would just go away. She could, right? She could just go away and leave you alone?”

I never got to answer him because Cruise arrived with four test subjects. He lined them up in front of me—one woman and three men.

If I failed because a demon was pretending he wasn't in one of them, then I wouldn't get the job. There were always other ways to make money. I preferred Cruise to some of the other options—my demon had some dirty thoughts in mind when it came to him, in fact.

But she liked the idea of spending time in prisons. The job would be great if we could do it.

Ryker squeezed my knee again, so I rose to approach the prisoners. The plan would only work if my demon played ball. If she decided to be a dick about things, then I would look like an idiot in front of Cruise Winters. I would also disappoint Ryker Williams, who still believed life was good—despite copious evidence to the contrary.

Oh, don't worry. I'm loving being here. You're in so much turmoil, I could live off your pain for weeks. Also, it smells like old disinfectant. I do love that smell, don't you?

The odor hit my nose at twice the intensity of before. I almost gagged. She loved to do that to me.

This one is not possessed. More's the pity. I have some friends who would love her.

I smiled at the woman in front of me. She was olive-skinned with bright, interested blue eyes. “Not her.”

Cruise nodded to the woman, and she stepped back. Probably law enforcement or worked at the prison? It didn't matter. Neither would make them immune to demonic possession.

The second man—red-haired, freckled, and probably eighteen—was possessed. My demon sat up and waved, and his waved back. *The world is so strange.*

“He is.” I pointed at the redhead. Once again, Cruise nodded. He knew about that possession, which was probably good.

The third man was older, hard looking, and mean-eyed. I was pretty sure he'd try to hurt me if I met him in a dark alley, but he wasn't possessed, just fucked up. “Not him.”

Cruise lifted his eyebrows and nodded. The guy probably tripped up pretenders. *Don't they understand, demons don't want to be caught?* The less evil we looked, the more they wanted to possess us. If we looked like nothing at all, like someone no one would notice, they loved us. That's me—cute, if you took a moment to look at me, but no one would, not unless you were from my area. *Because I am a no one.* As little as the world noticed me, I could get away with doing a whole shit ton of stuff.

Yes, I love that.

The last man was like me, minus the poverty—totally nondescript and completely possessed. “He's possessed, too.”

Cruise's face fell. “No, I'm sorry. I was hoping you'd...”

My demon surged to the surface. Oh, she didn't like that. My demon could sense she was higher up the food chain than his, yet she was working. *How dare he stay hidden while I'm out here, doing the work?*

He would—

"I am," he squeaked. "I am. I'm possessed. For about a week. Sorry, Cruise. I didn't know it would be her. I'm not messing with her. I'm possessed. I lied." He smiled. "That's what we do."

Cruise closed his mouth. "I see." Did he? I wasn't sure anyone, other than those of us who were hunted, could really understand. He turned to me. "Did you know that would happen?"

I sat next to Ryker. "No."

The young assistant district attorney rubbed his eyes. "This is so untenable. Okay, yes, Addalee, you're hired. When can you start?"

I jumped to my feet. "If I start now, will you pay me today?"

"Sure." He shrugged before he laughed. "Why not?"

Cruise sat down across from Ryker. The four people I'd analyzed fled the room. Would they fire the nondescript man, since they knew about his possession? I didn't know if demon possession changed whether or not we were qualified to work in government jobs.

"Would you like a break?" I asked him. "I mean, I could say that I need one and we could sit here for a few minutes to let you catch your breath."

Cruise's lips twitched until he smiled. "Sure."

"Great. Let's say I need fifteen minutes." I didn't. "Then you can have a breather. Can someone bring you some water or coffee or something?"

He leaned back in his chair. "No one brings me anything, and honestly...I prefer it that way. How long have you two known each other? You aren't siblings, right?"

Ryker stared at me when he answered. “Sixteen years. We met when her mom moved next door to us. She was ten; I was twelve. Then they got married for a blip a few years later. We’re not, nor have we ever been, siblings.”

It would be easier if I could think of him that way, that was for sure. “Sometimes, I pretend he’s my brother.”

“Which is just weird.” Ryker rolled his eyes.

“Is that a demon thing? The *pretend he’s your brother* bit?” Cruise stared at the two of us, his gaze finally landing on me and staying there.

“Nah.” Ryker laughed. “She’s been doing that for years, way before the possession.”

I bit my fingernail. Although it seemed like a good idea, I found myself nervous talking with both of them there. “I’m just weird. Always was.”

“I like weird.” Cruise got up. “Enough of a break for me. Let’s get this done. Cell by cell, okay? They’re going to love you in that outfit, so I hope you’re ready for it.”

When I fake-smiled, it was with the demon in my eyes. I could feel her, and what was more, I was sure Cruise could see her, too. “Oh, Mr. Winters, I hope they’re ready for me.”

CHAPTER

TWO

After the silent elevator ride to the cell block, it surprised me when the doors slid open to reveal a wall of noise. My new job entailed deciding which prisoners were possessed and which were not, and I could see the prisoners in their cells past the guards mulling around talking and observing.

“If guards are possessed, do you want to know about it?” I chewed on my fingernail. How far down the demon rabbit hole did they want to go?

Cruise shook his head. “No. Not my job to figure out if they’re possessed, just the prisoners. I didn’t save the hardest for last. There’s all lifers on this block, the ones who’ve done some really bad things.”

I understood lifer. My dad was a lifer until he got killed in prison. I never met him, since he died while my mom was pregnant.

Your family is so interesting. I love when you think about them.

I stepped forward. While I would have preferred to stay quiet, my demon preferred to introduce herself. “Hiya, I’m Addalee Ackers. I’m possessed, and I’m going to tell this guy behind me if you are, too.”

The prisoners started shouting again. I ignored them even as my demon loved their shouted slurs. She could practically roll around in the joy of it all. I steeled my shoulders. Sometimes it was hard—when I hated something, and she

loved it, we warred and she won. I knew any battles of wills wouldn't end well for me, since when she felt like fighting, she triumphed. We only co-existed because she wanted us to coexist. *Kill the host too fast, and you either go back to Hell or find another host.*

I was too comfy for her to risk losing me, so far.

The walls around me seemed to close in on me, covered in oppressive dark blue paint left to peel, yet no one was fixing it. They'd spent years renovating the prison—I'd watched with morbid curiosity the day the men moved in and the women out. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever see the inside, or if I even wanted to—and now no one was keeping it up. Were they concerned with the aesthetic comfort of their prisoners, or had they designed it with discomfort in mind?

The sharp scent of disinfectant cleaner cut through the overpowering smell of urine, but it didn't manage to overpower it. I really hoped my demon didn't decide I needed to smell it more clearly. I might actually puke.

The man in the first cell tried to spit at me, but his attempt failed, hitting the bars instead. *Gross.* My demon laughed. She loved this kind of thing.

I turned around to tell Cruise and Ryker, “Not possessed, just gross.”

Cruise's mouth twitched into a smile. “Thank you. So far, he can't be released for spitting, but I'll let you know if that changes.”

I grinned back and Ryker scowled. I didn't bother to ask him what was wrong. I had a job, and he'd decided to come along, so if he didn't like it, he could leave. As for Cruise, our arrangement was a huge undertaking. Since the courts had agreed to work with the possessed—I suspected at least some of those judges were living in the same situation as me—he had to handle it, regardless of how he felt about us.

I went to the next prisoner. Also not possessed.

“So, what was she like before?” Cruise asked Ryker.

My best friend didn't respond right away. Finally, he said, "Exactly like she is now."

The lawyer laughed. They were talking about me, which should bug the heck out of me, but my demon liked it, so I turned to the next prisoner instead. *Not possessed.*

"That's not possible," Cruise answered. "If you think it is, then you're not paying close enough attention. At the very least, they're exhausted from the constant endurance required to survive possession. Usually, there's more than that, too. Obviously, before, she wouldn't have rounded on me with the *Mr. Winters* comment."

Ryker sighed. "Yeah, that was different. She doesn't do that stuff very much. I really think it's just a matter of waiting this out. At some point, that thing has to leave her."

"No." Cruise stepped closer to me. "It doesn't. You can trust me on that."

"How do you know so much about it?" Ryker took a step toward me, too.

"Long story."

Oh, I'd love to know his story.

The prisoner in front of me was possessed. My demon caught her breath, so I did the same.

He is a big fucking deal. Higher than me, and that's hard to be.

As he stared at me through the bars, he seemed very unconcerned by my presence. He was big—maybe six foot five—and he leaned his tattoo-covered arm against the wall, almost hiding the full sleeve of ink. Dark, short hair matched his equally dark eyes. He hadn't shaved, but his facial hair wasn't long. Somehow, the orange jumpsuit looked good on his muscular, sculpted body.

Oh boy.

The stray thought was likely rooted in the demon in me. Otherwise, I couldn't think of any reason to react that way to a man who stared at me with nothing more than boredom.

“Don’t do it,” he said in a low, grumbly voice.

I blinked. He didn’t want out? Because identifying him meant his way out of a hard time.

No, he doesn’t want out. My demon practically giggled, her amusement off the charts. But it’ll be fun to see what happens when we don’t listen to him.

Apparently, power hierarchy didn’t concern my demon. Then again, she might not care what it could do to me if we pissed off the demon riding the man.

I turned back to Cruise with my demon in my eyes as I said, “He’s possessed.”

“Damn it.” Cruise sighed and wrote something down. “There’s going to be an uproar about letting Danvers Kearney out of prison.”

“Shit,” Ryker spoke up. “Isn’t he the one who killed his mother a few years ago? They found her splattered all over his bar.”

Danvers no longer seemed bored. He rushed to the bars. “*Prove* I was possessed then. Maybe I got possessed yesterday. Prove it.” He hit the bars. “I’m not leaving.” He pointed at me. “You’re going to regret this. I’ll find you and you’ll pay.”

I stepped backward. My demon might not be afraid of him, but I was. If we let Danvers out, what did that mean for the world?

Nothing good, and I’m looking forward to it.

I wasn’t.



THE THREE OF US left the jail together. Out of their prisoner population, only four people had been possessed. Three of the guards also pinged my radar, but Cruise said they weren’t his problem, so they simply watched us go.

“I thought it would be more,” Ryker observed from my left. I walked between the two men, so I shot him a quick glance before I shook my head.

“Most demons are great at avoiding detection. They don’t want to be locked away. What they do? You’d never catch them.”

“Do you do bad things?”

The question surprised me, so I glanced at him again. He’d never asked me that before, not once over all the years.

“Like she’d tell you in front of me.” Cruise laughed. “Hey, Addalee, can I speak to you for one second?”

It seemed a strange question, since we were on his time. Obviously, he could speak to me. He was right there. “Sure.”

“Alone.” He glanced at Ryker. “No offense.”

My once but no longer stepbrother shot him a look that could have melted ice with its heat and hatred before he headed toward the bus stop. I watched, wondering what was up with him, until he stopped to slouch and wait. Finally, I looked at Cruise. “What’s up?”

“I never do this.” He pulled out a card and handed it to me. “My home address is on the back. Come see me tonight, around eight.”

I pressed my lips together, wishing it was the first time it had happened to me, despite it being far from that. I tried to hand the card back. “My demon isn’t interested in sex, so it’s not really my thing. I don’t get paid for it, and even though you’re super handsome, it isn’t going to happen.”

He stared at the card then lifted his gaze to meet mine. No amusement twinkled in his blue eyes. “I’m not asking you to come over for sex, Addalee, paid or otherwise. I know the demons shut off your sex drive. I— never mind. That’s not the point. I’m not propositioning you. Fuck! I want you to meet someone.”

Our silent stand-off over the card continued, and it hung sort of awkward between the two of us. “Is this a religious thing? I can’t deal with that right now. It makes her really mad, and then we have a huge mess to clean up. Well, you would. I don’t clean it, because by the time I realize what happened, I’m not there anymore. We’ve moved on to somewhere else.”

His lips once again twitched into a smile. I did seem to be able to make him amused despite himself. “No. It’s not that, either. Come by, I’ll feed you. At the very least, you’ll get a decent meal. Take a taxi. I’ll pay for it.”

I did like food, and I was always hungry, a never-ending ache I couldn’t remember sating since I woke up possessed. “Okay, but I might not be there. She frequently runs my show.”

His smile fell. “I know. I’m grateful Nathan sent you to me. I’ll let him know we can get this done. We have three other locations to go through, then we’ll be done. The big bosses will be *so* impressed. Oh!” He reached into his pocket then pulled out some cash and handed it to me. I almost forgot, which was dumb since I only took the job for the money. “Cash, as we agreed. Well, you said two hundred, but I’m giving you three, because you did such a good job.”

Three hundred! That was amazing. “Thanks, boss.”

He groaned. “Not your boss, not any more than he’s your brother.” He stepped away before he headed toward the employee parking lot to the left of the building. It was the closest parking lot to the prison, clearly intended as a privilege for their employees, who didn’t have to walk far. While I thought about the psychology of keeping your employees happy, my demon wondered if we could break a window in the prison by throwing a rock. Since we didn’t give it a shot, I assumed she either didn’t think we’d make it or didn’t care that much.

Instead of causing mayhem, I walked over to Ryker. “Thanks for coming today. You don’t have to do this every time I work for him. It can’t have been *that* interesting.”

“What did he want to talk to you about alone?” Ryker’s gaze remained on the departing Cruise rather than focusing on me.

“Nothing important.” I sighed, rolling my eyes since he wasn’t looking at me anyway. “I’m going to go now. I’ll see you in two days for our regular lunch, okay?” I squeezed his shoulder, hoping to finally earn his attention. He liked touch.

Despite it no longer bringing me any peace, I kept up the façade because it kept things on an even keel for us. Ryker fed me twice a week, since I stopped being able to pay for myself. If he didn't notice that I was basically faking it—the way I went through life—there was nothing I could do about it.

He didn't notice I'd been in love with him for a decade before I was possessed, either.

Or, if he had, he didn't care. Ryker was either completely oblivious or polite enough not to hurt my feelings, but either way he left me alone.

“Let me take you home.” He pointed. “I gave up my lunch with you for this, so at least give me the time in the car to talk to you.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Ryker. You know I don't want you to know where I live.”

His hopeful expression fell. “Yeah, but I don't know why. We've known each other forever, so you can't still be worried I'd judge your home. What your apartment looks like? I'm not like that. I don't like not knowing where you are in an emergency.”

I want to smack him around. I want to beat him to death. I want to get a demon to come eat his soul.

I ignored my demon. She really, *really* hated Ryker.

But him imagining me living in an apartment proved how little he understood. He proved my point without trying. “See you in two days, okay?” I stepped back. “I'm grateful for you. Say hi to Taylor for me.”

His face fell. “I don't think you really like Taylor.”

I shrugged as the bus slid to a stop in front of me. “Maybe it's a demon thing.”

“I don't think so.”

He was right about that, at least.



THE WEATHER COOLED by the time I arrived at my “home.” Almost everything I owned fit in a backpack, including my tent and tarp. If I needed to run from Hunters, I could—fast. I pulled a ten out of my pocket and passed it to Lance, our resident protector at the tent city. If I tipped him, he watched my shit while I was out.

A fire crackled in a pit someone had made from a tire rim, and Lance sat around it with a few other familiar faces. He looked up to accept the ten. “Hey there, Addalee. Thanks. All was quiet here. You get done whatever you had to get done?”

Lance wasn’t possessed. At fifty-ish years old, he’d landed on hard times and hadn’t gotten out of them yet. The old me would have wanted to help him. Of course, the old me wouldn’t have met him in a million years. Regardless, he didn’t have to run if hunters showed up. They left him alone.

Not that we knew how they knew I had a demon. Whatever his reasoning, Lance never judged those of us who had to run from them, so for that I was glad to tip him when I could.

“Have you seen my mom?” The constant ache burned in my chest like a wound. Part of me dreaded the day when I would hear she wasn’t alive anymore. Part of me couldn’t stand the constant waiting for it to happen.

He pointed over his shoulder with a thumb. “She’s not in this one today. I think I saw her two over.”

Two tent cities away meant a greater distance than he implied. Two over could be a good mile walk, but I was responsible for her. My demon didn’t agree, but she liked to watch her suffer, so she tolerated my daily check-ins.

I shivered as I approached my tent. I’d long since lost my coat, the most recent one stolen on a bus. Arguably, I’d been distracted at the time, since my demon had been tormenting a young mother and her baby. It was one of my least favorite memories.

My demon could make it so I was never cold, but I’d freeze to death anyway, since my body would still freeze, even

if I didn't know it. I preferred to know it. I changed into a sweatshirt and pants, at least. The cash I'd just worked to earn would pay for a visit to the local laundromat, where I could wash more clothes finally.

“Hey,” a voice called. “Good moment?”

Nathan's familiar greeting made me smile even as my demon hissed. She hated him, but not in the same, pest-like way she hated Ryker. Something about Nathan Hall set her off, but she didn't want me to know why.

Get him away. Now.

Much as she ranted, she never did anything to him, nor did she take me over when he was around. In fact, it was so pleasant, I sometimes thought about following him around just to keep her away. Nathan would hate it, though. He might be helpful, but he preferred to remain a loner, and I didn't know much about him other than that.

The old me would have thought he was gorgeous, like Ryker and Cruise. Like I should *not* think Danvers was.

But it didn't matter. Appearance didn't matter to me much anymore.

“Hi, sure.” I put on my shoes and exited my tent.

The sweatshirt and pants helped, but I would need to find a coat before winter hit again. Maybe Cruise would pay me another three hundred then I could buy another from the next job? Then again, I'd be lucky if the other jobs I worked paid me more than twenty dollars at a time. The more people who found out I was possessed—and it wasn't a small number—the harder it became to find anyone willing to hire me.

Nathan smiled at me. I could never quite figure out his ethnicity, and that was okay. With his olive skin tone, light, almost blondish hair, very blue eyes, and impressive height, I imagined him to be a beautiful mixture of so many things.

Or a creation that should never have existed, my demon suggested. I chose to ignore her.

Nathan arched a brow at me. “I heard you did a great job today. Cruise was impressed. I knew you were the right person for the job.”

It was sweet of him to say so. Nathan had let me know Cruise needed help, then he gave me his phone number. Fortunately, my burner phone still had enough minutes to contact him.

“Thanks. I mean, I’m glad that he thought so. He was nice to me.”

Nathan smirked. “He can be. I’m glad to hear he was today. Sometimes he’s grumpy, and I can’t say I blame him. How you feeling?” His face fell when he asked. “Tough day with her?”

Tell him to mind his fucking business.

“Just about the same.” What difference did it make to discuss it? “How are you?” I asked mostly out of polite habit, but I wanted to know. I wanted to still be the kind of person who cared about the little things, even if sometimes it felt more like going through the motions.

He touched my shoulder, and for a second I forgot I didn’t like to be touched anymore. “I know she doesn’t like me around. I know it feels weird to be touched.” His blue eyes were so hypnotic, they were almost not real to look at. “But you need it, regardless. Human beings have to be touched or we get starved, so be careful she’s not leaving you without feeling the loss of it.”

Like freezing to death without knowing it was happening. “How do you know all these things?”

“I’ve been doing this a long time, even before everyone knew about it. You’re going to be okay, Addalee. I have faith in you. Hang on. Pack up your things tonight and take them with you to Cruise’s. The hunters are coming. By the time you get back, you won’t be safe here. They’re not going south tonight, so I advise you to go that way.”

He wasn’t ever wrong. “Why do you help me escape them? I mean, I’m grateful, but it’s confusing.”

Nathan lifted his chin. “Those fuckers. I mean...in the beginning, they wanted to help. Now it’s a power thing. Angry people who feel wronged by the situation somehow. Maybe it’s grief over someone they lost, or maybe it’s just wanting to feel superior? I don’t know. So few of you survive hunter exorcisms. It’s not meant to be done by amateurs who have seen it once, and I won’t stand by while they kill you all when there is still hope you can be saved. So go, do it tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow, make sure you’re safe in the south part of town.

I watched him leave, unable to move for a second. My shoulder still tingled where he’d touched me.

One of these days, I’ll kill him. We all will. How dare he interfere in things?

“What things did he interfere with?” She always said that, and I never understood.

Never mind. Aren’t you supposed to be packing and visiting your mom? If she’s not dead, dead, dead.

Yeah. That was the plan, at least before Nathan’s warning.

I should really ask him how he always knew what the hunters had planned. There were times I couldn’t remember what I needed to say to Nathan. He was nice to me, kind in a way that wasn’t only him tolerating me. He listened when I spoke like I was still a person worth hearing. Ryker did, too. Other than them...I didn’t have long-term people in my life anymore, not that I’d started with many.

And how did he know Cruise? Another question I should have asked before he vanished. I didn’t think he was homeless. What was he always doing there in the camp?

I pondered about it on my walk toward my mother. I shivered. In April, it shouldn’t snow, but it felt like it might.
Damn it.

I’d love to see you shake all night.

I hated her, and she obviously hated me. We weren’t companions, and I had at no point wanted her presence, but this kind of antipathy wasn’t unusual for possession.

“If I die, you find another person or you go to hell.”

You won't die. You'll just hate life.

I already did.

An older homeless woman pointed left when I approached, but most of them recognized me and knew I wanted my mother. Her tent looked just like mine because I'd bought it for her. I wanted her to be okay, but I didn't want to be with her all the time.

I didn't start out homeless. In fact, I used to have a place I shared with some roommates—who threw me out the first time my demon showed up. I didn't blame them. My job waitressing ended, too, then slowly but surely, I ended up in the tent cities.

My mother landed there a lot earlier than me. Drugs were her demon, and they managed to ride her harder than any possession. She needed them more than anything else—food and love ranked *much* lower. Sure, she liked me to bring her things, but she didn't much care whether I lived or died. She hated that I was possessed—not because she worried about me, but because it made it harder for me to acquire what she needed.

Today she would like me, and I knew it before I even found her. I'd take it, because her playing nice made it easier to get through the few minutes we'd stay in each other's company.

Her eyes were open when I found her. She wasn't dead. Not yet, anyway.

My demon bled into my eyes, something I could tell without needing a reflective surface. Nathan upset her, so fucking with my mother seemed like a great idea to my demon.

CHAPTER

THREE

“You’re a demon. A *demon*,” my mother shrieked as I came back to myself. Her blanket swung at me even as her shaking hands struggled to hold onto the fabric.

I blinked, holding my hands up defensively. “Not anymore. Sorry.” I looked around, trying to assess how much damage my demon had done while she had control. I could spot a couple of things that seemed thrown around, but nothing looked horribly destroyed. Sometimes I could really make a mess.

My mother panted, her cheeks flushed while her skin remained unusually pale. “Why do you *do* that? Why would you let that *thing* do that?”

My mother’s crocodile tears weren’t convincing. Despite her overacting, it didn’t make it okay or make me hate myself less for knowing I’d attacked her. *That isn’t who I am, is it?* “I can’t control it. She’s always able to take control of me. That’s just how this works.”

“Because you’re weak and *nothing*. You always were.”

Some of my sympathy fled. I stood up a bit taller, blew out a breath, then shrugged. “Okay. Well, that’s probably true enough.” I pulled a hundred dollars from my pocket then handed it to her. “Get some food with this tonight, at least. I know you won’t spend it all on food, but at least some, okay?”

Her gaze softened. “You’re really the best daughter. The *best*.”

“Right.” I shook my head, reminding myself it wasn’t worth it. “Bye, Mom. Be careful.”

The hunters would leave her alone. It was me they hunted, so I needed to move before they could catch me. Nathan said south, so I’d try it—after I saw Cruise. Nobody would bother going to the rural south part of town unless they wanted to tip cows. Other than pissing off farmers enough to make them chase you with shotguns, there wasn’t much to do in their neighborhood. I only tipped a cow once, myself.

Then some developer built apartment buildings on the land. I’d lived in one of them—back before my roommates kicked me out—and I always enjoyed the modern, small living spaces meant to house the growing population as it sprawled into the countryside. Although the south part of town might have been without any tent cities when I lived there, one had popped up recently.

The rise in demon possessions made tent cities a necessity, leaving city leaders at a loss as to what to do about it. At least, they didn’t seem to know what to do about it, unless they got possessed, too. The demons tended to take over people they found useful, so city leaders seemed a logical enough choice.

I gritted my teeth. Any time I thought about demons picking people in power to possess, it begged the question of what my demon wanted with me. I wasn’t anyone—I held no political power or money, nor was I special in any way.

I picked you for your winning personality, of course.

I rolled my eyes, but my thoughts drifted again. My mother got into drugs right before she married Ryker’s father. Her newfound addiction got worse with his and vice versa since they fueled each other’s sickness. Aside from encouraging each other, they also refused any help and didn’t give a shit about anything. For a time, they made a truly charming couple.

But Ryker’s dad got help eventually. In fact, he was still clean, last I heard. *Good for him.*

My mother wasn't willing to seek help, so eventually I stopped trying. Since I couldn't help her, I brought her money. I knew she used it almost entirely to buy drugs, but I started giving her money before I got possessed, so I couldn't even blame my demon. It was either the best or worst thing I did on a weekly basis. Should I force her to get clean? She got sick when she didn't use. No one ever told me what I was and wasn't supposed to do except the demon, and I couldn't trust her.

When I told anyone about our situation in detail, they would stare at me for shocked seconds before they quickly and inevitably offered their sympathy. Even Ryker didn't fully understand our situation—mostly because I didn't tell him about it. I liked how he thought of me, even as one of the possessed. I didn't want him to write me off as lost in his head just yet. Eventually it would happen, but I held on for as long as I could.

We could always get him possessed. Then you could be in this life together.

I ignored her. *No way.*

Cruise said he'd pay for my taxi, but even calling one could prove easier said than done in that neighborhood. Most cabs wouldn't be anxious to help me with all of my stuff packed up on the curb, especially not once they got a good look at me. Finally, one of them stopped, so I poked my head in his window to smile and wiggle a handful of cash toward him.

"I'm good for this ride," I told him. He didn't need to know who would ultimately hand him the cash.

He nodded. "Figured you were, kid. You don't look...too nefarious."

If only he knew. My demon remained quiet, which slicked my palms with nervous sweat. She must want to go to Cruise's, which would make it my opportunity. If I couldn't find a cab, I'd have to figure out a bus or something, or it would require a lot of walking to get there.

You have transportation available to you; use it.

I handed the driver Cruise's address and waited to see his place. Of course, where he lived wasn't anywhere near my neighborhood. Then again, most respectable people didn't live in our neighborhood. Still, his home sprawled on the outskirts of town in an area full of wealthy people. The location made sense; he worked for the government. Although he likely made a decent salary, his home had to be from either a very wealthy partner or family money.

I'm so happy we did this today. I love to terrorize the rich.

I didn't ask the question, even as the words floated through my mind. I wasn't going to ask the nice cab driver to pull over because I was possessed. Eventually, the wheels of the vehicle crunched their way up a long, tree-lined driveway. I tried not to stare, but I mostly failed, though I couldn't see much past black-shuttered windows. A mostly wood estate, it towered above me like some kind of sleepy god.

I wasn't the kind of person who entered homes like that one, even if I saw them on television. Or used to.

Does he have a butler?

I got out of the car as the door opened, swinging easily on well-oiled hinges to allow a woman to approach the car. She held cash in hand, her impatience almost as palpable as the weird grin. She smiled at me, even though we'd never met, her blonde hair gilded and her fingers elegant as she tapped the window to speak to the driver.

It seemed my guesses proved correct—Cruise did have a rich partner, wife, girlfriend, or whatever. Someone who made his lifestyle happen, someone beyond himself.

I should have possessed someone rich.

She could go right ahead and do that, especially if it meant she'd leave me alone.

“Hi,” the blonde woman said to the driver. “My brother sent me out to pay you. Take this. Addalee, come on inside. It's getting cold out here. I think it might snow.”

I had the same thought, despite April being awfully late in the season for it. I shivered, ready for sunshine and warmth. “Do you really think it will?”

“I hope not.” She frowned and put out her hand. “I’m Mary, Cruise’s sister. Come on. Leave your stuff to the left by the door. No one will bother it there.”

Oh, sister. Well, there went the spouse idea. Even if her connection wasn’t romantic, she was clearly in charge, so I obeyed and put my stuff down. “Nice to meet you.” We shook hands.

There is something about her I don’t like.

That was funny, since I liked her immediately. She motioned toward the house as the cab drove away, so I followed her inside.

“Are you okay? Need anything? We’re going to have dinner in a few minutes. My wife is cooking tonight, which should make us all unbelievably grateful.” She grinned. “Come in. I’ll introduce you.”

I was glad to follow her, especially since something about their house didn’t quite ring normal to my senses. They’d tastefully decorated the place, but not *too* fancy, considering the palatial exterior. Mary wore jeans and a white-collared shirt, and for some reason, her bare feet stuck out to me.

“Should I take off my shoes?”

“No,” she smiled, lifting her foot in the air. “I prefer to be barefoot when I’m able, but we’re not a *take your shoes off at the door* kind of a family.” I followed her to a modern, if farmhouse-styled, kitchen done in mostly whites, accented with pops of bright blue color. The table was set as though we would soon sit down for a meal.

A beautiful, Black woman stirred the pot as we entered. She turned around to smile at me. “Oh good, you’re here.” She offered her hand. “I’m Willow, Mary’s wife.” She sighed. “If her brother would get here, we could eat soon, but he’s almost always late. We’ll have to wait and hope the sauce doesn’t burn.”

He hadn't been late this afternoon so I shook my head. "He was right on time at the prison."

"Work is different." Mary sighed. "At home, he seems less concerned. Anyway, would you like some wine?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't drink. Thanks."

"Did you always prefer not to drink or just since you got possessed?" Mary walked to the fridge to pull out a soda. "I ask because my demon didn't want me to drink, so I didn't then, either."

I pressed my lips together as it all finally made sense. "You used to be possessed? At least I know now why he wanted me to meet with you. Listen, I don't want an exorcism, okay? I'm sure you know this, but only one percent of the people who go through an exorcism live. It's great that you did, but..."

She held up her hand. "I know the statistics. You don't have to convince me. Cruise didn't bring you here so I could talk you into an exorcism. In fact, if he hasn't told you, although I survived ours, my twin sister didn't. Cruise was one year older than us." She looked away. "I'm Mary, named after my grandmother, while he's got my mother's maiden name, Cruise. My twin was James, but we always called her Jamie, and that was my grandmother's maiden name. Since Jamie didn't survive her exorcism, I know Cruise wouldn't force anyone to get one. Never." She looked from Willow to me and shrugged. "Maybe he thought you could use a friend who wouldn't judge you or deny the facts of the situation."

I sank into a chair at the counter. She poured a seltzer and pushed it in front of me. "Does food still have taste for you, or are you to the point where it doesn't even have flavor anymore?"

"I haven't thought about it, honestly. Maybe a little? I can still taste some things, especially stronger flavors."

Willow spoke with her back to us. "That's great, because I put a lot of garlic in this."

Mary sat next to me. "That seltzer has a lime. If you can't taste it, that's okay. And Willow does like her garlic."

“Hey,” her wife laughed. “You can cook.”

“No, I can’t.” Mary shook her head. “I burn water. You know that.” They grinned at each other.

I hate this. Let’s leave.

I settled into my seat, happy to eat something.

“How long have you been without your demon?” Was it appropriate to ask? Was there social etiquette about demons I didn’t know?

“Two years now after being possessed for five years. How long have you been?” She drank her seltzer, so I did the same.

I thought about it, surprised to realize it was hard for me to remember. “Um, maybe three years? It could be a little bit less.”

She nodded. “It has to be so tiring, but you’re hanging on great.”

“Thank you.” I shrugged, uncomfortable with her words. I wasn’t doing anything. I had to think about what she had said before. “I don’t think my friend is judging me or anything. I assume he has to mean Ryker. Cruise met him today. I don’t have that many friends, so he must mean Ryker.”

Mary frowned. “Our parents died when we were young, killed by a possessed person. Then seven years ago, Jamie and I got possessed. Oh the sick irony, you know?”

That’s exactly what it was. My demon started laughing. I wonder who it was.

I didn’t care to hear any more about that so fortunately she stopped talking. “Did you feel...judged?”

“Oh absolutely. Most people did. If I’d met Willow back then, we wouldn’t be here now.”

Her wife turned off the heat on the stovetop. “I would’ve loved you anyway.”

“That’s sweet, and I would’ve wanted to love you, not that it would’ve mattered. They block us from real feelings. They stop us from tasting food, increase smell or take it away as

they see fit. And year by year, month by month, they drive us to nothingness.”

A sound from the doorway alerted me seconds before Cruise appeared. “My apologies. I had something I had to do.” He was dressed very differently than earlier, his work suit replaced with casual Cruise. The gray slacks and black t-shirt clung to muscles I had only guessed at previously.

Like Mary, he was barefoot, so I again looked down at my sneakers. “Are you guys sure you don’t want me to take off my shoes?” A glance back proved Willow still wore shoes, too.

He waved his hand. “You’re good. Did Mary offer you some wine? We can do better than seltzer.”

“Cruise,” Mary sighed. “Remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. No alcohol. They like you guys to be fully conscious when they hurt you. Right.” His tone spoke of hostility. “Come on. Let’s eat.” He leaned over to kiss Willow’s cheek. “Thank you for dinner. You’re the best, even when I spring dinner guests on you.”

They shared a grin then jumped in together to serve food and otherwise chat like they missed one another. The scene struck me as bizarre—I’d never lived their kind of life, not even when my mom and Ryker’s dad were married. It was so domestic, I shuddered in horror.

Cruise was my boss, yet he served me chicken and pasta as if it was completely normal.

Mary said he did this because I needed someone to not judge me.

The three of them began eating almost simultaneously once they finished serving the food. Willow teased Cruise about his constant lateness, and he took her ribbing with a grin.

“I do apologize, Addalee. I’m terrible about being on time when I’m not working.” He sighed. “It’s rude. I get caught up in things, and I can’t seem to break away. Forgive me?”

I shook my head. “It’s nice to be here. No need to apologize.”

“Sure there is. I only had parents until I was ten, but I can remember my manners.” He took a bite of his pasta.

“No, he can’t.” Mary smirked. “He really can’t. No manners whatsoever. He’s ridiculously rude.”

I considered him carefully, trying to merge my boss with the wealthy man with dead parents and mysterious reasons for being late... “You’re Batman or something, right?”

“What?” He leaned forward, and Mary threw her head back, laughing. Willow shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“I mean...you have some hidden thing at night. Hurting bad guys. That’s why you miss dinner.”

He held up his hands. “No. I wish. I’m much more likely to be at the gym or something like playing the piano or working on old cars. No, I’m not that good. I prosecute during the day and at night, I’m totally boring.”

He’s lying.

The fact seemed completely obvious, but it did beg the question of what he did with his time if not vigilantism. And why did it make Willow uncomfortable? I let it go and watched them instead. Mary finally caught my eye.

“You need to eat more. I know you think you’re not hungry, but you are.” She pointed at my plate. “You can’t do what you’re doing every day—you can’t keep holding on—if you’re not feeding. She can’t stop you from eating. She can make you not feel hunger, but you can eat when you’re not hungry.”

She was right. I didn’t love being told what to do, but I could see her logic. I took another bite of the sauce. I could taste the garlic, which was sort of fun. When had things gotten bland, and why hadn’t I noticed it before? I ate some more.

“Hey,” she caught my attention again. “I don’t mean to sound preachy. I didn’t eat more than a bite here or there for the last year of my possession. I’m mad that she’s messing

with you and then doesn't let you know it. I had a demon that wanted to hang around, like yours seems to be doing. It's not that they don't want to kill you. They just want to do it slowly."

I tilted my head, considering her words. I'd never thought of it that way, since my demon said we could coexist. Did she lie to me?

"Oh my god, it's snowing." Willow got up and walked to the window. She stared outside. "Go away snow. It's April."

I groaned. "It's going to be such a long night."

I thought of the tent city and imagined the fires being lit in garbage cans and other receptacles. People would be moving their tents close to the heat sources, but I wasn't there. By the time I returned, all of the good spots would be gone, leaving me both literally and figuratively out in the cold.

It would be the definition of eat and run, but I should get to where I could spend the night and try to move the collection of my stuff over there. "I'm sorry. Could you call me a taxi?" My burner phone was getting really low in minutes, so I would need to get more time the next day. If they had different phone plans, and I suspected they did, I'd be grateful if they could help me.

"No," Cruise shook his head. "I'm not going to let you go out there tonight in the snow. You could die." He motioned toward the table. "Have a seat. Eat, if you're still hungry. I'm not going to order you to eat, unlike my sister, who claims I'm the one with no manners." He rolled his eyes then smiled at me. "You can sleep here. We have three guest rooms. If you're not comfortable staying here, we can put you up in a hotel, but I don't want you to sleep outside tonight."

I waited for my demon to object, but she stayed remarkably quiet. *What is she doing or plotting?*

"I couldn't possibly put you out." They hardly knew me, and I was absolutely possessed. "I mean I'm still not entirely sure why I'm even here. I can't impose on your family more."

“Oh,” Willow whirled around. “Trust me, you’re not. This house is huge. Besides, once they’ve decided you’re important, they don’t let go of it. If you go back to your tent, Cruise will show up in the middle of the night to bring you back here. I stormed out once after a fight with Mary, and she apologized outside my door the entire night. They can be rather pushy. Yes, that’s the right word—pushy.”

Cruise laughed. “Blame it on our parents for never showing us the way or on the nannies paid from our trust funds to raise us. We’re just badly instructed.” He motioned toward the outside. “Let’s go watch the snow, if we’re all done eating.”

I guessed I could spend the night. Anything would be better than freezing.

Don’t get any ideas, Addalee. Their sister died getting a demon out of her. You will, too. Don’t start thinking how sweet Mary is fine now and untouchable, and you could be too... But you won’t. You’ll die. Badly.

I didn’t doubt her words. It seemed pretty likely she would be right. I’d die badly.

“Do you have a coat?” Mary asked. “Never mind. Since I didn’t have one when I lived in a tent, I can assume. I’ll get you a coat.”

I watched her leave the room, questions bubbling inside of me and out of my mouth before I could even think about not saying them. “Did you throw her out? Is that why she had to live in a tent?”

“No.” He shook his head fast. “This is as much her house as mine. I’d never throw her out, even if I could. She wasn’t living here at the time, just me. Mary was married before. Her wife threw her out. When I found out what happened, it was months later. I was away at law school in another state, then I basically got shoved out of my sisters’ lives when they got possessed, so I came back and found them. I brought them home.”

My heart seemed to calm somewhat—which made me realize it had been racing. Wow. Who knew? Maybe I cared more about being kicked out than I realized.

On second thought, no, I didn't. The time when it mattered had long since passed.

Willow stared at me for a long moment. "Then I met and fell in love with Mary. Honestly, I couldn't help myself—she's just the best person you'll ever meet. I agreed to move in with her. Since the siblings have stuck together after the loss of their parents, Cruise has been stuck with me, too."

He grinned at her. "Totally stuck. I mean, how do I make it through a night with you, Willow? It's not like you're walking around taking care of both of us and showing us what a good relationship with a good person should be?"

Cruise teased her like he had every right to. They really were family.

Mary reappeared and handed me a jacket. It smelled like lavender. I loved that scent. So of course, immediately, I couldn't smell it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Let's go."

The Winterses went outside to watch the snow, and neither one of them wore shoes. I followed them, wrapping myself up in Mary's coat. Maybe that came from knowing they'd be warm most of the time. They didn't have to worry that they'd get stuck outside and lose their toes. Maybe it had been a long time since Mary had been in that situation and didn't remember it.

Willow bumped me from behind. "I hate the snow. Why are we staring at it?"

I didn't know. "Thank you for this." I had to say it while she would still let me. "The hunters are coming tonight. Nathan told me where to hide, but it would be a nightmare night. The snow. The hunters. I appreciate having somewhere safe to sleep."

Cruise looked at me. "Nathan will make sure those monsters don't get you. So will I. I bet Ryker would, too, if

you'd let him."

Hard for me to believe. I wasn't very important. Why would any of them care?

CHAPTER

FOUR

Mary and Willow walked me to the room they were loaning me for the night. The entire situation struck me as bizarre. To get to spend the night in a house like theirs? It was like a vacation from my life.

A thought I didn't like dawned on me. "You know, if something happens—if I trash the room or I steal something—it's not me. I've never stolen in my life. I was poor, but I was working my way up, and I was honest."

Except to Ryker. You never told him the truth.

True but different. Telling someone you love them when they only like you as a friend was hard. And I tried to tell him—went to confess when I found him with his girlfriend for the first time. Minutes later, I got possessed. My luck was shit even when my intentions were good.

Mary touched my arm. "I believe you, but I don't think you'll do anything tonight. If you do, so be it. We're not concerned. We understand what it's like to be around possessed people. My brother understands better than most, and Willow loves me, so she takes my word for it what it's like."

"Would have loved you anyway." Willow repeated the refrain from earlier.

"What do you two do? When you're not taking in the homeless?" I touched the doorknob but hadn't entered my bedroom yet.

They looked at each other. “Willow is the manager of the hotel X downtown.” Mary beamed, pride in her gaze as she stared at her wife.

“One of *three* managers. It’s too big a job for just me. That’s why I can be here tonight, hang out and have dinner. Otherwise, I’d always be there. And Mary is getting a Ph.D. in history at the university.”

Her wife shrugged. “I’m a little behind. My demon wasn’t much interested in studying or teaching.”

They were so interesting, doing things I probably never would’ve attempted, if not for my demon. They were amazing, basically the women I once daydreamed of becoming, somehow.

“Thanks again.” I nodded to them and turned to leave.

“Addalee.” Mary caught my attention. “Willow won’t like this, and I know that Cruise would be really upset to hear it, but sometimes I miss my demon. I wanted you to know that. They get into our cells, they wrap around our organs, become part of who we are in such nefarious ways we don’t even notice all of it. Sometimes I miss how bad she could be. That’s not me, but there was an element to it...that was refreshing for someone who felt she had to be good all the time.”

Willow rounded on Mary. “You’re right. I don’t like that. You might just be inviting them back by saying something like that.”

“No.” I shook my head. “My demon said it earlier, and I’ve heard it before. Once you’re exorcised, they can’t come back inside of you. You’re done.”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s what the demon told me on her way out. One of the things she yelled at me, like I was going to regret it. I was almost dead when I finally told Cruise to help me. Our sister was dead. It was a mess.”

“You’re our mess.” Willow kissed her and they left me to finally enter the guest room.

It was a bigger bedroom than any I’d ever slept in before. I whirled around, thinking the room could have been featured in

a magazine. The burgundy bedspread matched the drapes, and in the adjoining bathroom, it also complemented the shower curtain. I kicked off my shoes and wiggled my toes in the soft rug.

Shower first, I decided. I tried my best to stay clean, and some churches let me shower there on occasion, but I'd lived without the luxury of a good scrub for years.

I stood under the spray and let it rinse away my day, pretending it could somehow cleanse my whole life. If someone told me what would happen, I would've stayed home and not sought out Ryker that night.

I didn't take you because you happened to be out. I could have just as easily gotten you in your bedroom, my demon pointed out.

I ignored her. Mary missed her demon sometimes, missed being bad. Did they only pick people with a propensity toward that kind of thing? Was I somehow badly made, so I could take on a demon?

Don't overthink it. I took you because I wanted you.

Anytime I tried to find rhyme or reason, she shrugged that right off. The shampoo smelled like flowers, a bright scent to counterpoint my dark thoughts. I tugged on a t-shirt and pair of shorts for sleep, watching as snow swirled aggressively outside the windows. It was beautiful seen from a nice warm bedroom. I crawled beneath the covers and waited for sleep to claim me.

Only it didn't.

And didn't.

And didn't.

"Are you doing this?" I asked her. Like everything else, she could make it so I couldn't sleep. I sighed and got out of bed when she didn't answer. Well, if she wasn't going to let me rest, then I could at least leave the room. I wouldn't wake or bother anyone, just watch the snow from elsewhere. She might be able to make me even more exhausted, but I didn't have to stay in bed while she kept me miserable.

I tiptoed from the room, feeling like a kid doing something naughty, and followed the sound of music tinkling in the distance. Across from the dining room, I found a game room. Old, stand-up video games lined the walls, and a pool table stood in the center. Cruise, still dressed from dinner, hit a billiard ball into the eight ball in the corner of the table. In the background, the soft sound of jazz music played.

He turned when I entered. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"No, she won't let me sleep. I came out to just be somewhere else, and I heard music. I followed the sound."

He winced. "That's so mean of her. I can't sleep, but I'm not possessed, just an insomniac. Have been for years." He motioned toward the pool table. "Do you play?"

I shook my head. "I've never even seen anyone play, truthfully. There's a foosball table at the bar where Ryker and I eat lunch twice a week. I've played that. I can play chess. My aunt taught me that when I was a kid. Checkers. Poker."

He stepped back from the table. "Well, it's time you learn how to play. It's fun, and it helps me think."

Cruise returned with a stick that he handed me. I stared at it for a second then I handed it right back to him. "Don't give me a weapon or make it easy for me to get one."

He seemed to consider my words for a moment before hanging the pool stick back on the wall. "Okay. Someday I'll teach you. When it's safe."

He'd likely be done with me long before such a thing could happen. If it ever did. I would more likely die either trying to be exorcised at the hands of the demon or because of something she did...

It was best not to think about it.

"You play." I walked to his couch and sat where I could gaze out the huge bay windows. The room was cozy and also beautiful. "I'll watch."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Let me ask you a question first. Does my house smell okay to you?"

Asshole.

What was her issue? I ignored her.

“Sure.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t smell anything. Should I? Am I being denied a really stinky smell, or worse... oh no. Do I smell bad? I showered.”

He held up his hand then shook his head. “You smell great. Clean. Don’t worry about that. No, I was curious about the house. Sometimes even those of us without demons can be nose blind. Good.” He set down his own stick and walked over to sit next to me, then abruptly stopped. “Hold on. Help me move the couch.”

Together, we turned the couch around so that it faced the windows instead of away from them.

“Let’s watch the snow together. An April storm like this deserves attention, I think.”

I never would’ve imagined he would be the type to be so interested in the snow. Twice, he’d stopped to watch it. I sat down next to him and watched the snow globe turned to life outside.

“You’re right. I mean, it’s pretty.”

“Sure.” He smiled. “Tomorrow it might be yellow and dirty. If I slip on it, I won’t think it’s so pretty.”

I grinned, but I shook my head. “No, I mean, tonight it’s pretty because tonight it can’t kill me.”

“Surely your demon would seek shelter before she would let you freeze. As you said, she wants to keep using your body. Best to have a healthy host for that.” He shook his head. “Never mind. I know better than to try to understand demon logic.”

I bet he did. He’d watched them for years. Lost one sister to them, and the other was...mostly fine, it seemed. But probably altered. We sat watching the glittering white drift almost aimlessly from the sky.

If it kept up at that pace, I would have trouble leaving in the morning. I certainly didn’t want to overstay my welcome,

so I shot him a glance. His phone dinged, and he responded to something on it before he shut off the volume. I watched the whole thing because it was so normal.

It had been so long since I'd experienced normal.

“Nathan is concerned that you're out in the snow. Wanted to make sure I had you.” He grinned. “I've assured him that I do. You would probably have gotten picked up if you hadn't come here tonight.”

I tilted my head, considering his expression. “How do you know Nathan? And why do either of you care? I'm just another person in a world of many. Why specifically decide to help *me*?”

He was quiet for a second. “Listen, I've dealt with more demon issues than I could've ever imagined. They took one of my very few people from me. James—Jamie?—she was sweet in a way that Mary and I aren't, so the possession ate her to death from the inside out. Faster than Mary, and likely faster than what is happening to you. She tried to get it out, the way that you all do, when she was almost dead. Didn't come to me. Maybe she didn't think she could, maybe I wasn't paying enough attention because she wouldn't let me? Anyway, for whatever reason, she went to the hunters. That statistic of death from exorcisms? Yeah. It's real. Nathan and I met through a mutual friend five years ago. We share similar beliefs and interests.”

That was interesting, but it didn't answer my question—well, not all of it. At least I knew how Cruise Winters, assistant district attorney, knew Nathan Hall—introduced by a mutual friend because they were both irritated by demon possessions.

“And why do you care...” I let my voice trail off.

“I can't speak for Nathan. When I told him I needed a possessed to find the possessed, he said you were the only one for the job. You seem like a nice person to me. I like to help nice people when I can. I was once...very alone. Left alone in the world without a true north. If I can help you before you

finally make the choice to try to get out of it, I'm going to do that."

My demon pushed into my eyes, but she didn't say anything. As quickly as she took over, she vanished. I blinked, surprised. *What was that about?*

He stared at me for a second. "I'm going to hold your hand."

"I don't really like touch anymore." I said it a lot, come to think of it. I never told Ryker the same reason I pretended to be so fine in front of him. Letting him see weaknesses was hard.

He nodded. "I know. Just bear with me a second. If you hate it, I'll let go."

"Okay." That made little sense, but holding my hand wasn't like he was trying to sleep with me. I wasn't sure I could handle that at the moment. I'd have to stop him and probably end up leaving in the snow. Or maybe not. Cruise actually seemed like a pretty decent man, if there were any left in the world. He strung our hands together without saying anything else and then went back to looking out the window.

It wasn't too awful. My demon was being quiet—very much so for her—and not trying to bite his hand or pull it back or hit him. All of that was a positive thing. The snow drifted in swirling clouds of white specks. Too much more and I might not be able to leave the next day. Did I have a plan if I ended up snowed in? I yawned.

Tears filled my eyes. *Oh no. What is that?* I hadn't cried in years, but sure enough, hot wet tears leaked down my face. I brushed them away with my free hand. "I don't know what's happening."

That was true and there was nothing else to say about it.

"You're touch starved. Most of you are. She doesn't let you feel it, but it doesn't mean that it isn't hurting you. It's like...starving to death but not knowing. Or breaking your arm and not feeling the pain. Your ability to sense the trauma

doesn't change its impact." He squeezed our hands tighter. "Don't be embarrassed. It's actually a really good sign."

I wiped away the tears again. What else was I missing? That was an incredibly disturbing thought. "A really good sign of what?"

"That you're not dead inside." He squeezed again.

That was even worse. Tears poured, blurring my vision even as I tried to wipe them away. "How are you doing this? It's like you're bypassing her tonight."

"Not entirely. If I were able to do that, you'd be asleep upstairs. She's keeping you awake, and you can't even tell why you're crying. That's proof she's still holding on nice and tight, but she's probably subdued. We've done a lot of research about this subject."

Who was *we*? I would have to ask later because he kept speaking.

"And we know certain scents—something you're not even being allowed to smell right now—make them kind of lazy. It's like a little bit of a break for you, not a fix."

I never heard of anything like a scent to quiet my demon, not ever. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you, sorry. She'll either make it so you're allergic to it, burn down the trucks that deliver the stuff, or something equally awful. Eventually, she'll build a tolerance to it, so you don't want to use it too often. I used to put it on when my sisters would visit, which they weren't allowed to do very much. They both liked it, so I did it for you. I didn't ask permission because...I just didn't." He stared at me. "I do know about consent. I guess I want my house to be a demon-quieted zone."

Such a ridiculous statement, but it made me smile nonetheless. "I'm glad that you did."

"She knew it was happening—had to, even if she doesn't know what I'm using to do it. So...yeah. You probably won't be allowed over here very much, except I bet she also liked the

food, and not freezing to death. You might be allowed to come under specific circumstances.”

I liked that thought—Cruise to the rescue when I was desperate. No one ever rescued me. Ryker and I took care of each other, but sometimes I felt like a big giant friendship burden on him, even if he wasn't admitting it. Nathan took care of all the homeless. My mom hated me or at least she loved other things a lot more.

And I had unleashed Danvers back on the world. I was still sure there would be retribution for freeing that monster. *Yeah...I'm a mess.*

Jazz music played in the background. It was soothing. So was his hand and the way he would squeeze it every so often. I didn't consciously do it, but I laid my head down on his shoulder. The second I realized it, I jolted up. “Sorry.”

“Don't be.” With a gentle hand, he pushed my head back down on his shoulder. “I like it.”

I closed my eyes.

Minutes or moments later, I realized he carried me in his arms. *Where are we going?*

“She okay?” Was that Mary's voice?

“Quiet, she's actually sleeping,” Cruise answered. The firm softness of the mattress hit my back as he settled me onto the bed. “Hit the button, will you? She could sleep downstairs, where it was stronger. In here, she needs more so that thing can't keep her awake.”

There was a pause. “Of course. But I doubt it was the scent as much as it was you. We both know you like her. You have since the second you started talking to her over text.”

I liked him, too. I snuggled down, hugging the pillow. Sleeping on him in the living room was nice, but the bed was comfortable, so I let myself drift back off into nothingness. Sleeping surrounded by strangers in the tent city was awful. Anything could happen.

The door closed quietly with a click.



I ALMOST NEVER DREAMED ANYMORE, but I could tell it was a dream even as I experienced it.

I followed a pretty woman who reminded me of Mary, with the same brown hair falling to her shoulders as she floated like a ballerina ahead of me. It seemed impressive to my dream self that, although the white nightgown she wore reminded me of a hospital gown, she could still look so graceful in the ugly garment.

She spun to hold a fingertip over her lips, the universal sign of silence. I nodded, covering my lips to show her I wouldn't make a sound.

Her lips curled into a smile as she reached for my hand. I smiled and squeezed her fingertips, touched at her tenderness.

On quiet feet, we crept into a dark room. People lay strapped to tables lining the walls from one end of the long room to the other. They yelled and screamed, straining against their restraints as they cried out for help.

“Please, don't do this to me! It's killing me.”

“Quiet,” an older man with gray hair and scratches on his cheeks yelled at her, anger in his voice. “That's the demon speaking. You're here to be saved. Besides, if you die, at least you'll still have your soul.”

Oh fuck. I blinked. *These are the hunters, and that has to be the famous Robert Gage.* One of their exorcists.

One of the people rolled over as best she could to puke on the floor. Things became clearer. Everyone wearing black, including Robert, was trying to perform an exorcism on these people. They couldn't possibly all be qualified. It wasn't something you could learn to do like operating a machine.

The people were beat up. How had they all gotten there? Swollen eyes—someone hurt them, and it wasn't the demons.

My guide turned to me, squeezing my hand. “Be careful, Addalee. You're very important.”

I am?

I woke up, the sun coming through the windows through holes made when the fan over the bed hit the shade, making the light seem to move gently. I sat up. Wow. That was some dream. I looked around, surprised to find myself in the bedroom they'd loaned me the night before.

My phone, plugged in next to the bed—nice of either Cruise or Mary to plug it in for me—said it was almost eleven o'clock. What? I had never slept so late in my entire life. I flung my legs over the bed, surprised to find them wobbly, and went to the bathroom. I used the toothbrush someone had left out for me gratefully and washed my face.

Finally, I dressed in my warmest clothes, which included my sweatshirt, and made my way downstairs.

I followed the sound of a tv to the kitchen, where I found Willow reading at the table.

"I'm so sorry," I said as my demon surfaced.

"For what?" She leaned back. "Sleeping? Don't be. Hey, listen. That thing you said about—"

Whatever she was going to say got cut off when Cruise entered with a cheerful, "Hey. Good morning. I'm about to head into work. All government offices were shut down until noon because of the snow. Give you a ride? Unless you'd like to stay? That would be great, too."

Stay?

"We'll be leaving." My demon spoke through my mouth. "And you won't get to pull this again."

He rolled his eyes. "Aha. Okay. Quickly adaptable, I see. Sure. We'll go. Where shall I take you, Addalee?"

Mary bumped him in the side. "Not acknowledging it doesn't make the demon go away."

"You think I don't know that?" He sighed but went to the fridge and came back with a yogurt, which he handed me with a plastic spoon. "Eat that."

It was almost lunchtime. "I meet Ryker today for lunch at a bar near his house, assuming they're open. Could you drop me

off there? We do it twice a week. She likes it because there are lots of people to watch and mess with, and I like it because...”

Something flashed across his face. “Because he feeds you and doesn’t seem to pay attention to the fact that you are otherwise suffering. Yeah, I get it. Come on, you can leave the yogurt if you’re eating lunch.”

“She doesn’t need your permission to eat.” The demon again.

So this is what today is going to be like.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Cruise listened to more jazz in the car, and we didn't say much. My demon had a way of making rooms silent. She was great about that. Mary insisted I take her coat with me when I left.

"I can't take your coat," I tried to explain.

She shook her head. "It was Jamie's. She would want you to have it. She was always giving her stuff to other people. I can hear her now—why would you leave a perfectly good coat in my closet when Addalee could use it?"

I held it for a second. "Sometimes it's nice to hang on to things from people who aren't in our lives anymore."

I actually kept one of Ryker's baseball cards in my bag. It wasn't worth any money, but he gave it to me to hold one day, and I never gave it back. He was still in my life, but maybe it was anticipatory separation or something that had me keeping it. I knew someday he'd be gone.

"I have lots of things from her. Take this. Please." She hugged me then. "Tell your demon I said to go fuck herself."

With that, she turned and left. Willow waved from the kitchen. She wanted to tell me something, but I really had no idea what. Their lives weren't my business, though, even if I wished things were different.

The cold air hit me, but it had already warmed up enough that the snow melted from the trees onto the ground around us as Cruise drove down the highway. The mountains clawed up

at the too-blue sky like angry gray teeth. Seeing them always surprised me. We lived so close to them, but I couldn't see them most of the time, not from where I lived or how I spent my days.

“Thank you for last night.”

He turned his head to look at me. “You're welcome. We liked having you over. I'm glad I invited you. Come anytime you want. Open invitation.”

“Is Mary different now than before she was possessed?” I didn't know why I asked. I was always going to be this way, so what difference did it make?

He nodded. “For sure, yes. I'm different, too, and I wasn't possessed. We lost James—that played a huge role in it, I'm sure. But she's harder. Mary was fun. It was just the three of us and paid help to watch us through the trust. Technically, our uncle was our guardian, but he was never around. He died when Mary and James were eighteen, and they hadn't seen him in five years. Four for me, because I went out to see him to get some papers signed.”

I noticed Mary always called their late sister Jamie, but Cruise stuck to James. I wondered if the difference in names lingered from when she'd been alive.

He continued. “But it was just the three of us. She's not as easily joyful now. Ten years ago, she would've danced barefoot in the snow until I screamed at her to get inside before she got frostbite.”

I smiled, amused by the mental picture he painted. “Maybe it's more like she's an adult now?”

“Thrown into it early, more like, thanks to her demon. Yes, that's what it's like. Adulting. I had two people and the demons tried to take them from me. They got one.” He pulled up to the bar, shooting me a quick glance out of the side of his eye before popping the car in park. Ryker leaned against a wall outside, tucked into gloves, scarf and a hat, besides his work coat. His jeans were slightly stained, which told me he'd likely

spent the night plowing snow and didn't want to get a nicer pair ripped.

Cruise took my hand, squeezing my fingertips to capture my attention. "Text me later? Just to tell me you're safe. It's supposed to warm up tonight, but if I can ever help you... please come to me, okay?"

"I don't know if I can ever be as brave as your sisters." It wasn't easy to accept, but it was honest. I accepted being a coward.

"That's the demon talking, whether you know it or not. See you later, Addalee. Tell Ryker I said hello."

I stepped out of the car, and Cruise sped off. Ryker was by my side fast. "Was that your boss?"

"Yes. He says hello."

Ryker stared after his car for a second before he answered me. "Why were you with him? Did you work this morning?"

"No, I spent the night at his house." I headed toward the entrance.

"Wait. You did *what?*" Ryker caught up with me as I stepped inside the bar. Heads turned and people stared as I entered, but it wasn't unusual. Maybe some people could hide their possession, but I wasn't one of them. Everyone could tell, but the bar was owned by one of Ryker's cousins, and they didn't throw me out, which was nice.

We sat in our usual corner, and when I went to pick up the menu—I always looked, even though I always ordered the same thing—he grabbed it from me. "You spent the night with him?"

Oh, let's make him sweat this out. Come on. Let me play with him.

I wasn't in the mood to humor her. "Not like you're thinking, I just slept. He wanted me to meet his sister, so we had dinner with her. It started snowing, so he offered to let me stay. Then he drove me here this morning. He's just nice."

Their family was complicated, too, but there was no need to get into that with Ryker.

He blinked. “Oh. Yeah, I guess driving you home in the snow would be dangerous. You could have called me. I would’ve come with the plow.”

Ryker helped to run his uncle’s towing company. When it snowed, they made extra money plowing the driveways of private customers. The city took care of the roads, while he did the driveways. Aside from bringing in a huge influx of cash every year, it made him feel like he was doing a good deed. He was like a white knight with a tow truck.

“Hi there,” a voice said before Ryker’s girlfriend Jasmine—who smelled like vanilla all the time—slid in next to him. “I knew you two would be here.”

It wasn’t like it took a rocket scientist to figure it out. We had lunch there twice a week on the same days at exactly the same times.

“Hi,” I said as I tried to be polite. My demon started laughing and Jasmine’s vanilla scent hit me even harder—the demon being really shitty by amplifying the aroma. If she kept it up, I might not even be able to eat.

Ryker asked, “What are you doing here?” She kissed him on the cheek in response.

“Oh, I was hungry. I had to come and say hello, let you feed me, too. You will feed me, won’t you, Ryker? I missed you last night. I thought I wasn’t going to lose you to the snow plow again this year, and then it frickin’ snows again.”

Maybe I’ll eat something different today, I thought, scanning the menu. *Like soup.* I liked soup. *Tomato soup and a grilled cheese.* It sounded way better than my usual chicken sandwich.

“I missed you, too,” Ryker said softly. I raised my eyebrows and snuck a look at him over the menu. “But you know this is my time with Addalee. It’s not like we had plans last night.”

“Ryker John Williams, are you asking me to leave so you can have lunch with this demon-infested homeless girl?” she practically shouted. “I can tell you there isn’t a person in this room who wouldn’t rather see me sitting here than her. Your mother practically *begs* me to rid her from your life.”

Ryker’s lips thinned. “Don’t talk about Addalee that way. What happened to her could happen to any of us. It’s not her fault. She’s my best friend, and what the fuck, she’s not homeless.”

“Oh, but she *is*.” Jasmine pointed at me. “I saw you. I drove past the tent city on Broad last week and saw you there. That’s where you’re living, right? Because you’re one of *them*. A dirty, nothing, homeless bitch who got possessed because there was something wrong with her. Now we’re all expected to be nice and kind and act like you didn’t somehow do this to yourself? Well, guess what? I’m sick of it, and so is everyone I know. All the violence? It’s people like you, but I won’t let you destroy Ryker.”

Wow. She’s really on a roll.

The sick thing was my demon really liked it. I wondered if she’d be nearly as proud of herself if she realized she pleased the demon.

Instead of pointing it out, I sat back and set down the menu. “I *am* homeless. I’ve been homeless for over a year now.”

Ryker widened his eyes. “You’re *what*? Why wouldn’t you have said something?”

“Because she’s a liar. All of them are.” Jasmine practically glowed with her pleasure in saying the words.

Okay, enough. The old me would have cried. Maybe, as Cruise put it, I cried on the inside still and didn’t even know it. Regardless of what soft feelings I had or might genuinely experience, my demon had enough of Jasmine. If this would be the last time I ever saw Ryker, I might as well go out with a bang.

“Thank you for continuing to be my friend when the whole world feels like she does about me.” I wished for whatever scent Cruise piped into his house, because it would be nice to have a way to push her back. Not that it mattered—in that moment, my demon wasn’t letting me feel any of it anyway. “I am lost. She’s not wrong. I’m all the things she says I am and worse. Last week, I helped rob a liquor store. My demon just wanted to do it. I don’t even drink.” I shrugged then leaned forward. “But I’m carrying around a *demon*, you fucking bitch. So if you want to play, you get to play with her. Trust me on this, you really don’t want to piss me off, Jasmine.”

I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. Whatever happened next, I figured it still would be the last time I would ever get to eat in Ryker’s cousin’s bar.



ALL OF MY stuff bounced along with me on the city bus. I held my hair in my left hand and brushed against my bag as we hit a particularly aggressive bump. I looked down.

Oh, what the fuck? I looked around. *Okay. I lost time.* The sun hung low in the sky. *Quite a lot of time, actually.* I might have wreaked havoc on the whole city. Was I running from the police?

I’d never let that happen. I have no interest in jail.

Was she going to tell me what happened? Crickets met my thought, so I sat back. *Okay. Where am I?* I recognized Grand Avenue out the window. If I got off there, I could walk to the northern tent cities for the night. I reached in my pocket, happy to find the money still there. I blew out a relieved breath and my stomach growled. I clearly didn’t eat while I was out of it.

When the bus stopped at the next stop, I got off, keeping my head down. No one looked at each other, and I was grateful for it. I didn’t need any more attention, not when I still didn’t even know how I’d spent the day.

Three blocks later, I arrived at the edge of the tent city. Or what had been a tent city but now hung in tatters. People

milled around the torn-up tents and dumped fire pits. I sighed. The hunters made such a mess. They always did.

I spotted a fire built from the wreckage near the center of what had been the city, so I headed that direction. If I could get my tent close to the fire, I'd be warmer tonight. Lance waved to me, and I approached him slowly, surprised to see he sported a black eye. "What happened to you?"

He shrugged. "I tried to intervene. Young mother. I didn't want him to take her. He punched me." He frowned. "I'll heal. The authorities came and took the kids this morning. We both know that won't go well, since they'll never see their mother again."

Deplorable didn't begin to cover how disgusting it was when demons took over parents. No one loved or needed me around, but kids needed their parents.

Lance shook off his dark thoughts, focusing on the problems at hand.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No. Just get set up for tonight. Nathan came around, possibly looking for you. I'm not sure. Thought maybe they got you."

I touched his arm. He still needed touch. Maybe somewhere inside of me, I did too. "I'm still here. For today, anyway."

Lance's face crumpled into sad lines. "You know...I know you're one of them, but you're so nice, Addalee. Is it possible that thing could go away and leave you alone someday?"

Ryker wanted to know that, too. He wouldn't care anymore. He'd be done with me. "Probably not, but thanks."

I set up my tent quickly. Lance had helped me the first couple of nights, until I got the hang of it. He was the nice one, making it seem even more unfair that the world remained cruel to him. Me, I could understand, but not him. I had laid out my bed, bundled up under my jacket, when I saw the tear.

That bitch tore my new jacket. Fuck. I lay back. *I really liked this thing.* It had been a gift and now it was torn.

Mary, if I ever saw her again, would think I couldn't take care of my things.

I listened to the cars going down Astor to Onna Street. I needed to do laundry and wished I thought of it when I was at Cruise's. Maybe they would've let me use their machines.

"Addalee?" Ryker stuck his head in the tent. "Oh, good. It's you. That guy said it was you in here. I found you."

I lifted my head, surprised to see him. "Ryker? Why were you looking for me?"

"I needed to see if you were okay. I wanted to know where you were living. See it for myself. Tell you how sorry I am for what happened today. And I also wanted to see if I could get you to leave here. The hunters come regularly. That's what I've heard, anyway."

Ryker sat down across from me. I abruptly remembered another time in a tent with him. When we were about eleven and thirteen respectively, we stayed in a tent one night for fun in the backyard. Back when his mother liked me and used to invite me over to do things.

It was a fun memory, but it faded quickly. I certainly wasn't camping out for fun anymore. "Ryker." I sighed. "My demon detests you. She's always threatening to get you possessed and doesn't because I push about it, but honestly, I'm not sure how long I'll be able to protect you from her. It would be better for you if you just left me alone."

"I'm not scared of your demon."

I sat up, spine straight even as my lips curled in a smile. "You should be. I look like a twenty-something blonde woman. I can assure you that she does *not*." I only saw her once, when she took me, and once was enough. I shuddered at the memory. "I'm not the girl you grew up with, okay? She's dying. In the meantime, I'm something else, and even this will be gone soon. You might as well step away now. My only choice is to continue to let her eat me up inside. Otherwise, I

could let some crazies pretending to be religious figures try to take her out of me. Most people die. I do horrible things. I can't taste food unless she lets me. Can't smell things unless she lets me. I don't like to be touched, and other than last night—which is a long story—I haven't smiled and meant it in years. I think she only lets me see you because you feed me. So go away, Ryker. Go live your life. Marry Jasmine. Your whole family will be so relieved. I don't even know what I did to her today. I didn't kill her, did I?"

You didn't. I am loving this so much. We are going to go a step further.

What did she mean by that? Ryker might have started to say something, but I continued, whether I wanted to or not.

"I was coming to tell you that I loved you. Instead, I saw you with her for the first time. Right after that, I got possessed. I'm sad and pathetic, even when I'm not possessed. I was never the girl you thought I was, not even back then. But the good news is I can't love at all now, so don't worry about my feelings. I don't even like you because I can't like anyone. She decides what emotions I'm allowed to experience, not me. So go away, Ryker. Go live your life." I waved my hand, gesturing him away.

Instead, he frowned. "Is that true?"

"Which part?" I sighed. "All of it was true."

"Addalee Ackers, I've been in love with you my whole life. How could you think otherwise? Jasmine is gone. I broke up with her, which your demon doesn't want you to remember. I broke up with her the second she put her hands on you. You ripped out her hair and shoved her on the ground right before my cousin threw her out. Then you ran. I've been looking for you ever since."

I let out a breath. "I can't love you. That's gone. It's the first thing they kill."

"I don't believe that. You're still you. I know you are. I didn't understand how you were hurting because you didn't let

me know. You did that because you love me, okay? I get that. It's not okay. I wanted to know. I would've taken care of you."

Did he really believe this crap? "The first thing my friends did was throw me out of my apartment. I lost my job instantly. You couldn't have taken care of me. You'd probably be dead by now, if you had attempted it." I sounded hysterical. "Just go. Surely people need tows today. Don't you have work to do?"

Instead, he lay down next to me. What in the hell was he doing?

"I don't like to be touched," I said quickly, my voice high and shrill.

"I'm not touching you." He stared at the top of the tent. "I didn't think you had those feelings for me. Not ever. I was pretty sure I was doomed to love you forever, unrequited. When did you start feeling that way? Back when you could, I mean."

His last sentence sounded disbelieving. I rolled my eyes. "What difference does it make?"

"I'd just like to know... how long exactly I fucked up my whole life."

My demon sort of liked the way he worded it. I tried to remember, tried to feel it. "I think I loved you from the time I was ten years old. The first time I saw you...boom. You were everything."

"That long?" He closed his eyes. "I have a lot of things to think about, but you aren't going to be living in this tent. Get your things together. You're coming home with me."

No way. No how.

"I'm sorry, Ryker. Thank you for the offer, but I'm not living with you. She says no. When she doesn't want me to go, it means that my body will literally not move. I'm not in charge of things."

He leaned up on his elbow. "Then I'll stay here with you."

Also a big no.

Maybe he read it on my face because he frowned. “She only hates me this much because you love me. She knows that, so she hates me.”

“Loved.” He wasn’t getting it—past tense. “Besides, you weren’t in love with me. You had girlfriends. You have—sorry, *had*—Jasmine.”

He took my hand in his and I thought about telling him to drop it. “You had boyfriends, too, Addalee. We made mistakes. It’s not too late to fix them.”

“It is.” I patted him on the arm. “Time for you to go.”

He put his head back down. “Not yet.”

“Okay.”

My demon grumbled but didn’t force him out of the tent. Instead, I let him hold my hand while he lay next to me. Eventually, I became aware that he was asleep. It would be hard not to know it. Ryker had always snored. It had been my favorite sound when we were kids. It meant I wasn’t alone in my mother’s house, where any guys who wanted her might also decide they wanted me. I pushed away the thought.

Let’s go kill them. Every one of them.

I wouldn’t have any control if she decided she wanted to kill them. I’d discovered just how far I could go today. Jasmine had pissed me off, and not only did I have zero control over what happened, I’d actively been happy it was about to happen. I slipped into this place where I was losing myself. Maybe I lost myself a long time ago and I was only aware after meeting Mary.

I let go of Ryker’s hand and slipped out of my tent. Someone nearby strummed a guitar. The tents had filled in since I went inside. Other possessed returned to what little we had left. We stared at each other in silence, the others dropping their gazes. My demon was badass, even though she had behaved more often than most other demons since she arrived. It was like the others couldn’t control themselves while she could most of the time.

It made her more nefarious.

“Hey.” Nathan waved as he walked toward me. “Glad to see you, though I sort of hoped you’d stay at Cruise’s. I’m sure he would let you, but I’m glad to see you again. You have a coat. That’s good. I was going to bring you one tomorrow when I got back from the store.”

Nathan seemed almost nervous, which was unusual for him. Normally, he practically radiated calm, even as my demon screamed her hatred of him.

“Are you okay?” I so rarely asked others the question. She had definitely made me more narcissistic, not that there was much I could do about it.

He met my gaze for a long moment. “I’m having a rush day, but it’ll be fine, thank you for asking.” He lifted his hand and cupped my cheek. “Don’t let her tell you that you’re not important. You’re very important, Addalee.”

Why did he say that? My dream from the night before hit me. “I dreamed that someone said that to me. I didn’t understand it when she said it, and I sure don’t understand now. I wasn’t important before I was possessed, and I’m certainly not with a demon on board.”

“Hey.” Ryker came out of my tent, rubbing his eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. Are you okay?”

Nathan didn’t drop his hand, and I had no interest in telling him to move it. Why was that? Cruise’s smell concoction was nowhere to be found.

“What’s going on?” Ryker asked again, coming closer.

“Nathan, this is my friend Ryker. Ryker, this is Nathan. He helps us around here.”

Nathan dropped his hand and offered it to Ryker. “Nice to meet you.”

After they shook hands, Nathan said, “You’re going to do a better job of taking care of this lovely girl.”

It didn’t sound like a question, nor did it entirely make sense, but Ryker nodded. “Yes, but she’s kicking me out tonight.”

“That’s okay. I’m here tonight.” Nathan nodded to me. “Let me ask you something, Addalee. If you were your demon, would you have possessed someone who wasn’t important?”

Ahhh! My demon yelled so loudly that my ears rang, and I fell backward. Ryker caught me. “Whoa. What’s going on?”

I wasn’t sure I could explain it. She hated Ryker, but she wanted Nathan *dead*, and for just a second, it seemed like his eyes glowed gold when he stared at me. When I looked at him again, the illusion had vanished. Did I imagine the whole thing?

CHAPTER

SIX

Ryker didn't want to leave. Now that he'd gotten the information about my situation fully worked out in his head, he was rather sure I should spend twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week with him. It also seemed he loved me too. Or loved whoever I'd been when I'd been longing for his love. Now, I just couldn't feel a thing at all.

"I don't understand why you can sleep at Cruise's house but not mine." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I am just as capable of giving you a bed and feeding you breakfast. You don't want to touch? Fine, I'll sleep on the couch or on the other side of the bed with a barrier between us. Surely the demon must prefer sleeping in warmth than out here."

The poor boy. I would almost feel bad for him...if I didn't want to kill him so badly.

I sighed. "If you could hear how she talks about you, you wouldn't want me around you at all. For your own safety, I suggest you stay away. Secondly, I hardly ever sleep. Last night, I only slept because Cruise knew some trick to screw with the demon. Otherwise, I'm wide awake most nights. I haven't slept more than a few hours a week for years. She lets me have enough to stay alive. Barely. You don't want me with you. I won't sleep tonight. Go home. See if you can make up with Jasmine. Maybe she'll suck your dick."

Oh, the last bit was entirely the demon, and I winced internally despite my expression likely hiding my discomfort.

He ran a hand through his hair. “Too bad she doesn’t know I would prefer to give head than receive it.” Ryker leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Someday, when you’re not dealing with this crap, I’ll show you.”

I didn’t want to be touched, and he’d just kissed me. Still, I remembered what happened at Cruise’s. I should probably just put up with people’s affection if they wanted to give it. Somewhere inside, I needed it.

“I love you, Addalee. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I should have manned up and done it. I was so afraid of losing you, it seemed better to say nothing to ensure I could still be part of your life.” Ryker looked pale. “Please be careful tonight, and I’m going to check on you tomorrow.”

He should just go fuck the hell off.

“Ryker, I’m not here all the time. I have to move locations. There are eight, maybe a ninth coming, tent cities around town. To avoid the hunters and sometimes the authorities, I move around a lot. If your cousin doesn’t hate me too much now, I’ll find you at our lunch stop. That’s the best I can do.”

He took two steps back. “I get that’s the best you can do, but it’s not the best I can do. I’m going to find you every day unless you come home with me. That’s the deal. Let her dwell on that.”

Ryker turned to leave, and I watched him move in the almost complete darkness. The fire in the pit lit the area, but otherwise it was night, and I was once again spending it all but completely outside. Nathan grabbed Ryker’s arm and they walked off together. What were they saying?

And what had happened with Nathan’s eyes?

“Was that real?”

Alone I could speak to her.

Someday you won’t care about speaking to me in public. Then you’ll know you’re really lost to me.

“That wasn’t what I asked you.”

I know.

So she wasn't going to give me any answers? I didn't want to sit in the tent and obsess. Maybe I'd go ask Nathan himself. *Hey, Nathan, remember that weird thing a few minutes ago? Yeah, did your eyes go gold? Or is she messing with my vision, too, now?*

Yep. That was just what I was going to do.

My phone dinged with a text from Cruise. *You okay? Too cold?*

Sweet, but why? Why did he keep doing that?

The demon decided I shouldn't answer him, so instead I pulled my jacket tighter and went to see if Nathan was still around. Outside of his visits, the man was mysterious. I didn't know what he did for a living when he wasn't do-gooding. I didn't know where he lived. Or what his story was. He was just gorgeous, helpful, and maybe also had something woo-woo going on .

The city was quiet. For all that we were homeless and in dire need of help—some of us more than others—there was little to no crime there.

It was peaceful most of the time, which was also strange. Why was that?

I hadn't asked questions in a long time, but right then I had a ton, and I wanted to know things again. I walked the perimeter of the camp before I stopped abruptly. On the ground, next to me, a distance from the fire, was a woman.

She was dead.

She wasn't the first corpse I'd ever seen. Even before my situation changed, a lot of the people in my life died earlier than the national average. Illness, disease, addiction, mental health struggles—all of it added up to death being a relatively normal situation around me. But this was different.

I bent over to stare at her. She was roughly my age, with blonde hair and blue eyes. Someone would have called her beautiful, as they used to occasionally say to me.

But she was dead.

What happened to her? She wasn't wearing a coat; had she frozen to death? Who was she? I'd never seen her before or never noticed that I had. *There are so many of us here.*

"She's dead." A voice I'd only heard once before spoke and I looked up, nearly jolting backward.

It was him. Danvers. The demonically possessed guy from the prison. He wore jeans, a black shirt visible slightly under his jacket, and some black boots.

My demon gasped. *He's here. How exciting.* I swallowed. It couldn't be good that she liked him so much. *He's famous. You've seen movies based on things he's done.*

I didn't want to know. I really didn't.

"Did you kill her?" It seemed an important question to ask.

He looked down at her and then back at me. "I don't think so. No, it's not possible. I just got here. I've been elsewhere." He stepped over the dead body and into my space. "Where are we staying?"

Had I missed something? "We?"

"Yes. I told you. If you let me out, you have to deal with me. I'm here. I'm staying with you. My demon likes yours. Says that she's very powerful." So I kept being told. "Where are we staying?"

She pointed for me. "Over there. Follow me."

So this is happening. At least he wouldn't want to have sex with me. He might want to beat me to death, but I could probably take him on, too.

Not for a while at least. He's much too fun for that.

We walked together to my tent, and he went inside, throwing down his backpack. I didn't know anything about the man, but he was going to be my roommate.

I didn't have any experience for this kind of situation. Exactly how was someone supposed to behave in these circumstances? I put out my hand. "Hi, I'm Addalee."

He placed his in mine. "Danvers."

“How did you find me?” That seemed like as good a place as any to start. I didn’t exactly have a home listing.

“I went to two other tent cities first. A junkie in the second one told me you were probably here. You were.”

He stretched backward and stared at the ceiling of my tent. This had to rank among the strangest situations in an already bizarre life. Did he really intend to stay with me?

“Can’t you go home? You want to stay here and live in this tent with me?” Maybe he forgot if he had a home. He was gorgeous and buff. Surely some woman somewhere—or maybe a man—would be glad to have him back.

He didn’t even blink as he answered me. “I killed my aunt. No one will want me back.”

Well...okay. That was that. “Did she deserve killing?”

“Does anyone? That’s not the way they work, and you know it. He wanted her dead, so she died. I can’t go home, and I wouldn’t want to, anyway. I wanted to stay in prison, and you chose to out me to the district attorney, so now we’re both in this tent. So be it. We’ll be besties soon. Isn’t that the phrase?”

I sat down. My demon reveled in his presence, like she’d just met a movie star. I grabbed my phone. Ryker would be no help, and I didn’t have a number for Nathan. There wasn’t anything I could do anyway, but someone should know he was in my tent.

Danvers has moved into my tent. Don’t do anything. I just wanted someone to know. I managed to hit send before she realized and stopped me. That would be all I’d get away with for the night.

He’d know who that was, had probably been the one to let him out earlier in the day.

There really was just one more thing to ask him before we became two possessed people alone in this tent together until something else happened. “Are you still in there or is it mostly just him?”

That got his attention. He sat up, leaning on the back of his arms to speak to me. “It’s mostly just him. I’m losing more and more time. I remember getting here. That’s about it. I liked the prison. We both did. Plenty of people for him to fuck with and I wasn’t at risk of killing innocents. How much of you is left in there?”

I thought about the fact that I’d cried and didn’t know why I had been, that maybe I was losing myself more and more each day and didn’t even seem to care about it that much. Other people did but not me. Near strangers gave a shit, and I was barely conscious of it. “I’m not sure.”

“The spiral down will be fast soon.” He lay back down. “Don’t worry about me. I never had much of a future. I was born cursed. Some people are.”

Maybe I was, too.



THERE WAS nothing more disconcerting than essentially waking up from what felt like a haze, carrying a baseball bat having just, very obviously, smashed in a car window. Danvers laughed, a dark deep sound while he dropped his bat and got on his knees. Someone—maybe the owner of the car we just smashed up—stood holding a gun right at his head.

I dropped my bat. Bat versus gun. I knew how it would end.

“Do it,” he taunted the older gentleman. Where were we? I looked around. Some random nice neighborhood, with big houses done in Tudor style. Okay, probably the west side of town, with the good public schools and the neighborhood watches. *Fuck me*. Why had we done this?

“Don’t make me.” The man’s voice shook, and that wasn’t a good sign.

I had to think of something. Police sirens sounded in the distance.

“We’re possessed,” I told him and he jarred at my voice. Had he forgotten I was there? On the outside, Danvers was a

lot scarier than me. “It hurts. All the time. And you do bad things you’d never do otherwise, but we love company.” I grabbed onto the gun holder’s arm. “We like to have more demons. We could make you one.” I gave him my best evil smile, which might look deranged because I’d never done it before. “Or you could let us go. Which one is it? Demon? Or you tell the police we escaped, your insurance pays for this mess, and we all get on with our night? Unless you want to feel what this is like?”

He outright shook under my hand, terrified. He dropped the gun. “Go. Don’t make me one of you. I want to go to heaven.”

I didn’t know anything about that, and maybe I never would. Danvers rose, and I grabbed the gun before he could. Neither of us were safe with that thing, but I had to believe I was still safer than he was with it.

“Move.” I nodded in the direction I wanted to go. The police would come up Broad Street to get us. We had to go down Chester to get away from them. “Run.”

He shot me a look. “You should have let him shoot me.”

So the real Danvers was there; his demon would never have said that. “Leave me out of your death wishes,” I suggested.

We ran together down the block. “I think you know I didn’t have anything to do with this anymore than you did, Addalee.”

He wasn’t wrong, but why had we come back to ourselves right when we did? Where was my demon? “Why did we beat up his car?”

“For fun. It’s always for fun with him.” He took my hand. “Also, for the record, I don’t have a death wish. I have a desire to cease this pain.”

I nodded. Actually, I could understand that. “I’m not there.”

“You are. You just don’t know it yet.”



BY THE TIME we reached the tent, my demon was back and happily humming in my ear. I hated that sound. The only thing worse was whistling. History taught me she'd be doing that next. Nathan stood outside the tent, his arms crossed, staring at Danvers.

“You don't belong here. Leave her alone.”

Danvers' demon appeared in his eyes, and mine surged forward as well. I didn't disappear. I couldn't tell if it was because she was too tired to knock me out, or if she wanted me to see her current antics. Either way, she used my mouth and I knew it.

“Are you particular about who you decide to take on, freak?” Danvers approached Nathan. His demon demanded, “Or do you just like her because she's blonde and helpless? Or at least she used to be. She's not so helpless anymore, is she?”

Nathan smiled at him, but no mirth existed in the expression. “There is more going on here than you would understand. You're a mid-level nothing that her demon is temporarily interested in indulging. Go live your own life, but do it away from her.”

“You don't know the first thing about how we work. You never will.” She spit at him. “Go back to your life and leave us alone. She doesn't require your help. Aren't you supposed to be so holy? Doesn't he deserve your so-called saving too? Or do you reserve your salvation for women you want to fuck?”

Nathan shook his head. “You aren't going to be around much longer to talk out of her mouth. You thought you were clever, taking her before she understood anything. But now we have you.”

“I'll give her to hunters before I let you have her.” My demon was furious, my spine straight with her anger.

I never floated into the sky before. If someone asked me before that moment if I *could* float, I probably would've laughed. But one second, I stood on the ground, the next I lay flat on my back in the sky, hovering over the ground. Danvers

smiled, watching me. I had the sense he could float, too, if he wanted, but the idea didn't bring me comfort. I tore at my clothes, tugging them away from my body as if they abraded my skin.

The cognitive dissonance in my brain became a scream. We were in the middle of the tent city, and I was about to be naked.

Nathan made a sound—something that came out a little bit like a harumph. He wasn't impressed with the display, clearly.

He should be. I am powerful. Evil. I knew no one could stop me or mess with my plans. He only *thought* he had any sense of any of it.

Then I started laughing.

Even though, in my own head, it was just the sound of my own voice screaming, it reverberated through my ears, a wail like a siren.



I HONESTLY WAS NOT sure what happened next. My next conscious thought was waking up with my head against the glass of the front seat of Cruise's car. I blinked, trying to make sense of things, remember falling asleep, figure out why I was in his car and how and when I got there—anything.

Cruise wasn't alone, I noticed, scanning the area. Ryker and Nathan sat in the backseat.

"It can't continue like this. She has to be told." Nathan looked out the window, so he hadn't noticed I was awake. "Before it's too late. That was end-level stuff, there. She may be further along than we realized."

Ryker shook his head. "How can it be that bad? I mean, I'm new to this, but look at her. She still looks like Addalee."

"I buried a woman today who died from her possession. They found her on the ground. She never looked sick. Don't go by your eyes; use your gut. How does she *feel* right now?"

I couldn't see what Ryker did, though it seemed to be some gesture with his hands, but he made a sad sound. "Like she's

hurting. I just want to bring her home.”

“I’m bringing her home.” Cruise took my hand. “And she’s awake, aren’t you, Addalee?”

I nodded. “I think so. Something is off.”

“She’s sleeping. Your demon. She’s out cold for a bit,” Nathan explained. “It won’t last, but Cruise knows a couple of interesting tricks. Coupled with my knowledge of her, we were able to knock her out for a bit.”

I rubbed my eyes. “What happened to Danvers?”

“I left him in your tent.” Nathan shook his head. “I’d help him if I could, but I think he’s too far gone. We’re going to start to get you better tonight. It’s early, but she’s leaving us no choice.”

Dizziness wafted through me, and I closed my eyes. “Early for what? I’m possessed. Death is possible at any time. We all know that.” I opened my eyes when my tears started. “This is like bringing someone back after death to say goodbye. At least, that’s what this feels like. I mean...I’ve known Ryker my whole life.” I tried to turn to look at him. “Might be better if you hadn’t done this to him.”

Nathan grabbed my arm and squeezed. “You’re *not* dying. You’re screaming in pain, and I’m so sorry you’re hurting.”

What did he know of it? “What are you?”

“I’m a human guy with a couple extra talents.” He stepped back, hiding his face in shadows whether by intention or coincidence. “Some time, centuries ago, someone in my family got busy with an angel. Due to that happy accident, I inherited some extra abilities that make me immune to demons and their shit. I can also help, at least a little bit, people who are possessed.”

Angels? When I would have turned around completely, Cruise put a hand on my knee. “Easy. Stay where you are. Seatbelt. We’re dealing with demons and angels, but you could still die if I skid out of control on ice.”

“Try not to?” Ryker looked out the window. “Neither she nor I were raised with any religious background. Would she have been safe if we’d been baptized or something?”

Cruise answered with a shrug. “Doesn’t seem to do much of anything. Plenty of deeply religious folks are possessed. Nathan’s an atheist.” He looked in the rearview mirror at the man with the angel DNA.

“Yep,” Nathan agreed then shrugged. “It’s complicated, but this isn’t about me. We’re almost there.”

None of it made any sense. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“Home,” Cruise said and smiled. “I’ve got some things that might help.”

“Help with what?” They needed to start making sense before my demon woke up and exploded their car. “I’m so tired.”

Ryker took off his seatbelt and leaned forward to stroke my hair. “I know you are. We all know you’re tired, Addalee. I think these guys know what they’re doing. They have a lot of experience, and I’m catching up. We’re going to get you better. You’ve always been very important to me. It seems you’re possibly important to a lot more people than we realized.”

I closed my eyes. “People keep saying that, even dream people.”

“Maybe you should listen?” Cruise pulled the car up his driveway. “And let us take care of you.”

“Why would you want to take care of me? And don’t say it’s because I’m important, because that doesn’t make any sense. Why would I suddenly be important today after not being worth a shit yesterday?”

Cruise’s lips curled in a slow smile. “Okay, maybe he’s right. Maybe it has to do with you being a cute blonde.” He winked and my cheeks heated up. “When this is over, I would like to take you on a date. How about that? Does that work for you?”

“I think you’ll have to fight us for that privilege, too.” Nathan laughed. “So...yeah. Maybe we all have an Addalee agenda. That being said, you’re very important.”

I groaned, which made Ryker laugh. Another flush of pleasure heated my cheeks—it wasn’t typical, making it feel like something special to be able to amuse him at all. “Most of the time I’m so cold,” I confessed.

“We’ll see if we can get you warmed up for a little while.”

I closed my eyes, wondering if it could even still be possible for me to experience warmth.



“IF YOU’VE BEEN in her life forever, why am I just now meeting you?” Nathan leaned against a window frame, his steady gaze focused out the window. I blinked, his figure snapping into clearer focus as I stared. He spoke to Ryker, who I noticed sat snuggled up on a couch under a soft looking blanket. *Where am I?* It wasn’t Cruise’s house or anywhere I recognized immediately.

Ryker shook his head. “I’m just meeting you, too. She kept me in the dark about most of this. She might have been trying to protect me, but I don’t know. Addalee always kept secrets, and she never was the type to tell people when she needed help. Instead, she took care of everyone, and she started with her mom.”

I jolted upward, panic making the blood in my veins seem to turn to ice. “My mom? I never saw her after the snow. She usually goes to a shelter when it snows, but I didn’t check to make sure she made it to one. What kind of daughter am I? I mean, *shit*.”

Nathan whirled around, catching my elbows in his hands. “I saw her today. She’s fine. I check on her for you, and you know that. This is okay. You are in Cruise’s basement.”

My heart rate slowed a bit, and my breath trembled out of me. I put my head in my hands, and I noticed my fingers shook. “What is going on?”

Nathan knelt in front of me. “Addalee, your name means *second chance*. Did you know that?”

I lifted my head. “No. What does it matter?”

He smiled slightly. “In your case, it’s just a lucky coincidence. Some people are born with the ability to get the demons out of themselves. They’re also people who can conduct successful exorcisms. There aren’t many, which was why your demon took you when she did. She intentionally possessed you before you could learn how to do what needs done, but we’re going to fix that. We hoped you would just figure it out on your own one day, but time is going by way too fast, and you need a lesson.”

I scowled at him. It all sounded like the biggest load of crap I had ever heard.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

“If people could get demons out of themselves, it would’ve been all over the news. It would be the biggest story of the year. Of *any* year.”

Nathan sighed. “No, actually, because the only ones who can do it are like me. Meaning anyone with these abilities inherited them from some kind of relationship to angels. There are different degrees, of course. For example, I have a lot of angel DNA, so they can’t possess me at all. You? They could still get you, but they can’t keep you if you decide to end it.”

I could stop it? I jerked to my feet. “Why wouldn’t you have told me that first? And...angel DNA? I mean, *fuck*. Sorry. Why wouldn’t you have told me before?”

Cruise leaned against the door, his gaze steady. “Listen, you’re supposed to figure things out for yourself and just do it. Historically, even in all the literature, that’s how it plays out. So Nathan watched you, and we waited for you to do the thing—to figure it out and just do it. But instead, it was getting worse. At this point, we’d rather tell you and help you than lose you. There aren’t that many of you left, and you can help a lot of people, once you’ve gotten rid of your demon.” He frowned. “I’m trying to learn how to do it, but I don’t have a great track record. No one has died on me yet, but I can’t handle the whole thing by myself. If I could do it, I’d do it for you. Gladly. I like you. Ryker obviously likes you. Nathan does, too. We’d all help you, if we could.”

My mind whirled. “I don’t have angel DNA, Cruise. Look at me. I’m...nothing.” I whirled around. “I’ve always been

nothing. Now I'm just a possessed nothing."

Ryker jumped to his feet. "You have never been nothing. Don't talk about yourself that way. The demon has been lying to you. That's not you. You're everything to a bunch of people. I've known you nearly my whole life. These two have only met you recently and even they can see it. I get that it's hard for you to believe, but that's okay. You don't have to believe it right now, love. Let us know it *for* you."

Tears flooded my eyes, so I blinked them away furiously. *This is insanity.* "How do you know I have this...angel DNA?" I gestured with my hand as I said it, as if flapping my fingers somehow would make it sound less ridiculous. It didn't, but no one laughed.

Nathan took my hand, stilling my restless fingers. "We can always recognize our own. It's why you liked me right away. I knew what you were, too. You're like me, Addalee. Your demon—the nasty bitch—she knows what you are. She's very high level, which is why she did this to you. She knew she would get clout for killing you. Slowly. For torturing you. And I can't allow her to get away with it anymore."

I swallowed. Maybe I was having a nightmare? "So...what do I do?"

The doorbell rang and Cruise walked over to a screen to peer outside. "Fuck. Really?"

"Who is it?" A wave of dizziness made the room spin, so I abruptly sat down on the couch before I fell over. I needed to sleep so badly, I knew, blinking my dry eyes. I also knew my demon wouldn't be gone for long. She would find a way to push through whatever barrier they used to keep her out. I had to be awake while she wasn't if I wanted a shot in hell of surviving her.

Cruise groaned. "Your demon friend."

My...what? I blinked. "Danvers?"

Nathan groaned. "He is the worst of the worst, and he's triggering your demon to act up more than normal. I can't... how did he find you?"

I shrugged, trying to focus past the dizziness. “I have no earthly idea. I didn’t tell him, not that I can remember, at least. I don’t know what I say sometimes. Maybe I gave him the address?” I couldn’t think of any reason why I’d tell him where to find me. Why would I? Besides, how would I have known to tell Danvers to look for me here if I came up missing?

Cruise headed upstairs without another word. Ryker walked over to me, kneeling by my side, but he spoke to Nathan rather than me. “Addalee is the kindest person I know, end of story. She takes care of everyone else, putting herself last time and again. It doesn’t surprise me to hear she carries angel blood. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve never met anyone else who made more sense to be an angel.”

Nathan rubbed my shoulder. “Yes.”

“So how does she get the demon out?”

He shook his head, looking away. “I’ve never been possessed, so honestly, I don’t know. That’s where Cruise comes in, since his training is in exorcisms. He studied this, and I’m here to make sure you’re safe. I want to feed you energy and keep you calm until we’re sure you’re safe.”

The door swung open, and Cruise reentered dragging Danvers behind him. I shot to my feet, despite the dizziness.

Danvers wilted, passing out on the couch I just vacated.

Cruise snorted. “The herbs hit him hard, I guess. I thought...maybe he could use a demon break, too.”

I pressed my fingertips against Danvers’s throat, checking for a pulse. His heart beat steady under my touch, his throat rising and falling with his every breath.

I asked, “Did he just pass out?”

Cruise gestured, blowing out a long breath before he explained, “He said, *I’m here for Addalee. She’s my friend, and I’ll always track her.* Then, he stepped inside, and before I could do anything, he passed the fuck out.”

Nathan stared down at the steady rise and fall of Danvers' chest. "He's exhausted. The tiredness in him is the extremest I've ever seen in all of my years of working with the possessed. I don't know why he killed his aunt, but I don't get the feeling Danvers is a bad guy, if he wasn't possessed. He doesn't set off my sociopath alarms."

I put my hand on Danvers' forehead. "He has nowhere to go, which was why he was in my tent. He wanted to stay in prison, since his demon liked it there. Can we help him?"

"We can." Cruise stood next to me. "The same way that I helped you. For just a few minutes, we can treat him like a human. Then we can see if that helps. In the meantime, we need to focus on you. Come with me. I have a room set up already."

I stared at Ryker for long seconds, his face so familiar despite the surroundings and circumstances. "What if I'm too broken? What if I'm too destroyed? What if it's over?" I hated that my voice trembled, but I needed to ask.

"It's not over, " he promised. He leaned down to kiss my cheek, his lips lingering and his breath hot against my cheek. "You probably won't be able to do it today. For now, focus on getting started. Focus on how. That's what they told me, and I believe in you."

I blinked fast, bunching my hands into fists. He wasn't listening to me, not really. "I'm not special," I said, trying again to explain.

"What if you are?" Nathan answered, squeezing my shoulder again. "What if we're not wrong? What if we're right, and then you can help people? What then?"

I opened and closed my mouth for a second, but if he was right... Of course, I wanted to help people.

"Okay, listen..." I began.

An alarm screamed to life, echoing in the house, and we all jolted at the jarring noise. Cruise and Ryker ran for the door as Nathan headed to stare at the video monitors. "What the hell? How is this possible?" he asked, clicking things on his screens.

“What is it?” I ran over to him even as Danvers moaned on the couch. “Nathan?”

“It’s the hunters. How could they find you here?” He shook his head. “Danvers. They must’ve tracked him. If they did, they don’t know you’re here. Maybe you can just stay here, hide from them until they give up on looking.” He chewed on his lip. “Maybe, if we give them Danvers...” Nathan winced. “It physically pains me to think about turning anyone over to their care, and I’m not sure I can bring myself to do it, even if it would keep you safe.”

“You can’t, because it’s the wrong thing to do. I won’t do it, either. Danvers stays with me. Whatever happens. I won’t sacrifice someone else for my own safety. If I do that, I might as well give up and go full-force demon. Not going to happen.”

Nathan met my gaze. “Will you go on a date with me when this is over? I can feed you dinner, and we can look at the moonlight together.”

“Sure. Then you can walk me back to my tent at the end of the night. Where do you live when you aren’t there?”

He blinked. “Did I never tell you? Really? Not far from you, actually. I...”

The door was flung open, and like a scene from my nightmares, the hunters flooded into the room. Dressed in all black, they struck me as emo and powerful in their dark and stealthy uniforms. They might mostly be normal people—Ryker’s old girlfriend might have joined them by then.

Nathan flung himself at the crowd, punching some of them and throwing the others around. “Addalee, run,” he shouted over and over again, as if he alone could stem the tide of hunters.

But Danvers lay prone and helpless on the couch. Ryker and Cruise never reappeared, meaning something likely happened to them. It seemed they had me, making it a foregone conclusion, so why would I try to run for my life,

while everyone I cared about stayed behind to fight the lunatics?

“Stop.” I intoned, drawing the attention of every gaze in the room like a beacon. “Don’t hurt them. No one here *has* to be injured in any way.” I got down on my knees. “Take me, for example. I’m possessed.”

One of the men grabbed Danvers, and two of them flung him around, dragging him out of the room with them. The biggest of the men in the room turned to me. “We weren’t expecting another one. We’ve wanted him since we heard he got out. But you, pretty blonde thing. You’ll be a trip to exorcise.”

“Addalee, don’t do this.” Nathan struggled against two of them who held him.

“Thank you for trying. It was always going to come to this. Watch out for my mom, okay?”

A woman stepped forward. Brown hair hung low over her mean, glass-bottle-green eyes. With a swing of her fist, fist she knocked me out. I went down, relieved to know nothing, if only for a little while.



“ADDALEE!” The woman I dreamed about called to me, offering her hand for me to take. “Wake up. You can’t let them have you. You’re very important, my Addalee.”

I opened my eyes to a raging headache. I blinked past it, hoping the memories would one day fade.

How did you get us into this situation? You stupid little bitch.

I sighed. *Well, apparently she’s back.* On a table next to me, Danvers moaned. We were both strapped down. I couldn’t sit up to see what was happening, but I could hear that we weren’t alone in this room.

It was a giant storage area for furniture and random old things. That was the only thing that would explain the musty smell.

“Hello there, Addalee. I’m so glad you’re awake.” A young, strange, thin, and unfamiliar woman with dark hair walked into my line of sight. Wasn’t this place run by crazy old men? Apparently, they had women in charge, too, which surprised me. “I’m Rianne. My friends and I are hunters. We’re going to exorcise you, which will help you.”

Like hell you are. My demon wasn’t interested. You’re not getting me out of you. Not ever.

I neither understood what was happening, nor did I know what the hell to expect next. I swallowed. “Okay.”

She grinned, but the baring of teeth struck me as more menacing than kind. “But first, we’re going to do a little basic questioning.” She picked up a knife, twisting it in her small hands so it glinted in the light. “I need you to answer me honestly. If you don’t, I’m going to have to cut off one of your fingers. Don’t worry, I’ll start with a pinky.”

She waved the knife over my right hand, and the wickedly sharp blade parted flesh, leaving blood dripping down my fingers. Luckily, I didn’t feel it. One of the few benefits of possession was my demon decided when I felt pain and when I didn’t. Right then, she clearly didn’t care for me to have the experience.

No, I’m the one who makes you hurt, not them.

I figured as much, so I sighed in resignation. She pushed into my eyes, seeing out of them. For the moment, she allowed me to basically ride along, still aware of what happened. Who knew how long she would allow me consciousness, so I did my normal and just focused on handling whatever she and the world threw at me.

And at least not complaining too much about it.

“You know what?” I could still talk, so I took advantage of the small measure of control to address the hunter directly. Usually, she wouldn’t even allow me the liberty of speech. It struck me as interesting, her leaving it in this case. “You made a huge misstep today.”

Rianne blinked before chuckling. “How do you figure, demon? I’m not the one bleeding.”

“You busted into the house of an assistant district attorney.” Staring down at me, Rianne visibly paled. “Oh, did you not consider that when you were chasing Danvers and found me, too? He is the youngest assistant district attorney this city has ever had, but he’s still a DA. Not to mention...” *Yep, I am on a roll now.* “He’s rich. Did you notice that when you ran in where you weren’t invited? Cruise Winters is fucking *rich* and not living off his government salary. He does the work because it’s meaningful to him. He is going to rain hell from the courts down on you so hard that you might wish you were possessed.”

She blustered. “We do this to save people. We’re here on a mission to save humanity.”

“Yeah? By cutting off their pinkies? Listen, I don’t know much about exorcisms, but I know you kill more than you save. I can’t imagine the physical endurance needed to survive exorcism, something rare to begin with, is helped much by first suffering torture because you just happen to enjoy sadism. About that, by the way, good on you. I’m not judging you. Find your kink. I say people need to make themselves happy if the other person is consenting.” I practically screamed the words in her face. “But here we are! Whatever you want to claim about helping us, we both know that’s not what you’re actually doing here. Plus, bonus, you just pissed off Cruise Winters.” Or at least I hoped so. “Unless you killed him, in which case, good luck dealing with the combined fury of his surviving family.”

Her eyes were huge.

I didn’t even need to stop. “What’s your day job, Rianne? When you’re not torturing demons, I mean? What is that you do for a living? I’m just curious, because a lot of jobs are kind of out of range if you’ve got a criminal record. Hope that’s not problematic for you since you’ll have one now.”

“I am on a mission to save humanity.” She kept repeating the words, like they’d protect her somehow. So far as

protective mantras went, she'd picked a shitty one.

“Well, I hope that pays the bills, sweetheart. It sure as hell wouldn't pay mine.” Not that I had any bills, which caused part of the problem. I officially went off the grid when I became possessed, but it didn't feel germane to the topic. “Did you know, I'm sort of important, according to others? So it seems to me the shit that you just did to Assistant District Attorney Winters is going to blow up in your face, hence me mentioning your misstep.”

They told you that, did they? That you're so special? You're never getting away from me, Addalee. You're not special, you dumb fucking bitch.

Yep, gotcha. She was cursing me a lot. I tried not to let myself become too satisfied with irritating her enough to cause it, and I wondered what Ryker would think about it.

The lights flashed, and Rianne strode away from me, dropping the knife with a clatter onto a tray. “We're not done here, demon.”

I sighed. Actually, it was more me than the demon, for what it was worth. It was fine, though. She didn't have to like me, either. I glanced at the flickering light. “I hope you've paid the electric bill. You won't have money coming in for a while, I bet.”

Danvers laughed, and I turned my head to try to see him.

“Believe it or not, I'm not trying to be funny,” I told him.

“Well, my demon finds you fucking hilarious.” He coughed. “So do I, truthfully. What happened at his house? Why did I conk out like that?”

I shook my head. “We can talk about it later.”

“I'm not going to have a later. Truthfully, this isn't the worst outcome for me. At least it'll be over. If there's something next, I'll have to face that consequence, but it won't be this anymore.”

A girl cried out, a wail somewhere in the room. Her voice came high and panicked. “Do you think that we're forgiven?”

For the things we do when they're in charge? Or are we blamed for their actions? Does it go on our record?"

I blinked and then realized what she meant. *Oh, she means in some afterlife.* I snorted, amused despite myself. "Wrong person to ask."

I looked at Danvers. "This may be inevitable, but I'm not ready to give up just yet."

He stared at me, his eyes dark and somehow fathomless. "If you go, take me with you. My demon likes your demon. He's less cruel to me when he's with her, and I like you. It's nice to have you nearby. But if they take me, and they end this—one way or another—don't feel sad for me. Don't even give me another thought. I've done terrible things, and not all of them are his fault."

I was afraid that was true for all of us, or at least me.

The lights officially gave up, blinking off and blanketing us in nothingness. Demons should be comfortable in the dark, and thereby make it cozy for their hosts, but since I was possessed, sudden changes in light or dark made her touchy. Anxious. She didn't mind either scenario, dark or light, but she liked to be prepared and adjusted.

The sudden darkness threw her off. She squirmed inside of me. Did sudden changes indicate problems in hell? I wouldn't bother asking her since she would never honestly answer anyway. She might torture me for even asking the question.

Everyone in the room moaned or screamed, so it wasn't just my demon struggling.

"Addalee," Danvers said, his voice rough. "You still okay?"

I blinked. Nice of him to ask, considering. "As okay as I can be, I suppose. How did you find me earlier, anyway?" It wasn't much of a distraction, but thinking about anything but the dark seemed like a good idea.

"Sorry that I brought them to you. I don't know how I found you. My demon can find yours, and he likes being with her. For now, anyway. When he headed out to find her, I didn't

get in his way. It's nice to have company when we're together. Someone who gets it."

I thought so, too, or something similar.

"I won't leave you," I promised him abruptly. *Of course, if they kill me, I'll break that promise.* I thought of the other girl's question. For how much of the demon's actions would I be held accountable when my time came around?

Screams and other general noise echoed around us suddenly. I closed my eyes then I sensed someone standing over me. My eyes scanned up, able to see past the darkness to realize he wore all black, his face was covered, and he managed to be almost a phantom. He reached down and ripped my restraints away with a single motion, and I could hear similar noises from the nearby tables. What was happening? None of it made any sense.

"Don't fight. We're rescuing you." I knew the voice. *Cruise?* He threw me over his shoulder, and a pinch pricked my arm. "Can't have the demon fighting me right now."

I snickered. "I knew you were a superhero."

"Not funny, Addie."

"No nicknames. I told you. That's for a person with a future." My eyes started to close.

He patted my back. "I know."



I WOKE up on a soft bed with an IV pulsing in my arm. It hurt, but I didn't have the wherewithal to even complain. I lifted my head. Where was I?

"Hey, Addalee." Ryker ran over to me, his familiar face easing my initial panic upon waking somewhere unfamiliar. "Easy. You're up. Hello. You should keep resting. Cruise really dosed you."

I swallowed. "How? With what?"

"They have a whole organization. It's a long story. They're going to let me participate. It finally feels like I can do

something to help you. When you're better, we can help others. I'm glad to be here."

I rubbed at my eyes and then gave up, reclining back against my pillow. My demon slept, silent for once. Even if I felt too loopy to sit up, it was remarkably nice to be without her, if even just for a moment.

I loved looking at Ryker, always had, but even more so without her discoloring the view. I loved how he looked like a skater boy, even though he wasn't one, with heavy locks of his blond hair hanging recklessly into his eyes. My lips curled, and I really just stared at him, taking in all that was so familiar and yet so wonderfully him.

"You're really beautiful, Ryker."

He took my hand in his and squeezed. "That's what I'm supposed to say to you."

"I think we both know I am not beautiful right now." I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed it, his skin warm against my lips. I'd never kissed him before on the lips, and he audibly gasped. But for just a moment, we simply stared at one another. "Why did you go to her?" I asked.

He blinked. "I could give you a lot of excuses. I think I was scared you didn't want me. I didn't think you did, truly, and I just wanted...someone. Something that was mine. Something to hold while I figured out what to do with my endless love for you."

My lips thinned, and I shook my head, knowing I was about to ruin things. *This is so me*. Seeing it coming, however, didn't stop the upcoming damage. "Nathan asked me to go on a date with him when this is over. I told him I would."

Of course maybe dates planned during stressful kidnappings don't count?

Ryker brought my hand to his mouth, kissing my fingers roughly. "Okay. I don't get to decide who you date. I actually like Nathan. Cruise, too, for what it's worth. But maybe you could go on a date with me, too? How about that? Would you?"

When this is over, and when we're not feeding you through an IV, would you go on a date with me, Addalee?"

I smiled at him. My hand tingled from where he kissed me, the skin almost electric from his touch. "You've been taking me on dates for several years now. Twice a week, remember? Sometimes, it was the only time I ate."

His face fell. "I'm such a fucking idiot. If I knew, I would've fed you every day. Those weren't dates. Those were excuses to see you. I mean a real date, one we plan. I'll pick you up, take you somewhere that makes you say *whoa*. Afterward, I'll bring you home and kiss you until you can't think straight. You know...a date."

I lifted an eyebrow, considering him carefully. "Just a kiss?"

"Gotta start somewhere." He smoothed his fingertip down my nose. "What do you say?"

"Okay, Ryker." If I lived through it, I would have *two* dates—more than I'd imagined for years. It was nice to fantasize, even if things didn't work out that way.

"Good. Now, go back to sleep. You're worn down. They took blood work, and it came back anemic. You have next to no vitamin D. Nathan listed a whole bunch of stuff you're short on, actually. Sleep while she'll let you, and we'll go from there."

They wouldn't be able to keep her away very long. I closed my eyes, but sleep evaded me. Typical. When I could actually sleep, I didn't. Eventually, Ryker left. It made sense, as he had things to do. Cars to tow. Family to see. It seemed more shocking he managed to be there at all. The door opened and closed, and I opened my eyes to see Danvers crawling into the bed next to me. Our IV poles clanked into one another before coming to a stop, as if they too simply shared a visit.

He wrapped his arms around me, so I buried my face in his chest. We really didn't know each other well enough for that sort of intimacy, and it shouldn't have felt needed. Despite that, he offered warmth, deep, even breaths, and he smelled

like soap. He squeezed me tighter, and I sighed into the pressure. When our demons woke up, we wouldn't want to or be able to touch, but oh, how I needed it. He must, too.

I closed my eyes. Sleep waited, and I drifted away.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

I woke up in Danvers' arms. He still breathed evenly in my ear, so I lifted my head to regard him. At some point, we'd been spotted. I vaguely remembered hearing the whispers in the room. *He's with her. Can't keep him away from her. Leave them alone.*

I didn't know who discussed it, since none of it seemed important enough to wake up fully to process. I basically slept through it, and so had Danvers, since he clearly hadn't stirred.

With a gentle touch, I stroked his cheek. Tenderness wasn't in my repertoire when my demon came online, and touching in general was a no-no. Cruise said it was part of how they kept us under their control, how they kept us needy, without us even knowing they did it. If Danvers could also still need touch, and have that need met, it meant I wasn't alone.

I wouldn't ever be able to explain my urge, but it hit me with the force of a freight train, and I gave into it immediately. "Danvers," I whispered. "Can I kiss you?"

He had to say yes. I wouldn't force my kisses on someone unconscious, especially if I didn't know if he would even want it anyway.

His eyes fluttered open, and he stared at me a long moment, those dark, fathomless eyes utterly unreadable. "Yes. Fuck. Please kiss me," he practically growled.

So I did. I kissed him lightly to start, my lips the barest whisper of a touch against his. He sighed against me, his lips moving almost restlessly.

Then Danvers deepened our kiss, his hand sliding up my back to force me closer. I ran my tongue over his bottom lip, and he moaned, a beautiful sound. I did it again, letting the quiet joy of the moment fill me up inside. *Yes*. I wanted it more than I'd ever desired anything in my life. He kissed and kissed me, his lips hungry and his tongue streaking against mine, but he made no other move for more. It was as though he understood the rules, too. We needed so much, but not too much, lest it destroy us.

Finally, he stopped, his breathing was hot as it washed over my face. The solid heat of his cock pressed against me, and I blinked at the realization. Another pulse hit me, pooling in liquid heat deep within me. If he touched me, I would be wet, slick with need for him.

Our bodies were certainly awake and willing.

His dark eyes held my gaze, keeping me captive even as I tried to calm my own racing breaths. "You're so beautiful. I would've hit on you the moment you walked into my bar. And I mean hit on you *hard*. Like, ridiculously so. You probably would've rolled your eyes at me and ignored me."

I stared at him, studying his handsome and rugged face. "In this hypothetical situation, where we're not possessed, and I walk into your bar? You should know that I was, and probably still am, a total dork. I don't know how to do bars. Well, except the one where Ryker feeds me lunch, because his cousin owns the place, but I'm pretty sure lunch doesn't count. I'm stupid in bars. I trip. I break things. I don't get hit on, not by anyone and certainly not by men who look like you. I leave after about twenty minutes, then I go home and play video games."

At least, that was the way things used to be, in the before times. My roommates used to try to take me out, then they'd call me later to come get them. Inevitably, they got too drunk, while I was home, probably playing an RPG and drinking soda.

The definition of boring.

“Even more likely I would have hit on you. I would have loved it if no one else noticed you. Gorgeous girl, little bit lost, no idea how appealing she looks? Forget it. I would’ve kept you at my bar all night trying to get you to like me.”

I smiled at him. “Danvers, the attention I get now—which I think has to be related to her, and not me—I didn’t get before. I’ve always pretty much been a nothing.” I shrugged. It wasn’t sad or anything, it just was the way it was.

He stroked my hair, gently. “Me too.

I rolled my eyes since I found it beyond hard to believe. “You owned a bar. And *look* at you. Danvers, you practically define the word sex. All this ink.” I ran my hand up his arm, sliding my fingers over the swirling- color- covered muscle. “The muscles. I doubt very much you were a nothing.”

He kissed the end of my nose, then stroked his nose against mine. “I put on a good show, that’s for sure, but it was to cover a lot of things. I wish I hadn’t, in retrospect. I wish I had been myself, that I told people the truth about what was going on with me. I wish...I wish I had been better at being me, so that, when it ends—and let’s face it, that’s going to be soon for me—then I would at least know at some point I was authentic.”

It broke my heart. I might not have been much, but I was always myself. “What were you lying about? And were you lying to yourself or to others?”

He winced. “I opened that door, so it’s fair if you have questions. Here I am, and I can be authentic. I’m literally in your arms, hard as a rock, unable to do anything about it, right?”

Heat flooded my cheeks, and I resisted looking down, but only barely. Although I felt his hardness, somehow him admitting it made it seem more intimate. I didn’t look away, though.

He continued, his voice gruff. “And I’m still struggling with this. My demon didn’t kill my aunt because he decided to randomly take out a family member. He did it because she

used to do bad things to me when I was a kid. He thought he should kill her, assert his dominance over her. Since I was such a wimp and couldn't do it myself. Plus, he wanted to try jail for a while, so it seemed like a good idea."

I kissed his neck, breathing him in and enjoying both his salty maleness and the smell of his soap. He drew me even closer, allowing me to nuzzle against him. "Bad things?"

"Yes, she did *very* bad things." I didn't ask for more since he didn't elaborate. I could imagine many possible bad things. "My family doesn't know it, and I doubt they'd believe me anyway. They just think I killed her for no good reason. They don't care that I'm possessed. They never wanted me back, and that has nothing to do with the demon."

Sometimes, there really weren't good things to say. "I'm sorry."

"I was awake when he did it, too, by the way. I wasn't under. I was right there, and I saw the whole thing. And, worse, I think I wanted him to do it." He closed his eyes, shifting his hips against me restlessly. "So you should know you're being held and kissed by a person who isn't particularly wonderful."

"Danvers," I whispered before I kissed his chin. "It's okay to forgive yourself. Sometimes I like when she does bad things. I love it, even. I think it's part of it."

He smoothed my hair away from my face. "Like I said, my dream girl. You're stuck with me now. He is going to follow you around for a while, anyway, and I can't say that I mind it."

The strangest sensation filled me. Pressed so close against him, our bodies entwined, I could suddenly feel the duality of him. Two parts—one Danvers, the other, his demon. But they weren't one being—some parts might be made of both of them, but I could feel the separation between the two.

I sat up a little, concentrating on the shape of the thing, and he furrowed his brow. "Addalee? Are you okay?"

My hand itched, and I smoothed it over his stomach, his muscles warm and inked under my touch. "I...I need you to

trust me for a moment.”

“Sure.” He smiled at me, brow clearing. “I mean, I know we don’t really have a past yet, but I feel like I know you. As well as I’ve ever known anyone, at least.”

I understood the sentiment, but right then, I could only focus on his demon. The door opened, and Nathan entered, carrying two plates, Cruise and Ryker right behind him.

They wanted something, but they would have to wait, because I was busy with...something—I just wasn’t sure *what* yet.

My stomach panged, a hollow bottoming out sensation. Oh, my demon wanted to be awake. I recognized the sensation, and it hurt like hell. She did it to me once before, when she first took me—a sensation like a knife being shoved into my gut. Although she managed to terrify me as a child, right then, I was too focused on the sensation of Danvers’s demon to give her much thought.

No, instead, I reached into Danvers and I *tugged*. Hard. My hand might rest on the muscled plane of his stomach, but my energy grabbed onto him. Using that invisible grip, I tugged his mother fucking demon right out of him. Danvers screamed as I did it. I did, too. And his demon? Well, he *bellowed*, a sound like scratchy rage that wanted to claw us to ribbons.

I smiled, satisfied to have pulled that thing out of him.

He burned my skin, the demon, as I held onto him. But I didn’t let go. I couldn’t. Danvers shook—violently, convulsing as if a force we couldn’t see tried to rip him apart from the inside. Probably because it was. His demon roared again, its red eyes glaring at me with pure hatred and an almost palpable malice. It loved my demon, but boy did it hate me.

That’s fine. I want it gone anyway. Right this second. Despite the second most horrible pain I ever experienced, I refused to let go, determined to save Danvers from the one who’d stolen so many years from him. He thought he was

going to die? That it was too late? I had news for him. It wasn't too late.

As I pulled harder, I could feel my own strength leaving me. My own demon roared in my head, a second layer of sound amid the chaos. She wanted back in control, and she didn't like the situation at all. Not one second of it. My body shook as I fought her *and* Danvers's demon. The three men watching cried out, but I couldn't listen to them, nor could I spare the attention to try to hear them. It didn't matter right then. Nothing did, not beyond holding on. Tears leaked from my eyes, mixing with the blood trickling down my arm, but I gritted my teeth and kept pulling. Finally, although it seemed impossible, I felt the snap and the release of tension. The demon fled his body.

It flew into the air in a rush to stare back at us. With a flap of wings that stirred my hair, it roared like a dragon, its red eyes glittering out of an inhuman face. I stared back at it with a smile that faded a heartbeat later. Danvers would be safe, but the demon could take anyone else in the room.

Nathan said a few words I couldn't quite hear, and it roared again before it flew upward and away with a few powerful bursts of its wings, vanishing over the rooftop of a neighboring house.

"You did it," Cruise said as he grinned at me. "How did you do that? Wait, you're still possessed?"

Danvers clung to my body, drenched in sweat and shaking. He lifted his head to stare at me. "Addalee..."

I don't know what he would have said because I convulsed. *Oh, she is mad.* So fucking mad she couldn't even speak to me right then. Nothing existed beyond her all-consuming rage and her very clear intent to punish me.

Cruise must have somehow sensed what would happen because he tugged Danvers away from me. The other man didn't even struggle, blinking helplessly. *How could he? He must be weak as a newborn kitten.*

My demon threw me on the ground. With my own hands, she yanked the IV out of my arm.

“Addalee!” Danvers called. “No. Let me go! She’s going to hurt her. It’s going to be bad.”

“Stay away from me,” she said with my voice, turning my head so she could show them her eyes through mine. “Or I’ll kill her. And I’ll make it hurt. There are others like you I can take. Stay back, or it’ll be so bad, it’ll haunt your nightmares for the rest of your pathetic lives.”

She threw me around then. I would float up in the air, weightless as a diver, then she’d crash me down so hard, I thought my bones would shatter like china. Not enough to kill or paralyze me, she just made sure to do enough damage so I would hurt everywhere. Into the bed, the chairs, the walls, she dragged me around the room with as much care as a child with a ragdoll. I clawed at my own face, my fingernails cutting me everywhere. She ripped at my clothes, stripping me.

“No!” Danvers wrenched out of Cruise’s hold. The room had fallen silent as they stared at me. “No.” He grabbed onto me. “No more. You wanted her punished. She’s punished. Fucking stop. Stop.”

She let me feel the pain then. Everything she’d just done, saved up and released right in that moment.

I screamed until I couldn’t anymore, tears streaming down my face. It felt like my body was being torn apart. I begged for death, for anything to end the torturous nightmare, but there was no escape. She didn’t stop; she increased the pressure, magnifying the pain past any human comprehension. Across my vision, I saw my own death, Ryker’s death, my mother’s. Cruise. Nathan. Danvers. All of them being split in two. Explosions. Gunfire. Disease. Decay. Rot.

She laughed, using my lips so they could hear her. “Go ahead, scream all you want. Beg me to stop. I won’t.”

Everyone surrounded me, all of them trying to help somehow. Nathan finally took me from Danvers, his touch cool, like rain on my burning skin. He spoke words I didn’t

understand, and she stopped, her internal magnification at least halted for the moment. Oh, she wasn't gone, or even put away, but she ceased beating on me. I gasped for air, finally able to try and move past the agony, but it was hard to breathe.

"I think she cracked a rib. Maybe more than one." Nathan shook his head. "We need to get her checked out."

I looked around the room, my vision blurred, but I could see what I expected to find. Ryker gazed at me in horror but not just because I was hurt. No, I expected to see the expression on his face, even if it had taken longer than I thought. "I knew someday you'd look at me and actually see the monster."

Then the world went black.



THE BEEPING WOKE ME AGAIN. Another IV, the clear tube snaking up to another dangling bag, connected me to the blinking and beeping medical devices. A nurse's bent head read something on a chart near the foot of my bed. A hospital? I wondered. It didn't seem like Cruise's basement.

I lifted my head, and the nurse sprang into motion, pressing her hand on my shoulder to stop me. "You're okay. We're treating you. How do you feel? That demon beat you up pretty badly."

I'll do it again if you pull bullshit like that again. Again and again. You won't get rid of me, and if you fuck with any others, I'll beat you until you're just a walking bag of pulp. I won't let you die, though. I'll make you rot while you breathe.

She meant it, too, every word. I stared at the nurse's hand. "Please don't touch me. I don't like it."

Her eyes widened. "Sorry, sometimes I forget. I do this all day, too, so you'd think I would know better. We treat you guys regularly. You're about an hour from Cruise's house, and he brought you here, if you're curious. We run a special hospital for the possessed—totally secret, of course. We know a little better how to help you than a regular human hospital. We can't do anything about *her*—our experience is that

putting them to sleep only makes them madder, although I know they used some of those drugs on you before. I also heard you did a successful exorcism while you are still possessed, and can I just say...wow. You're going to be a celebrity!"

She was perky, and I hoped she was wrong. The last thing I wanted was to be well known.

I focused on the important part. "The man I helped? Did he survive?" Only one percent of people survived possessions, so I tried to prepare myself for the worst-case scenario. Although he seemed okay when I conked out, was he still?

The nurse nodded, patting the blanket absently. "Oh, sure, we checked him out and released him. You're just amazing. Get some rest. You have two cracked ribs, contusions everywhere, and a concussion. You'll heal, though."

She left the room, and my breath caught even as my heart raced. She'd left me alone, I realized. Totally alone with my demon for the first time in a long time. I closed my eyes.

Okay. I can do exorcisms.

You won't again.

No, I probably wouldn't. I would love to help. Like Danvers, I had to search for meaning in my otherwise problematic life. Somehow, if I could figure things out, I thought my time would at least have mattered.

You don't matter.

For a second, I thought I would cry, but the impulse passed. Sadness filled me, and the overwhelming hopelessness of being possessed. I understood the important basic truths about myself—nothing made me important. Sad and pathetic was my life, and if nothing else, the knowledge at least seemed familiar.

I closed my eyes.

The memory of my possession flooded me, fresh for the first time in a very long time. She wanted me to remember

every moment of it, to experience how horrible it truly was, again, just in case I forgot.

Although it wasn't likely I *could* forget. Being possessed by a demon was memorable and awful.

The night started off okay. Terror followed me all the way to Ryker's home, but I told myself it was good nerves. I was finally going to tell him how I felt. *Woman'- up* as my roommate Kat called it, and just tell him I liked him. I knew the words I would use: *Ryker, I've been in love with you for years. I wanted you to know. Nothing has to change, not if you don't want things to change, but I wanted to be honest with you. Tell you my truth. Well, what do you think?*

I practiced the short speech over and over in my head. I ran through it once more with my eyes closed outside his door, with my hand on the knob. Then I steeled my back and walked to his small bungalow house. Although his space wasn't huge, he owned it himself, a concept that blew my mind. I still worked temp jobs while trying to finish my associates degree. I would finish it soon, and then I'd see what I could do from there.

My mom took up so much of my time.

He'd given me a key to his house, and although I'd never used it before, I thought about it for a second. Normally, I tended to knock on his bedroom window when I came by, just a thing we did. He used to climb in and out of my bedroom when we were kids, just for fun, because we lived in a one-story home. Should I use the key, knock on the window like normal, or knock at his front door?

I'd brought a bottle of wine with me. If he was interested in me, too, maybe we'd celebrate. It wasn't expensive—I picked it up at the gas station—so it wasn't a tragedy either way. We weren't fancy, and even if his life seemed to be improving at a rate faster than my own, it was hard for me to imagine that Ryker would ever want to pretend to be anything else. I loved that about him.

I stopped at his window, my palms slick from nerves. Humid air blanketed the night, so sweat dripped slightly down

my cheek, and I brushed it away impatiently. I blinked, breathing in once to calm myself before I held my hand up to knock and froze.

There, inside the cute little bungalow, I could clearly see my best friend—who I had secretly been in love with my whole life—being ridden with rhythmic and enthusiastic hip thrusts by a girl I knew from school. Jasmine, my brain supplied helpfully—richer than us, because her parents owned several convenience stores. Beautiful—far more beautiful than me with her head thrown back and hands on her hips as her breasts bounced with perky fervor.

I turned around fast, blinking despite the fact I couldn't seem to suck in a breath. I wasn't a voyeur, and if I was, that wouldn't be an image I wanted, yet it burned itself into my brain with all the permanence of a tattoo. My feet pounded against the earth, the shock of the impact of running hitting me before I realized I was even in motion. I ran and ran until I had to stop to wheeze and crumple against a wall. *Where am I?* I didn't even know, and I wasn't sure it mattered since I couldn't see past the tears flooding my eyes and turning the world wobbly. Leaning against a red brick building, I cried as I gasped for air. Sobs. Big. Ugly. Pathetic, gasping noises punctuated with horrible little hiccupy wails.

He is with someone else.

Of course he is. It was Ryker—gorgeous and fun. Smart. Driven. Helpful. Everything I loved about him? Someone else would love those things, too. I'd waited too long.

No, he never would've wanted me that way.

If I doubted for a second, all I had to do was look at Jasmine and myself. There wasn't even a competition—she won, hands down.

On my next shaky sob, I smelled the sulfur. It was such a cliché, but they're clichés for a reason. I stood up straighter, and my next inhalation burned with the strength of the rotten egg scent. I started to claw at my skin. Looking around for help, I realized I was completely alone, not another soul anywhere nearby to help. I started to shake.

Terror robbed me of breath, but I couldn't run anymore if I tried. I stared openmouthed while a creature out of nightmares appeared before me. Wings, enormous leathery wings that stirred my hair with the slightest motion from her. A red body covered partially with thick, shiny black hair that didn't cover her pointed ears—she actually smiled at me. Turned her head, the movement more insect than human, and then did it again, baring black teeth to glitter at me with menace. Clawed fingers clicked together, the nails rattling with a sound like old bones, and even though I wanted to run, I couldn't. I stood frozen in place and watched the way the light shifted across her...fur? I'd never seen something so horrible nor imagined such a thing could exist.

She grabbed me then and launched herself into my body. Hot pokers assaulted every cell as she took over control of them at a mitochondrial level. I bent in agony as a knife plunged into my stomach. No, it didn't. There was no knife, or at least no physical weapon. Blood dripped from my nose as I tried to make sense of the conflicting sensory inputs. Soon, I convulsed on the ground, unable to even control my legs well enough to stand.

You're mine now. We're going to be so cozy together, you sad and pathetic creature.

I opened my eyes, and I found myself back in my hospital room in the present. The agony of it kept muscles dancing across my arms, and I gritted my teeth. Pain. Maybe I was lucky to have her? When I was good, she could make it so I wouldn't feel any of it.

She didn't want to stay there, not in a hospital bed, and she would likely keep me in agony until I obeyed. The tent was better, and if I wanted to make up for how badly I'd fucked up, I would go there.

Okay. I could do that. It almost seemed a relief to at least have a plan. I yanked out my IV, surprised when the view seemed familiar somehow. Blood flowed down my arm, gushing. It was okay. She could fix that. We grabbed bandages, and she wrapped me up—a little tightly—but it made her happy when I didn't complain at the bite of pain.

It was what she wanted.

More stickers and tubes and a blood pressure cuff—soon I freed myself from the spiderweb of machines. My reflection in the mirror surprised me for a second, but then I felt a pulse of joy. I'd never looked worse, just as she wanted. Scratches marred my face, deep, ugly, gashes that had puffed up with swelling. One of my eyes had swelled so much with bruising and a cut above it that it wouldn't even open entirely. When I lifted the hospital gown, my pale skin seemed mottled with red and purple bruises. White bandages around my ribs stood out stark against the violent color, and she thought about having me remove them. She changed her mind, finally deciding it would be easier for her if I could breathe.

Where were my clothes? Not that it mattered. Surely, the hospital gown would work for our purposes.

With that thought, I marched out the door.

Sound stopped, a wall of nothingness closing out the world around me. My ears almost rang with the startling emptiness of the lack of sound. I heard no voices, no breaths, no heartbeats, nothing. The absence of it was strange but also normal—I didn't deserve sound.

Funny, I thought, stopping to tilt my head as the humor struck me. She'd never kept me in an in-between state before. I either was or wasn't present in my body, even if I couldn't control my actions. Her current control wasn't the same.

Arms grabbed me, and I felt them for a second before she stole the sensation away. I blinked. *Cruise*. My heart thudded once, but it hurt in my bruised chest. I could see his mouth moving, but I couldn't hear even the smallest sound. I tried to push away from him since he was slowing me down. I needed to leave the hospital, to get to my tent. It was what she wanted.

He was stronger than me, but I didn't think he wanted to cause me more pain. When I realized it, I saw the advantage. I shoved at him, but the son-of-a-bitch didn't move.

Danvers appeared in my vision, his dark eyes familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Despite the changes, I could see

he was tired. *That's good. How dare he get rid of my friend?*

No, he didn't do it. I did it, because I was a disobeying bitch. I slapped myself, the force of the blow nearly making me fall to my knees.

Ryker appeared—his lips moved way too fast for me to guess at what he might be saying. Nathan, too. I reached out to touch his mouth and shook my head. Nope, I couldn't hear any of them.

Finally, I spoke, and I could hear myself, at least. “She can't hear you. Not a word you're saying. She knows you're talking, but she can't hear a thing. I can make that permanent if that's what you want. I can keep hurting her. It's either that or you let me out of here. Just get the fuck out of my way. Stay away from us. You're not welcome anymore.”

Cruise answered her—she turned my head, but I could only see his hands moving and his mouth forming mysterious words. Oh, she didn't like whatever he said, and she snarled in response.

What had he said? She didn't want me to know. He pointed at me. Once. Twice.

Sound rushed in, and I couldn't process the wall of noise.

It was too much, so I covered my ears.

Danvers shook his head. “You have to stop. You don't know how much it hurts. I do. She's torturing her.”

“I stopped. She can hear us now. Addalee, can you hear us?” His hand was gentle on my shoulder, but it crackled like static, a buzzing sensation that jarred me.

I stared at him, practically vibrating in pain. “Please don't touch me. I don't like it.”

“In a second, I'll stop.” First, he picked me up and carried me back to the room. I gritted my teeth to keep from screaming at the pain as he settled me onto the hospital bed. “Let her know you're never going back to that tent, so she can get that the fuck out of her mind.”

CHAPTER

NINE

I was sick of the hospital. I punched the mattress in frustration. *Pissed off* was my new name. Adding to the problem, I spent most of my time alone. Everyone else, it seemed, had to work. Everyone except me.

My demon refused to leave. She also refused to talk most of the time, leaving me to silence and the sounds of the hospital. The nurses were afraid of me since she told one of them off for not bringing food early enough. She threw the fruit plate right at the woman, using my hands to launch it. I hated her, not that it mattered. She still wore me like a human costume.

Finally, Ryker entered the room dressed for work, the name of his uncle's company embroidered on his chest.

"How are you feeling, beautiful?" he asked as he sat on the edge of my bed. "They say you're almost physically healed. Soon, they'll let you out of here."

Yeah, so they said. When they would talk to me. "Where have you been?" My tone sounded petulant to my own ears, and I hated myself for sounding so pathetic.

"Working." He touched my knee. "I'm sorry. I would've been here if I could've been, but if I want some time off work, I have to put in overtime." He smiled. "I need to have a job, so I can afford to take you out for a fancy dinner and romance you under the moonlight."

Okay. I rolled my eyes, not having the time for him being ridiculous. "That is never happening. You looked at me and

saw me as the monster I really am. You don't want to take me to dinner, Ryker."

"You're not a monster, Addalee. The demon is a monster, and I'm going to find a way to help you beat her. It's part of the whole plan. Cruise knows a place, and I'm going there to train. It's where he went, actually. When I come back in a few weeks, I'll be better able to help you. I came to say goodbye, sweetie, but you don't need to worry. Nathan, Cruise, and even Danvers are going to help you while I'm away."

I was so tired of needing help. I leaned back on the pillow, trying not to pout and doing a shitty job of it. "Well, good luck with that because there isn't a thing you can do for me, Ryker. Not one thing. Cruise can't either, except maybe what he does with his money. Nathan has angel blood, so I suppose he could do something...and I can at least do exorcisms." I laughed. "But what can you do, Ryker? You're *nothing*."

He shook his head. "It's okay. This isn't you. It's the demon. What I can do for you, Addalee? I can love you and I can learn how to help you fight these things." When he would have touched me, I shook my head, and he stopped, backing away with a sigh.

The door opened and Danvers entered, nodding to Ryker. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Where have you been? It's not like you have a job." I wanted to bite my tongue, but she really liked pushing at my friends. She might have been playing nice before, but now she apparently wanted to assault them verbally.

Danvers shook his head. "Cruise let me crash at his house. I am depleted, or that's how they put it. I needed rest. Ryker got me a job at his cousin's bar, so long as I don't kill anyone." He sat down in a chair across the room.

I winced. It sounded like Ryker, so I wasn't surprised, but I wasn't going to tell him that so long as my demon was in charge. Instead, I started to scream. I tilted my head back and bellowed, fully committing to making the loudest, biggest sound I could, even if I scraped my throat raw.

But no one could hear me. People were still talking. I even answered them—probably saying something awful—while I screamed. Alone. With only the sound of my demon laughing in my ears as I screamed till my voice vanished.

Nathan rushed through the door followed by a man I didn't know. Cruise entered behind them. Nathan put his hand on my arm, again causing the awful staticky pain sensation. Why didn't they understand I didn't like to be touched?

“Stop screaming,” Nathan said, his voice resonating in my head. “You're going to hurt yourself. Please stop. I can hear you. I can't hear what you're thinking, not exactly, but I can hear your scream. I can hear you cry. Stop hurting yourself. You work on surviving.”

I swallowed, tears pricking behind my eyes. He could hear me? It was such a relief. Someone knew that I was screaming. I didn't know why it was such a fucking gift. He took my hand and squeezed it. “Addalee, this is Ben. He's like us.”

Like us? Oh, the angel blood. I could finally hear them again. She stopped laughing. Maybe she wanted to hear what Ben had to say, too. Why was he there?

He pulled up a chair next to the bed. “I understand you're rather unusual.”

I snickered. Both the demon and I found the idea amusing, and then I realized tears streamed down my cheeks. I touched them with my fingertips, noticing the way the liquid glittered in the light.

“You pulled out this man's demon while you still have yours,” he said, and I noticed he still stared at me. “How did you do that?”

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't talk. She wouldn't let me.

“She said she could feel two entities in me—the demon and me. Then she reached for my skin, palmed me right there.” He pointed over his heart. “And she just pulled.”

Ben, Nathan's friend, nodded. “That is so interesting. Okay. And the demon doesn't want you to talk about it? I'm

wondering how you pulled this off with the demon in control of what you're doing." He sighed. "Rather remarkable."

"I had herbs going," Cruise supplied just as the doctor entered to check the machines. "And an IV in her arm supplied her with a light sedative. She was in control, not the demon."

The doctor threw his chart on the counter. "There is no reason whatsoever to do that. The demons build a tolerance for it. She has to get it out of herself. Period. End of story. Otherwise, it's going to kill her."

Cruise shook his head. "I disagree. Ben and I have had the same training. Nathan has had some of it, too. She has to have breaks. We could've saved my sister and countless others if we'd just given them the time to get their strength back up. Otherwise, she's too tired from fighting it and she doesn't have the strength to go on. That's why most exorcisms fail. We know this."

The doctor pointed at him. "That is not fair to say to me. I've been through it, too. I know what you're going through, and I know what it is like to lose people you love to demons. Despite that, you don't want to use the drugs. When they stop working, they're just going to make her sick faster."

I considered Ben, with his gray hair and lined face. I asked him simply, with a glance down at his dirty old wedding band, "Did your wife know she was fucking an angel blooded freak when she said yes?"

I hated the things I said. I started to scream again, but Nathan squeezed my hand. Yes, I needed to stop. "No one in this room thinks you're saying anything like that yourself. We all know it's her."

I pointed at Ryker. "Not him. He knows I'm really a bad person."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "When she gets out of you, I'm going to celebrate. It will be the best day of my life."

"Hold your breath, you pathetic creature. It'll never happen, and you'll drop dead first. You're going to be with her, too. I'm just waiting to suggest you to the right demon."

Nathan squeezed my hand. “Don’t start screaming. She’s making herself sick in there. Reminds me of someone else who was on the edge just days ago.” He looked over and stared at Danvers who rose.

“I think we should get her out of here. It’s hurting her to be here. The trick is to keep the demon as happy as the demon can be...within reason. You threatened her, and she’s complying because she doesn’t want what you told her could happen, Cruise.”

That was right. What did he threaten, I wondered? I didn’t even know.

“So she’s taking it out on Addalee, who could use a break from the abuse. If her demon can be...mollified, then perhaps Addalee could get a little better. If she’s less exhausted, she can be a little more on the surface of her consciousness. It’s very painful to be stuck where she is listening to herself say and do things against her will.”

Ben rose and patted him on the back. “When next you have her home, Cruise, let me know. I can come by and work with her there when there’s a break. I can’t with the demon riding her like this, though. She simply has to get her out.”

Simply? I laughed, sounding hysterical to my own ears.

Nathan shook his head. “Not better.”

“Stop touching me,” I shrieked and yanked my hand back.

“Okay.” Nathan nodded. “You say touching or no touching.” He looked over at Ryker. They were obviously constantly talking about me, about how fucked up I was. Even if they weren’t talking, they were *talking*.

Cruise nodded. “Plan to be over in two hours. She’ll be there.”

Oh hell no you won’t be.

“Because first, we’re going to go rob a liquor store.” Cruise stormed from the room. “We’ll make the demon happy.”

We are going to what?



I AWOKE in Cruise's basement. Danvers held my head in his lap. "Did we rob a liquor store?" I asked him.

"You did. Well, you and I did. We robbed the store. It was very dramatic." He shook his head. "I know how to do it because I did it so frequently with my demon. Afterward, we got back in the car and sped away. Cruise's sister went in and paid the guy. So, no harm no foul. It won't work again but it got us through today." He smiled down at me. "I'm so sorry she hurt you so badly after you saved me. I want to do what Ryker is going to do but I'm going to wait. I don't think I should leave you right now."

I stared up at him. Years ago, it would have been a dream. This man wanting me? I never would've believed it. But he didn't want me like a man wanted a woman. He was drawn to me because we'd been possessed together and because I saved him.

I sat up. "You're so handsome, Danvers. Now that you're free, you have a whole life ahead of you. A big life. Stay away from your family, but other than that, you can do whatever you want to do. Please don't waste time trying to save me. I'm so far gone, there is no coming back."

He smoothed a finger over my lower lip. "I hear that they're lining up to date you when this is over. Whatever that means. Ryker. Nathan. Cruise wants to ask." He smiled down at me. "So can I put myself on that list? Will you let me take you somewhere on a date? I might actually have some money, because I'm getting to work."

I bit on the edge of his thumb, and he smiled broader. "Sure. Why not? I...Danvers, I'm not going to be here to date, you know that, right? The idea of the so-called dates...it's just for my fantasy. I don't want to lie, and I think you understand."

He put my hand on my heart. "You felt my demon right here and you pulled it out. Can you feel your own?"

I tried. I closed my eyes again to try to do so, but there was nothing. No demon for me to tug. Just nothing. “I think...I think maybe I’m just all demon now.”

“Not even close.” He shook his head. I noticed the IV in his arm. I must have made a face, because he shrugged. “I’m really low on some things. They’re trying to get me healthy.”

The door opened and closed, revealing Cruise and Ben. “Oh good,” the former said. “She’s up. Off his lap. Come over here.”

Danvers groaned. “You’re just jealous.”

“Maybe.” Cruise took my hand and pulled me up and against him. He smelled good, and I tried not to sigh into the feel of him. “You okay? Dizzy? Hungry?”

They fed me a lot in the hospital. More consistently than I’d eaten in years. “I’m not hungry. Thanks.”

“Good.” He smiled at me. “Ben is here to talk to you about an option that we have. You’ll have to decide if you want it, now or never. She doesn’t want it, and I threatened her with this once before. If she had any idea Ben was the guy who could do it? There is no way you’d be here tonight. Go ahead, Ben.”

How was I supposed to pay attention to Ben with Cruise’s body against mine? His warmth was so close, so safe... “Maybe I could just hug you? Would that be okay?”

Ben made a tsk noise. “I know it’s hard. I remember it quite well myself. Exhausting. And you so need to be held.”

Cruise’s arms slid around me, tugging me close. “How about if you hold onto me and listen to Ben?”

I lifted my gaze, sighing again. “I’m sorry, Ben. That was rude of me. Please, tell me what I should hear. You’ve come all this way just for me, after all.”

He laughed. “I live where your friend Ryker is going to study. I teach there, actually, about a two-hour drive from here. I’m not too far out of my way, but it is nice to see you behave the way they all keep describing you. It’s not surprising, of

course. The angel blood is most apparent in those most deserving. What if I told you, if you can't exorcise her, you could contain her instead?"

I let go of Cruise, shock stiffening my body. "What?"

"I have a demon in me, but you would never know it. I found a way to cage it. He doesn't affect me anymore. Every once in a while, I get a headache, and I blame him for it, but otherwise, I've been able to get my life back. I help people. I teach. I'm married. I have teenagers in the house. You can do it, too, if you want. If you can exorcise people without being cleared yourself, you're really strong, so I know you can do this. I'm going to show you how."

No, he isn't. I walked toward him, and no one flinched. Both Danvers and Cruise had to think I was on board with caging my demon, and while it sounded like a good idea, if this poor man had to live with his demon at all, that was too much demon. Focus made my ears ring, and I knew that my demon would take vengeance for everything I did once again.

That's fine. At some point, she'd kill me, and then I'd be done with the whole mess. I wasn't looking forward to death, but I'd rather help than hide. Maybe it was my angel blood?

I stared at Ben. "I think he does more than that. It must be a little bit like living with an illness. You learn to handle it, but it still makes you tired."

"That's very...intuitive."

Well, time to call me doctor, Bennie Boy. There it was, that other thing inside of him—I could see it. My hand tingled. *At least know what to do this time.* He carried the thing long enough, and while it was encouraging to hear he could function with it, I am a big believer in cutting out things that make you sick.

Or at least I decided I was right then. I never thought about it before. But what if he hurt one of his kids one day?

Regardless, I ripped the demon right out of him. It was older, the age of the thing hitting me in a cloud like dust and ash. Everyone screamed, Ben falling backward onto the couch

and Cruise pulling me with him, as if the demon could get me. It couldn't. It stared up at me, and I gave it right back to him.

"Enough," I said simply. In front of my eyes, it shriveled away into ash, crumpling into nothingness. Danver's demon hadn't done that. I blinked fast, not sure what happened. Maybe it was weak because they contained it for so long?

Ben's mouth fell open. "No one could get it out of me."

I shrugged. "I could."

He got to his feet. "You're the *one*. Cruise, she's the one."

I was okay, I thought, dusting myself off, but Cruise shook as he held me. Had he been that startled by the demon? He busted into the hunters' lair and stole me back from them; he wasn't cowardly.

"Fuck." He shook his head. "She doesn't need that. She doesn't need to be that."

"What is *the one*?" Danvers looked between us. "Here, pull your shit together, Cruise. Give her to me."

I let myself go into Danvers' arms, clinging to him easily. It really was nice these guys were so huggy. At least with me. I doubted Danvers walked around hugging people, and I knew Cruise didn't. He was sort of scary when he wasn't with me. *He puts criminals in jail.*

And destroyed the hunters' lair.

"The strongest of us," Ben held his head. "Died about ten years ago. He was the purest angelic blood among us. He made Nathan seem like he was nothing, and Nathan's pretty strong. He told us there would be one more born, another like him. He said she would change things because she would be able to do what you're doing. Just rip them out. That's not how exorcisms work, by the way. Not even for people like us, when we're doing them. You...you're the one they were talking about."

I could see why he'd find it interesting. Prophecy and all that—still sort of creepy and magical, even in a world where I was possessed. *Still, though.* "Why does it matter?"

“Because he said if we wanted any chance at beating the demons, we had to keep that person safe. Honestly, we’ve failed at it.” Cruise looked away. “We failed before we even knew we were failing. I knew him briefly. I wasn’t really concerned with possessions. The girls hadn’t been taken yet, but I studied law in college. One night, a speaker predicted what would happen—with letting the possessed out of jail.” He stared at me. “He told me to come with him after his speech. We had a beer, and he said he’d heard about me. He called me smart, and he said he had a feeling I’d end up wrapped up in things big time. I didn’t agree, but again, I didn’t know what would happen to my sisters. This life was never my plan. But he told me about what he saw. He was that guy, the last one. Before I even knew what it meant, I met him. His name was Rafe, and he’s gone now. I never saw him again after that.”

Ben rose. “He always did stuff like that.” When he would have fallen over, Cruise pushed him back down.

“Let’s get an IV going for you. Addalee, that was amazing, but...he was going to teach you how to box your demon.”

Yes, he was. I nodded, remembering. “Did anyone teach you or did you just figure it out?”

“I just did it one day.”

We’d have to hope I would figure it out, too. I sat down next to him. “I’m not the one. Look at me. Do I look like *the one* of anything?” The mere idea of it was sort of funny. “I’m just a nobody girl. Danvers, you need to get out of this situation. You’re free. No joining. No helping. Just be human and make a life for yourself. Cruise?” He left and then reentered the room and began to start a line on Ben. I blinked at him, wondering how he’d learned to do it. “You need to stop, too. I’m not getting better. I’m not the one, and I’m just...Addalee Ackers. That’s all I’m going to be.”

“The demon’s getting her again.” Danvers sighed. “Come here, let’s get you some hugs before you don’t want them anymore. Consider it a favor to me. I need them, too.”

Danvers wrapped me up. Maybe he was right, I thought, blowing out a wobbly breath. Maybe I needed to be held tightly for a long time. Cruise crossed the room and put on some music—jazz, like when we watched the snow together. I sighed. Okay. Maybe it was nice.

I lifted my head to meet Cruise's gaze over Danvers' shoulder. "There was never anyone in my whole life who could keep me safe. It was never your job to keep me safe. Not ever. We didn't even know each other. You're so far out of my league, I can't even see you from where you're sitting. And you, Danvers? You're going to remember who you used to be, I just know it. Maybe we would've met, but you wouldn't have wanted anything permanent with me. No one ever has, and I honestly don't think I'm built for it."

"Ryker wanted forever." Danvers swayed to the music with me while Ben closed his eyes on the couch. "I realize he's the competition, but someone should say it. Cruise did. And Ryker did."

I shook my head. "It wasn't meant to be. We never connected like that, not until it was too late. He had a girlfriend until last week. And Nathan? He just wants to save me. That's what he does. I'm not *the one*. You should keep looking for her. It's not too late to keep her safe."

"When you talk about yourself like that, it makes me want to throw something." Cruise took me from Danvers, and his hands were a bit rough. It was sort of fun, how they passed me back and forth to each other. It made me feel small and feminine and protected in strange ways. "Regardless of whether you're prophesized or just Addalee Ackers, I'm going to keep you safe. That means I'll find someone to get that thing out of you. If I can't, I'll figure out how to do it myself."

My head swam and I leaned it on his shoulder. "Did you give me a sedative again?"

"No, I didn't want to make you immune to them. Tired? Maybe you're just exhausted. You're still healing."

That could be true. "Let's just dance?" I tugged Danvers over. "We can all dance together."

He wrapped us up in a hug and they both laughed, like it was the funniest thing ever when it was exactly what I hoped would happen. What a sweet moment—which was why it was absolutely no surprise when the pain in my head started.

“She’s coming back,” I warned them while I still could.

Danvers hummed in my ear. “Try to ignore it for a few more minutes.”

“Don’t follow me if I go back to that tent. Stay here with Cruise where it’s warm. I’ll be mad if you do. Okay?”

I noticed he didn’t agree.

CHAPTER

TEN

I didn't know where I was or how I got there. I closed my eyes, trying to orient myself. I remembered dancing in Cruise's basement. I opened my eyes again, blinking fast at the moisture on my eyelashes. Cruise's basement seemed awfully far away from barefoot by the side of a highway without a coat in the rain.

The sound of it splattering on my skin didn't make it feel any warmer.

Well... this fucking sucks.

Someone honked at me as they whizzed by, their headlights a burst of starshine in the twinkling wet night. I resisted the urge to look like a bigger jackass by waving at them. In my black shorts and white shirt, I had to look completely out of place. Oh and completely visible through the soaked white shirt, if anyone wanted a good look at my boobs. I glanced down at my super evident areola—*wow. This is so not fun.*

I'm having a lot of fun, finally.

I would bet she was. I wondered if she intentionally removed the bra before she replaced the shirt, because it almost made me look more naked somehow. Another person honked. *This is just awful.* I refused to cross my arms to try to pretend to cover myself as I started walking in the direction of a sign that said Grand Street. I chose not to think too hard about how unsafe it was to be alongside the highway, since I

didn't know how I got there nor what city might have a Grand Street. None of it was good. I could literally be anywhere.

My feet were bare, so I had to watch where I put them for every step, too. *Oh, what the hell.*

Despite my discomfort, I couldn't help but wonder about the guys. Were they okay?

No, I killed them.

I didn't believe her, mostly because she would've been far too triumphant if she had. Likely, she'd even play back their deaths, just to make sure I saw every second of their pain. No, despite the fact there were more of them than us, and the worst she would've been able to do would be to injure them. I would've been locked in a room, strapped to a bed before they could be really hurt. She could hurt me, but not them.

A pain stabbed through my chest, and I realized that although her thoughts might be accurate, it was really fucking mean to point out the absolute desolation of my situation.

Is it? Or am I telling you the truth and you just don't like it?

I was saved from having to come up with an answer for her when a car pulled up next to me. "Hey, honey, want a ride?"

I leaned close, sticking my head through the window. He was older than me by quite a bit, and he wore a trucker hat. He'd rolled his sleeves up past his elbows, and the red of that flannel shirt matched his cheeks on his long face. If I had to guess, I'd put him in his fifties, which made the visibly hardening cock in his khaki pants extra disgusting. Clearly he wasn't interested in offering fatherly rescue, and instead he hoped to pick me up so he could take advantage of someone clearly in trouble alongside the road.

I wanted to tell him to fuck off.

But the demon decided what words would come out of my mouth. "Sure," she said, curling my lips into a smile.

I climbed in next to him, happy briefly for the heat in his car, at least.

I drove his car when she next let me see out of my eyes. I looked around, swerving for a second before I managed to situate myself in the lane. *Oh shit.* I...I had very little experience driving. *What happened to the man with pink cheeks?* I glanced down to see if my white tee shirt was still wet and—I looked away quickly. Being covered in blood meant nothing good had happened to him.

My demon remained strangely quiet. *Did I kill him?*

Sirens sounded behind me, red and blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror like a strobe. *Oh no.* Just what kind of mess had she made for me? What was going to happen?

I could hear her laughing, the sound filling my head until the sirens vanished. *Maybe this will teach you to leave demons where they are? You're not special. I can destroy you.*



I MIGHT HAVE BEEN BORN in a prison, but I didn't have a clue how long it took to make it to my current cell. I looked around, considering the space carefully. I wore a cotton orange jumpsuit, and bars caged off the room where I sat. I was alone, which was probably weird for prisoners. I stood and grabbed the bars.

How long had I been here?

Days? Weeks? Months? Years?

I leaned against the bars and listened to the nothingness around me, trying to gauge if it felt later or if only a little time had passed. The place was utterly silent. In the prison with Cruise and Ryker, it had been loud. Why weren't there any sounds? I looked around, trying to see anything to give me a clue. I had a bed, a sink, and a toilet, and that was it.

Was she going to tell me what was going on? Silence met my query. She didn't want to talk. But she was there. I could still feel her. *Okay.* My demon didn't want me to be able to mess with the demons. Did she make it so I would be kept in

solitary confinement for the rest of my life, so I couldn't free them?

Terror had my hands clenching on the bars and a strangled noise rising in my throat. I didn't want to go to jail. I really didn't want to be locked away. It wasn't fair. I never even got to live my life.

"Hello," I called out, and my voice echoed around the room. "Hello." I called again, ignoring how much higher and panicked it sounded.

No one answered me, and I sank to the floor, shaking violently.

A voice echoed through the room. "Prisoner, you will not shout. You will remain silent."

I would? "I...I'm not sure where I am or what has happened." Maybe I could make them understand. I couldn't be the first possessed person they locked up. "Why do I have to stay quiet?"

"You will remain silently in solitary until we've determined if you really are possessed."

"I'm not!" I screamed—or she did? "I'm not! I'm not."

Oh, I guess I understood. Anyone could claim possession to get out of their imprisonment. Kill your spouse? *Sorry, I'm possessed.* They needed proof. My job, when I met Cruise—literally telling them whether or not prisoners were possessed. My legs went weak and wobbly.

So someone would do that with me.

I sank to the floor, my legs no longer able to support me. What would happen to me? They told me to shut up, and I was a rule follower. A big one.

I'd just be quiet.

It proved harder and harder as the days passed. Through a window, I counted sunrises, and a guard brought food and a warm washcloth for me to clean myself. Otherwise, I sat in the cell. I wanted to throw myself out the tiny window. Instead, I sat in the cell.

My demon had never shut up for so long before, but as if to amplify my torment, she remained silent. Nothing, not a peep.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "I can't control the exorcism. Now that I've done it, I have to do it."

That's not going to work for me.

At last! She said something. I pressed my advantage. "You know, if you left me alone, I never would've been a problem for you. No one would have known about my angel blood. I could have lived and died without ever knowing. I never would've had anything to do with your kind, but you decided to torture a member of my kind just because you could. Now, that sure did bite you in the ass, didn't it? You're stuck with what I can do now, so ultimately, this is your fault."

I slapped myself across the face, and the pain rang through my ear and jaw. Okay. Maybe I could've worded that differently.

On the fifth day of ultimate solitude, the door opened and closed. Cruise Winters and Danvers Kearny entered the room, both of them looking remarkably wonderful.

"What are you doing here?" she screamed with my voice, her rage and fury making it an attack of sound.

Cruise looked me up and down, icy coldness keeping his inspection both distant and remarkably polite. "Ms. Ackers, my name is Cruise Winters. I'm an Assistant District Attorney with the state's office. I understand you claimed you weren't possessed when you were arrested. It is my job to verify the actual validity of your state of possession." He nodded toward Danvers. "Do it."

I pointed at him, my finger shaking like a leaf in the wind. I didn't have any control, my breath coming out of me in gasps. "He's not possessed! He can't possibly tell whether or not I'm possessed. This is fraud! They're frauds. I'm not! I'm not." She threw me against the bars, making me lick the bars as I stared them down. Cruise winced but Danvers remained steady.

“Everyone knows I’m possessed. I’m the most famous possessed person out there, in fact.” Danvers smiled at me. “And she is carrying a demon.”

Cruise nodded. Obviously, he knew that, but he pretended otherwise. “Ms. Ackers, under the newly formed Demon Acts, you are going to be released shortly. If you need help with your demon, resources will be provided to you.”

With that, my two friends exited, leaving me alone in my cell. I shook the bars impotently, shrieking. She was furious, ranting in my head. Latin? I wasn’t sure what language she used. It could’ve been Greek, but I wasn’t educated enough to begin to guess. It wasn’t a language I understood.

I sank to the floor, glad she wasn’t shaking the bars anymore. How many things could happen? What did I do to get locked up?

If anything, time dragged slower. I wondered if the demon could somehow do that—unravel time itself, so it would take longer, as an additional torture. *I wouldn’t put it past them.*



I BLINKED, coming back into consciousness. *Where am I now?* I struggled—a bag covered my head, obscuring my view. I couldn’t use my hands to yank it away, so I tried to shake my head free of the fabric covering it. I grunted in frustration because it was getting old. She knew I couldn’t stand it when she popped me in and out of consciousness, and I fucking hated her for doing it to me.

“Easy.” Nathan’s voice. I stilled, waiting to hear what else he had to say. “We can’t let you see where we’re going. We told you this, but obviously you didn’t hear it. Relax, Addalee. I promise, you’re okay.”

I relaxed a bit, licking my lips. “Nathan, I’ve lost huge amounts of time. The last thing I remember before I totally lost time, I danced in Cruise’s basement.”

“That long ago?” Cruise’s voice sounded a bit gruff. “Two weeks ago, Addalee. We lost you two weeks ago. We turned our back on you for a minute, and you walked out the door.

After that, we're not sure what happened. We know you stole a guy's car and knocked the shit out of him. You broke his nose." Relief flooded me, and I exhaled deeply. *That was the blood. Okay. I didn't kill the man in the trucker's hat. I simply broke his nose.* He deserved that much, at least. "When the police stopped you, you went nuts. You literally broke a whole row of cars. It was quite the scene."

So far, no one was dead, which was helpful. I nodded, not entirely displeased with the turn of events. "Who is in this car with me? Right now, I mean. I can't see you."

"Danvers, Nathan, and me," Cruise supplied. "Although Ryker is so often on video call with us, he might as well be here most of the time, too. The place where we're taking you...I'm not going to lie, it's not fun there. I wanted to avoid it, but I think at this point, we have no choice."

"You're taking me *where*?" Before he could answer, another question popped in my head. "What did I do before I got to that highway? I was hardly dressed, and I don't remember anything that happened before that. I don't even know where that was."

Danvers took my hand. "Near where I grew up, actually. As for what you did, I think you were looking for the hunters. They had a stronghold nearby for a while."

Looking for the hunters? It didn't make sense. I should have been avoiding them at all costs, but my demon was *looking* for them? "I don't understand her. I thought that I did for a long time, but I really don't. Do any of you know what the hell she's doing?"

"I think..." Nathan sighed. "I think there's some kind of plan you've disrupted—three times, now. The first time you disrupted the plan was when you took out Danvers's demon. He was a big deal, right? They've made movies based on things he's done."

Danvers shifted in his seat next to me, so I reached out to squeeze his thigh. It had to have been hell to live with his demon.

“You have no idea,” Danvers agreed.

“Right. I bet I don’t.” Nathan shifted next to me. I caught a whiff of his scent through the hood. The three of us had to be in the back seat of whatever vehicle they used. Was Danvers driving us around, our very own chauffeur? Or was someone else up front, some passenger I couldn’t see? *They would’ve told me, right?* Paranoia roared through me, likely fueled by my demon’s intervention. Even as I thought about the demon, she laughed, confirming my suspicions.

“After that, you cleared Ben, who had his demon trapped. No way do they want to risk you doing that to every possessed person you meet, but then I think you disrupted their plans in a way they never could’ve seen coming. I think the third thing is that you have hung on so long. I don’t think anyone expected you to manage it. You’ve only started becoming desperate recently, and now they’re trying to stop you from your path. Only they won’t.” He leaned toward me, his voice intimate as he added. “Hear me very clearly, you, the one who doesn’t belong in there—this is done. You can leave now because you chose to do so, but otherwise, we’ll find a way to make you leave. You should be ashamed at how miserable you’ve been making her.”

I wished he was right, and she’d just decide to leave after all. Fat chance of it, though.

We drove in silence for a while longer until I felt compelled to speak. “You guys don’t have to do this. You must have lives of your own to lead. Danvers, you just got a new job. Cruise, you’re probably missing work to mess with me. Nathan, do you have a job? I mean, besides helping at the tent cities.”

“Most of my time is taken up with my work in the tent cities if I’m being honest. I’m not trying to brag, but I was born with a lot of family money. Since I had the luxury of deciding what to do with my life, I chose to help with the homeless situation and assist with the fight against the demons. Where we’re going? My family actually owns the place. I’m privileged, and I know it, to be able to do what I do.”

I leaned my covered head on his shoulder. “You don’t need to justify yourself. You’re amazing.”

“Thank you.”

Danvers nudged me. “Don’t worry. I wasn’t raised with money, either.”

Compared to me, he actually was. So was Ryker, but we didn’t need to have a pissing contest over who had the saddest sob story. Not when I was suddenly so tired. I yawned, tried to shake it off, then thought to ask, “Are you guys giving me something that’s making me tired?”

“Yes,” Cruise answered without the slightest hesitation. “And don’t you worry about my job. I have a lot of vacation time, and it’s about damn time I’m using it, according to my boss. Danvers will still have his job when this is all said and done. Ryker’s family loves you. They all want you better.”

Not all of his family, but Cruise wouldn’t know our history. His mother hated me. That was the last thing I thought before I drifted off—how much Ryker’s mother hated me. How long had it been since I last slept? Weeks? *Is that possible?*

I didn’t know.

Distantly, I felt myself being lifted. Someone removed the bag from my head, and I sighed in relief as cool air touched my face.

“Is this her?” asked a woman’s low voice. “You should have brought her to us as soon as you found her.”

I snuggled down, enjoying both the softness of wherever they put me and the warmth of the man—it had to be Nathan who held me. He always smelled a little like ginger, and the spicy sweet scent of him wafted over me. “I could bring you half a dozen people a day right now. I can’t just kidnap people and bring them here. Addalee was living her life. I couldn’t interfere until it became clear we were losing her.”

Losing me? I lifted my head, but he pushed it back down. Blinking, I finally managed to focus my eyes. The first thing I noticed was Nathan needed a shave. Almost a full beard’s

growth decorated his chin, amusing me beyond belief. I never saw him any way other than freshly shaved before.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ve got you. Go back to sleep. I’m just arguing with my sister,” he said, snuggling me more comfortably into his arms.

I fell for it for a half a second before my brain caught up. *Sister?* I tried to sit up again, but his hand kept me tucked tight against his chest.

“Bring her inside. I can guess at what happened, and I’m not surprised, if she is who you say she is. Ryker has been waiting all day for you to show up. His training won’t progress if I can’t keep his attention on his studies.” A soft hand touched my cheek. “You must really be something, Addalee Ackers.”

I finally managed to speak. “I’m really not. I’m not special at all. I’m just me.”

She laughed. “Okay. If you say so.”

As Nathan moved, I drifted back to dreamland. The girl who haunted my dreams lately waited for me.

“You’re always here, and I’ve never met you,” I told her.

She smiled at me and took my hand. “No, you’ve never met me, but we’re very much the same, you and me. You’re where you should be now, and I’m gone.”

I shook my head, wondering if my mind somehow twisted some image I saw at Cruise’s house or something, causing the dreams. Aloud, I said what I realized. “You’re James.”

“Yeah, most people called me Jamie, but Cruise never did.” A shadow seemed to chase across her expression before she squeezed my hand. “Take care of my brother, Addie. He’s so soft inside, even if he doesn’t know it.”

No one used that nickname for me. “That’s the name of a girl with a future.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “Yes, of course it is.”

I opened my eyes to darkness. My heart raced. The dream seemed so real. *What is happening?*

“Easy...” Cruise’s voice rumbled close to my ear, his breath stirring my hair. He held me against him in the bed, and I relaxed into his familiar warmth. “What’s wrong?”

I swallowed. How much to tell him? “Honestly, I’m half convinced I’m meeting your dead sister in my dreams.”

He sighed. “Well, James was really nice, so if she’s hanging around for some reason to visit with you, don’t be afraid of her. She wouldn’t be a harbinger of bad things; she would want you to be okay. James would want to help.” He groaned. “Am I actually considering the idea that my dead sister might be visiting your dreams to talk to you? Fuck.”

His logical mind had to hate so much of what made our lives work. “If there are demons, maybe there are ghosts? Although, she’s not floating around in a white sheet chanting woo-woo or something. So, maybe she’s a spirit?”

Cruise tugged me against him, burrowing his nose into my neck. “Whatever James is doing—whether in your head, or in the spirit world, or wherever—she was the kindest person I knew. Mary and I are selfish beings, both slightly narcissistic. James was just altruistic, almost to a fault. She was the best of us.”

“I think you’re way nicer than you give yourself credit for. After all, you’re holding a near-stranger in bed after taking care of her again and again... I think you’re pretty outstanding.”

He was quiet for a second, but when he answered, his voice had gone husky and soft. “I feel like I know you better than you’re giving me credit for, Addalee. Do you really still feel like I’m a stranger?”

“No.” It wasn’t a lie. “But I don’t know much about you, not really. I know you’re a lawyer, and you do this stuff. We know each other, but not any of the small details, which is how I used to qualify *knowing* people. Are you keeping her asleep?”

“Yes.” I liked that he cut right to the answer. “The whole place is like that because of the number of possessed in the area. Anyway, favorite things.” His heartbeat was slow, a steady rhythm in my ear. “I didn’t have a normal childhood—the whole orphaned, rich boy thing. So, look, you knew that. Um. Okay. I like the color blue, although I mostly wear black because I don’t have to think about whether or not it matches. I love pizza. And hot dogs. Even though I was mostly fed fancy foods by nannies, I’d rather order pizza for dinner. I’ve never been to a baseball game or a football game. Not ever, but I always wanted to, even though I don’t have favorite teams. I wanted something normal like that, something... wholesome, you know?”

I’d lived most of his list of dreams, but I never thought any of it mattered. It never seemed special, yet we lived almost opposite lives. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten fancy foods, not once in my whole life. I wouldn’t know what to do with them. Which fork goes where? No way. I’d be an embarrassment.”

“Stop putting yourself down. I don’t know anyone who cares about etiquette, not really. If it ever comes up, start on the outside and work your way inward. The forks are usually placed to match each preassigned course.”

Good to know. “Thank you.”

“Your turn. Favorites. Go.”

Favorites? I thought about it, closing my eyes while I went through the sum total of my life so far. “I like pink? Maybe that doesn’t qualify, because I’m a demon girl right now, but I *was* a girlie, pink-loving mess. I mostly dress to make other people comfortable. What I mean by that is, I figure people will judge no matter what, so why not make it easy for them? Let them see what they expect and move on with your day. I...”

“Hold on.” Cruise sat up a little. “Wait, now I’m very curious. How did that play into what you wore the first time we met? I’ve never heard of anyone else doing this before, so I’m really curious. And your demon just goes along with what you want to wear?”

I shrugged. “Well, she didn’t used to pay attention to what I decided to wear. Now, who knows what she’d do? I think when we met, I wore an outfit I thought you would find quasi-inappropriate. I did it because I figured you’d think I was poor and ignorant, so why not lean into your preconceptions?”

He ran a hand through my hair. “I don’t remember really noticing your clothes. I remember thinking you were hot as hell.”

A pulse of heat thrummed through me, but then I shoved at him. “Stop it. I’m cute, maybe. I make people want to pat me on the head. But I’m not hot.”

“I never judged you by your clothing.” He leaned closer. “You *are* hot, Addalee. Trust me on that.”

His mouth was so close to mine, so I gave into the impulse, and I kissed him. Softly. Maybe I should have asked first? But then Cruise closed the gap between us and kissed me back, harder. He wasn’t a gentle kisser, but I craved his hunger. I sighed, leaning into him. Yes, let him lead me. Let him take control of it. I was so sick of having to *think think think* all the time.

Couldn’t we just be? It seemed...we could.

Our bodies pressed against each other, so I could feel how instantly hard he got. I rubbed myself against the ridge of that heat, causing little electrical sparks to dance up my spine and pool between my legs. Running my hands under his t-shirt, I could feel his muscles jump when I touched him. He was fit and strong. Truthfully, not someone I could ever have seen in my life, and if I wasn’t possessed, I would’ve gone my whole life without ever knowing him. I accused him of having preconceived notions about me, but I met him pre-loaded with a ton of misconceptions about him. Didn’t I worry he would be a snob?

He kissed me gently then pulled back. “You’re so beautiful, and I’m going to get carried away.”

Baby steps are probably important. Despite the thought, I couldn’t help but wonder...what would she do to me if I *did*

have sex? What punishment could she enact? Every decision I made had a consequence, so the question was simply whether the crime was worth the punishment.

I decided to be open with him. “Honestly, I wasn’t at all sure you were interested. You were the only one who didn’t ask me on a date, or some semblance of it, after this is all over. If you were interested, I thought you’d ask when they did.”

Even in the darkness, I could see him smirk. “Well, since I intended to move you into my house, I figured they could steal you away for a few hours here and there, if they wanted. When you get home from your dates, you could climb into my bed.”

I laughed, despite myself, even as another of those little pulses had me moving restlessly against him. “Now, there’s the ego I was expecting.” I kind of loved it, because I was sick in the head enough to be thrilled because it had nothing to do with my demon. “Your sister, in my dream, told me you were soft inside.”

He caught his breath, his gaze suddenly serious. “That exact phrase. Shit. Yes, I think you’re seeing James, Addalee. She used to say that to me. Cruise, you’re soft inside, she would say, and I’d tell her to shut it. She stopped saying it after she was possessed. The demon took so many things from us, and not just years with my sister. It stole them. I’m not going to allow yours to continue to steal time from you.”

A pounding on a door sounded from a distance away. Cruise rolled over and turned on the light, illuminating the room for the first time. I blinked. The enormous room connected to a living area where two more doors waited.

“Where are we?”

“It’s a school for adults to learn to deal with demons. No kids at this location. You have to be older than eighteen to even get admitted, though most of the patients are much older.” He walked toward the door. “I own a suite. You can fund an area and they name it after you.”

I smiled at his back as he so casually talked about buying an entire wing of a school dedicated to helping humans with

their demons. Because he was rich, and that was something rich people just did, I realized. To him, it was no stranger than hitting the after-holiday chocolate sales at the stores would be to me.

I pulled the sheet up to my neck, hoping to hide the fact I only wore a t-shirt, since I noticed the outfit. In the dark, it didn't matter, but suddenly it seemed relevant.

“Hey,” Nathan said as he entered, and he gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “I’m not staying over there with her. I’ll stay here with you two.”

I rolled over and lifted my head. “Nathan?”

“Hi, Addalee. Sorry if I woke you.” He kicked off his shoes. “My sister has done it again. Family drama every time I come around, I swear. For someone so good at what she does, she sure handles other matters poorly.”

Cruise gestured at the bed. “Want to cuddle with her? Me on one side, you on the other? It’s the whole touch thing.”

Nathan grinned. “In a word, *yes*.”

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The posters featured cats and kittens in various capering poses. I pinched my lips together as I considered a little tuxedo-wearing kitten hanging onto a watering can in a garden. Somehow, the cat didn't fit in the stuffy room with its brown walls and loudly ticking clock. My demon was awake...and pissed. Every so often, she would make me punch myself in the face. Rolling my jaw to loosen the latest blow, I stared harder at the kitten's wide, empty, thoughtless blue eyes. I would be badly bruised if she kept it up, and there wasn't a thing I could do to stop her. The door opened, and an unfamiliar woman entered the kitten-poster room. My demon hissed, so I assumed the woman must be an angel-blooded person or otherwise demon-bane. Angels seemed to cause the hisses.

Nathan entered on the woman's heels. He winked at me, and my cheeks heated up, despite my demon's hissing. I didn't care what she thought of him. Nathan was fantastic. He had held me all night, I remembered, closing my eyes to relive it. He and Cruise held me tight, and when I started to have nightmares, he'd said something in a strange language that scared the nightmares away.

Plus, he was ridiculously handsome. Like, he could be on the cover of a romance novel handsome.

Behind him, I spotted Danvers. He grinned at me as he entered the room, and something about his dark eyes still seemed a little dangerous. They dressed him in some kind of

uniform—khaki pants and a black-collared t-shirt—yet they couldn't diminish his raw masculinity.

They all sat down around me, their gazes falling on me like a combined weight.

“I see she's awake and mad.” Nathan sighed. “Well, we got her down for a bit.”

Danvers took my right hand. Static crackled across my skin. “She usually has you hit yourself with this one. I'll just hold it so she can't for the moment, okay?”

As if to demonstrate her power, she used my left hand to punch me in the face. It was awkward, but my cheek still stung from the blow, so I rolled my jaw to ease the sting. Danvers frowned and dropped my right hand.

“That was just childish behavior. I thought everyone said she was an important demon? Just looks temperamental to me.” The woman leaned back in her chair, arms folded while her expression seemed kind. “My name is Maura, and I'm Nathan's sister.” Her gentle voice pulsed with a kind of hypnotic quality. I could imagine zoning out while watching a video narrated by her telling me to take deep breaths to center my core.

Her hand stretched out in a delicate way that reminded me of a ballet dancer, all genteel grace, as she said, “This room is filled with people who can't be possessed. Nathan and I were born with a natural immunity. Danvers has already been possessed, and thankfully was freed because of you. We're also being observed.” She nodded toward the window, her hand flowing in another graceful pose. “By two people who *can* be possessed. They're a distance away from this room for their own safety, but I don't think you'll mind them observing. The two observers are Cruise and Ryker.”

I swallowed. “I've spent a lot of time with them, and they've been fine.”

“Cruise has never been possessed, but we're not sure why. His sisters both were, so... Ryker is relatively new to the study of demons. Perhaps you've been protecting him or maybe he

has a natural immunity? In any case, it made sense to keep them away for their own safety. We're about to make your demon very angry, and her fury can draw other demons to us. No one here needs to be exorcised, except you. I'm hoping the same instinct that drew you to fix Ben and Danvers, despite her hurting you afterward, can be used to exorcise yourself now."

I doubted it. I would always be possessed. Until the day I died.

"Take my hand." I wanted to squeeze her fingers back, to take her hand with my own, but my demon refused to touch her. She side-eyed her brother. "Nathan, a little help, here?"

He rolled his eyes and then took my hand, rubbing his thumb over my wrist before he placed it gently in hers. "Sorry if the demon made that hurt, Addalee."

It only burned a little. "How do you guys know so much about this?"

"Our family has been involved in all things demon for a long time. Our great-great-great grandfather, I think? It comes with the angel blood." Nathan smiled as he spoke. "An obligation to help."

No one told me I had angel blood, and I certainly couldn't help anyone. "If I have angel blood, why am I possessed? I mean, how strong can it actually be? Like, my great-whatever had sex with an angel a lot longer than yours did?"

"We're pretty sure we get it from both sides, which is highly unusual. And maybe it's just luck. There are some very strong angelic people who are still getting possessed. Maybe your demon is so strong or particularly able to do it. We don't really know, and we don't have a great way to research it. Realistically, we won't ever know for sure. What we do know is you are strong. You can do exorcisms while you're still infected with that thing yourself."

Infected? I shifted in my seat. That was a new term for it. Interesting, like I just picked up an illness. My head pounded, proving my demon wasn't a huge fan of being compared with

the flu. In fact, she could now see why Maura pissed off Nathan so readily.

“My demon feels sorry for you, Nathan.” I said the words because she made me do it.

“Oh, she’s getting pissed off by my sister, too? Look, Maura, you’re even annoying the demonic now.” Nathan grinned, and Danvers looked between him like he wasn’t sure either of them were real.

Maura smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Are you ready to see if you can do this?”

“I know I can’t, so it’s your time you’re wasting. I think you should all put me outside and leave me there, just mind your business and get on with your lives. I’m not special. Who cares what I can do?”

I hoped they would understand. I really was nothing.

“Right. Then let’s get started.” Maura ignored me. “You are naturally better able to be hypnotized. It comes from the possession. Why is that? We don’t know.”

“Wow. Your family has been doing demon things for so long, and you know jack shit about them.” I laughed. It really was ridiculously funny, how bad they were at even dealing with demons.

She kept talking as if I hadn’t said anything. “We’re going to bring you back to your possession.”

She was going to do *what*? I sat up. “I really don’t like that idea. It wasn’t a great day for me.”

I do. Her laughter echoed through my head like someone had rolled barbed-wire-covered dice in my skull.

“Of course you don’t. It must have been painful, but you need to see your demon in your mind’s eye so you can see it here. That’s going to help you feel the separation.”

She wants you to see me? Fine. You can do that. No hypnotism needed. You want to see me, Addalee? Here I am.

As though my mind was thrown from there into somewhere else, I could suddenly see my demon as if she stood in front of me. She hadn't changed over the intervening years, and her massive wings extended to take up most of the space in the room. Her red body and black hair still gleamed just as awful as I remembered, and all of it topped off with her cute little hairless pointed ears. Yep, same nightmare, different day.

"Where are we?" I asked and swallowed, trying to look around despite my gaze being drawn back to her as irresistibly and lethally as a moth to a light bulb. I hated looking at her, satisfied most of the time pretending she was something else. Almost anything else...

"We're right here in your mind, Addalee. You and me. Let's see each other face to face, so I can remind you how much of nothing you are. Congratulations! You managed to exorcise two demons who weren't paying attention. I am paying attention. I always am, and you're nothing to me."

Nothing she said was news to me, since I knew all those facts as well as her. And yet...A memory stirred at the edge of my thoughts, something she couldn't really touch.

In the memory, I walked down the street with Ryker. We wore our school backpacks, so we likely had just gotten off the bus, and I recognized the block. My brief happy time, I remembered with a smile. Our parents, newly married and still dewy in love, both still sober and mostly on the same track. Overall, just a brief window of perfect.

"I guess what I don't understand," Ryker said, shifting his backpack as he shook his head, "is why you believe her. "

I sighed. "She's our English teacher. She has studied the stuff. Presumably, she knows what she's talking about when she says I have no knack for English lit. She put in a recommendation for me to be transferred to the program for the kids without futures."

Ryker stopped walking and turned to face me. "You know what I'm looking forward to, Addalee?"

His abrupt topic change threw off the memory version of me, making me stumble. “No. What?”

“The day when you know yourself well enough to let their lies roll off your back. Like...I kind of know myself that well already. If she said, Ryker, you’re an idiot at English, I would say, yeah...okay, but I can fix your car. I can also understand chemistry better than you can, you evil old bitch.”

I laughed, covering my mouth. I loved when he was like this. Love...Didn’t he love me just a little bit? Could I ever ask him that?

Instead of asking, I fiddled with the strap on my backpack. “I always thought I was good at English. I understand it, at least. I love to read.”

He shrugged. “Then don’t believe her. You know you. Don’t let someone else tell you what is true about you, Addalee.”

I blinked and stared at my demon. She was terrifying, there was no doubt, but if she could have killed me, or if that was her goal, she would have already. So she didn’t want me dead, not really. I got to my feet. Okay, we were in some space in my head. Which meant it was *my* frickin’ head.

She didn’t get to tell me what I did and didn’t get to do in my own head anymore. I got to my feet. It wasn’t like she could hurt me, not more than she already had. Really, if she did manage to hurt me more, she’d kill me, and then she would have to move to another body anyway.

My hands tingled like when I’d exorcised the other demons. Was it possible? Could I just get rid of her?

If it were possible, I wondered if it could be like the rules in other dreams. Could I make things, simply by willing them into being?

A shield, I thought.

A chair appeared before me. *Really?* My brain conjured a chair and not something I could even use as a shield? I sighed and decided I would use whatever I created, and I wouldn’t

complain. *At least it didn't give me a bunny rabbit or something.*

I held on to the chair tightly and shoved it in front of me. I wanted a shield, so I would use the chair as if it were a shield. The demon rolled her eyes at me. “You think that you can beat me with that? A chair? You’re kidding yourself.”

“Not with the chair. No.” But it would block her for half a second if I were lucky. I used to be bullied. When I was really young, after I left my cousins and before I met Ryker, some girls really came after me. I learned early on how to throw a punch, but could I punch a demon?

I imagined that my hand was sharp, each knuckle coming to a bladed edge. I glanced down at my hand, hoping it would be magically transformed, and saw my fingers. Shaking my hand, I closed my eyes and tried again. Why couldn’t my mind actually cooperate with me? When I opened my eyes again, I held a knife—one she could easily take from me, but at least a knife.

“You didn’t expect this from me. All of these months in my head, and you thought I wouldn’t defend myself,” I practically snarled at her. “Let’s see how you like this in your stomach.”

She flapped her wings, the gust from them lifting my hair like a hurricane. “I’ve been thinking about this a great deal, Addalee. I don’t think I need to do this with you to hurt you. I think that I have a much better way to cause you pain, one that will get me what I need better, or even easier, than by possessing you.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I’ll see you soon, sweetie.”

Just like that, I found myself back on my knees, staring at the room around me. Everyone shouted—Cruise and Ryker were supposed to be separated for their own safety, weren’t they? I stared down at myself, at my hands in my lap. Why were they there? Blood stained my fingers, and when I caught my reflection in the glass, my cheeks, too. *What happened?*

A surge of energy bolted through me, and the fire of it sent me screaming backward. Pain like I never before experienced assaulted my body, throwing me down to the floor on my back. I stared up, screaming as my demon flew to the ceiling above me.

“Fuck!” someone yelled. I thought it was Nathan, but I couldn’t look away from my demon to be sure.

“I didn’t do this. I didn’t get her out.” I tried to talk, but my throat hurt. “She’s just...”

Her words came back to me as if on replay. She wanted to hurt me. She wanted me to obey. I blinked rapidly as the room blurred and then refocused my gaze. I wanted to talk, wanted to cry out. What the fuck were Cruise and Ryker doing in there? Oh, she was brilliant. If there was a surefire way to get them in the room and within her reach, it was by making me get hurt badly enough that I bled.

I couldn’t look around, but I would bet Nathan and Danvers weren’t okay. My friends would have rushed in to help.

Hands came around me and Danvers, who sported a fresh black eye that might be from my fist, pulled me against him.

“No,” I managed to say.

“Ssh. It’s hard when they leave. It hurts. I know. Just relax, you’re safe now.”

I was safe? I realized how right he was in that moment. With my demon out of my body, I could never be possessed again. One and done, although no one knew why the demons never broke that rule. Danvers would be fine, too. Nathan and his sister—also safe. Cruise spent so much time around the possessed—they would have gotten him when they got his sisters, if they could get him at all.

But Ryker? Nothing protected him. I hadn’t exorcised her, hadn’t rid the world of her. She just left me, like Ryker once suggested she would do. Still a fully formed demon, still perfectly capable of doing as much damage as she liked, because I didn’t fight her.

My demon—who tormented me for years—possessed my oldest friend as I watched. The boy I had been in love with for years in secret.

One second, he was Ryker. He stared at the demon in horror, and in the next second, he was overtaken by her.

She threw him down on the ground, sulfur filling the air, and Maura screamed in revulsion. I could understand the sentiment. I'd seen it before, though, when she'd done it to me. I knew how it hurt when she shoved inside, how she would make him bend to her will. Ryker was gentle inside, softer than me, much more so than I had ever been—I imagined the kind of damage she could do to someone like him.

I knew she would destroy him. I lifted my arms like I could hold him, like I could banish it from him. I could—I could exorcise her, but she took him away while I was too weak to stop her. He rushed from the room faster than I could imagine he could move on his own.

Inside, he had to be screaming.

“Nathan,” I managed to say. Maybe he'd understand. I wilted, my legs going weak.

“I'll get him.” He ran, but as much as I could count on Nathan, and as much as I knew he would do everything in his power to get Ryker back or stop him from leaving, I also didn't believe he could help. Not while the creature possessed Ryker's strong body.

Cruise crawled over to me. *Fuck*. What had I done to him? At my unasked question, he shook his head. “Nothing that won't heal. Don't worry about it. We'll get him back. I won't let them have Ryker.”

Danvers squeezed me against him. “You can believe Cruise. You'll see now. You're free. You'll be able to see things more clearly. We'll save him.”

I tried to swallow. My breath hitched. I couldn't breathe. “Pretty sure I'm going to pass out.”

“Do it.” He kissed the top of my head. “We've got you.”



I OPENED my eyes and rolled them back to see the IV in my arm. Again. Over the entire course of my life, I didn't think I had as many IVs as I lately found myself needing. I sat up, stretching my stiff body. No demon waited to throw me around the room or remind me, if I forgot, how much of a piece of shit I really was. She was gone, no longer there to haunt my every thought.

For as much joy as the knowledge brought me, an equal measure of dread waited.

What is she doing to Ryker?

Next to me, still mostly sitting in a chair, Nathan snored. His head dangled downward in a way that had to be uncomfortable. Claw marks marred his face—from me or Ryker? Despite the damage, the man spent his whole life helping people like us.

I reached over and took his hand, squeezing his fingers with my own. He lifted his lids and blinked awake, staring at me as a smile brightened his face. “Addie.”

No one called me Addie. *That's a name for a girl with a future.* I told him that once, so I wondered if it was why he brought it up. “What will I do without you?”

“Where am I going?” he whispered. Although we didn't need to whisper, it seemed a moment for shared secrets.

I shook my head. “You help the possessed. Since I'm not possessed anymore, you'll be rid of me soon, I guess.”

He leaned forward and kissed me, his mouth warm as it sent tingles over my skin. “You're going to have a whole new time with me now. I don't know how any of this will play out, but I know I'm not giving you up. I did let you down. I couldn't catch Ryker. Cruise is out there looking for him now.”

I expected to hear most of it, except for Cruise being out looking for him. “Not your fault. She has a whole new, stronger body to run with now. No one is going to find him until she wants him found.”

“That’s unfortunately probably true.” He kissed me again, his lips a delicious distraction. “I am sorry.”

“For what? For giving up your whole life to help people like me? For doing it silently, so that most people don’t even know what you’re doing? For caring for the homeless? For coming back to your family home, where your sister obviously drives you crazy, to save me? For training people? For saying things in a language I don’t understand to calm my demon? To...”

He kissed me again. “Noticed all that, did you?”

I really wasn’t done. “For sending me to Cruise, which probably saved my life?”

“Addalee.” He stroked my hair away from my face, his steady eyes serious. “You just need to get stronger. We’re hydrating you and giving you vitamins. Believe it or not, there is a protocol for your recovery. Your appetite will come back soon. Tell me what you want to eat when it does. Anything in the world, Addalee. I’ll get it for you or find someone to make it for you, just tell me what you’d like.”

I grinned at him, shaking my head. “Thank you, but I’m afraid I’m going to disappoint you. I’ve never had any exotic foods. I can’t imagine asking for something that isn’t already on the cafeteria menu.”

“Cruise and I are going to spoil you.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do with that.”

He rose. “Scoot over.”

I easily obeyed, and he lay down next to me, tucking me close to the warmth of his body. “Tell me what happened. How did you get her out, and then how did she get in him? Shouldn’t she have been sent back where she came from?”

As he spoke, he readjusted until I snuggled up tight against him. I wouldn’t stay awake long, not with his warmth cocooning me. “I didn’t get her out. She said she knew how to motivate me. I was going to shove a knife in her gut. Instead, she let me go and then took him so that I’d do whatever it is that she tells me to do.”

“That’s nuts. She really is insidious.”

I nodded, pressing my forehead against him. “I begged her for years to leave him alone.”

“I heard how hard you struggled. It’s one of my talents, so to speak. I can hear the person inside the possession. I can hear you guys in ways you don’t even realize. You were so quiet in the beginning.” He ran a hand through my hair. “That’s what caught my attention. Then I realized you were like me, which freaked me out. An angel blood just hanging around a tent city? Not screaming or crying? Wow.”

I yawned. “Then what happened?”

“You started crying. Screaming. I knew we were getting in trouble, so I sent you to Cruise. I thought he could convince you to get exorcised. I didn’t know you’d be you. Magical.”

My eyes were starting to close. “What is Ryker doing? Could you hear him?”

“He was screaming. Loudly.”

That I believed.



I STARED at the grilled cheese in front of me. It seemed, in that moment, extremely possible no sandwich ever looked more delectable. Danvers grinned at me. “For me, it was chicken nuggets, but I know how you’re feeling. Eat it. Go on. You’ll even be able to keep it down. Your body is back to being your own.”

I took a bite and closed my eyes as I almost shut down from sensory overload. Flavors rushed through me, so moist, buttery, yet crisp and crunchy. I couldn’t think of anything else until I swallowed, sending the yummy goodness into my stomach. When I finally finished chewing that first magnificent bite, three sets of eyes pinned me in place. Danvers, who was there when I started eating, had been joined by Cruise and Nathan. They all crowded around the same small table in the cafeteria.

“It was good.” I sat back, sighing in pleasure. “Thank you.” Danvers had made it for me, since in addition to other things, he was a chef. When I asked for a grilled cheese sandwich, he laughed at me then proceeded to make it as if it were no problem.

I glanced at his fake uniform and tried not to let concern knot my stomach.

Cruise plopped into the seat next to me. “What do you say to us getting out of here for a while?”

He hadn’t found Ryker so far. Nathan shook his head, answering for me. “She can’t. In fact, you both have dinner with my family tonight. You, too, Danvers, unless you can’t make it because you need to study, in which case, we get it.”

He smirked. “You have no idea how bad dinner used to be at my house. Sure, I’ll come.”

Cruise grimaced. “Maura doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone.” Nathan shrugged. “Tomorrow, we can all go home.”

I didn’t really have a home. Where would I go? And was Danvers staying there? The only thing I knew for sure was I couldn’t do anything until I found Ryker.

Cruise squeezed my hand. “Whatever is bugging you, don’t worry about it today.”

We’d see.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Maura wanted the façade of a family dinner, while I couldn't focus on anything past Ryker, somewhere out there, trying to survive a demon possession. Meg, their younger sister, seemed equally tuned out. She looked at her phone more than she looked at her plate. Maura smiled, asking polite questions. Had Ryker survived? I knew the kind of things my demon found a good time, and I couldn't imagine poor Ryker—

I shoved it out of my mind, focusing on the chicken. To be fair, it was ridiculously good chicken.

As I chewed a bite, another thought struck me. When was the last time I ate something delicious and didn't think about the fact I could experience the taste? The thought struck me immovable. I couldn't chew anymore, frozen by the sheer liberty of controlling my own mouth. I set the fork down as tears rushed down my cheeks, pain at the forefront of my mind.

What happened? Why had so much happened? Why was it still happening? It was the middle of dinner, and even my upbringing taught me it was completely rude to burst into tears at the table. But I covered my face and wept anyway because I couldn't help it. I simply couldn't stop the flow of grief. I pushed my chair back with a screech of noise.

"I've got you," Cruise said as he picked me up. "This is totally normal. You've been through so much. Mary cried and cried for months. It's okay."

Danvers petted my back. “I’ve cried behind closed doors a lot.”

I hadn’t even noticed, which somehow made me feel worse. I was so horrible.

“We’re leaving. Maura, we don’t do family dinners well on a good day. This isn’t a good day.” Nathan spoke fast. “I don’t know why we had to do this.”

She shouted, “We had to do this because we never do this. We had to do it because we spend our lives dealing with those evil creatures and we never take a moment to even celebrate when we’ve won. You’ve made these people your family. I’d like to know them.”

I lifted my head. “I’m sorry, Maura. You’re right, and that’s a fair request. Thank you for dinner. I’ll stop by again sometime soon. The chicken was so good, and that’s the truth. I started crying because of the chicken being so good.”

“You started crying because an evil being controlled every moment and aspect of your life and now took control of your best friend, who you were in love with for a long time.” Nathan tugged on the end of my hair, his smile boyish and teasing. “We can get out of here.”

I shook my head. “No. I was invited to dinner. I’m almost never invited to dinner.” A fresh flood of tears started, so Cruise took the hint and set me down. “If you give me a second, I’d like to go splash some water on my face. Then I’d really like to try again, okay? I don’t want your family to think of me like this, Nathan. I’d rather try to be me through a whole dinner.”

Quiet, disinterested Meg walked to me and took my hand. “You can use my room. Come on.” She suddenly seemed neither so quiet nor disinterested. In fact, she seemed kind, so I let her lead me to her bedroom. Decorated in pastels, her room looked like something out of a child’s princess dreams. Who was raising this girl? She had to be seventeen, and their parents died a long time ago. Did she live here alone with Maura, just training people to fight their demons all day?

“Is this what you want? To do what your siblings are doing?” I asked her before I walked into the bathroom. It probably was none of my business, but I was faux-pas-ing all over the place. Why stop?

She smirked at me. “Fuck no. I mean...I can’t wait to get out of here. Would you want to stay? No, I’m going away to college next year. I can’t get possessed, so I’m getting out. I guess I don’t feel called like they do to use my natural born gifts or whatever. Maybe I didn’t spend enough time with the asshole who had all that angel blood? I don’t know, but for whatever reason, I don’t see why we have to do any of it. It’s not our problem. Sorry, I’m not being very nice.”

I shook my head. “Makes total sense to me. Why would anyone do this if they didn’t have to?”

No one gave me a choice, of course. No one ever gave me choices. Life happened, and I needed to find Ryker.

I liked that Cruise and Nathan thought I was special, but not that it meant they would likely want me to do something.

She laughed. “My brother will benefit from spending time with you. He can get a little obsessed with all of the demon stuff. After you find your friend, do me a favor? Remind Nathan that there is such a thing as life after work.”

What would that be like? In her bathroom, I stared at myself in the mirror for the first time since I got rid of my demon. Despite my body being quiet and obeying my control, my silent mind, and my solitary thoughts banging around in my skull, my face looked more lost than I ever saw it appear. Dark circles surrounded my eyes, leaving them looking sunken, and my inability to eat those last weeks of being possessed had left my face gaunt. I could see where some might find my reflection fashionable, but I wished for another ten pounds to fill out my face.

Ten pounds would mean I got properly fed, eating three times a day. I knew what I looked like growing up. When my mother had enough money to feed me, I looked better than when she didn’t. Ryker tried to make up the difference, when

my mother failed, and just remembering that caused the tears to start tracking hot lines down my face again.

Quietly, I made my way back. After sitting, I stuffed a bite of chicken in my face, chewing despite the tears. I would make conversation, too, to prove I could.

And Cruise was right. Maura didn't like him, which she made more than evident over the duration of the meal. It also became completely clear she could hardly speak because of the enormity of her crush on him. She blushed when he spoke to her and then said something terrible to him. He didn't seem to notice but possibly because he kept looking at me. Actually, every man in the room spent a long time staring in my direction. I figured their savior complexes would have worn off, since my demon wasn't around to make me pitiable anymore.

Nathan met my gaze over the table. "Ready to go to bed? We'll head home first thing in the morning."

There was that word again—*home*. "Nathan, do you mean my tent? I hope my stuff is still there. I've been gone a lot of days, though, so it would be weird if the man who watches my stuff was able to hold my spot this long." A few places around town gave out clothing. I might get lucky and be able to get a few pieces that fit, at least, to hold me over. I'd always held onto my jean shorts and t-shirt that I wore as part of my f-you game. But, the rest of it was hard to keep track of. I didn't know if that problem was more about me or the demon. "Or maybe I destroyed it all myself? I can't remember. Did I?"

Cruise shook his head. "You are not going back to your tent, Addalee, and we've been over that. You'll come home with me. You and Danvers can both stay in my house. Nathan can come, too. We'll all stay there, and when we find Ryker, we'll bring him back here to get that fucking thing out of him."

"How does it work? The demon was female when she was inside of me. Does her gender change, or is it still a her in there?" I realized it didn't answer his question, so I added,

“Thank you. I’ll stay for a while, at least until I can figure out where to go.”

Danvers winced. “I’m here for a while, but I’ll take you up on that when I get out.”

Nathan shook his head. “I have responsibilities in the tent cities. You can stay with me, too. I have several rooms, although I couldn’t offer you one before, when you had the demon. Originally, we intended to avoid letting the demons know what we were up to, but now that Ryker knows...well, he’s the first person to ever get possessed here.”

Cruise got to his feet. “Let’s not worry about that just yet. Come home with me tomorrow. We’ll get it figured out.”

“Wow.” Meg grinned at Nathan. “I never saw it, but you’re a lot cooler than I thought.”

He stared at his sister as Maura tried not to smirk. “Why is that?”

“You’re about to go straight into a relationship with Addie while she is also in one with all of them.” She pointed around the table seemingly randomly. “It’s very modern of you, Nathan. I give you props, big brother.”

Addie is a girl with a future. I almost said it aloud, but maybe I would have a future. At the moment, I didn’t know what that future might look like, and saying it reminded me too much of Ryker. Nathan chucked a roll at her, and she laughed. He said his family was messed up, but I sort of loved it. Maybe they weren’t all happy with each other all of the time, but their easy affection flowed in their every interaction. It was really the most anyone could ask for.

Wasn’t it?

“Thank you for having us.” I smiled at Maura. “Sorry if I ruined it a bit.”

“You didn’t.” She took my hand and squeezed it. “I should have known it would be too soon. I just thought maybe... you’d like to have a dinner around a table with no demon for a change.”

I squeezed her hand back. “I didn’t have this growing up, so thank you. Yes, I really did enjoy it.”

The halls seemed hushed other than our footfalls as I followed Cruise from the room. Danvers already headed back to his dorm, Nathan stayed with his family, and otherwise, most people were already in bed. I leaned against Cruise as we walked, allowing him to lead the way with the arm he slung around me.

“Are your sister and Willow okay?” I hadn’t asked about them in a while. The demon must not have wanted to know.

He nodded. “Sure. Mary is happily studying, and Willow works weird hours, but they’re happy. I should probably move out of the house and let them have it already.”

I didn’t know enough about their situation or dynamic to tell him if that was a good idea or not. “Where would you go?”

“Maybe I’d get a place closer to Nathan, downtown. Maybe in the same building. You could be there, too.” He gave me a nudge with his hip, and I thought about it.

In the building with him and Nathan? I shook my head. “I don’t have a job. I don’t even have the prospects of how to find a job, so I don’t think I can afford to live in the same building as you and Nathan.” Family money allowed them both to exist in the world without having to think too much about bills. Nathan was in a perpetual state of saving people, which he did as a volunteer, but it took all his time, and Cruise worked hard. But neither of them would be figuring out a budget anytime soon, based on their daytime activities.

“You could live with me.” He kissed my hair. “I don’t know why that hasn’t managed to penetrate your thoughts. We’re not kicking you out onto the streets. We’re saying, please, stay with us, Addalee.”

I shook my head. “Cruise, you can’t just invite me to live with you. Neither can Nathan. You guys don’t really know me. You knew me possessed, sure, but you haven’t spent any time with the actual Addalee. I’m boring. In a year, you might hate me. We have demons in common. Hopefully, there will come a

time when no more demons torment our lives, and then...what then?"

He took my face in his hands, his eyes somehow almost too intense and serious. With his thumbs, he caressed my cheeks. "Don't you think we have a little bit more in common than just demons?"

I shivered under his touch. Desire was potent, thickening the air until it became hard to breathe. The desire pleased me, since its being there without the demon meant it was a true sensation, rather than a lie she created to control me. Something special, something just between me and Cruise. My demon might not want to be touched, but I did. I really, really did. Cruise was one of the people I wanted to have doing the touching.

"I don't mean...sex." I might be blushing, and I could feel the heat climbing my cheeks like a banner. I wasn't that well-versed in the subject, and I never got a chance to get comfortable talking about it because demons didn't care for touching.

He lifted his eyebrows. "I didn't mean sex, either, although I like that your mind went there."

Giggling felt foreign, but the bubble of mirth escaped my throat anyway. Cruise grinned at me, and the two of us stood in the hall like teenagers, saying stupid things and finding them ridiculously amusing. "Okay. What else do we have in common?" I finally managed to ask when I stopped feeling giddy about the idea of sex.

"You *really* like spaghetti. You don't seem to mind my taste in music. We're clearly in sync when it comes to our sense of humor. Oh, you didn't like potatoes, I could tell. I didn't either, but we both liked the chicken."

He wasn't wrong. "So some pretty interesting things to build off, then."

"Sure, relationships have been built on less than chicken." He led me down the hall again.

I pointed at him. “I like how you smell, Cruise. Always so clean and fresh. I sometimes just want to push my nose up against you and inhale you until I’m drunk on the scent.”

“Fuck.” He tugged me closer to his side, his breathing rough in my ear, and I leaned against him again. “Do you know what you just did to me?”

I would have answered him, despite the pulse of heat that flooded me. In fact, I had a pretty flirty thing to say, but then a picture on the wall caught my attention. Large portraits dotted the walls of the house so regularly, I hardly paid any of them more than a brief few seconds of attention. Old men and women, posed in formal outfits for expensive paintings—good for them. A long time had passed since I’d concerned myself with topics like history, and maybe it was because I wasn’t ever good at them when I was a kid.

But I recognized the man on the wall. I pulled away from Cruise to stare up at his picture with open-mouthed shock.

“Oh, I see you found him. That’s the last man with nearly pure angelic blood. He’s the one who found me and told me to look out for you.” Cruise stepped behind me, his touch light on my shoulders. “What caught your attention?”

I stared, pointing as I tried to find words. The gray hair, the dark eyes. I knew him. I’d only seen him once in my life, then my mother put the picture away. She said she didn’t want me to sit around staring at him, because there wasn’t any reason to stare at the dead.

The angelic man? I blinked. *No, that isn’t possible.*

“Addalee? What’s wrong?” Cruise put his chin on my shoulder. “Talk to me.”

I had to find my voice. “That’s my father, Cruise.”

“What?” He stood up straight, his brow crumpling in confusion. “Your father?”

“He died in prison, or that’s what my mother always told me. They were both in prison for drugs, but he died there. He never knew me, but she kept one photo of them that a guard took. I guess it’s a big no-no, but it happened, and sometime

afterward, the guard sent it to my mother.” I’d only seen it once. “I have no idea what happened to it. It’s amazing I can remember it so well, but I guess some images stay with you. That’s my father.”

The man who conceived me then died. I always wondered, if he’d lived, would it have been better or worse for me? But the man in the photograph wasn’t as young as the picture I saw, meaning he didn’t die in prison.

My heart rate kicked up and my hands shook. I shoved them in my pockets, as if stuffing them away would get rid of my panic. None of it made sense.

“My mother told me he never knew me. That he died in prison. I think they might have met in prison, where she got pregnant with me. As you know, that’s where I was born.” I sounded frantic and forced myself to breathe. *This can’t be right.* Maybe he had a twin brother. That had to be it. *Fuck.*

Cruise stared at me. “He did spend some time in prison. There was a period of time in his life when he fell into a deep despair. He didn’t want this life, felt burdened with it, so he picked up a drug problem. He eventually landed in prison for three years, probably where he met your mother. But he didn’t die there. He was released and then he found his way back to demon fighting. By the time I knew him, he had his shit well in hand and he was very upstanding. Actually, he’s one of the reasons I believe in rehabilitation. Never mind. That’s not important.”

I lifted my chin. “So he knew I existed? He had to, since he told you I would be coming. But, despite that, he had nothing to do with my life. They shoved me off on cousins and then returned me to my mother, so that she could both... neglect and abuse me, sometimes in the same day.” I held up my hands. “Never mind. This doesn’t matter. It doesn’t.” Where were the rooms? I stormed away from the picture.

“It matters.” Cruise caught up to me. “Because it hurts you. Because you were lied to. I don’t know why that happened. Did your mom really think he was dead? I can’t answer that. Maybe you should ask her. She is the one with all

the answers. Or any answers. If she thought he was dead, maybe there aren't any answers to find. He had things, though. I don't know what happened to them. But, also, he had money. It should be yours."

My ears rang. "Cruise...I can't deal with this." I didn't want to erupt into tears again. I didn't want to be this level of pathetic. "I'm just...done."

"I know." He opened the door to his room, and I stopped in the doorway, not entering. "Do you feel...responsible for me because he told you that you were? Is that why you're with me, why you keep me with you? Is it all out of some weird sense of obligation?"

Maybe I hadn't noticed when I was possessed, but I could think clearly again. I wanted more than to be an albatross around his neck.

"Addalee, I didn't know you were the one when I met you. I knew you had angelic blood because Nathan told me. We do want to help people with angelic blood. We know that they can exorcise themselves and that it's helpful. They're good at helping others. We thought you would probably be able to perform exorcisms after you got rid of your demon. I did not in any way think you were the one Brandon told me about." He cleared his throat. "What I feel about you is not wrapped up in my obligation to an old friend, one who kept rather large secrets from me. How I feel about you has to do with your sense of humor, the way you keep surviving things, the way that you look at me, the way that your gaze flares up, even when you were possessed, with so much strength that I am floored by it. I could keep going. You're also beautiful. Okay? I'll admit it. I am so fucking attracted to you that I am constantly in a state when I'm with you. You are not an obligation. You are the girl I'm trying to date, and who I want so much, I may have to share you with three other guys."

I threw my arms around him and hung on for dear life. "You're going to have to understand that most people don't want me around, okay? I'm not a sought-after person. Ryker looked out for me, but it's complicated. Even my father didn't want to be in my life. He faked his death, maybe."

Cruise squeezed me tightly. “I’ve been responsible for my sisters since I was too little to even know what that meant. We had paid employees who looked after us, sometimes. I did such a bad job of it, James is dead, so I may not be doing this right, either. I’m smart, but I’m also not. I might be... emotionally stunted.”

I smiled into his shoulder. “I don’t know what I am, but I wouldn’t have even thought of that phrase, emotionally stunted. I’m not educated enough to be your girlfriend.”

“Hush with that. Who says you’re not? You’re very smart, much more so than you give yourself credit for, and that demon messed with your head. Come on.” He kicked the door closed. “Let’s go to bed.”

We were quiet after that until Cruise told me he was going to take a shower. I undressed, staring at myself again in the mirror. In some ways, it was like looking at a stranger. Who was I now, without her guiding me? Mary told me she sometimes missed her demon. Did I? Not yet. Would I? Maybe. I battled other thoughts in my head for so long, how would I even adjust to fighting only my own dark musings?

Water running in the bathroom caught my attention. *Oh, fuck it.* I wanted to feel something that women my age experienced all the time. I wanted Cruise between my thighs, panting his need for me. I wanted to know that I was sexy, desirable, and not so broken that he’d never touch me past gentle caresses. *Didn’t he say he wanted to date me?*

I dropped my clothes into a pile on the floor and walked into the bathroom. He might just ask me to leave, and I could apologize and leave. Cruise hadn’t asked me to join him, after all.

When the gust of humidity hit me from the shower, I nearly lost my nerve. It had been a really long day, and braving social interactions wasn’t something I was great at without exhaustion.

He turned in the shower, the door clear so that I could watch the amazement streak across his face, followed by absolute happiness. He swung open the door, some of the

water splattering onto the tile, past the brown towel he'd put down to catch the drops outside the shower.

We still hadn't said a word, but his eyes didn't leave my face.

I stepped under the water, allowing it to cascade over my skin in a sensual epiphany before I turned into his embrace and kissed him. Cruise gripped me tightly against his body, his cock erect and nudging into my stomach.

He took control of our kisses, forcing me back against the wall of the shower, which didn't surprise me at all. Whatever else Cruise was or wasn't, he wanted to be the one in charge. I slipped my tongue into his mouth just to throw him for a loop and because I wanted to make him work for that control.

Quickly, he changed positions, hoisting me up so that I had to wrap my legs around his waist for balance.

Spread against him, shivering in pleasure, reality sliced through my needs. "I'm not on any birth control. I'm sorry, I didn't think to mention it."

"Why are you sorry?" He kissed all over my face, his lips frantic for more as they streaked across my skin. "I'll take care of it. I've got you."

I closed my eyes and kissed him again, melting into the pleasure. Cruise really did make it easy to fall right into him.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

My breasts pressed against his body, my nipples tingling at the sensation of his chest hair against their sensitive points. I needed him to touch me, to stroke me, to make every part of my body feel something after being so completely alone for so long. Maybe he understood without me having to ask, because his hungry mouth and greedy hands seemed intent to find every curve and crevice of my body in his exploration. Cruise stroked my arms, twining our hands as he dragged my arms above my head so he could dive his head down to capture my nipple in his mouth. His legs held mine against the wall, the feel of his strong thighs against my legs just another layer of teasing pleasure.

My awareness of him sizzled ever taut, a snapping connection that tightened even as we embraced. It was as though he took up all the space in my mind, the smell and taste of him driving out anything beyond my body's needs in the moment. But it wasn't enough for him to touch me. No, it seemed I craved more—his sighs, his gasps, the way his teeth caught his lip when pleasure spiked up his spine. The tips of my fingers ached to feel his skin, so I circled my hands over his back, my nails biting into the hard flesh there. He was strong, impressively so. He'd busted into the hunters' lair for me and saved me. I'd joked about him being a superhero, but I wasn't so far off, at least as far as his amazing rescue.

He moaned when I brought my teeth down on his neck, obviously liking the way my hand slid around his erect cock

and pressed it against my heat. The noise he made? Had to be heaven. I couldn't imagine a more perfect sound.

I pulled my head back to look at him, finding his eyes glazed with needs. "Usually, I'm just okay at this kind of thing."

"Fuck that." He stared into my eyes, passion making his gaze go fiery. "There is nothing okay about you. Everything is extraordinary. I'm only holding on by a thin amount of control. You make me feel crazed. Don't put yourself down again. Not about this, not about anything."

His words were barely a whisper in my ear, and he nibbled my earlobe, his breathing rough against my ear. I jerked against him, my hips automatically seeking more, and even though I couldn't see it, I could feel his smile against my ear. "I see you are sensitive here. That's awesome. You have the prettiest ears."

My blush moved through me fast, my cheeks so warm they had to be bright red for him to see. People always told me I was pretty, so much that it felt almost like an insult sometimes. Like, it was a good thing I was pretty, since I was so poor and stupid. But no one had ever remarked on my ears. Cruise didn't just say the words, either; he had a way that made me feel seen and beautiful, which was different than the *pretty* I was used to hearing. Fuck, anything he said was amazing. I wriggled against him, every slide of my skin against his another cascade of pleasure.

"Where did you come from and how are you here in my life?" I asked.

He cupped my chin. "You say that now, but in a month, you're going to be so annoyed with all my selfish, egotistical, narcissistic ways... You'll be trying to figure out how to get the fuck away from me." He shook his head. "And by then, I'm not going to want you to leave."

I stared into his eyes, wishing I never had to look anywhere else again. "Cruise, don't make me promises, okay? It hurts too much when they don't happen."

For a second, I thought he was going to argue but instead, he nodded. “Okay. Fair enough.”

It meant something that he understood, that he got me. He kissed right below my ear, and I sighed for him.

Cruise leaned forward, his clever hands turning off the water despite my small noise of complaint. “We’re not doing this against this wall the first time. I want to lay you on the bed and learn all of your...sensitive spots.”

I grinned at him. “Okay.”

“Good.” He grabbed a towel and wrapped me in it before he got one for himself. Water dripped from his hair and down his body. Unable to resist, I leaned over and licked a drop of it from his chest, chasing the droplet with my teeth. He caught his breath and then kissed me, hard.

With a grin, I backed away from him. “Catch me?”

I barely made it out of the bathroom door before he scooped me up and laid me down on the bed. Both of our towels had vanished somewhere between the bathroom and the bed, and so our damp bodies lay naked and entwined on the comforter. “Caught you.”

I ran my hands through his hair, enjoying the freedom to touch him, and he smiled at me, a sultry grin that spoke of what was about to come.

“Don’t move.” He kissed my neck. “Unless you absolutely have to move, of course.”

What did he have in mind? Cruise kissed his way down my body, stopping when he reached my breasts. He took one of my nipples in his mouth, and I squirmed below him as he sucked the flesh between his teeth. Wet heat pooled between my legs, and I pressed them together to try to quell my hunger. I wanted him—no, that wasn’t enough of a description. I *needed* him to keep going, to keep doing what he was doing. He squeezed the other breast in his thick fingers as he sucked and tongued my nipple.

He’d said not to move unless I absolutely had to move, but I squirmed, unable to stay still anymore.

In fact, it was almost too much. “Cruise,” I practically sobbed.

I didn’t even know what I was asking him. I felt like I might overload from the sensations, but I didn’t have enough of them at the same time. I didn’t know what I needed. He lifted his head.

“You taste like honey,” he said, his deep voice causing another little thrum of pleasure inside me.

I did? He kissed my stomach and then down my belly button, which made me giggle. He grinned at me then but kept going, planting kisses everywhere. On both of my thighs. My kneecaps and then finally he pushed my legs open. Maybe I was being particularly slow, because it occurred to me right then what he intended to do.

“Cruise.” I caught my breath. “Might be too much. I’m just feeling...everything right now very intensely. Almost too much.”

He nodded. “Okay. But when your senses settle back to normal, I’m going to talk you into letting me make you come. I might be fantasizing about it...a lot.”

“Let’s look forward to it.” I nodded, knowing I was nuts. A hot, successful, rich man who once rescued me from near death and continued to want me despite all my flaws, tried to go down on me and I just fucking said no? What was the matter with me?

It didn’t matter though because he crawled up my body. Although he stopped when he was in position to enter me, he reached over to grab a condom from the drawer by the bed. Part of me tried to think about why he kept the place stocked for visitors, but then another part told me to be grateful for it.

Instead of asking questions, I kissed him. He kissed me back before he held up the package. “Open it for me?”

I nodded. “Hands a little shaky?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. Not even going to be embarrassed about it.”

I grabbed the package and tore it open. His hands were a little shaky but not so much that he couldn't sheath himself in the condom. My mouth watered as I watched him hold the thick length in his hand. Cruise was big before we'd gotten really started, and now he looked huge. Could a man be a shower and a grower?

"You're...really big," I said and smiled at him. Was that an absolutely stupid thing to say? I couldn't even tell anymore, but my nerves insisted I should say something.

"And now she strokes my ego. I love it. But don't worry. We're going to fit beautifully, and I am going to make you come. Hard."

Even as his words were rough, his mouth was soft when it met my own. He pressed a finger inside of me and then moaned. "You are so wet for me, sweetheart."

Did he ever think that would be a question? I never got to ask because he kissed me again, sinking inside of me in the same movement. I sighed, surprised at the fullness of him being there, so deep within me. Yes, that was heaven. It really was. I wrapped my legs around his waist and drew him in deeper. He pushed in and out of me, each movement stroking over my clit and hitting the other spot inside of me, a sensation I needed him to repeat again and again. I cried out, pleasure building and building with each rocking nudge.

The muscles in Cruise's neck strained, and his eyes met mine as our hands met, fingers twining even as our hips rocked together. Over and over again, I floated up, down, and around again. It had never felt like this for me. This was something different, and I didn't think it was because I was touch starved. This was because it was Cruise and he had the ability to kill at every task he undertook.

I cried out, louder, a primal sound from the back of my throat. My fingers dug into his back, clawing and scraping for purchase until I feared I would leave a mark, but I didn't care. He seemed to love it, driving in and out of me faster before I finally exploded, bucking beneath him.

He called out my name as he emptied inside of me. Or sort of. He'd promised to take care of me and that was what he'd done.

I kissed him all over his face. I was this person before. I just forgot her.

Still inside of me, he smoothed his thumb over my bottom lip. "Addalee. You're so fucking beautiful."

Cruise had just become essential. And I knew that was a risk in my life. I was demonless, but even in his bed, wrapped up in his body, my life continued to be one of risk. I just didn't know what the risk would be just yet.

But I kissed and kissed him. For now, there was Cruise.



I RAN AFTER RYKER, my ponytail slapping against my face. We wanted to sleep in the tent in his mom's backyard, but my mother said I couldn't go, because she hated Ryker's mom. I didn't know why she would hate his mom. She was always nice to me.

"You can't catch me." He laughed. He was right. I absolutely couldn't, and my bottom lip stuck out in a pout. He was much faster than me, but he was also a year older, so it really wasn't fair.

"Addie." James suddenly stood in front of me. I blinked. What was she doing here?

"Here isn't real, and it isn't safe for you to get lost, not even in dreams. They never really let you go, you understand that, right? You have to stay alert. Ryker isn't here. He's suffering."

I whirled around. "Ryker?"

He was right in front of me, but he didn't look like a little boy anymore. Blood dripped from his empty eyes and spiders climbed all over his body, making cobwebs in his buttonholes and between his teeth. I gasped and rushed toward him.

"You have to find me, Addalee. You can't leave me like this."

His hand stretched toward me. I ran toward it. I wouldn't. I wouldn't leave him.

I sat up in bed with a jerk and a gasp. Cruise slept next to me, his face passive as he snored quietly. Although his arm was slung across my waist, he moved without waking when I sat up.

I had to get out of here. Ryker needed me to find him. Why was I lounging around in bed having amazing sex when the one person who had been there for me my entire life was suffering? I got out of bed, which roused Cruise. He sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "You okay?"

"I have to find him," I replied, tugging a shirt over my head.

He rolled over and turned on the light. "Ryker?"

"Yes. I saw him. He's suffering. He's suffering, Cruise, and James said I can't let my guard down. What am I doing? How could I have just let him suffer today?" My hands shook so badly, I couldn't work the buttons on my shirt.

Cruise got out of bed, his strong hands catching mine and stilling their frantic fluttering. "Few things, Addalee. Number one, if you're going, I'm going with you. You're not going out on your own to search for the demon who tortured you for years."

He didn't understand. How could he? "I'm not tracking the demon. I'm looking for Ryker."

"You hear yourself, right?" He lifted his eyebrows. "You find Ryker, you'll find the demon. You're tracking both things, and I'm not sure how you even intend to do it. Are you?"

Cruise made a good point. I sat down. How was I going to find him? Cruise knelt in front of me, which was when I cued into the fact that he'd put on his shorts. *Well, that is a bummer.*

"I have a computer system that tracks the known possessed. It's how I found you that night with the hunters. We had to figure out who had been taken with you. I don't have a tracker on you. I mean, I never would now, and truthfully, I

would be in a lot of shit if anyone knew I had one on all of those people. It's not legal. I'd be disbarred."

I leaned my head on his shoulder. "I won't tell. I'm just grateful you did it. Do you think we can find Ryker using it?"

"We need him to be spotted, then I can do it. Your demon, the one in him, she didn't stay alone very long. You tended to end up in groups, from what I could tell. Danvers, yes, but also when you robbed the convenience store. Even then, you had three others with you."

I stared at him. "I have no memory of robbing a store."

"I know." He rose. "It's better that way."

Just then, the cabinet across the room flew open. I jumped to my feet as Cruise whirled around. A television I hadn't known was there turned on and changed channels rapidly.

I tried to speak. "Cruise?"

"No fucking idea." He pulled me right up against him just as the flickering channels stopped.

A crowd parading on the screen carrying signs. Okay, not a parade or a crowd. A protest. They wanted demons dead. Their signs had a lot of suggestions as to how it could be accomplished, some of which were pretty creative. Well, that was great. I wanted them dead, but I doubted we had a shared goal beyond that. I'd seen how the hunters liked to interrogate, and they killed far more than they saved. At the front of that line, though, holding a sign, I spotted Ryker. He walked next to their leader, chanting.

My mouth fell open. There he was. With the hunters. *What the fuck?*

"Cruise," I whispered. "What is happening? I can't think."

He shook his head. "Get dressed. We're getting out of here. We know where he is now. We'll go get your friend."

I pointed at the television. "How did that just turn on?"

"I don't know. Could it have been my sister? And how creepy is it, if James is hanging around my bedroom while I'm

naked with you.”

She seemed pretty preoccupied with possession, but he was right, that was really pretty cringe. I covered myself up quickly in the outfit from earlier since I didn't have enough to change all the time.

Cruise finished dressing and looked over his shoulder at me. “James, if this is you in here, don't look at things you wouldn't have wanted me to see. I'm going to get Nathan. He needs to know about this, and I want him to come with us.”

I nodded and he left. I remembered James telling me how Cruise was soft inside, and I thought about how many times he proved her right. How many guys would be fine going from sex to working with a guy who wanted to be in my bed, too? In fact, we were rescuing a guy who loved me, who I had been desperate for before things got even weirder. *And* he'd offered Danvers a place to live.

Cruise was really incredible. I turned off the television. “Hey, James, thanks for deciding you wanted to know me. You've been very helpful.”

The lights in the room flashed on and off and then back on again. It might be the only answer I would get, and I wasn't sure how to interpret it. James could have been saying it was her, or she could've been pissed. Who knew?

Nathan ran into the room, his shirt half off, rubbing his eyes. He must have been asleep when Cruise got him. *In fact, where is Cruise?*

“He has something he needs to do. It's important, trust me on that. Come on. Let's get out of here and then we'll find the protest and locate Ryker.” He offered his hand.

Why wouldn't Cruise have told me he was going to leave? My brow crumpled, thinking about it.

“Feels a little strange that he would take off like that.”

The other man shook his head. “You can trust me, Addalee. You know you can. He is doing something for you.”

I could trust Nathan, and I did. I shook off my concerns, deciding I just wasn't used to normal human interactions, so I took his hand. "It's just...off that he didn't tell me he was leaving."

"Cruise can be off sometimes." He shrugged. "Particularly when he gets really focused on a project. This is one of those times. We'll go. We'll find Ryker, and when we need help, Cruise will show up."

I liked not thinking about other people's behaviors and motivations when my demon was in charge. Without her navigating interactions, I tried to focus and consider past information with the current data. Was Cruise always a little off? I hadn't noticed. Or was it because I had sex with him—I knew it sometimes got weird for couples after their first time. Besides, when had I become the kind of girl who freaked out because the guy she had sex with once didn't say goodbye to her? Damn it. I didn't know myself anymore, and I might not have an inner demon to play havoc with my head, but I wasn't sure if I particularly liked myself anymore, either. Had I ever?

"I should say goodbye to Danvers," I said, standing to do so.

Nathan shook his head. "He's sleeping. I'll have Maura tell him you said goodbye. You're preoccupied tonight. Goodbyes? Something going on in your head?"

He was right. I really was preoccupied. "I...Maybe I know how quickly the ability to say goodbye can be taken away."

Nathan nodded but didn't comment on my response. What was he thinking? We drove in silence. His car was nice. I never knew brands, but it was a deep auburn color and clean inside. The clock read 3:33 when it occurred to me to glance down at it because it had gotten dark already. I blinked. What did it mean when numbers like 3:33 or 2:22 popped up? I couldn't remember, so I asked. Nathan looked at the clock and then over at me.

"People tend to consider it the angel signs. It means perhaps an angel is with you."

I shook my head, laughing. “Do you think that’s who turned on my television?”

“Listen, I know this is going to sound crazy because I have angel blood, but the aspects of this that fall into religion? I don’t buy into it. I’ve never believed all of that stuff. There is something special about us, but we don’t know what the demons are and we can’t guess at what motivates an angel. No, I don’t think the angels, or whatever those creatures actually are, messed with your television. I also don’t think Cruise’s dead sister came to change the channels either. As far as I’m concerned, it’s probably someone with a remote.”

I opened my mouth to point out that it didn’t explain how the cabinet just flew open, but I closed my mouth before saying anything. My gut said he’d have an answer for that, too, if I said something. I was sure of it.

Just as sure as he was that ghosts weren’t channel surfing. I shook my head, turning to face him in the seat.

“How do you *not* believe it? I thought you were raised in the church or something.

He side-eyed me. “Because I know the people who were teaching it. I met the ones who believed strongly in it, and they weren’t people I’d buy a used car from, let alone a belief system.”

I smiled. “So you grew up here. Did you go to school here?”

“No.” He frowned. “We got sent away to school for a long time. Since my parents died, Maura is homeschooling Meg. She’s terrified someone will take her from us to force us to do what some demon wants. Because of that, Meg has stayed and been pretty pissed about it. She liked you, though. Regardless, she’ll leave next year, and there isn’t a thing we can do about it. She has the right to live her life. “

“I liked her, too.”

Getting sent away to school wasn’t something I ever worried about. Things couldn’t be more different between us,

yet I figured we probably had more common ground than we realized. “Why are they protesting in the middle of the night?”

Maybe I should have asked myself the question earlier. Why were they out there holding signs in the middle of the night? It couldn't solve anything. Protests were daytime activities.

“Why would they protest right now, anyway? It's dark. No one is there to see them. Government offices are closed.”

Nathan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “You're right. That's a good question. I don't have an answer. We'll get you a phone, so you can text Cruise questions like that since he's more likely to have an answer.”

I couldn't just keep taking and taking from these guys. “I'm going to get a job, assuming I can convince anyone to hire the ex-possessed girl.”

“The ex-possessed get jobs all the time. What do you think you want to do?”

It was a good question and not one I wanted to answer. Deflect-deflect-deflect when I got uncomfortable, just like my mother taught me. Instead of answering, I asked, “Do you just like me because I can do exorcisms?”

He grinned. “Yep, that's totally why I like you. Your ability to do what about a third of the people in my life can do. That is specifically why I spend time with you instead of all of them.”

I punched his arm and he laughed, throwing his head back. “Do you ask yourself all the time why you like people? Why do you like me? Danvers? I'm not going to say Cruise, because he's triggering you tonight. But why do you like Danvers? Or do you maybe just like Danvers? You just do and you don't overthink it.”

“I could completely tell you why I like Danvers.” I shifted in my seat. “Shall I get started?”

He held up his hand. “No. Obviously this is an Addalee thing. You know why you like everyone.” Nathan sighed. “I like you because you're you. Because you are smart, funny,

strong. I like the way you embrace who you are, and you're not afraid of me."

"Why would I be afraid of you?" Nathan was the least frightening person I knew.

"Have you seen my eyes change? Or the way I know things that don't make sense? I am scary, Addalee. That is why I'm almost always alone despite the fact that I am really, truly trying to help people."

I leaned over, which was harder than I thought it would be because of the seatbelt. Once I got close to him, I kissed him on the cheek.

"You're not alone anymore. Okay? We'll be together, at least until you get sick of me."

He took my hand in his, keeping the other one on the steering wheel. "I won't get sick of you. Also, how much of that is you and how much was the demon? Or maybe both can be true? How could a beautiful, talented person like you not think you're wanted? Anyway, you avoided a work discussion. We'll shelve it, though, because we're here."

We are? I looked around, spotting farmers carrying torches, walking back and forth, and chanting things about killing demons.

"I don't think you can kill a demon." Nathan sighed. "If they could be killed, we'd be doing it. They vanish when we exorcise them but that doesn't kill them. They just go back to wherever. And apparently, if they exit a body by choice, they can just take another one. You know that firsthand." He nodded toward Ryker. "Do you just want to walk over?"

I nodded. "I'm getting it out of him, right now. This time that bitch is being exorcised."

Nathan kissed me, right on the lips. I caught my breath. "I'm slower than the other two. I'm going to be...nervous about pushing you too far because I'm so odd. But, they don't want you more, they just don't know how to savor the beginning." He smiled. "Go get Ryker. See how cool I am? Meg was right."

I laughed. I'd never been so happy to go do an exorcism.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

I walked toward the demon infesting my best friend's body with my spine held straight. I didn't have a lot of experience with exorcism, but I was good at it. My success rate so far destroyed the average. My demon left my body unexorcised, so she was still able to possess. I couldn't let her do it again. She needed to be gone.

"Hey," I shouted over the crowd. Ryker turned to look at me but stayed silent. He stood next to the leader of the so-called hunters—Gordon Fleece, the asshole who led these fuckers into thinking they had the right to exorcise. He had them take away their rights to decide what did or didn't happen with their bodies. With a one percent success rate, he killed more than he healed, acting like it was somehow okay for him to slaughter the possessed because they didn't matter anyway. I was very glad to be done with my demon, but no one else should get to decide whether people should die or live with their demons.

He was deplorable, and although there was nothing I could do about him personally, I hoped bad things happened to him. Maybe that made me a horrible person. The crowds roared and cheered as they chanted about death to demons. I could respect their dream; at least. I would love to be there on the day that happened.

But they were fooling themselves. Exorcisms were complicated, obviously, and few of us could do them. If the demons targeted angel blooded people, then it was for that

reason. Things could be done, maybe they could be improved. *But not like this.*

“Hey,” I shouted again.

Nathan ran up beside me. “Hold up a second.”

Now he wants to hold up? He kissed me a minute ago and told me to get to it. “I’m not afraid to do it in front of these people. Maybe if they all actually see a real exorcism take place, they’ll stop their lunacy.”

“That’s not my concern. This crowd can go fuck itself.” I lifted an eyebrow. It was quite a statement for Nathan. He was the sweet one. Most of the time. “I’m not sure what I’m getting from Ryker.”

What did that mean? “What?”

“I think we should wait for Cruise.”

Where was he? “I don’t want to stand around waiting. I don’t want to risk him disappearing. Besides, Cruise can’t do what you do. What are you getting from Ryker?”

“He’s crying.”

I hated to hear that. Ryker was absolutely not a crier. “I’ll get it out.”

“He says...I mean, he’s talking to me.” Nathan winced and looked at the ground and then back at Ryker. Even with the crowds carrying on, it felt like a quiet moment. What was happening?

“Nathan?” The chanting got louder, the sound drilling into my head like a knife.

“He says please help him, Addalee. Please help him right now.”

Okay. Then that’s what I would do. I grinned at Nathan’s handsome face. “That is a useful skill you have right there, Nathan. Hearing what the human inside the possessed is saying? I didn’t know I was communicating with you like that.”

“It was different with you. You were more unconscious about it, but Ryker had the beginning of training. He knows what he’s doing.”

Interesting. A ton of questions came to mind, but I could ask them later. At the moment, I had to save Ryker. Gordan waved his hand and the crowd parted. I ignored their organization, even as a car screeched to a halt behind us. I didn’t turn to look at it, keeping my gaze focused on Ryker.

“Cruise,” Nathan called out. *Well, at least he finally made it here.* What had he been doing? I stepped closer to Ryker, wondering how close I could get before the demon would see me.

“I see that you’re welcoming me inside.” I threw my arms in the air. “Did you miss me that much?”

“I want you to know, it didn’t have to be like this.” There was something surreal about hearing my demon speak with Ryker’s throat. He sounded the same, just like, but different, too. The tone was wrong, and it was as though I could hear her in my head. Maybe others would hear only Ryker, but I could hear both of them—two voices at once.

I wanted to punch her, hard. I could almost hit her when we last wrestled for power in my mind. It would hurt Ryker now or I would hit her just for nostalgia.

“It didn’t have to be like this, Addalee. You could have just done what I told you. I would’ve kept you alive. I never abused you too much. We could’ve gone on a long time like that, but you had to get pushy. You had to interfere. You had to start this nonsense.” He gestured vaguely to the crowd before he looked over at Gordan. “She exorcises our kind. She’s one of *them.*”

The hunters’ leader glared at me. Okay, so he was possessed, too. He wasn’t, when last we met, unless my demon hid it from me. It seemed more likely the possessed had taken over the hunters. That was interesting and one way to handle the exorcism problem.

But I wasn’t going to leave them alone.

I lifted my hand. I would get her out of him and then she would have to leave. Whoever was left, I could get rid of in due time. Over and over, I'd get rid of them until there were no more of them left to get rid of. I had no choice. My father, who I never met, left me a legacy, and I would use it to make things easier. I just wasn't going to think about how hard it would be, and focus on one small task at a time.

Nathan and Cruise argued nearby. I smiled a little, amused how my brain could pick their voices out of the crowd.

I lifted my hand, but Ryker's body seized backward as the demon ran from his body and into the crowd behind me. I whirled around. Where had the fucker gone? I couldn't see it anywhere.

"I can be anyone at any time," someone shouted and then fell over. Another person shouted. "You'll never know where I am. I am going to fuck up your whole life. And I started with him."

Well, she was going to be a huge pain in the ass. How could I stop her from jumping bodies? So I could exorcise her?

"Addalee." Ryker's voice was faint, but like the other two, I could hear him, and he didn't sound...right.

I ran over to him immediately, having to push two people out of the way to even get to him. The crowd ran away, whether because of demon's orders or because they understood the situation, I didn't know. I didn't care. Kneeling down, I stared at Ryker. Bruises were appearing all over his body and blood leaked from his nose.

What had she done to him? I took his hand. "Don't move. We'll get an ambulance. Cruise! Nathan!" I shouted. One of them would call an ambulance—maybe they already had.

"Not everyone survives possession, Addalee. I should have died when she took me." His hand shook. "Couldn't take the possession. She was too much for me. How did you do it for so long?"

What did he mean? "You're going to be okay."

“Addie, I’m not.” He knew what that name meant to me. The fact that he used it meant he was saying that I had a future. It wasn’t the time to argue with him, so I just gripped his hand in my own.

“I’ve loved you from the moment I met you,” he said, then he coughed. Blood splattered when he coughed, marking my shirt, but I tucked him closer. *Oh, that is bad. Where is the ambulance? Where are Nathan and Cruise?*

“Don’t talk like we’re saying goodbye,” I begged him. Tears leaked from my eyes. It dawned on me that Ryker was going to die. He was absolutely going to die in my arms, and he knew it. Panic welled up inside of me, its own kind of demon. I brought his hand to my mouth and I kissed him. “I loved you, too. My whole life. I’ve always loved you. And... and I would’ve died without you. I only ate because you fed me. You never stopped loving me, not even when the whole world did. There was always you. Oh, Ryker.” I could hardly speak, sobs stealing my voice. “This is my fault. It’s all my fault. She killed you to hurt me.”

He shook his head. “You have important things to do, Addie. You always have.” His gaze moved past my shoulder, as though he saw something there, but there was no one behind me. “I love you.”

Hands gripped my shoulders. Nathan. Cruise knelt beside me. “We’ll get an ambulance.”

He was gone. An ambulance couldn’t bring him back, and I knew it. I could feel it. Anger surged through me, fury the likes of which I never felt on my own. The demon, yes. She got this angry. But not me. I didn’t.

I shoved Nathan off my shoulders. Half-crawling, half-walking, and sobbing through all of it, I found the target for my rage. He pretended to lead people in exorcisms while he had a demon riding him the whole time. His head tilted back as he laughed at something someone from the crowd said, and I laughed with him as I let myself yank his demon the fuck out of him.

Shock registered on his face just as Nathan pulled me backward. The demon hung in the air for a second before he turned to ash and vanished, as they all did. Gordan fell to the ground, dead, his empty eyes staring at the sky.

I blinked. I just killed him. I...killed him by yanking the demon out of him. *Ryker is dead. And...and...*

I let out a scream, a sound like I didn't know I could make. I stood there and screamed. Screamed and screamed. In the distance, sirens howled.



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