

Bram Stoker Award® Winner

JEFF STRAND



DEMONIC

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## CHAPTER ONE

Quinn Fielding didn't manipulate me into trying to kill her husband. I was sure of it. I'd replayed every relevant conversation in my mind dozens of times, and I was one hundred percent confident that the decision was entirely mine. I wasn't some lovestruck, gullible idiot.

Okay, I was definitely lovestruck, and I've been an idiot on many, many occasions. But the way things went wrong—and holy freaking crap did they go wrong—wasn't something I could've ever anticipated. When I knocked on their front door, with a gun in my pocket and a knife strapped to my wrist, I'd planned things out from what I thought was every conceivable angle.

The gun was only in case of an emergency. I needed to do this quietly, even if the knife was messier.

I *wanted* to kill her husband long before I *planned* to kill him, if that makes sense. I'd sit in my cubicle fuming as she came in with a black eye, explaining that she walked into a door. I wanted to ask how you could give yourself a black eye walking into a door, but I didn't. I never questioned her excuses. If she hadn't gotten really drunk at the holiday party, and we hadn't gone outside to get some fresh air, she may never have told me the truth.

"Do you need to throw up?" I asked, as we stepped out of the building.

She shook her head, though she looked unsure.

"It's okay if you do. I won't tell anyone."

“I’m fine. I’ll let you know if it changes.” She stuck her tongue out to catch some of the falling snow. I did the same.

I was pretty sure Quinn was older than me. I’d just turned thirty-one, and I figured she was mid-thirties. She looked forty, but I was deducting a few years because of her obviously stressful home life. I didn’t mind that she was older than me; my acceptable dating ages ranged from nineteen to Helen Mirren.

To be clear, I wasn’t actually trying to hook up with her. She was married and a co-worker. I’ll admit that I’d made an exception for each of those in the past, but Quinn had given absolutely no hints that she was interested, and I certainly wasn’t going to push the issue. I was—how can I best say this?—not lonely. Not a man-whore, but not lonely. I believed very strongly in the idea of “enthusiastic consent,” because I didn’t want anybody waking up next to me thinking, “*Oh, Jesus H. Christ, what have I done?*” But I didn’t spend my nights wallowing in self-pity, wondering when I would finally know the touch of a woman. I’m not saying this to brag. It’s a fact: I can be a very charming guy.

Some people tell me I look like a young George Clooney. Some people tell me I look like a young Christian Slater. The fact that George Clooney looks nothing like Christian Slater doesn’t stop these two comparisons from coming up over and over. I don’t see either of them, to be perfectly honest, but I get it a lot and thus I’m passing that information on to you. Thick black hair. Dark complexion. Crooked smile that I’m told is endearing. Tall, if you consider six-foot-one tall. Not the best body—I need to get more exercise.

My relationships were brief and superficial, but I wasn’t the kind of guy who would gaze at the moon and long for something more. Though I figured that a streak of romanticism was coming, I wasn’t there yet. And Quinn, though perfectly nice, was a very professional, all-business, no-gossip type. She was my type, because “my type” cast an extremely wide net, but she wasn’t the kind of person for me to become infatuated with. We’d worked together for three years, and I didn’t picture her naked any more than I did my other co-workers.

And then the holiday party happened.

Quinn hadn't attended the previous two. She showed up to this one in a cute red dress and plush reindeer antlers. Those antlers really worked for me. I'm not saying that I want to bang Rudolph—what I'm saying is that I was suddenly very attracted to her, but not in a bestiality way. I think it was more that the antlers seemed to be her way of saying, "Screw it, I'm going to have fun tonight," and that was a major turn-on.

She did have fun. She danced. She laughed. She drank too much.

Quinn shivered. "It's cold."

I would have offered her my jacket, but I wasn't wearing one. And I wasn't going to be sleazy by offering to put my arm around her. "We can go back inside," I said.

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"Still think you might puke?"

"If I tell you something, would you promise to keep it a secret?" she asked.

"Of course."

"I mean it. You can't tell anybody."

"Not even the FBI? Have you been stealing money from the company?"

Quinn laughed. "No."

"Are you sure? Because I get a strong larceny vibe from you."

"I'm being serious."

"Yes, I promise. Your secret is safe with me, even if they try to pry off my fingernails."

Quinn's energy level suddenly disappeared. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked as if she was going to cry. "Vic hits me. A lot."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I kind of figured that's what was happening."



“It’s not my fault. I don’t do anything to deserve it.”

“Of course you don’t. Nobody deserves to get hit by their husband. Does it happen when he’s drunk or something?”

“No,” said Quinn. “He doesn’t drink. And it’s not like anything sets him off. I had a friend whose husband would scream at her if dinner wasn’t ready on time, but there’s no trigger for Vic. He just hits me for no reason.”

“Asshole.”

Quinn nodded. “Yeah.”

“So, I’m going to ask the obvious question, and I’m asking out of curiosity, not because I’m judging you. Why are you still with him? Why not leave him?”

Quinn didn’t answer.

“Is it because you still love him?”

“No. That’s long gone.”

“Then...?”

“I’m scared of what he’d do to me.”

“Okay. That’s reasonable.” I suddenly felt much colder than I had before. “I haven’t really had this kind of conversation before, so I don’t want to act like the solution is oh-so-easy. I’m just asking questions. Why can’t you just have the police take him away? You don’t have to call them from home. Call them now.”

Quinn smiled. “Oh, sure, I’ll make a domestic abuse call during the Christmas party.” She stumbled a bit over “domestic abuse,” but was overall speaking quite articulately for somebody who was that drunk.

“I mean, not *now*, but...”

“I know what you mean.” She was silent for a moment. “It’s not like they’d put him away for life for slapping me around. He’d get out. Probably the same day.”

“Right. So a restraining order.” I was beginning to feel like a jackass. It’s not like she was going to say, “Oh my God, I

never thought of that! How silly of me not to think of getting a restraining order! Your brilliant advice has changed everything! You're a genius, Corey Black!" At least not without a tone of withering sarcasm.

Quinn shook her head. "He'd destroy me."

"What do you mean, destroy you?"

"That's what he told me. He'd destroy me." She sighed. "There's a lot more to it."

"I'm listening."

"No, it's okay. I shouldn't have said anything. We're supposed to be having fun."

"No, no, no, you can tell me. Our secrecy pact is still in effect. I wasn't having fun at the party anyway. It is, objectively, a truly shitty party, with shitty music and shitty food. You're saving me from the misery."

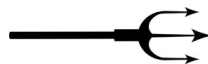
Quinn didn't seem amused. She shivered. "I shouldn't have burdened you. That's why I don't drink. It's all fine, really."

The door opened. "Hey, you two boning or what?" asked Larry, who worked in Reconciliations and was the kind of guy who didn't fear being reported to Human Resources.

"Classy," I said.

Larry gave me a drunken salute. Everybody was making the most out of the open bar, probably from the standpoint of "If they aren't going to give us a pay raise, we might as well score some free booze."

We went back inside.



I'D SEEN VIC A COUPLE OF TIMES, WHEN HE'D PICKED QUINN up from work. Big bald dude. In a fair fight, he'd kick my ass. And now I hated that guy...which was weird, because Quinn hadn't told me anything I didn't already pretty much know. Of

course he hit her. And fear of retribution, irrational or not, was often part of the package. But now I *loathed* him.

Not enough to kill him.

And I wasn't going to call the police on her behalf. Maybe she had a legitimate reason to be afraid. Maybe the whole "there's a lot more to it" part was really important. It wasn't up to me to decide when she should have that son of a bitch taken away in handcuffs.

The end result of that talk was that Quinn and I became actual friends. We didn't see each other outside of work hours, and we didn't call, text, or interact on social media, but she did become my default lunch partner, usually just the two of us.

We didn't talk about Vic. The conversation was almost always either lighthearted discussion about movies, books, or food, or it was venting to each other about work. Working in the office was better than coal mining, but we could fill an entire forty-five-minute lunch break with frustrated rants, no problem. Though she didn't show up to work with any visible marks, her office attire showed very little in the way of bare skin, so I had no idea what she might be hiding. One day she showed up with a mild limp and said that she'd tripped.

After a few weeks, I started to realize that I was developing feelings that one should not have toward a married co-worker whose husband has anger issues. I didn't act on those feelings, not even in a way that I could pass off as a joke. Our time together was one hundred percent flirt-free. If she was envisioning crawling over the table and ravishing me with the animalistic passion of a neglected wife, she sure wasn't showing it. There were no hugs, no physical contact at all, though I did get plenty of smiles.

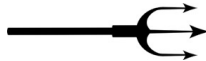
I had an occasional fantasy where I'd show up at her place, beat the shit out of Vic, and carry her out of her miserable life. Okay, it was a frequent fantasy. And sometimes I broke his neck with one quick twist.

I'd always had success with dating apps, if by "success" you don't mean "long-term relationships." I realized, to my surprise, that I hadn't bothered to check my accounts in over a

month. Nor had I tried to strike up a conversation at a coffee shop or any other place I hung out when I wasn't at work.

Fine. I was falling in love with Quinn.

But I'd never complicate her life by telling her how I felt. All I could do was hope that she whacked that douchebag over the head with a frying pan and left him.



ONE DAY, IN THE MIDDLE OF MARCH, SHE SHOWED UP TO work looking positively sick to her stomach, far worse than she did at the party where I thought she was going to throw up.

“You okay?” I asked, standing by her cubicle.

Quinn nodded. “I’m fine. Stomach flu, I think.”

She was lying to me, but I didn't call her out on it.

Patty and Stacey, a pair of middle-aged women who, yes, I'd had impure thoughts about, both individually and together, walked into the department with their morning coffees. “Does pepper spray go bad?” Patty asked.

“I can't imagine that it does,” said Stacey. “I've never heard that you need to do routine maintenance on your pepper spray. I've got a Taser.”

“Are we allowed to have a Taser in the office?”

“Of course we are. Sometimes we have to walk through the parking lot at night.”

“Hey,” I said, “if you need somebody to walk you to your car tonight, or any night, let me know.”

“Thanks, Corey,” said Stacey. “That's very sweet.”

“I'll take you up on that,” said Patty. “They really should have a security guard doing it. It's ridiculous that there's not better lighting out there.”

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“They found another body.”

She didn't need to explain further. And we were in Toledo, Ohio, which doesn't exactly have a low homicide rate.

This had been going on for about five years. Every six months or so, a new body would be discovered. Always a young woman. Always in *horrific* shape—shattered bones, organs torn out, a limb or two missing, burn marks, and bites taken out of their skin. The bodies were never hidden. They were simply dumped somewhere. The time before this, an unfortunate father had gone out to get the mail and found a mangled, naked woman splayed out right on his front lawn.

When the first victim was found, the press had theorized that it could be a bear attack, but the teeth marks were quickly determined to be human. Thanks to the bites, the authorities knew that the first nine bodies were all victims of the same killer.

If he'd just go in for a dental exam, they could catch him.

The killer was dubbed the Toledo Trasher. There was controversy over this name, which was considered disrespectful to the victims, but I guess the press liked alliteration in their serial killer monikers.

Quinn bent over, pulled over her wastebasket, and dry heaved.

"It's okay," Stacey told her. "We'll watch out for each other."



TEN MINUTES INTO LUNCH, QUINN HADN'T TAKEN A SINGLE bite of her BLT.

"Maybe you should go home early," I said.

She violently shook her head.

"If I ask you a question, do you promise to tell me the truth?" I asked.

"Not necessarily."

“Can I ask anyway?”

“Sure.”

“Did your husband kill those women?”

Quinn burst into tears.

## CHAPTER TWO

The server thought that Quinn and I were having a fight and gave me a death glare. I decided that a crowded restaurant was not the best place for Quinn to bare her soul about what she knew, so we got a to-go bag for our sandwiches and sat in my car in the parking lot.

For several minutes, all she could do was sob. I didn't say anything or try to comfort her. I just gave her time.

Finally, she spoke. "Yes."

"Yes, Vic killed them?"

Quinn nodded. "And a few more that were never found."

I'm a good conversationalist, but this was a tricky one to navigate. I tried to make sure my voice was soothing and non-accusatory. "How long have you known?"

"A long time."

"Since the beginning?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"Okay."

"He needs to do this. He'll have this cooling off period where he's really sweet. Then it'll wear off and he'll start taking it out on me, and then he'll need to do it again."

"Okay." I supposed I should say something more substantial. "I promise I'm not judging you, but why didn't you turn him in?"

She cried for a few more minutes before she could answer. “I was scared. He said that he’d do worse to me. ‘*I’ll make what I did to her look like a backrub*’ is what he said. And I believed him. *Believe* him. He said he’d make it last until I died of old age. Hell on earth.”

“Okay,” I said. “But this isn’t like hitting you. He’s not going to get out on bail. They’ll match his teeth to the bites, and that’s the end of him.”

“They weren’t his teeth.”

“What?”

“He made me bite them. Made me...take a bite out of them. Called it his insurance policy.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah.” She wiped her nose on her shirtsleeve. “Good thing I don’t need a root canal, huh?” She looked like she tried to smile at her joke but couldn’t quite make her mouth cooperate.

“But couldn’t you...I mean, couldn’t you just tell the cops that he made you do it?”

“Does it sound credible?”

“Sure! I believe you. Take a polygraph. They can figure this out. Put that psychopath in the electric chair. He can’t do anything to you inside a maximum-security prison.”

“I don’t agree with that.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t.”

“You have to do something. I’ll help you.”

Quinn had been avoiding eye contact, but now she looked directly at me. “Corey, I’ve been carrying this guilt for years. It’s like a physical pain, acid burning away at me from the inside. Every time he does this, I want to kill myself. I *should* kill myself. Turn him in and then eat a bullet. But I’m too much of a chickenshit to do it, probably because I know that



what's waiting for me afterward is even worse than what he'll do me while I'm alive."

"Quinn—"

"Let me talk. I know what you think of me. I'm a coward who's letting innocent young women die horrible deaths. A monster."

"You're not a—"

"I said, let me talk. I wish like hell that there was something I could do. But there isn't. I just have to keep living my nightmare."

We stared at each other for a while.

"You can talk now," she said.

"You know I can't just ignore this," I told her. "I have to tell the police what I know. I can't let it happen to another girl. I promise, you'll be fine."

"You can't promise that."

"Yes, I can," I said. Of course, she was right. I couldn't promise that. Ten gruesome murders over five years—not counting the undiscovered bodies—would make it pretty easy to convince a jury that she'd been an accomplice. I didn't want Quinn to go to prison, but I also didn't want another woman to die. There was no chance that I'd just sit back and let things continue on their merry way.

"Are you going to turn me in?" she asked, quietly.

"No. I'm turning Vic in."

"I can't stop you."

"You shouldn't stop me," I said.

"I deserve whatever happens to me."

"Nothing is going to happen to you. You didn't kill anybody. We'll call the police, they'll take him away, and you can explain exactly what happened. It'll be bad, probably, but it can't be worse than the way things are now."

"Yes, it can. Much worse."

“You’re wrong about that,” I said.

“I’m not. But it doesn’t matter. I would never, ever, ask you to share my burden. Do what you need to do. I’m just going ask for one favor—*beg* for one favor.”

“What is it?”

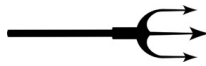
“Give me a few days. Two days. Time to figure some things out. Vic will be in his cooling off period now. Nobody is in any danger. Not even me. It’ll last for a few weeks, and I’m only asking for two days. Then we’ll go to the police together.”

“What if you change your mind?” I asked.

Quinn shrugged. “What difference does it make? It only matters if *you* change your mind.”

“All right. I can do that.”

“Thank you. You’re a good friend.” She handed me the bag with her sandwich. “Here. I’m not going to be able to eat this.”



WE WENT BACK TO WORK. AS USUAL, I WAS OVERWHELMED with stuff that needed to get done immediately, but for some strange reason the fact that Quinn’s husband was a psychotic depraved killer felt more important than spreadsheets.

Keeping her secret was not an option. If I didn’t do anything, and an eleventh corpse turned up, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.

Was giving her the two extra days a mistake? Could I get in trouble for that?

I didn’t *think* so. The murder had already happened, and I could claim that I didn’t believe Quinn at first. I wasn’t going to rush to the FBI to accuse a potentially innocent husband of murder. Or I’d say that I was scared. I wouldn’t be charged as an accessory simply because I’d waited a couple of days to tell the authorities what I knew.

Quinn deserved the time to wrap her mind around all of this. To get her story straight. Would I think that she deserved a chance to get her story straight if I wasn't kind of in love with her? Probably not. But I was, and I wanted to see her get through this as unscathed as possible.

The love part was weird.

I think—and I don't know if this was chivalry or chauvinism—I liked the idea that I could swoop in and rescue her. I could be her knight in shining armor. Dating apps didn't offer many opportunities to save somebody from a hellish existence.

Granted, my solution could very well send her to prison. She was complicit in a lot of murders. She feared for her life, but when your husband commits at least ten grisly murders and you don't say anything...it's not great. From a purely objective standpoint, I'd say that some time behind bars was probably deserved.

But I wasn't coming at this from a purely objective standpoint.

I was, in fact, thinking of a way we could avoid this whole mess.

If Vic was dead, we wouldn't have to worry about him killing anybody else. Quinn wouldn't have to tell anybody what he'd done. The victim's families wouldn't get the closure they desperately needed, but there would be no more dead bodies dumped on lawns.

Could I actually kill the guy?

From a moral perspective, I believed so. He was a reprehensible, worthless piece of shit. The world was better off without him. I would not lay awake at night, haunted by thoughts of the precious human life I'd snuffed.

Could I handle memories of his blood spilling all over my hands? The sight of seeing somebody die? It might be disturbing, and I might go through some rough times over it, but I thought the sacrifice to my mental health would be worth it.

Could I get away with it?

Quinn wouldn't tattle on me. She'd be the first suspect—the spouse was always the first suspect—but she wouldn't have actually committed the crime. If I was questioned, I'd say that I was glad the wife-beating son of a bitch was dead, and I wished that I could shake the hand of whomever did it.

Let's say I *did* get caught. His body turned up in a shallow grave covered in my DNA. I'd tell them the truth. I wanted to remove a serial killer from the world, but I didn't want his innocent wife to suffer. Obviously, murdering Vic would technically be illegal, but wouldn't I be hailed as a hero for ending the reign of the Toledo Trasher? In the court of public opinion, I'd deserve a medal more than prison time.

Could I actually succeed in doing it?

Vic was a big guy. He'd gotten away with a lot of murders. Presumably some of those women had put up a fight. But I wasn't going to barge into his home and shout, "Prepare to die!" I'd be charming. Befriend him. Take him completely by surprise.

I couldn't believe I was seriously considering murdering Quinn's husband.

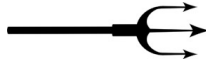
I couldn't believe I wasn't talking myself out of it.

It was absolutely batshit insane, but it also seemed like the right thing to do.

I decided that I'd sleep on it. If I woke up in the morning and still thought it was a good idea to kill Vic, I'd start to work out a plan.

I slept oddly well that night. And when I woke up, yes, I still wanted to kill him.

Quinn didn't talk about Vic much during our lunches, but I did know that he had Mondays off. He spent them at home, sometimes doing projects around the house, sometimes just relaxing and watching television. Today was Friday. Maybe Monday would be the perfect time to pay him a surprise visit.



“HOW ARE YOU FEELING ABOUT THIS?” I ASKED QUINN AS WE got into her car at lunchtime. It’s not like we went out to lunch every single day, but I wanted to talk to her surrounded by strangers, not our co-workers in the cafeteria.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Do you need more time?”

“We agreed on two days.”

“Right. But here’s the deal: I need you to promise me, *swear* to me, that if he starts to get scary again, you’ll let me know. Don’t wait until he hits you. As long as you know he’s not a threat, I’ll wait.”

Quinn looked as if she was going to cry, but she held herself together. “Thank you, Corey. That really means a lot to me.”

We didn’t talk about Vic during lunch, and she ate most of her burrito. It was a pretty big burrito.

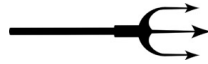
I didn’t tell her my plan, because I had no idea how she’d react. She’d probably try to talk me out of doing something so dangerous. Or maybe she did still love him, and would on some bizarre level not want to see him get hurt. Or she’d insist on helping, which I didn’t want.

The main reason I didn’t tell her, to be completely honest, was that I wanted to be able to back out. If I stepped up onto their front porch and suddenly lost my nerve, I wanted to be able to hurry back to my car without having to report to Quinn that I’d changed my mind.

Because that was a key part of my plan. If I got nervous at any point, I was giving myself permission to abandon the whole idea. Maybe I’d decide that I couldn’t live with committing murder. Maybe I’d question my ability to strike first. Maybe I’d just be too scared. However it worked out, I

didn't want to feel like I *had* to do this. Chickening out was totally fine.

Monday morning, when I called in sick to work, I hadn't chickened out.



THERE WAS NO NEED FOR AN ELABORATE PLAN. I WOULD SHOW up at their house, turn the charm up to its maximum setting, and explain that Quinn had won a major award at work for a project she'd recently completed, and I wanted his feedback to make it extra special. When his guard was down and the timing felt right, I'd stab him in the throat.

The knife had a spring-loaded blade. It was taped to my wrist and hidden underneath my winter jacket. If he insisted on taking my jacket, it was still well-hidden beneath my long-sleeve sweater. I'd practiced dozens of times and could trigger the blade with absolutely no fumbling on my part.

I also had a gun in my pocket. I didn't want to use it—I could buy a spring-loaded knife easily enough, but acquiring a pistol with a silencer was a much bigger deal, so I was carrying the gun I already owned. It was a fully licensed .22 caliber Ruger. I kept it unloaded and locked in a safe—not really for self-defense, but rather because my family liked to do target shooting in my dad's backyard during the summer. If I messed up with the knife, and Vic knew I was trying to kill him, I'd have the gun as a backup. But that was a last resort.

I pulled in front of their house. Quinn had never told me her address, but it wasn't difficult to find. They lived in a decent enough one-story house in a not-great neighborhood. Not the kind of neighborhood where I could drag Vic's dead body down the sidewalk without anybody calling the cops, but the kind of place where a bit of extra noise wouldn't set off any alarms.

I gave myself to the count of fifty to change my mind.

I didn't change my mind. In fact, I was...well, *excited* is most definitely the wrong word. My palms were sweating, my

heart was pounding, my head was throbbing, and my stomach was doing flip-flops. But I also couldn't wait to tell Quinn that I'd solved her problem. She could have her life back. And maybe she'd choose to spend it with me.

I got out of my car. I didn't see any potential witnesses around.

I walked up onto the front porch, then knocked on the door.

## CHAPTER THREE

Vic opened the door, looking annoyed.

I'd seen him get out of his car once, yet the man seemed a lot taller and larger now that I was standing right in front of him. And quite a bit more menacing. I'm not sure why I thought a savage serial killer wouldn't be intimidating, but I suddenly had very intense second thoughts about this whole venture.

"Yeah?" he asked.

I wanted to blurt out, "Sorry, wrong house!" but didn't. This might be my only opportunity to take him by surprise. Instead, I flashed him a smile. "Hi, my name's Corey," I said. "I work with your wife."

"I know," he said. "She talks about you all the fuckin' time."

Really? I assumed she'd kept me a secret. "Wow, I'm flattered. May I come in for a minute? I promise it'll be quick."

Vic shook his head. "Nah."

"You won't have to serve any refreshments."

"I said no. You want to talk, do it here."

"All right. That's fair." Shit. "Anyway, I didn't have your cell phone number, or I would've called instead of just showing up unannounced. I couldn't get it from Quinn without making her suspicious. Basically, she's been working on a project at work, and she absolutely knocked it out of the park.



Upper management was seriously impressed, so they're going to give her an award with a cash prize and a nice little ceremony, and they put me in charge."

"How much cash?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Not bad."

"So, really, I just wanted your input on how to make the ceremony extra special for her."

"She likes yellow," said Vic.

"Thanks. That's helpful. And what's her favorite kind of cake?"

"Coconut."

"Perfect. I think that's what we usually get her for her birthday."

"It is."

"Is there anything else you can think of?" I asked.

"It's just a little ceremony at work, right? She's not winning the Presidential Medal of Freedom. What more do you need than cake and some streamers?"

"Well, it was a pretty important project."

"Not important enough for her to tell me about."

"Who's that?" a female voice asked behind Vic.

He turned around. A woman stood in the hallway behind him. A beautiful brunette, maybe twenty or twenty-one, wearing only a tight T-shirt and panties.

"It's none of your business," Vic told her. "Thank you so much for not staying in the living room like I asked. That was so great of you."

"I didn't know who it was. Did you want me to stay there forever?"

"No, I wanted you to stay there for one goddamn minute." Vic looked back at me and sighed. "You might as well come

in.”

“It’s all right. I’ve got what I need.”

“You said it was an important project. Come on inside.”

Though my instinct was to get the hell out of there, I decided to play it cool and step inside the house. I still had a knife and a gun. As long as I stayed vigilant, I’d be fine.

“Close the door behind you,” said Vic.

I closed the door. He didn’t tell me to lock it, thank God.

“Go get dressed,” Vic told the woman.

“Are we done?”

“Yes, we’re fucking done! Put some clothes on and get out. I’ll call you later.”

“Look,” I said, “what’s happening here is none of my business. I’m not going to say anything. I’m not interested in breaking up your marriage.”

“Not interested in breaking up my marriage?” Vic asked. “You don’t think she’d forgive me?”

“I don’t know. I’m not part of any of this. All I’m saying is that I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

“Why would you be loyal to me over her? She’s your work friend.”

“It’s not about loyalty,” I said. “It’s about not getting involved in something that’s none of my business. This is between you two. I was just here to talk about the ceremony.”

“Your timing was pretty goddamn bad.”

“I know. And I’m leaving now.”

“I’d like you to stay.”

The woman walked out of the other room, now wearing pants and shoes.

“Get out,” Vic told her.

“I need a ride home. You drove me here.”

“Take an Uber.”

“That’ll show up on my credit card statement. Herschell will see it.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault you answered the door. I asked you not to. I said, ‘*Hey, baby, don’t answer that.*’ Do you remember? You messed up, not me.”

Vic looked like he wanted to strangle the woman, and I wasn’t completely convinced that he wouldn’t, right there in front of me. I took a backwards step toward the door.

“Why do you look so nervous?” Vic asked me.

“Why shouldn’t I look nervous? Isn’t this exactly the kind of scenario when people look nervous?” I was very tempted to take out the gun, but I didn’t want to escalate the situation sooner than necessary.

“You look more than nervous. You look scared.”

“Again, I think that’s an appropriate response.”

“Why?”

“Because you look like you want to kill me.”

Vic let out a loud, braying laugh. “I’m not going to kill you, buddy. I just want to talk this out.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I promised that I wouldn’t say anything to Quinn. That should be the end of it. Case closed.”

“What was the project?” Vic asked.

“It was about switching some of our functions over to a new system. The cost savings will be huge.”

“What functions? What system?”

“Well, to start, it’s the employee count. The way it works now, a lot of this information has to be input manually, but this will make data feed automatically.”

“Be more specific. What I’m trying to get at is that after you describe the project, I’m going to call her and ask about

the mystery project she just finished that she never bothered to tell me about, and the details had better match.”

I felt like he'd punched me in the stomach. The impression I'd gotten was that Vic didn't really give a shit about what Quinn did all day. He'd be jealous if he knew that she had lunch with a male co-worker on a regular basis, but the details of her day-to-day workload were of no interest to him. I would never have expected to be interrogated about why she was getting an award. She hadn't completed any major projects recently—her biggest complaint about her job lately was that it was pure mindless drudgery.

“You know what, this is ridiculous,” I said. “You can't keep me here against my will. I said that I won't tell Quinn that you're cheating on her, and I'm sticking to that. But I'm leaving.”

I backed toward the door, expecting him to charge at me at any moment.

“Did you know that his wife is a frigid bitch?” the woman asked me.

I didn't say anything.

“Vic's a healthy guy. He has needs. If she's not filling them, what's he supposed to do? Whack off in the shower every day? This is on her. If she would do her job as a wife every once in a while, Vic wouldn't need a fuck-buddy.”

“I totally understand.”

“She's ice-cold toward him. I quite frankly don't understand why he hasn't kicked her ass to the curb, but he hasn't yet, so to give himself just a tiny bit of pleasure in this miserable life he has me. It's not his fault. He's only human.”

“Like I keep saying, this is none of my business. You two have all the fun you want. I'm not going to tell you how to live your lives. I haven't always been faithful in my relationships, either.” That wasn't true. I was always monogamous, though that wasn't much of an accomplishment when you considered the brevity of anything that could be construed as an actual relationship.

“Oh, yeah?” asked Vic. “You’re a cheater, huh?”

“Sometimes.”

He pointed to the woman. “With anybody as hot as her?”

I had this sudden, horrifying thought that he was going to invite me to join in their escapades. I shook my head. “Oh, no, not even close.”

The woman giggled.

“Go back to the bedroom,” Vic told her. “Shut the door.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked you to.”

“You gonna kick his ass? I want to watch.”

“Are you going to make me ask you again? Is that how this is going to play out?”

She gave Vic the finger, so I guess she wasn’t *too* scared of him, but she did leave, and I heard a door close.

Vic cracked his knuckles. He looked at me like I was a piece of abstract art that he didn’t really understand.

“What did Quinn tell you?” he asked.

“About what?”

“Please don’t play stupid with me.”

If I casually stuck my hand in my jacket pocket, would he know that I was reaching for a gun? Did it even matter at this point?

“I’m not playing stupid,” I insisted. “I don’t know what you’re asking me.”

He took a step toward me, clearly intending to be intimidating. There was still time for me to pull a gun on him, or snap out the blade. But I hadn’t intended to murder him with somebody else in the house!

“You’re not here to ask about what kind of cake she likes,” said Vic.

“Oh, I’m not? Well, that’s a surprise to me. Why don’t you tell me why I’m here, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“This is a waste of my time,” I said. “Sorry I interrupted you. I’m leaving now.”

“I didn’t say you could leave.”

“It’s not your decision.”

“I’ll break your goddamn neck.”

I took another backwards step toward the door. If he followed, then I was going to have no choice but to pull the gun on him.

He followed.

I’d practiced pulling the gun out of my pocket more times than I care to admit. It wasn’t hard to imagine a scene where I yanked the gun out, accidentally twirled it around on my index finger a couple of times, and watched it land hilariously on the floor. I really wanted to avoid that, so I’d practiced over and over.

I pulled the gun out of my pocket and pointed it at Vic without dropping it.

He raised his eyebrows. “I guess things have gotten serious.”

“I guess they have.”

“What do we do now?”

“It’s pretty simple,” I said. “You do nothing. I leave. Everybody’s happy.”

“Why’d you bring a gun, Corey?”

“I don’t go anywhere without a gun.”

“Are you planning to blow my brains out?” Vic asked.

“No. But if you take another step closer, I’ll shoot you in the leg.”

Vic shook his head. “Don’t do that. Never do that. If you shoot, shoot to kill. Commit.”

“I don’t want to kill anybody. I just want to leave.”

“And I’d happily let you leave if I thought I could trust you. The thing is, your cover story sucks.”

I respectfully disagreed, but he’d seen through it, so I supposed he had a point.

“If you’re lying about why you’re here, I have to assume the worst. And the worst is pretty goddamn bad. So unless you can convince me that we’re not in a worst-case scenario, I’ve got to proceed as if that’s where we are.”

I wished he was acting more frightened of the gun pointed at his head. He seemed upset about the whole matter, but not particularly worried that I was going to shoot him. Did I look like I didn’t have the nerve?

“Fine,” I said. “I know that you hit Quinn. She didn’t tell me, but I’m not stupid. If you ever do it again, and I find out, I’ll call the police. Do you understand me?”

Vic narrowed his eyes.

“I said, do you understand me?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean it. The next time she comes into work with a black eye, I’ll make sure she presses charges.”

I couldn’t read anything into Vic’s expression. I didn’t know if he was relieved, suspicious, or enraged. He just stood there, staring at me.

“Does she know you’re here?” he asked.

“No. But other people do.”

“Because you thought I’d try to kill you?”

“I didn’t know what you might try to do.”

Vic laughed. “Well, shit, Corey, looks like you’ve got me by the balls here. I promise that I will never lay a hand on

Quinn again. Does that work for you? Do you need me to put it in writing? Should we go to a notary?"

"No," I said. "I just need your promise."

"I promise. I solemnly swear. Cross my fuckin' heart and hope to fuckin' die."

He wasn't being serious. He knew exactly why I was here, and he wasn't going to let me leave.

Okay. I'd known something like this could happen. I hadn't anticipated that there'd be a witness, and I'd hoped not to have neighbors reporting gunshots, but I had considered the idea that I'd have to turn myself in for executing a serial killer. I had to stay calm. Stay focused.

The woman stepped into the hallway behind Vic. She had a revolver pointed at me. The way Vic grinned, I was pretty sure "Go back to the bedroom" had been code for "Go get a gun."

"You can't take out both of us," she told me. "You may shoot him, but I'll shoot you next. Is it worth it?"

It was very much *not* worth it.

"Drop the gun," she told me.

If she'd intended to shoot me, she would have done it while I was completely focused on Vic. At least that's what I told myself as I dropped the gun onto the floor.

"I really wish you'd minded your own business," said Vic. That was something we agreed on. He clenched his hands into fists and strode toward me.

Though I didn't know his intention, I was relatively confident that it didn't involve giving me a friendly handshake and sending me on my way. I had no trouble imagining him knocking me unconscious, and then me waking up in a dark musty basement, tied to a chair, gazing in horror at the sight of Vic and the woman standing in front of me with rusty knives.

He stood in front of me. "Now what are we going to do with you?"



I'd like to report that I said something really clever. I can think of several options now, but at the time my mind was devoid of witty retorts and I remained silent. What I *did* do was press the button to snap out the blade.

And then I slammed it right into Vic's throat.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I could not have aimed better if Vic had an X drawn on the center of his throat. The blade went in all the way to the hilt, and I even thought to give the knife a bit of a twist as I yanked it out.

The woman screamed.

Vic stumbled backward as a gout of blood sprayed from his neck.

I pushed past him and rushed toward the woman. If she was an experienced killer, I was screwed, but she seemed pretty frantic about the whole “holding me at gunpoint” thing, and maybe she wouldn’t squeeze off a shot before I reached her.

I wasn’t fast enough. She pulled the trigger.

The sound was the most painful part. I’d fired guns plenty of times, but never indoors. It was as if somebody slapped their hands into my ears like they were crashing cymbals. The sound was so intense that it took a moment for me to realize that she hadn’t actually hit me.

Before she could get off a second shot, I shoved her against the wall. She struck it hard, lost her footing, and fell to the floor. I crouched down and slammed her head against the wall, keeping the presence of mind not to do it *too* hard, and she let me take the gun from her.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I told her, even though I just had.

I stood back up and returned my attention to Vic. Blood had spilled all over the front of his shirt, and he was gasping for breath. He wouldn't last much longer.

Now what the hell was I supposed to do?

If I heard sirens, the answer would be very straightforward: wait for the cops to show up, and tell them everything. If nobody reported the gunfire, then I'd have to have a very serious conversation with the woman and see what we could work out.

For now, I supposed the plan was to stand here, make sure the woman didn't try anything, and wait for Vic to die.

He spat out a large mouthful of blood. "*I'm gonna kill you,*" he said.

"Whatever," I replied. I was impressed that the guy could still talk.

He tried to get back up.

"Stay on the floor, asshole," I told him. "Just die with dignity."

He tried again. This time he successfully stood up. He gave me a look of pure hatred. I'm not ashamed to admit that it was extremely unnerving, even though the piece of shit serial killer was no longer a threat.

Vic wiped some blood off his throat and took a step toward me.

I wasn't a medical professional. I was used to movies where people would get shot in the chest and die instantly. So maybe it was totally normal in the real world that a man could get stabbed directly in the throat—the blade plunging in deep—and still be able to talk and move around for a while. Vic was a big guy.

I wanted to keep the mess as contained as possible. In the off chance that we could get through this without the police showing up, I didn't want to have to clean up multiple rooms. So I walked over to Vic and stabbed him in the throat a few more times.

I didn't do this in an emotionless manner. It made me physically ill, and I kept turning my head with each stab so I didn't have to watch the blade actually go in. But I did it.

He fell to the floor again.

The woman began to cry.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Darla."

"How close were you?" I asked her.

"What?"

"How much did you care about him?"

"I don't know."

"He trusted you enough that you had a plan for this sort of thing."

Darla shook her head, sniffled, and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I knew he had a gun in the bedroom drawer. We didn't have any kind of plan worked out. I just figured out what he wanted me to do from the way he said it. We *got* each other."

"Do you know what he did?"

"I suspected."

"Tell me."

"Sold drugs."

"Did he sell you any?"

"No. I'm clean now. He never said anything about it. But he got weird and secretive sometimes."

"It wasn't drugs," I said. "You don't want to be associated with him, Darla. The best gift I could ever give you is to let you just walk out the front door and never tell anybody you were here. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

Darla nodded.

"Say it out loud."

"Yeah, I can keep my mouth shut."

“I can tell you everything if you want, but the less you know, the better. What I will say is that if you do go to the cops, you’ll become associated with him, and you do *not* want that. You don’t want me to tell anybody that you knew where he kept a weapon. Trust me on this.”

“I trust you.”

“I’d love to let you go now, but I could use some help cleaning up the blood. Will you do that for me? I just need to get the worst of it mopped up, in case the cops show up.”

“Yes,” said Darla.

“Thank you.”

Darla looked over at Vic and frowned. “How’s he still alive?”

I looked at Vic as well. “He’s not. His eyes are open, but he’s not...”

Actually, he *was* breathing.

Not shallow, barely noticeable breaths. Full breaths.

He spat out some more blood and tried to get back up again.

No. Hell no. One stab wound to the throat, maybe. Six or seven? No, not as deep as I’d plunged that knife into his neck. You didn’t lose that much blood, yet still try to stand.

Then Vic gave me a bloody smile. “Why’re you looking so spooked, Corey?”

“What the fuck is happening?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if I was talking to Vic, Darla, or myself.

“What’s happening is that I’m not ready to die yet,” said Vic. His voice was gravelly, but I could understand every word. He got back up. He swayed a bit but kept his balance.

Darla began to say, “Oh my God, oh my God,” over and over.

I extended my arm, pointing the knife at Vic. “Stay back.”

“Or what? You’ll stab me again?”

“What are you, a zombie?”

“No, I’m not a fuckin’ zombie.” He let out a braying laugh similar to the earlier one, although this time it was accompanied by blood spewing out of his mouth and neck. “Just call me *resilient*.”

I’d thought of a great many ways this plan could go sideways, but none of them had included a scenario where I stabbed Vic a few times in the throat and he didn’t die. I wasn’t dreaming or hallucinating. Vic was standing right there in front of me with a mangled throat that didn’t stop him from talking.

And then, as if zapped with a bolt of electricity, he charged at me.

Though taken *very* much by surprise, I didn’t yelp and fall on my ass, which would’ve been a reasonable reaction. I lunged at him with the knife.

Vic grabbed it by the blade and tore it out of my hand. I’d strapped it on really well, so that hurt enough to make me think he might have broken my wrist.

He spat some blood in my face. It was shockingly warm, almost hot.

As I blinked it out of my eye, Darla said, “Leave him alone!”

I wasn’t sure which one of us she was speaking to. When I saw that she’d picked the gun back up, it still wasn’t clear.

Vic grabbed me by the throat.

“I said, leave him alone!”

I stepped away from him. Vic kept his hand on my throat until his arm was fully extended, and then he let his slick wet fingers fall away. Darla kept the gun pointed at him.

“Point that somewhere else,” he told her.

She ignored him. “What’s happening?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Vic. “You tell me.”

“I’ll shoot you in the head,” said Darla.

“I wouldn’t.”

“Shoot him,” I told Darla. “Do it. He’s scared.”

“I’m not afraid of either of you,” said Vic. “I’m not afraid of anything. But if you shoot me, it’ll hurt, and then I’ll be madder than I already am.”

“Do it!” I shouted.

Darla lowered the gun. “No,” she said in a whisper. I’m not sure if she was worried about making him mad, or if maybe she thought there was a reasonable explanation to what we were witnessing, in which case she didn’t want to be the one to commit murder.

I ran for my own gun.

Vic dove at me.

He tackled me to the floor. Blood smeared all over the back of my shirt as I scrambled to get to the gun. Vic grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked my head back, as if preparing to smash my face into the hallway tile. His grip was amazingly strong, and I knew that with a couple of slams I’d have a broken nose and no front teeth.

Another gunshot rang out.

Vic let go of my hair and cried out in pain.

I scooted out from under him. I assumed that the gunshot had come from Darla, unless there was another mystery person in the house. I didn’t look back until I’d grabbed my own gun.

Vic had his hand pressed against the side of his head. “God *damn* it!”

Darla shot him again. A chunk of skull flew into the air.

He flopped over and went still.

We both just watched Vic’s body for a moment.

“Is he breathing?” I asked.

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“Is he good at holding his breath?”

“How would I know that?”

I kept watching him. The only movement was the blood pooling under his body.

“Do you want me to shoot him again?” Darla asked.

“No,” I said. I still kind of hoped that we could get through this without me having to tell the police I’d murdered somebody. I didn’t know what the hell was going on here, but if forensics wasn’t able to confirm that Vic had come after us after being stabbed a half-dozen times in the throat, we had some very challenging explaining to do. And though it probably wouldn’t matter if neighbors heard four or five gunshots instead of three, why risk it?

I didn’t say it out loud, in case Vic was faking it, but my plan was to find something I could use to cut off his head.

“I need a drink or I’m gonna lose my mind,” I said. “Keep an eye on him. If he moves, shoot him.”

“You should stay clear-headed,” Darla told me.

Nothing about this was going to be easy, was it?

“Then I need a cold glass of water,” I said.

Darla didn’t protest as I went into the kitchen. I walked over to the counter and realized how well I’d been holding it together for the past few minutes, because I suddenly wanted to completely freak the hell out. It would’ve been bad enough just to have had that tense conversation where I thought things might turn violent. Stabbing a man in the throat, no matter how much of a piece of shit he was, was going to fuel a lot of poor mental health moments. But the fact that Vic had lived through all of that? It made me want to drop to my knees, tear out my hair, and start incoherently screaming.

That said, I wasn’t yet willing to go with “powers beyond those of mortal men” as the explanation. I could simply have witnessed a marvel of human endurance; man’s desire to survive at all costs. But it was incomprehensibly freaky.

And now I had to cut off Vic’s head.



That was never part of the plan. I mean, yes, I'd considered the idea that there might end up being some dismemberment involved. Yet that was for body disposal, not to make sure the dude with the mutilated throat was actually dead!

I had no idea if Quinn owned an axe. I didn't have one, but I lived in an apartment. Maybe she had a shovel. If a very quick search of the kitchen didn't turn up a knife big enough to cut off a human head, I'd look in the garage.

I opened the drawer closest to the refrigerator. I hit the jackpot on the first try. There was a great big butcher knife and an even longer knife that I assumed was to slice bread. I grabbed both of them.

The gunshot startled me so badly that I dropped the butcher knife. Not on my foot, fortunately. I scooped it back up and ran out of the kitchen.

I *think* Darla had shot Vic in the chest. His shirt was almost entirely red, so it was hard to tell, but there was a gout of blood spurting from a spot near his heart. Now he had his hand on Darla's neck, and he slammed her head against the wall.

When I did that earlier, I just wanted her to drop the gun, and was consciously trying not to hurt her. Vic, presumably, also wanted her to drop the gun, but didn't care if he shattered her skull in the process. He slammed her so hard against the wall that I thought I heard her neck snap. Her body dropped to the floor.

Vic turned toward me.

In that moment, I hoped that one of the neighbors had called the police.

Vic touched what I assumed was the bullet hole in his chest and winced. "How are we gonna work this out, Corey?" he asked.

I had no answer.

He glanced down at Darla. "Does she look dead to you? She looks pretty dead to me. Better make sure, though." He raised his foot and slammed it down upon her neck.

“Stop it!” I shouted.

“I’m making things easier for you.” He slammed his foot on her neck again. Her head was now twisted at an angle where, had the past few minutes not happened, I would’ve been certain that she was dead.

Vic tapped her head a couple of times with the toe of his shoe. She didn’t respond. “Yeah, she’s gone. That’s a bummer. I actually liked talking to that one.”

I reached down and picked up the butcher knife.

Vic seemed amused by that. “Not gonna ask me if she’ll get back up?”

“Will she?”

“Nah.” He touched the bullet wound again. “Can’t keep my finger out of it. Kind of like when a filling comes out of your tooth and you can’t keep your tongue out of there.”

I had nothing to add to that.

Vic sighed. “You really fucked things up for me, Corey. I had a good thing going. Stability. I know how it looks, but I love Quinn. I never would’ve left her.”

“So what happens next?” I couldn’t believe I was having a conversation with this blood-drenched...*creature*. I should be doing nothing but shrieking in fear.

“That’s what I asked you. I’m the one who’s in all the pain. What is *your* solution? How do you propose we resolve this?”

“Let me go.”

Blood trickled out of the wounds in his throat as he laughed. “Try again,” he said.

Though I was terrified, I was also numb, as if this was happening to somebody else, or I was playing a character in a movie. And in this movie, I realized that the hero—if I could call myself the hero—was holding two knives.

I didn’t know what was going on with Vic. Maybe he couldn’t die.

But maybe I could fuck him up enough that it wouldn't matter.

I rushed at him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Vic wasn't expecting that. The sight of me—looking, I assume, less than mentally stable—running at him holding two large knives seemed to startle him.

Instead of throwing a punch or trying to grab me, he put his arm in front of his face in a defensive gesture.

I went absolutely berserk, slashing and stabbing at him with the knives like I was trying to carve him right down to the bone. He was bigger and stronger, but I was a lot more crazed. And I hadn't just been stabbed in the neck and shot in the head and chest.

Most of my knife strikes had little impact—they bounced off his arm, barely jabbed into him, or missed entirely. But I was attacking him so frantically that they weren't all duds. The bread knife sunk deep into his belly, and a slash with the butcher knife removed a large chunk of flesh from the side of his neck.

Vic looked furious, but he also looked kind of worried.

That was my plan. Whittle this son of a bitch down until he couldn't move.

I tried to drag the long knife horizontally through his guts. Unfortunately, the knife was meant for slicing bread and not intestines, and it didn't really work. I yanked it out and stabbed him again.

I thrust the butcher knife at his face, trying to jam it right into his eye. I missed, getting him a couple of inches under his left eye instead. I pulled the knife out and tried again. This

time he turned his head, and the blade struck the side of his skull, not going in very far.

“Enough!” he shouted.

As far as I was concerned, it wouldn't be enough until Vic was a skeleton. But before I could stab him with either of the knives again, he finally got in a really good punch, right in the stomach. I doubled over and dropped to my knees.

Then he punched me in the face. I fell onto my side, landing on Darla's corpse.

Vic, who was now so covered with blood that I'm not certain Quinn would have recognized him, raised his foot as if he was about to do his signature neck-stomping move. As he brought his foot down, I stabbed up with both knives.

They both hit. Sadly, Vic was wearing shoes, so neither of the knives hurt him very much, but they did keep him from stomping on my throat. And it put him off balance. Enough that I was able to let go of the butcher knife, grab him by the ankle, and yank his foot toward me.

The butcher knife landed on me first, followed by Vic. Neither felt *good*, but since the knife didn't actually strike me blade-first, it could have been far worse. I still had the bread knife, and I ran its serrated edge across the back of Vic's neck.

I frantically drew the blade back and forth, somehow believing that I might be able to saw off Vic's head before he did anything to stop me. I was only able to dig in about half an inch before Vic scooted away from me.

Without hesitation, I scrambled toward him, and slammed the knife into his chest.

Then I did it again.

And again.

I may have said, “*Die, you motherfucker!*” or may have imagined myself saying it. I'm not completely sure.

After a *lot* of stabs—I'm talking a couple dozen at least—Vic stopped struggling.

I switched to his neck, vigorously sawing away at what remained of it.

It worked up to a point. But this knife was not designed to saw through bone. I needed...well, an actual saw.

I stood up, had a dizzy spell, almost collapsed, yet maintained my balance. There had to be something around here that I could use to decapitate the bastard.

I crouched back and tried to roll Vic onto his stomach but couldn't quite manage it. So instead I lifted his left foot and sawed through his Achilles tendon. Then I did the same thing with his right foot. He wouldn't be going anywhere.

Then I hurried into the kitchen. From looking at the house when I pulled into the driveway, I was pretty sure that the kitchen was connected to the garage.

It was. I opened the door, fumbled for a moment trying to find the light switch, and then went into the garage. Junk was piled everywhere, and there was barely even room for a motorcycle, much less a car. I looked around for a convenient rack of sawing instruments mounted on the wall, but didn't see anything.

They owned a saw, right? Everybody who lived in a house had a saw.

I did see a metal garden rake, and *maybe* I could get his head off with the tines, given enough time, but that wasn't ideal. There had to be something more effective.

I didn't think a snow shovel would do the trick.

There! Resting against the far wall. A small hatchet.

I ran over, grabbed it, and rushed back into the kitchen.

I heard a door slam shut.

Oh, shit, was that the police? I hadn't heard any sirens. Was it Quinn?

No, I'd heard the door close, not open. That meant it was...

Darla's dead body was still on the floor. Vic was gone. I wouldn't have thought he could run off after I slashed up his tendons, but apparently that was not the case.

I should go after him.

Or, as an alternative plan, I could *not* go after him.

It was one thing to be hacking him up in the privacy of his and Quinn's home. It was a very different thing to chase after him outdoors, even if it was, apparently, the kind of neighborhood where nobody could be bothered to call 911 to report some gunshots.

I almost opened the front door. But that could be a trap. He might be waiting.

Instead, I went into the living room and peeked out the window.

I could see blood in the light dusting of snow in the driveway, but not Vic. Though it was obvious which direction he'd gone, from the vantage point of this window I couldn't see the psychopath himself.

Fine. It was no longer my problem.

Except...my mind played a little movie where a friendly neighbor saw the blood-covered man running down the sidewalk and offered to drive him to the emergency room. This movie did not end well for the neighbor.

I couldn't just let Vic run loose. Somebody else would die. Maybe he'd kill a whole family.

I cursed and ran out the front door, hatchet in hand.

He'd turned right when he reached the sidewalk. I couldn't see him, but I could see the blood. I ran as fast as I could after him, hoping that nobody would peek out their window and see the bloody guy running down the sidewalk with a hatchet.

I ran to the end of the block. How the hell was he able to make such good time after what I'd done to his feet?

"Hey!" somebody shouted. It wasn't Vic.

An old man stood in his garage. The hood of his automobile was up; apparently he'd been working on his car, only to turn around and see a bloody dude running past his home with a hatchet.

There was no time to explain, and it was a safe assumption that he wouldn't believe my tale of terror, so I ignored him. Honestly, if I'd taken a moment to take a deep breath and calmly analyze the situation, I might have decided that there was absolutely no reason to avoid the cops. They certainly weren't going to charge me with murder. But I hadn't quite gotten out of the mindset of "I'm here to murder somebody, and I don't want to get caught."

The man called "Hey!" after me again. I turned right to follow the blood trail. I could see Vic running, only half a block away. His feet weren't even flopping around.

I raised the hatchet as I picked up my pace.

I was quickly gaining on him. Hopefully he wouldn't hear my footsteps.

He turned around at the sound of my footsteps.

He held up his hand, palm-out, as if trying to ward off my approach.

Good. I'd chop it right off.

"Stay back," he warned me.

I kept running.

"Stay *back!*" he shouted.

It was not the tone of his voice that made me stop. It was the fact that his fucking eyes were glowing red. I'm sure it would've been more impressive at night, but even in broad daylight it was scary as shit.

"*Get out of here, Corey,*" he said in a voice that didn't sound like a human being could make it without demonic assistance.

Suddenly, I no longer wanted to get close enough to Vic to chop off his head.



I almost flung the hatchet at him. But even if it was the most amazing throw imaginable—even if it struck him right between his red eyes—it probably wouldn't slow him down. It was best to let him go.

I turned and ran.

I don't think this counted as chickening out. I'd fought bravely, and there's no shame in deciding that glowing eyes and a demonic voice are more than you want to deal with at the present time.

I rounded the corner, going back the way I'd come, hoping that the guy working on his car wouldn't be waiting for me.

He wasn't waiting in the center of the sidewalk, but he'd stepped out of his garage.

"Sorry," I said. "We're shooting a movie." I pointed to the sky. "There's the drone." Then I resumed running.

I returned to Quinn's home. As I went through the front door, I was surprised to see Darla's body where I'd left it, as if I believed that the world was now a place where all dead people got up and ran away.

I counted to ten, giving myself time to calm down.

Then I counted to twenty.

Okay, I wasn't going to calm down anytime soon. But I wasn't comatose in the fetal position, so that was something to be proud of.

I locked the front door in case Vic decided to make a return appearance. If he wanted to come after me, he was welcome to slash himself up even more by crashing through the living room window.

Though I really wanted to get some of this blood off me, I needed to make a call first. I dug my cell phone out of my pocket. I'd never actually called or texted Quinn, but I had her number in my contacts. She'd be in her cubicle, and this would not be a conversation that our co-workers should overhear, so I decided to text her.

*Hi, it's Corey. Can you give me a call? Someplace private.*

I stared at my phone for a few moments until it showed that she'd read my text. The three dots appeared, indicating that she was typing something back, and they stayed on my screen for an excruciatingly long time. Finally, her reply appeared.

*Is something wrong?*

Yes! Why the hell would I ask her to call me from someplace private? I wasn't calling her at work to engage in phone sex!

*Please just call me.*

I paced around her home, avoiding the gore-splashed hallway, until my phone finally rang. "Hi," I said.

"Hi. What's going on?"

Where to start? Where to start? My mind abruptly went blank. I didn't have the slightest idea how to explain this to her.

"Corey...?"

"I'm here."

"Are you okay? I got worried when I heard you'd called in sick."

"I'm fine," I said. "I mean, I'm not fine. Any chance you could take the rest of the day off?"

"Jasper will freak, but yes. What's wrong? What did you do?"

"What makes you think I did anything?"

"Corey, please, just tell me what's going on."

"Vic was cheating on you."

There was a long silence.

"I'm not sure why I started there," I admitted. "It's not relevant. I mean, it's kind of relevant, but it's a minor element. I don't even know what I'm saying."

"I'll ask for the rest of the day off. Where do you want me to meet you?"

“Your place?”

There was another long silence.

“Are you at my house?” Quinn finally asked.

“Yeah.”

“Is Vic there?”

“He was.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

## CHAPTER SIX

**I**t was a very, very long fifteen minutes.

The police never showed up. This meant that Quinn lived in the kind of neighborhood where four gunshots could go off in the middle of the day, and a neighbor could witness a blood-covered hatchet-wielding man running down the sidewalk, without anybody feeling the need to contact the authorities. I mean, yeah, I'd told the guy we were shooting a movie, but really?

I stripped out of my clothes, rinsed myself off, and stole a shirt and pair of jeans out of Vic's closet. It obviously didn't fit well, but it was better than greeting Quinn covered in blood.

I hated to leave Darla's corpse just lying there. But Vic had killed her, not me, and I wanted a forensics team to be able to prove it.

When I heard Quinn's car pull into the driveway, I stepped outside to meet her. She shut off the engine, got out of the vehicle, and frowned.

"Why are you wearing Vic's clothes?" she asked.

"There's a lot to explain," I said.

She looked down at the blood on the snow and hurried over to me. "Is Vic inside?"

"No."

"His car's still here."

"He ran off."

“Tell me what’s going on, Corey.”

“I will. I’ll tell you everything.”

“Should we go inside?”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not.”

“Give me a *very* high-level summary. Super quick. Tell me in one sentence.”

“I tried to kill your husband, and he wouldn’t die.”

Quinn looked absolutely horrified. Frantic. Queasy. What she did *not* look was surprised.

“Let’s go inside,” she said.

“It’s awful in there.”

“My husband is the Toledo Trasher. He made me take bites out of his victims. Is what’s inside there worse than that?”

“No,” I admitted. “It’s not.”

We went inside. Quinn slapped her hand over her mouth as she saw the bloody hallway and Darla’s corpse. “Who’s that?” she asked. “Is that the woman he was...?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.” I shut the door.

Quinn closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to calm herself down or pretend that this wasn’t happening. She opened her eyes again, then gave me a look that wasn’t exactly filled with love and affection.

“You thought you were going to be a hero, so you tried to kill Vic. How’d you do it?”

“Stabbed him in the throat.”

“And he didn’t die?”

“No. Bled a lot but didn’t die. I stabbed him over and over.” I pointed to Darla. “She shot him in the head. Nothing worked.”

“Shit.”

“I wish you were more shocked by this.”

“I wish I was, too. So he ran away?”

I nodded. “He was completely mangled. I mean, I slashed his Achilles tendons, and he still ran away. I chased him, but then he went all demonic, like he was possessed.”

“He wasn’t possessed, but I know what you mean.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I don’t know. I guess we could follow the blood, but it doesn’t matter.”

“It seems like it matters a little.”

“He’s hiding somewhere while he heals up,” Quinn said. “It won’t take long.”

“Is there a way to kill him?”

“I don’t know. For some reason, he never bothered to share that information with me.” The panic in her voice wasn’t enough to outweigh the sarcasm.

“There has to be a way, right?”

“I suppose we could try running him over with a steamroller. Maybe throwing him into a volcano.”

“Your attitude isn’t helping,” I said. “I get that I screwed up, but I was trying to save lives. I was trying to save *you*.”

“Corey, however bad you think you may have screwed up, it’s worse. It’s so much worse. I’m sorry that you think I have a poor attitude right now, but we are in deep, deep shit.” She thought for a moment. “Are you on any medications? Anything you absolutely need?”

“Just sleeping pills.”

“And do you *absolutely need* these sleeping pills to survive?”

“No! Jesus, Quinn, I know you’re upset, but give me a break while I try to process what is happening right now. Apparently you were mentally prepared for your husband to get stabbed in the neck and walk it off. I wasn’t.”

“What about money?” Quinn asked. “Do you have a stash of cash at home?”

“No.”

“Gold? Jewelry? Anything you can liquidate easily?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m always getting compliments on my collection of gold chains.”

“And they’re in your apartment?”

“I was joking.”

“Don’t joke!” Quinn screamed, making me flinch as if a fifth gunshot had gone off. “There is nothing funny about this! Are you keeping up with what I’m trying to say here? We are going on the run, Corey. We are fleeing for our lives. So I need to know if we have to stop at your apartment to get anything, or if we can skip that step.”

“No, there’s...I mean, how long are we going to be gone?”

“Maybe a long time.”

“I need my phone charger, but I guess I can buy a new one.”

“How long had Vic been gone before you called me?”

“A few minutes? I chased after him, only a couple of blocks, and then I ran right back here.”

“So he’s been gone for twenty-five, thirty minutes?”

“That sounds right.”

“Okay.” Quinn thought for a moment. “Drive home and pack a bag. Do it really quickly—I’m talking ten minutes at the most. Clothes, toiletries, whatever you think you’ll need. Text me your address. I’ll come get you.”

I nodded. “All right. What are you gonna do?”

“I’m going to grab my bug-out bag. Vic let me have it because we knew that at some point we might have to run from the FBI.”

“There’s a blood trail. Do you think maybe we should try to hunt him down? Maybe you could talk to him. Convince

him that I did this all by myself?”

“Oh, he knows that. He knows I wouldn’t be stupid enough to send you after him. I’m sure we could find him, but the only way he’d let me talk this out is if I started the conversation by tossing him your severed head. Which is tempting. Very tempting.”

“Ouch.”

“Go,” she told me.

“I’m really sorry about this.”

“I don’t care.”

I left the house, got in my car, and sped off.

I turned on the radio, cranked the volume as high as it would go without blowing out the speakers, and blasted hard rock as I drove. I sang along—screamed along, really—so that I could focus entirely on the music and not my thoughts. I didn’t want to think about the fact that I could no longer chuckle and say that people with glowing red eyes didn’t exist. This was “my entire world has changed, and there’s no going back” stuff, and I quite honestly didn’t want to cope with it right now.

When I arrived at my apartment complex, eighty-year-old Mrs. Elster was seated on the stairs, wearing a too-light jacket. That’s where she spent most of her day, sitting out there, talking to people as they passed. Any other time, I was happy to oblige and spend a few minutes chatting with her. Today, I rudely ran past her, acknowledging her greeting with a quick, “Hi, can’t talk, sorry.”

I pulled a small suitcase out from under my bed and began throwing in clothes. If you’d told me that I’d be packing for a trip with Quinn, I would’ve expected to be putting a lot more thought into what to wear. I already had a small travel bag packed with a toothbrush, razor, and other essentials, so I tossed that into the suitcase as well, followed by my laptop computer and my phone charger.

What else?



I opened my bottom dresser drawer and grabbed my passport and birth certificate, just in case.

Less than ten minutes. Not bad.

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to wait in the parking lot, or if Quinn was going to text me when she arrived. Since she was so angry with me, I decided that I should be waiting and ready when she got there.

I walked past Mrs. Elster, apologizing again. I considered standing and talking to her, which might distract me from my thoughts, but I also didn't want her to say, "Oh, yes, he was acting very strange," if she had to give a statement to the police.

I tried to think of a rational explanation for what had happened. If I'd merely been a witness, I could say that I'd been watching a state-of-the-art special effects show, but I'd slammed the knives into Vic myself. The idea that he'd slipped in some glowing red contact lenses and was using some sort of voice distortion device was as ridiculous as the idea that his eyeballs were actually glowing.

So, yeah, that kind of shit existed in the world.

I'd do my best to stay sane.

I paced for about twenty minutes, half-expecting a dozen police cars to suddenly surround me, or for Vic to show up, ready to do to my neck what I'd done to his. Finally, a small brown car I didn't recognize, with tinted windows, pulled up next to me.

I prepared to make a mad dash, if necessary.

The window rolled down. "Get in," Quinn told me.

I opened the back door and tossed my suitcase onto the seat next to a large duffel bag. Then I got into the front passenger seat.

"Sorry," said Quinn. "Getting the new car took longer than I expected."

"That was still pretty quick."

“I’d planned ahead. Not for you screwing things up, but for things going bad.”

She pulled out of the parking lot and drove off.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“You didn’t plan that out ahead?”

She turned and glared at me. “I have multiple plans. I’m trying to figure out which one to go with. For now, I just want to get as far away from here as possible.”

“Okay.”

“I can’t believe this. I just can’t believe this. I can’t even describe how bad this is. What the hell were you thinking?”

“You know what? You can stop that shit.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Quinn. “Am I hurting your feelings?”

“Vic is the Toledo Trasher. He’s a serial killer—one of the worst. And he was forcing you to go along with him. So I decided, not just for you, but for *humanity*, that I was going to kill him. Then you wouldn’t have to go to prison for whatever role you played. And my plan worked. I stabbed him in the throat. By any realistic scenario that I should’ve been able to predict, your husband should be dead on the floor, and you’d be free and clear. I’m getting really sick of you acting like I’m stupid because I didn’t know that Vic couldn’t be killed by having his entire neck ripped open!”

Quinn drove in silence for a moment. “All right. I’ll grant you that point.”

“Thank you.”

“But don’t act like your plan would’ve gone flawlessly, because Vic’s dead mistress is in my hallway.”

“If Vic wasn’t some kind of supernatural being, I would’ve handled it.”

“Would you?”

“Yes!”

“Why didn’t you tell me before you did it?”

“Because I didn’t want you to be involved. I didn’t want you to put yourself in danger. In retrospect, sure, it would’ve been nice to know beforehand that Vic could get shot in the head and survive, but I don’t think I was being sloppy by not considering that tiny little detail. I didn’t think that was the kind of helpful tidbit you’d have available to share.”

“Fine. You had no way of knowing he couldn’t be killed. But let’s be clear—you went to my house to murder my husband and kept me out of the loop. You’re not blameless.”

“But, again, your husband is the Toledo Trasher. It’s not like I was trying to knock him off so we could be together.”

“You want us to be together?” asked Quinn.

“Not anymore, no.”

“Okay, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll stop bitching at you, but you have to listen to everything I say from now on. Don’t question anything I tell you to do. I’m in charge.”

“Got it. So what is he? Is he even human?”

Quinn nodded. “Yeah, he’s human. You’re going to have a hard time believing what his deal is.”

“No, I’m really not. I’m open to a lot of possibilities right now.”

“He’s not a demon. But he’s *powered* by a demon.”

“I thought you said it wasn’t demonic possession.”

“It’s not. Not really. When you think demonic possession, you think of an unwilling host, like the little girl in *The Exorcist*.”

“Regan,” I said.

“I don’t give a shit what her name was.”

“I feel like we’re getting hostile with each other again.”

“Fine. Her name was Regan. Anyway, it’s like he and the demon are working as a team, but it doesn’t control his

thoughts or actions or anything like that. It just gives him abilities.”

“The ability to not die when he’s all hacked up.”

“Among other things.”

“What kind of other things?”

“He can burn you with his hands. It’s not something he can do spur of the moment, but if he concentrates, he can turn your skin to ash.”

“Damn,” I said. “What else?”

“I don’t know. He kept a lot of secrets. Maybe that’s as far as it goes, or maybe he can do a bunch of other stuff. Maybe he can make your head explode with his mind.”

“I hope not.”

“Me too.”

“Okay, so, this is obviously very bad. But I’m smaller than him, and I only had a couple of knives to work with, and I sent him running. I don’t get why we had to drop everything and flee town. Why not send the cops after him? He can’t teleport out of a jail cell, can he?”

“Vic is part of a cult,” said Quinn. “It’s this whole ‘Satan is our master’ thing, and I don’t know if it’s actually the devil that they talk to, but if not, it’s pretty damn close. It’s something very, very evil. And the cult has a policy where if you fuck with one of them, you fuck with all of them.”

“Oh,” I said.

“So, yeah, Vic is not the only one like that. And they’re all going to come after us.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Can we not talk for a little bit?” I asked. “I’d just like some time to sit here quietly.”

“That’s fine,” said Quinn.

I closed my eyes and tried to think of something happy. Kittens. Puppies. Fond childhood memories of the Scholastic Book Fair. Oh, how I’d loved the Scholastic Book Fair! And I loved those catalogs they sent home. We didn’t have a lot of money, but my parents would always make sure I got to order at least one book. I could still remember how excited I was when the box of books would be resting on my teacher’s desk in the morning.

And baby otters. They seemed to be so full of energy and joy. I could watch baby otters for hours.

I opened my eyes again.

“How many members are in the cult?” I asked.

“At least a dozen.”

“At least?”

“Probably closer to twenty.”

“Crap.”

“Yeah.”

“Are they all in Toledo?”

“No,” said Quinn. “Vic may be the only one. They’re all over the country.”

“So we may be driving closer to some of them?”

“Maybe, yeah. We’re not trying to outrun the whole group. We’re trying to get away from Vic, and hide ourselves away where he can’t find us.”

“Okay, so I’m trying to figure out the actual amount of danger that we’re in. It’s not like they’re tracking us with, I don’t know, cult satellites or anything like that, right? Forget I said cult satellites. That was stupid. What I mean is, can they use the power of the devil or whatever to find us?”

“I wouldn’t be comfortable promising you that they can’t.”

“Okay. Okay. Okay, so, while I continue to assess the situation, you’re saying that up to twenty supernatural demon-assisted cultists might be using the power of Satan to hunt us?”

“I’m not saying they aren’t.”

“All right,” I said. “I now understand why you were so upset earlier. It all makes sense.”

“I’m sorry,” said Quinn. “I would have told you, but how was I supposed to know that you were going to try to kill him? It never would have occurred to me that you’d do something like that. That was insane. I wouldn’t have even thought that you’d try to threaten him, or try to talk to him. I literally would never have expected you to make any kind of contact with my husband.”

“Would you have let me turn him in to the police?”

“Yes. But we would’ve been gone before they showed up at the door.”

“Well, that’s lovely.”

“If he went to prison, the others would’ve showed up.”

“Are the others all psychopathic serial killers? Are there, like, twenty Toledo Trashers out there?”

“No. Vic had that need before. This just made it easier for him. I don’t know exactly what the others are like—I’ve never met any of them—but they’re all the kind of people who would join a Satan-worshipping cult and let demons enter their

bodies. They aren't the finest specimens that humanity has to offer."

"Got it. They probably aren't very nice."

"Not at all. For all I know, Vic is the friendliest one of them."

"And we know for sure that they're all coming after us?"

"What I know is that this isn't the first time something like this has happened. When it did, Vic went off on what he called 'his holy mission,' and it turned out really bad for some guy and his family. Did you hear about that massacre that happened in Grand Rapids a couple of years ago?"

"Refresh my memory," I said.

"A family of five was skinned alive, including the two-year-old."

"Okay, yeah, I heard about that."

"Want to know what the father did to deserve it? It was a car accident. One where nobody died. And Vic's brother—not his real brother; that's just what they call themselves—was the one who ran the red light. It wasn't the other guy's fault. Could've happened to anybody. But they snatched up the five of them, took them to a soundproofed basement, and skinned them one at a time, youngest to oldest, making the others watch. Vic laughed about it when he got home."

Yes, the Scholastic Book Fair! Oh, such happy memories! And what about Christmas morning, when I'd wake up my parents to let them know that Santa Claus had arrived! I wasn't sure why Santa Claus gave superior gifts to my richer friends, but it was always a wonderful time of year.

"There has to be a way to defeat them, right?" I asked. "Some kind of weakness we could exploit?"

"You mean like splashing water on them, or we find out that they can't withstand the common cold?"

"Something like that."

"It would be nice, wouldn't it?"

“Have you decided on a plan yet?”

“Nope.”

“What about turning ourselves in? Could they get to us if we were in prison?”

“I don’t know,” said Quinn.

“I mean, they can’t just magically pass through walls, right? Even if you can’t be killed, you can’t just walk into a prison and murder one of the inmates. I’m obviously not in love with this idea, but we’d be safe.”

“I’m not sure they’d give up. Do you want to spend the rest of your life behind bars?”

“Better than being skinned alive.”

“Maybe they couldn’t get us. Maybe they could possess a guard and shank us in our sleep. I don’t know how it works. If you want me to drop you off at the next prison, I’ll be happy to do so, but I’m not interested in going that route.”

“I guess I’m not either.”

Quinn’s phone rang. Vic’s picture showed up on the display.

“Shit,” she said. “I knew this was coming. I’m going to need you to trust me, Corey. I’m going to tell him what he wants to hear, or at least part of it, and I can’t have you getting all paranoid.”

“I trust you.”

Quinn answered the call and put it on speaker.

“Quinn?” asked Vic.

“Yeah.”

“It sounds like you’re in a car. Where are you?” His voice still sounded the way it had after the neck-stabbings.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Yeah.”



“I can tell I’m on speaker.”

“So?” said Quinn. “I’m driving. Do you want me to get pulled over for holding a phone to my ear while I’m driving?”

“Is he with you?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know, Vic. Do you want me to do a thorough search of the car to make sure he didn’t sneak in here when I wasn’t looking? Maybe he’s in the glove compartment.”

I never would have imagined that this was the way Quinn would talk to her husband. Granted, she was having this conversation on the phone as we were speeding away from him, but I would’ve expected her to be much more subdued.

“You know what I meant.”

“You meant, am I lying to you? He’s not in the car.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s driving separately.”

“Are you fucking him?”

“*That’s* your concern right now? Are you kidding me?”

“Are you?”

“No, I am not. He hasn’t even touched my tit. But, hey, on a very similar note, who’s the dead girl in our hallway?”

“Where are you headed?”

“Oh, no, you don’t get to change the subject. Let’s talk about the dead girl for a while. She looked pretty young. I couldn’t tell if she was cute or not, with the way you twisted her head around.” Despite Quinn’s tone, her voice was trembling. “Was she fun, honey? Did she make you feel all shiny and new?”

“I asked you where you were headed.”

“And I said we were going to talk about the dead girl.”

Vic chuckled. “You know what’s going to happen to you and your boyfriend, right?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. We already discussed that. Try to keep up, Vic.”

“Why did he try to kill me?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t talk to me about it. He didn’t say anything to you while he was there?”

“What did you tell him?”

“Is this really why you called?” asked Quinn. “Does any of this even matter right now?”

“I guess not.”

“We should be talking about how to work this out, not Corey’s motives.”

“You know that the others are going to be called on a holy mission, right?”

“Do they have to be?”

“That’s up to you. Bring Corey to me, and we can pretend none of this ever happened.”

“None of it? You never murdered your girlfriend? You never ran through the streets leaving a trail of blood?”

“Nobody is going to come looking for her. If they do, they won’t find anything. So what if people see blood on the sidewalk? I can make all of this go away. I’ve done it before. We can call this a bump in the road and move on.”

“Pretty big bump.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Oh, sure, I’ll just forget you were cheating on me, no problem.”

“Don’t act like you give a shit about that. You don’t care. You know I’ve been screwing around. We haven’t had a decent marriage in years.”

“Right,” said Quinn. “I wonder when that started? When was that moment that our marriage started to be a lot less

happy? I'm trying to think. I feel like there was *something*, some inciting incident, a moment in time where the fairy tale ended. What was it? Do you remember, Vic?"

"Don't be a bitch," Vic told her.

"Oh, I was wondering when the b-word would make its appearance. Congratulations on holding out this long."

"He's in the car with you, isn't he? You're showing off."

"How exactly am I showing off?"

"You're pretending you're not scared."

"He's not in the car with me."

"I'm tired of this," said Vic. "We both know we're not trying to save our marriage. I'm trying to save your life. My brothers and sisters and I have talked about the things we'll do when we get our next opportunity. Believe me, Quinn, you don't want to be the recipient of this."

"Then don't let me be. Call them off."

"I haven't called them on yet."

"Good. Don't."

"They're coming. Don't get me wrong. The question is whether they're coming for both of you, or just your work boyfriend. You're not the one who did anything to me. There's no reason for you to go through hell on earth, and then hell in Hell. Deliver him to me, and I'll make sure they don't touch you."

"What do I tell him?"

"I don't care what you tell him. Just bring him back here. If he walks through the front door, I'll consider your debt repaid."

"And if I don't?"

"You shouldn't need me to answer that."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"I don't give a shit if you trust me or not. We're not trying to work out a business deal. I'm offering you a lifeline. I'd be

just as happy to spit flesh-eating worms into your eyeball sockets, but since I believe you when you say that your boyfriend acted alone, I'm being *very* generous and giving you this chance. Take it or leave it. Doesn't matter to me, but if you leave it, you're the dumbest bitch who ever lived."

"I'll take it," said Quinn.

Even though she'd warned me that she'd tell him what he wanted to hear, I still recoiled a bit.

"Good girl," said Vic. "How are you going to do it?"

"I'm going to call him and tell him that a neighbor found you dead, and that we need to get back to clean up the mess in the house as soon as possible."

"That should work. Tell him you'll fuck him afterward."

"Stop it."

Vic chuckled again. "See you soon. Don't piss me off."

Quinn disconnected the call. Then she seemed to simultaneously suck in a deep breath and let out a sob. The car swerved a little into the next lane as she acted like she was hyperventilating.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm..." She tried a couple of times but couldn't say anything else. I hoped we didn't go through all of this just to perish in a car crash.

"You should pull over."

Quinn pulled over to the highway shoulder, not quite slamming on the brakes but stopping abruptly enough that I would've smashed into the dashboard if I hadn't been wearing my seatbelt.

"I'm having a panic attack," she managed to blurt out.

"That's fine, that's fine," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. "Just take a few moments to get composed. It's fine."

She nodded and tried to get her breathing under control.

I was the one who should be having a panic attack. Because, yes, she'd given me a disclaimer before she answered the phone, but still, the takeaway from the call had been "deliver Corey to Vic."

We sat there for about a minute, until a truck pulled up behind us. Probably a friendly driver seeing if we needed assistance. Quinn pulled back onto the highway.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

"No."

"That's fair. What's the plan?"

"We're going back to my house."

"And then?"

"I haven't figured it out yet."

"So you don't have a plan beyond, basically, doing exactly what Vic told you to do?"

"At the moment, yes, that's correct."

"That's not great."

"Why do I have to come up with the plan?" Quinn asked. "Why do I have to be the genius? You're the one who came up with this masterful scheme to rid the world of the Toledo Trasher, so how about you figure something out?"

"All right, all right. I assumed that when you told Vic that you were going to deliver me to him, that you had already worked out the next step. I was wrong. That's okay."

"I'm not actually going to deliver you to him," Quinn assured me. "That was just talk. We need to figure something out between now and when we get there."

"Understood," I said. "I don't want to overwhelm you with questions, but if we don't have a plan in place, why is going back to your house a better idea than what we were doing?"

"What?"

I didn't like the way she said that. It sounded more like she was trying to buy herself a few extra seconds to come up with

an answer, than “I didn’t understand your question” or “I didn’t hear you.”

“Maybe we should stick with our original idea,” I said. “Get as far away from here as we can.”

“Maybe,” said Quinn.

“He’s lying to you.”

“About which part?”

“He said nobody was coming to look for Darla.” I’d never actually told Quinn her name, so I clarified. “That’s his girlfriend.”

“I figured out who Darla was.”

“He told her to take an Uber home, and she was worried that somebody named Herschell would see the charge. So he was lying when he said nobody would come after her. She’s married or has a boyfriend or somebody who sees her credit card statements.”

“Could be her brother.”

“Right. Herschell could be her brother. My point is that she’s not somebody who can just disappear without anybody caring.”

“And? How does this change things?”

“Just sharing the information.”

“Thank you for that, then. I’m sure it will be extremely helpful in our efforts to not be dragged kicking and screaming to Hell.”

I thought we were just getting skinned alive. This was sounding worse and worse.

“I had no idea you were this acerbic,” I said.

“You learn a lot about a person when you completely ruin their life,” Quinn told me.

I hoped we weren’t going back to her place. But a moment later, she took the highway exit, and a moment after that, we were headed back the way we’d come.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“**Y**ou never really answered my question,” I said.

“What was the question?” Quinn asked.

“Why is going back to your house, where Vic is, better than fleeing somewhere that Vic *isn't*?”

If she took too long to answer, I was going to jump out of the car.

Well, no, not while we were going sixty. I'd ask her to pull over and let me out. If she refused, I'd reach my leg into her side of the car—not easy with the center console—and slam on the brakes myself. Then I'd jump out of the car and make a run for it.

“If we run away, the others will come after us for sure,” said Quinn. “But if we go back, maybe we can stop Vic before he calls for the holy mission. Trick him somehow.”

“Why didn't you think of that before we packed our bags and fled?”

“I never would have imagined that Vic would offer me a deal.”

“You told me before you answered his call that you were going to tell him what he wanted to hear.”

“Right. But I didn't know *what* he wanted to hear. I was playing it by ear.”

That didn't quite match up with what she'd told me before. She'd asked me not to become paranoid, and I wanted to grant

her that request, but I also had to think very logically about this.

What would I do if I were Quinn Fielding in this situation?

We were friends, but we weren't lifelong friends. We'd never promised that we had each other's backs, no matter what. We hadn't cried together, or laughed until we fell on the floor, or had any truly deep bonding experiences. I knew her biggest secret (shit, I *hoped* that being married to the unkillable Toledo Trasher was her biggest secret), but if she decided to move across the country, it's not as if there'd be a single word of discussion about me going with her.

If Vic offered her a lifeline, why wouldn't she take it?

Why would she risk whatever unimaginable fate Vic's Satanist buddies had in store, when she could just hand me over to him?

I'm sure she'd feel guilty about it, but it wouldn't make her a selfish asshole. She didn't drag me into this mess. I put myself in it.

The big question I had to ask myself was, what would I do if I were in Quinn's position?

From a moral perspective, I wanted to believe that I never would've let things go on anywhere near this long. If my spouse brutally killed somebody, that would've been the last time it happened. Which was, of course, very easy to say, because I'd never even had a long-term girlfriend, much less a murderous spouse.

But let's say that I was married to a gender-swapped Toledo Trasher with demonic powers, and that things had played out exactly the way they had up until now. What would my next move be?

I would spend the entire drive home desperately trying to work out a plan to defeat my psycho killer wife.

Failing that, I would hand my dumb-ass co-worker over to her.



I would. Vic had been right—Quinn would have to be a complete idiot to turn down his deal. And, if we were bringing her personal code of ethics into it, it should be noted that she'd let more than ten young women die grisly deaths at the hands of her husband. She was doing that completely out of self-preservation.

She was *totally* going to deliver me to Vic.

Fuck.

I'd abandoned the idea of trying to slam on the brakes myself and escape the vehicle. At the bare minimum, I could wait to do that until we stopped at a red light. I just had to get the hell out of the car before we pulled into her driveway.

I could also subdue Quinn, throw *her* out of the car, and speed off. I wasn't fond of that idea at all. I'd keep it in mind as a possibility, but it wouldn't be near the top of the list.

I hated the idea of going this alone. I was sure that Quinn still had more useful information she could convey. If they were human like Vic, how would I even know when the demon-ish things showed up? She'd been married to one, and probably had some idea of how to identify them.

So, if I assumed that Quinn was thinking in terms of self-preservation—which was an excellent assumption—and yet I wanted to keep her around so that we could help each other, I really only had one option. I had to come up with a plan that was better for Quinn than handing me over to Vic.

No problem.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuuuuuck.

I decided that I should pretend I didn't know Quinn was driving me to my doom. Let her think I believed we were still working as a team. If I *did* figure out something, I'd be glad I hadn't made us enemies.

“Okay, so, our plan,” I said. “What assets do we have?”

“The element of surprise.”

“Yes! The element of surprise is always a good one. He thinks I'm coming in through the front door, but I could

always sneak in through a back window. Lots of ways we can take advantage of having the element of surprise.”

“I agree,” said Quinn. She didn’t say it with a lot of conviction.

“Are you sure we can’t just call the cops? Have them surround the place?”

“That could be a lot of dead cops on our conscience.”

“True.”

“And it wouldn’t solve anything. The demons would still come after us. And then we’d have an APB out for the wife of the Toledo Trasher, which would not be helpful for us.”

“Okay, we’ll nix that idea again. What other assets do we have?” I thought for a moment and then answered my own question. “I beat him. He killed Darla, and things suck crap for us right now, but still, *he’s* the one who ran away.”

“Right. And...?”

“What if I had a better selection of weapons? I’d grabbed a hatchet from the garage that I was going to use to chop his head off. What if I’d really been able to do that? Would it be a living head?”

“I don’t know.”

“A living head wouldn’t be a problem for us. We’d kick it into a closet and shut the door. What about a shotgun blast to the face? A chainsaw across the waist? Even if we can’t kill him, we can incapacitate him. If I walk through your front door with a shitload of weapons, maybe I can *ruin* him.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” said Quinn. “Mess him up to the point where he’s no longer a threat, and then tell him that you have an uncle who owns a crematorium. But where would we get a shotgun?”

“Walmart. This is America.”

“We might be able to get one today, but we couldn’t just grab one off the shelf and do self-checkout. We’d have to fill out a form, let them do a background check, and all that. It

would take way too long—Vic would know something was up.”

“Okay,” I said. “A chainsaw, then.”

“Where are you going to hide a chainsaw? Down your pants? And are you sure you can start it on the first try?”

“Well, we’re not going to dismember him with ninja throwing stars!”

“You need a really good axe,” said Quinn. “Better than the hatchet. Something you can hide behind your back. You’ll chop him down to a torso, threaten him with cremation if he tries anything funny, and then we’ll work it out from there.”

It honestly seemed like a decent plan. Not a foolproof plan by any stretch of the imagination, since it involved me doing battle with the Toledo Trasher again. But unless Quinn bonked me on the head, dragged me into her house, and offered me up to her psychopath husband, it was a plan that might work.

I wasn’t a big fan of the “then we’ll work it out from there” element, but, overall, I was okay with this idea.

We didn’t talk much as we continued the drive. I tried to watch Quinn’s face for clues as to what she was thinking, but all I could tell was that she was incredibly stressed out, which didn’t really indicate whether she was intending to help me or betray me.

About ten minutes from her house, we stopped at a hardware store. “Hurry,” she told me as I got out of the car. I hurried down the aisles, trying to find the homicidal maniac axe section. Their selection was quite good. I quickly chose a double-bladed axe that I could completely hide behind my back, for an affordable price.

“Good one,” Quinn said as I showed it to her.

As we pulled into her neighborhood, I suddenly had extreme second thoughts. Was this suicidal? Why was I trusting Quinn after my analysis of the situation concluded that she couldn’t be trusted? Were my final thoughts in life going to be, “*Wow, Corey, you’re a fucking idiot*”?

But I didn't know what else to do. I had to believe that Quinn thought our plan was better than just handing me over to Vic.

"Here's what we're going to do," said Quinn. "I'm going to park a couple of houses away. I'm going to give you the keys. You're going to run through the back and use the key to get into the back door of the garage. Then you're going to, very quietly, head into the kitchen, and sneak up on Vic."

"What if he's in the kitchen?"

"He won't be. I'm going to distract him."

"You're going in?"

Quinn nodded. "I don't want to. But it'll be too dangerous for you otherwise. I'm going to go in through the front door, tell him that you refused to come back here, and beg him for forgiveness."

So did this mean that Quinn wasn't going to sell me out? I was pretty happy about that, if it was actually the case.

"Do you think he'll forgive you?"

"I'm sure he won't. But I have a way to distract him."

"What is it?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"Okay."

"No, I should tell you so you're not shocked when you see it. I'm going to blow him."

"Blow him up?"

"*Blow* him. Sexually."

"Oh," I said.

"He loves it and I never do it. So I'm going to cry and beg and plead, and then I'm going to unzip his pants and get on my knees. While he's focused on that, you're going to creep up behind him and chop his head off."

"Okay."

“Will that bother you?”

“Chopping his head off?”

“Me blowing him.”

“No. Not at all. I mean, I won’t be thinking, ‘Yay,’ but it won’t distract me or anything.”

“So that’s what I’ll be doing when you come into the house,” said Quinn. “I’ll make sure his attention is entirely on me. Don’t mess this up.”

“I won’t,” I assured her. “I guess if you’re going to die, that’s the way to go, right?”

“He’s not going to die.”

“Right. But you knew what I meant.”

“I did, but it was a pointless observation.”

“Okay.” I wanted to remind her that there was really no reason to be so unpleasant, but I decided not to bother. It was a fair assumption that Quinn and I would not be whispering sweet nothings to each other tonight.

“Do you understand the plan?”

“Yeah.” I thought for a moment. “What if you bit his dick off?”

“Excuse me?”

“That would be an extra level of distraction, right? As I sneak up behind him, you bite his dick off, and then I chop his head off.”

“I don’t want his severed penis in my mouth.”

“You’d spit it out right away. I mean, he made you take bites out of his victims.”

“That’s not the same thing. And I didn’t do that willingly.”

“All right. It was just a suggestion.”

“Why don’t *you* bite his dick off?”

“I said it was just a suggestion!”

Quinn parked the car on the side of the street. She cracked her knuckles. “Are you ready?”

“Completely,” I lied. I unzipped my jacket, wedged the handle of the axe in the waist of my jeans, and zipped it up again. I hoped I wouldn’t trip and fall on the ice.

She took the keys out of the ignition and handed them to me. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

We both got out of the car. Quinn walked along the sidewalk while I crossed into the backyard of her neighbor’s home.

I was reasonably confident that Quinn and I were on the same page. Reasonably. I wasn’t *positive* that I wouldn’t open the door to the kitchen and hear her scream “There he is! Get him!” But I felt like, probably, more or less, the chances were fairly good that I could trust her.

I made it to Quinn’s backyard without any unexpected complications, like somebody inquiring about the axe-shaped bulge in my jacket.

I unlocked the back door and very carefully opened it. Then I stepped into the garage and quietly closed the door behind me. I unzipped my jacket and removed the axe. Then I took off my jacket and draped it over a box—this was going to get messy.

Oh, wait, the gun. My .22 Ruger was still in my jacket pocket. I transferred it to the waistband of my jeans.

I stood there for a moment, listening.

Nothing.

Should I sneak into the kitchen now, or wait until I heard Quinn?

I should wait. Vic wouldn’t be sitting in a recliner, listening to music with headphones. He’d be on high alert. He’d hear me come inside.

I waited.

Another option was to let Quinn deal with this, run back to the car, and drive away. Could these demons *really* track me down? Maybe I'd be better off without Quinn.

I was disgusted with myself for even having considered that.

As long as she didn't screw me over, I wasn't going to screw her over.

Then I heard voices. Loud ones. Quinn was sobbing.

I opened the door to the kitchen and very carefully stepped inside.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Please!” Quinn wailed in the hallway. “I did everything I could! He got here and sped right past the house! It wasn’t my fault! I promise!”

“Bullshit,” said Vic.

“It wasn’t!”

“Then you should’ve run off with him.”

Quinn began to make choking sounds, and not the kind of choking sounds that indicated that everything was going according to plan. I stepped into the hallway. Vic’s back was to me, and he had his hand around Quinn’s throat.

I raised the axe.

“Please!” Quinn managed to say. “I’ll make it up to you!”

“How?”

“Let me show you!”

Vic let go of her. He’d changed his clothes. His hair was slick with blood, but it kind of looked like the gunshot wound had healed. I couldn’t see any exposed bone. “I’m listening,” he said.

Quinn dropped to her knees. Vic chuckled—and it was a raging douchebag chuckle—as she tugged down his pants, offering me an unobstructed view of his ass. Then she quickly went to work.

I had a brief moment of completely inappropriate, poorly timed jealousy.



*Stop watching, asshole*, I told myself. My hands were sweating so badly that I worried the axe might fall out of my grasp.

Vic put his head back and let out an orgasmic moan.

Wait...was he done already?

I took a quiet step forward.

Vic spun around and saw me.

I'm not saying that I just stood there, gaping. That's not what happened at all. It was one second at most, and probably half that. However, in the interest of honest reporting, I had a flash where I couldn't help but stare, because either Vic had been extremely blessed by God, or this pact with Satan carried more benefits than the whole "can't be killed" thing.

I wondered if Quinn had rejected my idea because she knew she wouldn't be able to get through it in one bite.

But, like I said, my astonishment lasted for half a second. Then I ran toward him with the axe.

I tried to focus entirely on my target. I wasn't completely successful. I couldn't help but notice, for example, that Darla's corpse was no longer in the hallway. I didn't wonder what Vic had done with her body—that could wait for later—but the observation did occupy some of my brain power. Possibly siphoning power away from other observations, like the fact that a lot of blood remained on the floor, and that I should watch my step.

I'm not sure if it was Vic's or Darla's blood that I slipped on, but slip I did. My legs flew into the air, and I landed so hard that it felt like I cracked my tailbone.

Quinn should've tried to bite his dick off.

Vic shoved Quinn out of the way. Then, after tugging his pants back up, he walked toward me, stomping with each step like a fairy tale giant.

His throat still had deep visible slashes, but he'd healed quite a bit, and they were no longer leaking blood. There were a couple of large red spots on his new shirt.

He pointed at me. “You are so goddamn dead.”

My mistake had been not seeing the blood before I slipped on it. His mistake, which was quite a bit worse, was pointing at me.

I sat up and swung the axe. In a perfect hit, it would have struck his shoulder and lopped his arm right off, like the Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Instead, it struck him a few inches below his shoulder, and though it sunk in deep, it didn't come close to chopping his arm off.

It clearly hurt, though.

I got up and swung again, aiming for the same spot. I missed by a lot, but I *did* hit him in the wrist. Though his hand didn't pop off, it dangled and sprayed blood.

Vic bellowed with pain and rage.

He shouldn't have told us to come back.

I swung the axe again. Vic blocked the swing with the hand that wasn't almost severed, and gritted his teeth as he tried to wrench the weapon out of my grip.

Quinn grabbed the hand that *was* almost severed and gave it a violent twist.

I didn't feel sorry for him, but I did wince. I couldn't imagine how much that had to hurt.

She gave it another twist and then *yanked*.

Vic's hand tore off.

He let go of the axe. I prepared for another swing.

Writing this now, I think it would've been delightfully amusing if she'd bitch-slapped Vic with his own severed hand. I didn't think about that in the moment, and of course Quinn did nothing of the sort.

I swung the axe at Vic's neck as hard as I could.

He dodged the swing. The axe blade sailed right over Quinn's head. Had her husband not been so much taller than her, I might have decapitated the wrong person.

“Corey, what the hell?” she shouted at me.

There was no time to apologize. I swung the axe again, this time in a downward arc, hoping to chop off Vic’s foot.

He grabbed the axe.

Then he held his spurting stump up to my face, getting blood in my eyes.

He pulled the axe out of my hands, then jabbed it at my chest like a sword, bashing the flat top into my solar plexus. I stumbled backwards, gasping for breath, until I struck the wall.

Okay. Now Vic had my axe. That was not ideal.

Fortunately, as far as I could tell, he hadn’t shattered my ribcage. And I currently still had both of my hands. So though things sucked shit right now, they could be a lot worse.

Quinn seemed to suddenly realize that she was holding her husband’s severed hand. She tossed it away. I wondered if it would grow back.

Vic raised the axe and ran toward me.

My instinct was to flee. But I resisted my instinct, because Vic could definitely outrun me, and that would lead to the unpleasant sensation of an axe blade sinking deep into my back. He expected me to run. So I’d charge right at him instead.

I should have let out some sort of animalistic battle cry, but my bravery only went so far.

Quinn tackled Vic at the same time that I ran toward him. If she *was* going to sell me out, she was doing a damn good job of maintaining the illusion that she was on my side. It was probably time to stop worrying about her being a traitor.

She grabbed his bad arm and dug her fingernails into his stump.

Vic let out a sound that cannot be phonetically translated. The closest description I can come up with is that it was kind of like a screech, but filtered through voice distortion software.

It hurt my ears, chilled my blood, and made me want to cry. It did—it made me want to cry. I can't explain it.

Oh, also, Vic's eyes glowed red again.

He dropped the axe.

Then he grabbed my arm. Squeezed it so tight that I thought his fingers might burst right through my flesh. The pain was intense.

But that was nothing compared to the next few seconds, when it felt as if my arm was pressed against a red-hot stove. Smoke rose from my shirt.

I let out a high-pitched shriek. I may have screamed "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" but I don't remember for sure. I tried in vain to tug my arm away from his burning grip.

The pain was so great that everything suddenly went black.

My vision snapped back when he released me, courtesy of Quinn jamming the sparkly-polished nail of her index finger right into Vic's glowing eye.

Twin streams of blood trickled down his cheek, looking like lava.

I crouched down and grabbed the axe. Vic kicked me in the face, hard enough that if his aim had been just a bit better, I'm certain that he would have snapped my neck. Instead, he stunned me for a moment, but I still had the axe.

I stood up.

Vic gave Quinn a shove that sent her flying. She slipped on the blood that had been there when we arrived, lost her balance, and hit the floor. Instead of landing on her tailbone the way I had, she landed flat on her back, striking her head really hard against the tile.

I clutched the handle of the axe with both hands and swung it at Vic.

Got him in his good arm, right at the elbow joint.

Apparently practice makes perfect. The axe sliced all the way through, and the bottom half of his arm came off,

accompanied by a generous spurt of blood.

I turned and threw up. I'm not sure why this particular gross-out was the one that sent me over the edge, but my stomach had had enough and sent its contents spewing onto the floor. I didn't let that distract me. I turned back to Vic without even wiping my mouth and swung the axe at his foot.

Another really good hit. His foot didn't come off all the way, but Vic fell.

So, in addition to the injuries he'd sustained during our first encounter, Vic was now missing an eye, his right hand, and half of his left arm, not to mention the axe wounds to his foot and shoulder. It didn't feel like he was going to be much of a threat anymore.

I dropped the axe and walked away, pleased with a job well done.

No, I'm kidding. I'd slashed this guy's Achilles tendons and he'd run away, so I had to make very sure he wouldn't be causing problems anytime soon.

It was time to go all Paul Bunyan on his ass.

I started with his arms, because those would be easier to chop off. He screamed a lot while I did it. I'm proud to report that I got his left arm off in one blow, and his right arm in two.

Though he twitched a lot, he wasn't screaming as much as I chopped off his legs. Those took several swings each. I threw up twice more during the process, turning away so that I wouldn't vomit right on him, a courtesy I couldn't quite explain.

The Fieldings' hallway wasn't exactly starting to look like the hallway in *The Shining*, but "river of blood" was a pretty good description.

Now Vic was just a torso. He was flopping around as much as was possible for somebody with no arms or legs. I'm not saying that dismembering him was *fun*, but it was certainly *satisfying*. In fact, the adrenaline rush was incredible, like I was the MVP of a sports team right after an important game. Let's say the Super Bowl.

“How do you like that, bitch?” I shouted at Vic. “Not so nice when it’s happening to you, is it? Now you know how those women felt! Fuck you, Vic! Fuck you!” This was not the way I would behave under normal circumstances, and I’m not proud of it now.

One final step remained. I raised the axe over his neck.

“No,” said Quinn. She was still on the floor, but she’d rolled over to face us.

“Why not?”

“You’ll sever his vocal cords.”

“So? It’ll make him shut up.”

Quinn slowly got up. She touched the back of her head and looked at the blood on her fingertips. “We need to question him. Find out if he already called the others.”

“He sure as hell won’t be calling them now,” I said. I leaned down toward Vic’s face. “Try making a call on your cell phone now, bitch!”

“Stop it,” said Quinn.

That was fair. Vic was the Toledo Trasher, but I was the one being an asshole right now. If he suddenly leaned up and bit off my nose, I’d deserve it. I stood back up.

Vic looked like...well, he looked like somebody who’d been violently dismembered. His facial expression was pure terror and agony. I hoped he was in his own private little hell on earth. But, yeah, I was going to stop taunting him.

“Are your arms and legs going to grow back?” I asked him.

Vic spat out some blood but didn’t respond.

“Are they?”

Vic slowly shook his head.

“Good. How were you able to run earlier?”

“Why is that important?” Quinn asked me.

“I want to know! I slashed up his tendons and he ran off. How did he do that shit?”

“He can heal a certain spot really quickly if he focuses all of his attention on it.”

“Why do we need his vocal cords if you have all the answers?”

“Step away,” said Quinn. “I’ll take over.”

I took a few steps away from Vic’s torso.

“Put down the axe,” Quinn told me. “You looked like you were getting into it too much.”

“I wasn’t enjoying it,” I insisted. “Didn’t you see me throw up three times? You don’t throw up when you’re getting off on something.”

“I didn’t say you were getting off on it. I said you were getting into it.”

“Well, I wasn’t. I did the job that we came here to do, and I did it very well, thank you very much.”

“Put down the axe.”

“Okay.” I set the axe on the floor.

“Vic, I’m going to need you to work with us,” said Quinn. “Corey has a close friend who works at a crematorium. If you don’t cooperate, we’re going to burn you to ashes.”

“Corey’s a liar,” said Vic.

“Let me say this again so it sinks in. If you don’t cooperate, we’re going to burn you to ashes. You may be hard to kill, but even you can’t survive a crematorium oven.”

“Those things go up to a thousand degrees,” I said. This was inaccurate. They actually go up to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. It didn’t matter.

“Throw me in the oven, then,” said Vic. “I don’t want to live like this.”

“Really?” asked Quinn. “You want to burn to death? You want to feel every molecule in your body catching fire?”

“I’ll get over it,” said Vic.

“Fine,” I said. “I was lying about having a friend who works at a crematorium. I don’t know anybody who’d just let me burn a living torso. Do you know what that means?”

Vic didn’t answer.

“It means that we’ll have to bury you. How does that sound, Vic? Being buried alive? How long will you last? Forever? Will you be in the cold, dark ground forever, in excruciating pain, unable to breathe, unable to even move? That sounds pretty damn awful to me. That’s your future. Or, you can work with us, and we’ll make your life as pleasant as possible, all things considered.”

“Lean down,” Vic told me.

“Why?”

“I want to tell you something.”

“No.”

“I want to whisper something in your ear.”

“Hard pass.”

“C’mon. You’ll like it.”

“Are you sure I can’t chop his head off?” I asked Quinn.

“No. But you can stack his arms and legs and hand against the wall. We’ve got a lot to clean up.”

She was right. Vic had mostly stopped bleeding, so the mess wasn’t getting worse, but we were really going to put a shop-vac through its paces.

“Don’t you want to know what I was going to say?” Vic asked.

“Were you going to tell me to go fuck myself?”

“Yes.”

There was a knock at the door.

Quinn and I looked at each other.



The knocking grew in intensity. “Hello?” somebody called out from outside.

“You get it,” I said. “You’ve got less blood on you.”

Quinn walked over to the front door. “Who is it?” she asked.

“My name’s Herschell.”

## CHAPTER TEN

“I don’t know anybody named Herschell,” said Quinn.

“Can you just open the door and talk to me for a minute?” asked the man. “It’s really important.”

“I’m dealing with an emergency right now.”

“I really don’t want to have to say this through a closed door. Just give me ten seconds of your time.”

“No.”

“Your husband was sleeping with my wife.”

“I know that,” said Quinn. “That’s the emergency I’m dealing with. I need you to go away. My husband and I have a lot to work out.”

“I’m worried about Darla. She was only supposed to be gone for an hour, and she’s not answering my calls.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not here to cause any problems, I swear to God. I’m not going to do anything. I just need to talk to him and find out if he knows where she might have gone.”

“I’m really sorry your wife is missing,” said Quinn, who, to her credit, did sound genuinely sorry. “But we can’t help you, and I’d like you to leave.”

“She had a ‘Find My Phone’ feature installed on her laptop. I know that her phone is in your house.”

Quinn squeezed her eyes shut and lowered her head, like this was one more complication she absolutely did not need. I glanced down at Vic, thinking he might be amused, but he still looked like he was feeling horror and misery.

“Yes,” said Quinn. “She forgot her phone here. Things were crazy. Wait there while I get it.”

She walked over to Vic. “Where’s her phone?” she whispered.

Vic didn’t have arms, but he had shoulders and was able to shrug.

“Tell me, or I’ll have Corey bash your teeth out.”

“I guess it’s in her pocket.”

“Why didn’t you smash it? This isn’t the first time you’ve made somebody disappear! What the hell is the matter with you, Vic?”

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“Where’s her body?”

Vic shrugged again.

“Corey, use the tip of the axe to shatter his front teeth.”

I picked up the axe. If she wasn’t bluffing, I was ready and willing to execute her command.

“She’s in the trunk of my car,” said Vic.

“Shit,” said Quinn.

“Maybe just ask him to close his eyes while you dig around in there. There are six garbage bags. I’m not sure which one her back pocket is in. Just shove your hands in the muck until you find it.”

“You’re an idiot,” said Quinn. “I don’t know how you’ve gone all this time without getting caught.”

“I didn’t have my wife betraying me.”

Herschell knocked at the door again. “Hello?”

“Do you want me to call out to him?” asked Vic. “Shout for help?”

“Try it and see how well that works out for you,” said Quinn. She walked over to the door. “I can’t find it. It’s in here somewhere, but I don’t know where, and we honestly don’t have time to look for a phone. I’ll use it to call you when we find it.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“We’re going through a lot of shit.”

“Listen to me,” said Herschell. “I’m not just going to drive away knowing that my wife didn’t come home, and her phone is in your house. You can let me in, or I can wait here until the police show up. Your choice.”

Quinn looked over at me. “Take out your gun.”

I pulled the Ruger out of the waistband of my jeans.

“Don’t shoot him unless you absolutely have to,” she said.

I nodded. I’d been on an adrenaline high, yet Vic objectively deserved the punishment he received—far worse, actually. I hoped he suffered a lot more before we finally disposed of his body. But Herschell didn’t deserve to have anything bad happen to him. He was worried about his wife. He was hurting. And we had no choice but to let him through the front door into a nightmare.

I wasn’t going to shoot him. I was going to do everything I could to try to resolve this matter without things turning to complete shit.

Quinn beckoned for me to get closer to the door.

She placed her hand on the doorknob.

Then, changing her mind, she let go of it and hurried over to Vic. “You damn well better play dead,” she told him. “One twitch and we’ll spend the next few hours taking you apart with fingernail clippers. Do you understand?”

“Sure.”

I couldn't decide if fingernail clippers were a sinister enough threat or not. It would hurt, obviously, and the basic concept was that it would take a really long time. But, I don't know, it's not the threat I would've personally gone with. Though I didn't contradict her in front of her dismembered husband.

Quinn returned to the door. "I'm letting you in," she said.

"Thank you," said Herschell. "I know I came at a bad time, but I'm really worried about her."

She turned to me and made her hand look like a gun, indicating that I should have the gun ready to point at poor Herschell as soon as she opened the door. I came up behind her.

She opened the door just a bit.

I pointed the gun over Quinn's shoulder at the man standing outside.

Herschell looked like a nice enough guy. Darla was a little out of his league, sure, but he had the bland good looks of the dude in a romantic comedy who's engaged to the heroine at the beginning and sheepishly takes the ring back at the end, because he knows she'd be better off with the more exciting hero. There was genuine worry on his face when the door swung open, though that was replaced with shock as he saw the gun.

"Don't scream," Quinn told him. "Don't make a sound. Close your eyes."

"I—I—I didn't—"

"I told you not to make a sound, and I told you to close your eyes. Don't make him shoot you."

Herschell closed his eyes.

Quinn opened the door all the way, grabbed Herschell's hand, and quickly pulled him inside. She closed the door behind him.

"Don't you dare open your eyes until I tell you," she said. "Not a peek, do you understand? Nod your head if you

understand.”

Herschell nodded.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” I assured him. “As long as you do exactly what we say, I promise nothing is going to happen.” Was I lying? I hoped I wasn’t lying.

“Please don’t kill me,” he said.

“I just told you we’re not going to hurt you,” I said. “We’re going to ask a small favor of you. That favor is to stay calm. Don’t scream. Just stay calm. Can you do that for me?”

Herschell nodded.

“When you open your eyes, you’re going to want to scream. But we need you not to scream. We need you to do everything you can not to—”

“We’re not going to have him open his eyes out here,” said Quinn, in a tone of voice that implied that I was the single dumbest human being currently walking the earth. She took Herschell by the arm. “Come with me,” she said. “Try not to slip.”

She led Herschell, who was quietly weeping, down the hallway and into a room. Was I supposed to follow? I wasn’t sure. I decided to follow.

Okay, yes, to give all due credit to Quinn, it was much smarter to take Herschell into another room instead of having him open his eyes in the gore-drenched hallway. I never claimed to be a mastermind about these things. My plan to assassinate Vic—which I maintain would’ve gone fine if he hadn’t been immortal—was the work of careful planning. I wasn’t good at the spur-of-the-moment stuff.

I walked into the bedroom, which was a lot...*pinkier* than I would’ve expected Vic to tolerate. The feminine touch was all over this room. Quinn sat Herschell down on the bed.

“You can open your eyes,” Quinn told him.

Herschell kept his eyes closed, as if when he opened them he’d be greeted by the sight of some unimaginable horror.

“Open them,” Quinn said.

Herschell very slowly opened his eyes. He let out a sigh of relief at the realization that he was in a very normal, but very pink, bedroom.

“I won’t say anything,” he insisted. “I don’t know anything.”

Quinn shook her head. “Don’t. Don’t do that. We both know that you’ll say something.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Of course you will. I would.”

“What happened to Darla?”

“I don’t know,” said Quinn. “I caught them in the act, and she ran off. I was nice enough to let her put her clothes back on instead of making her run outside butt-naked, but I guess she left her phone behind. And I’ll be completely honest with you: I don’t particularly care where that whore went. You get it, right?”

“Yes,” said Herschell.

“As you might expect, things between my husband and I got very tense. And that’s what you interrupted. If you’d left when I very politely asked you to, you wouldn’t be sitting here now, but you refused to leave, so now you’re a problem that we have to deal with.”

“Please don’t kill me.”

“You already asked. We’re going to try to avoid that.”

“I don’t care about you. I don’t care about what you might have done to your husband. I knew Darla was cheating on me. I’ve known it for a long time. This would’ve been the first place I looked even if I didn’t know that her phone was here. But that doesn’t mean I don’t still love her. It doesn’t mean I’m not worried sick. All I want is to go find her and bring her back home. None of what’s happening here matters to me.”

“You sound like you believe that,” said Quinn.

“I do.”

“What if I said that I got so mad that I smashed a lamp over Vic’s head?”

“He deserved it.”

“What if I said that he’s bleeding in the hallway right now, and I don’t feel like calling an ambulance?”

“How bad is he hurt?”

“Bad. He needs stitches. He’s losing a lot of blood. But I don’t give a shit.”

“Is he going to die?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m a doctor,” said Herschell. “I could take a look at him.”

“You’re a doctor?” I asked. Quinn glared at me.

“Yeah. A pediatrician, so it’s not like I’m stitching up head wounds all day, but I could tell you how serious it is. No judgment. You do whatever you want with the information. But I’d let you know if he needs to go to the emergency room or if he’ll...you know...”

“I know...?”

“Die.”

“He’s not going to die. I didn’t hit him that hard.”

“You said you broke a lamp over his head,” said Herschell. “It could be bad. Or it might not. I’m just saying that I could ease your mind, and say, ‘Yes, he’s going to be okay.’ I’m sure you want to teach him a lesson, but you don’t want to kill him.”

“I appreciate the offer,” said Quinn. “We’ve got things under control.”

Herschell gave her a nervous smile. “Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

“Why are you so worried about her anyway?” Quinn asked. “How long has she been gone?”



“Not very long. She works from home doing customer service. Every Monday morning your husband picks her up and drops her off about an hour later. A neighbor saw it the first time. They were all over each other. After that, I set up a camera. It’s been going on for months. I just...I just let it happen.”

“It would’ve been nice if you’d done something,” said Quinn. “I had no idea.”

“She was happier. I don’t know what to say. But she always came home around the same time, so when she didn’t, I texted her. Then I called. Then I came over here.”

“And then we shoved a gun in your face.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be honest with you. I don’t know how we can fix this. As soon as you’re safe, you’ll call 911.”

“I won’t. All I care about is Darla.”

“The police will want to know where you think she is. They’ll trace her phone. And then they’ll show up here.”

“Then let’s sort things out with your husband. Get him bandaged up. Get everybody’s story straight.”

Quinn just stared at Herschell for a moment. I was glad that I had the gun, because I felt like she might have gone ahead and shot him in the face.

“Can I talk to you in private?” I asked her.

“Sure.”

I pointed the gun at Herschell. “Stay here. Don’t leave this room. If I so much as see you try to peek out, I’ll shoot you. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And hand over your cell phone.”

Herschell gave it to me without protest.

Quinn and I stepped out of the bedroom. I didn’t close the door, because I didn’t want Herschell to think that he had

enough privacy to grab a makeshift weapon or set a trap. I kept a close eye on the doorway as we walked over to Vic.

“We have to kill him,” said Quinn.

“No, we don’t.”

“Do you trust him? You think he’ll really just waltz out of here and not tell anybody?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean we have to kill him. We can, I don’t know, take him hostage or something.”

“I don’t want to deal with a hostage.”

“I don’t either,” I said. “We still shouldn’t jump right to committing cold-blooded murder.”

“This wouldn’t be cold-blooded murder. We’re trying to protect ourselves.”

“It still counts as cold-blooded.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Quinn insisted. “It doesn’t fit the definition.”

I almost started to look up the definition of cold-blooded murder on Herschell’s cell phone, but sanity prevailed. “It doesn’t matter. All I’m saying is that we can’t decide we’re going to murder him before we’ve brainstormed other options.”

“And what I’m saying is that we don’t have time to just stand here and discuss it.”

“You should definitely kill him,” Vic said.

I told Vic to shut the fuck up.

“We’re rushing too quickly to the idea that we have no choice,” I said to Quinn. “Maybe you’re desensitized because of all the murders you’ve been part of, but I’d like to figure out a better way to handle this.”

“That’s not fair,” said Quinn.

“You told him about us?” asked Vic.

“It is fair,” I told Quinn, ignoring Vic. “Ten women were slaughtered, and you were there. I know that you were forced

to do it, but when you're taking bites out of corpses, you're probably more inclined to think that murder is the way to solve a problem."

"You're an asshole."

"No. I'm the one trying to keep Herschell alive. The person who is pushing for his death is the asshole."

"You're lucky you have the gun," Quinn told me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Was that a threat?"

"I said, it didn't mean anything."

It was looking less and less likely that Quinn and I would emerge from this as boyfriend and girlfriend. I decided to ignore her threat for now.

"This is a democracy," I said. "We'll make sure we both agree on a plan of action. I'm not refusing to kill him. I'm just refusing to commit to that before we're sure there's no other way."

"All right."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I said, all right."

"We should get back to the bedroom. We don't know what he's doing in there."

Quinn frowned. "Aw, *shit*."

"What's wrong?"

She pointed behind me. I turned around. Through the window at the top of the front door, I could see red and blue flashing lights.

I hurried over to the door, hoping that the flashing lights had nothing to do with us. Perhaps the cops were merely driving by, or maybe a neighbor had just turned on their Christmas lights, even though it was the middle of March.

As I peeked through the window, I saw a pair of police officers walking toward Quinn's front door.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I backed away from the door.

“What do you think they want?” Quinn asked.

“Well, Vic screamed a lot while I was chopping him up. They could also be responding to the gunshots from before.”

There was a loud knock on the door.

“Let’s just ignore them,” Quinn whispered. “Pretend we’re not home.”

“There are two cars in the driveway.”

“Do you think they’ll break down the door?”

“They might.”

“This is the police,” said a man on the other side of the door. “Open up immediately.”

“One of us needs to do it,” I said.

“It’s my house. I’ll do it. You watch Herschell.”

I nodded and hurried back into the bedroom. Herschell, appropriately for a guy who hadn’t bothered to mention to his wife that he knew she was having an affair, was still sitting on the bed and did not appear to have made any effort to improve his situation.

“Show me your hands,” I whispered.

He held up his open hands, palms out.

“Thanks.”

I heard the front door open and then close again.

“Is that the police?” Herschell asked, keeping his voice low.

“Yeah.”

“Do you think she’ll be able to send them away?”

“I hope so.”

“What if she can’t?”

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“Is her husband already dead?”

“No.”

“You were right. She wanted to kill me pretty quick.”

“Well, we weren’t happy when you showed up,” I said. “Things were bad enough already.”

“I get that. But she’s insane. You can see it in her eyes.”

“She’s not insane. She’s desperate. We both are.”

“That’s not how I see it,” said Herschell. “When I look at you, I see a reasonable person trying to figure out an impossible situation. When I look at her, I see a crazy lady. By the way, who exactly are you?”

“What?”

“Who are you? Why are you here? Are you her boyfriend?”

“No. I’m just a friend.”

“Friend with benefits?”

“None of your business.”

“I’m just trying to put the pieces together. Trying to help. Do you think she’s going to be able to make the cops go away?”

“I already said that I don’t know.”

“What does your gut tell you?”

“It’s not telling me anything,” I said. “I don’t have a lot of experience with cops showing up at my place.”

“Neither do I. But they’re going to want to come inside and take a look.”

“Then they’ll need a search warrant.”

“Will they?” Herschell asked, raising an eyebrow.

Would they? If a neighbor had reported somebody screaming bloody murder, wouldn’t the cops have probable cause to come inside to investigate? Shit.

Herschell seemed to notice the doubt on my face. “What happens if the cops walk through that door?”

“Nothing good.”

“What are they going to see?”

“A mess.”

“A mess that she can explain to their satisfaction?”

“Stop talking,” I said.

“I asked you a question. Will the cops see a mess that she can explain to their satisfaction?”

I pointed the gun at his face. “I told you to stop talking.”

“Are you going to shoot me with the police right outside?”

Of course I wasn’t. But I wouldn’t have expected this cuckold to call me out on it.

“Here’s my concern,” said Herschell. “My concern is that she’s going to have no choice but to let the cops inside, and they’re going to see something really bad. And then she’s going to want you to kill the cops.”

“I’m not going to kill anybody.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“She can’t make me do anything.”

“Of course not. I’m sure you haven’t done anything today that you didn’t intend to do.”

“What the hell are you?” I asked. “Some kind of mind reader?”

Herschell shook his head. “I’m observant. She says she’s the one who smashed a lamp over her husband’s head, but when those cops come through the front door, it’s going to be very much *your* problem.”

“Well, thank you for that observation. That’s very helpful.”

“At my job, I tell my employees that they can’t complain about something unless they also propose a solution. Here’s my solution: This place has a back door, right? Let’s leave. Let’s go now. Sneak out the back so that we’re not here when things go sideways, which is going to happen any second.”

Just to be clear, my masculinity wasn’t threatened by this little speech. Quinn couldn’t make me shoot a couple of cops. But Herschell made a very good point. If she wasn’t able to stop the police from taking a look inside the house, it would be much better for me to be someplace else.

It would be a total dick move.

Still, at some point self-preservation had to kick in.

“Let’s go,” I told him.

Herschell and I emerged from the bedroom. He glanced over in the exact wrong direction—I’d stupidly failed to order him to look only to the right—and slapped his hand over his mouth.

I could hear raised voices on the other side of the front door.

“Go,” I told Herschell, prodding him with the barrel of the gun. “Into the kitchen.”

We quickly but quietly went through the kitchen. Herschell opened the door to the garage. I felt like a piece of absolute crap abandoning Quinn like this, but she was the one who let her husband commit all of those murders. I had nothing to feel guilty about, right? Right?

We walked into the garage and hurried over to the back door.



“Damn it,” said Herschell, looking at the door to the kitchen.

“What?”

“I think the front door just opened.”

I looked back. Suddenly something bashed into my head. My legs buckled beneath me, and I fell. Herschell dropped the toolbox he’d struck me with. He made a quick grab for my gun, but I managed to keep it away from him despite my blurred vision and inability to quite process what had just happened. Then, presumably guessing (correctly) that I wasn’t actually going to shoot him, he ran out the back door, closing it behind him.

“Help!” he shouted. “Somebody help me! Police!”

I reached up for the edge of the wooden table and pulled myself up. My legs buckled again. So I couldn’t run, and the cops now knew somebody was fleeing through the backyard.

I shoved the gun back into my inside jacket pocket, then I staggered back into the kitchen.

My best bet now was to go with full honesty. Yes, I’d chopped a man’s arms and legs off, but he was the Toledo Trasher. And he was still alive, despite losing so much blood. As long as he didn’t pull a Michigan J. Frog routine and pretend to be dead, maybe Quinn and I could distract the authorities with the miracle of the psychopath who couldn’t be killed.

I walked into the hallway, bracing myself against the wall.

The front door burst open.

The two cops both had their guns drawn. Both of their faces registered immediate horror at the gruesome sight that greeted them, but unfortunately they didn’t scream, drop their guns, and run away.

They didn’t take the opportunity to politely introduce themselves. However, instead of calling them Cop #1 and Cop #2, I’m going to pretend I already knew their names, and call them Officer Penner and Officer Tichy.

“Show me your hands!” Penter shouted at me. He was a big guy—not as big as Vic, but close—with a lustrous mane of red hair that you didn’t often see in law enforcement.

I held up my hands to show that I wasn’t carrying a weapon.

“Put your hands on your head! Now!”

I did exactly what I was told as Tichy entered the hallway. He had the look of somebody who hated his job even when it didn’t involve entering a house of horrors.

“On your knees!” Penter told me.

I got down on my knees.

“Is that him?” Tichy asked Quinn, gesturing to me.

She nodded.

“Hands behind you!” Penter shouted at me.

I removed my hands from my head and held them behind me. Penter wrapped one of those plastic zip-ties around them, pulling them so tight that I winced.

Tichy entered the hallway. He kept his gun raised as he walked past Vic’s torso. Credit where it was due—he did a remarkable job of focusing on the task to be done instead of the dismembered body and the neatly stacked pile of arms and legs.

“If anybody else is in the house, come out now!” he called out, as he continued walking down the hallway.

“I wasn’t—” I started to say.

“You shut up!” Penter told me. “Don’t say a word!”

He kept the gun pointed at me. Quinn, still standing on the front porch, looked like she wanted to make a run for it, but she also looked like she knew that would be a really stupid idea.

Penter touched a button on an earpiece he was wearing. “Suspect has been restrained. Where’s that backup?” he demanded.

I stayed as motionless as possible for about a minute. Tichy walked past me again. "It's clear," he told his partner.

"On your feet," Penter told me. "Now!"

I stood up. Penter, not being gentle, slammed his hand against the back of my neck and led me toward the front door.

He walked me past Quinn, who avoided eye contact.

Another police car, lights flashing, turned onto the street, followed immediately by a second one. They both pulled up in front of Quinn's house.

*"Help me..."*

Penter frowned. "Who said that?"

*"Help me, please..."*

Penter and I both turned around. Vic's good eye was wide open.

*"Don't let me die..."*

"Oh my God, he's alive!" Penter shoved me back down to the floor, then hurried over to Vic. "How is this even possible?"

The doors opened on the newly arrived police cars, and four new cops got out. Again, I didn't know their names at the time, but they were Green, Highley, Dalton, and Rudd.

I could make a run for it, but I'd be lucky to make it off the front porch.

"What the *fuck*?" Penter shouted.

I looked back again. Vic's eyes were glowing. The eye that Quinn had punctured with her fingernail wasn't glowing as brightly, but both of them were glowing red.

*"Get out of here,"* Vic snarled, his voice taking on that demonic quality again. *"Leave my home or I'll take you with me straight to Hell."*

Penter frantically pointed his gun at Vic. He turned to Tichy. "Did you see that?"

Tichy nodded. "Is this a joke? Is this a publicity stunt for a haunted house or something?"

*"I told you to leave my home!"*

I glanced back at the other four cops, who had their guns drawn and were rapidly approaching the house. Dalton and Rudd split off and went around each side, while Green and Highley ran up onto the porch.

"They're in there!" Quinn called out to them, motioning to the front door.

I decided that the best thing I could do for myself right now was to simply let everything play out.

Penter knelt down in front of Vic, looking at him very carefully.

Okay, maybe I wouldn't just let things play out.

"Don't get too close," I told Penter. "He's a demon."

"You shut up!" Penter said.

"Take a look at this burn on my arm." My arms were bound behind my back, and Penter couldn't see them, but I'd turn around upon request. "He did that. I don't know exactly what he's capable of, but I know you don't want to get too close."

Penter looked at me, looked at Vic, and then scooted away from the torso.

Vic grinned. *"I guess none of you care about your souls. Satan is going to have a delicious feast when you greet him."*

"Seriously, what the hell is that thing?" asked Highley. He had a scar on his chin that was exactly where Harrison Ford had one, making me wonder if it was coincidence or self-inflicted.

"Everybody calm down!" Penter shouted. He pointed to me. "Somebody get him out of here. Put him in the back of a car. The woman, too."

I was happy with that idea. I'd much rather be in the back of a police car, on my way to the station for questioning, than

in this house right now.

*“They stay,”* said Vic. *“Both of them.”*

“Throw a blanket or something over that thing,” said Penter. “We’ll get this sorted out.”

“He said it was a demon,” said Highley.

“It’s not a demon. This is somebody pulling a prank. And it’s not going to be so funny when they go to prison for it. Did I or did I not ask for a blanket?”

Green gave me a shove toward the door. I obligingly walked out of the house.

“You too,” Green told Quinn. “Don’t make me restrain you. Walk in front of us.”

Quinn walked off the front porch. Green and I followed.

“The one on the right,” he said. We walked over to the police car, which still had its lights flashing.

Behind the house, a man screamed.

Everybody turned to look. Highley, who was still on the porch, asked, “Was that Dalton?”

The man screamed again. It was a scream that conveyed an incredible amount of pain—until it was abruptly cut off.

Rudd, the other cop who’d run around the side of the house, reappeared. He staggered across the lawn, no longer wearing his jacket, his uniform drenched with blood. Both of his ears were missing, like they’d been torn off, not neatly severed. He pitched forward, landing face-first on the grass. Most of the back of his shirt had been torn away. Much of his spinal column was visible.

I desperately wanted to be in the back seat of a nice safe police car right about now.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Officer Highley ran off the porch and hurried over to his fallen partner. He shouted into his mic: “Officer down! I repeat, officer down! At least one, possibly two!” Penter emerged from the house a moment later.

Instead of opening the back door to the police car and shoving Quinn and I inside, which was our desired course of action right now, Green pointed his gun at Highley. No, wait, not at Highley—past him.

A man was walking through Quinn’s side yard. Strolling, actually, as if he didn’t have a care in the world. He wore a dark blue jumpsuit with bloodstains on the front. He also wore a plastic devil mask with a bright red face, mustache and goatee, horns, and a menacing grin.

He carried a sickle with a wooden handle. The blade was red, with scraps of flesh dangling from it.

“Put down your weapon!” Green shouted.

The man stopped walking but did not drop his sickle.

Green moved away from us, toward the man. “Drop it now!”

“It’s okay,” said the man. “It’s all good. I’m not here to hurt anybody.”

“I told you to drop your weapon!” Green shouted.

The man resumed walking forward. “No need for the guns. We’re all friends here.”

Highley stood up and also pointed his gun at the man. “This is *not* a joke! We will take you down!”

“Why act like that?” asked the man. “We’re all trying to have a good time here. Just take a deep breath and chill out. Think of your blood pressure.”

“You’ve been warned!” Green shouted. “This is your last chance!”

“You can’t shoot me,” said the man. “I’m a taxpayer.”

He kept walking. Highley shot him in the chest.

Despite what Quinn and I had experienced today, we both flinched, and Quinn let out a sharp scream.

The man cried out in pain. “Dammit! Do you know how bad that hurts? Would you like to get shot sometime and see how it feels? Son of a bitch!” He touched the wound. “The bullet’s lodged in there. I’m gonna have to dig it out with a frickin’ pair of salad tongs.”

“Down on your knees!” Highley shouted.

“Screw that. No judgment if that’s what you’re into, but you won’t be getting any of that from me.”

He stumbled a bit, then resumed walking toward Highley.

“Hey!” a woman called out. She was fashionably dressed in a black leather jacket. She also wore a devil mask, although this was an over-the-head rubber mask instead of a cheap plastic one. She held a pitchfork. Surprisingly, it did not have a severed head skewered on it.

Highley was distracted for a moment. Only a moment, but the man raised his sickle and ran at him.

Highley shot him in the leg. The man cried out and fell to the ground.

The woman looked over at her fallen comrade. Though her face was completely covered, I got the sense from the way she moved her head that she was rolling her eyes.

She walked over to him and nudged him with her foot.

“You!” Highley shouted at her. “On the ground!”

The woman kicked the fallen guy gently and said something to him that I couldn't hear. She reached down. The man nodded, took her hand, and let her help him up.

“I don't know what the hell is wrong with you, but you have been warned!” Highley adjusted his aim a bit, so I assume he was pointing his gun at the woman now. “We will use lethal force! I am *not*—”

Highley stopped shouting as a few more people stepped out from behind the house. All of them were wearing devil masks. They were all different, as if they'd followed instructions that said “wear a devil mask” without a purchase link to the specific item. The quality of masks ranged from a shitty one that looked like a drawing on a paper plate, to a Hollywood-level one that could've been Satan himself for all I knew.

Each of them held a weapon. I could see a machete, a spiked mace, an aluminum baseball bat, a meat cleaver, and a couple of very long knives.

Highley glanced back at Green and Penter, as if to check to see what his fellow cops thought he should do.

The demons' eyes all began to glow red.

Again, this would've had more impact at night, but I assure you, it scared the absolute living shit out of me in broad daylight.

They all ran forward.

The three cops opened fire. Highley's next two shots hit their mark, but his aim faltered as the first man slashed the sickle across his face. The screaming cop fell to the ground, and four of the demons pounced upon him, hacking and bashing him with their weapons as he tried to fight back.

I know they weren't technically demons, but I'm using that term instead of “humans who were sort-of possessed by demons.”



Green quickly backed away as he fired over and over. He brought down two of the demons, and ruined one of the cheap plastic masks, before one of them flung a meat cleaver at him. It struck him in the face, blade-first. This in itself wasn't fatal—it was a ghastly, deep cut, but he would've been fine with a few stitches—but having a meat cleaver protruding from his face kept him from aiming the gun properly. His next few shots missed entirely. Then a machete blade went straight through his throat.

He fell. Unlike Vic, I didn't think he'd recover.

I prayed that the back door to the police car would be unlocked. I turned around and pulled on the handle with my bound hands. It was indeed unlocked. I threw open the door, and, even though she'd tried to sell me out to the cops, I ushered Quinn inside before hurriedly scooting in next to her. She leaned across me and pulled the door shut.

“Turn around,” she told me. “Give me your hands.”

I did, and after a few moments of sawing she cut the zip-tie handcuffs away. She snapped closed the blade of the pocketknife she'd been carrying. Not every tool had to be effective at dismembering demons to come in handy.

The demons had almost reached him, but Penter fired until his gun was empty. Then he rushed over to the car, kicked a female demon out of the way with an impressive bit of foot action, and opened the driver's door. He got inside and pulled the door closed, smashing the fingers of a demon who let out a howl of pain.

I looked over at the house. There were now at least a dozen demons on Quinn's lawn, and that was if you only counted the standing ones. A few were on the ground, having been taken down by bullets, yet they were all moving.

I had plenty of questions, but they could wait.

The demon with the baseball bat was standing right next to the police car. He smashed the bat upon the front windshield. He didn't shatter it on his first try, or even his second, but on

the third attempt the entire windshield crashed onto the dashboard.

Penter pointed his gun at him and pulled the trigger. The gun, which he'd already known was empty, clicked and clicked as he continued to fruitlessly try to shoot. Complete panic had set in.

The demon climbed onto the front hood. He swung the bat, knocking the gun out of Penter's hand and—from the sound of it—shattering a few bones in the process. He adjusted his grip on the bat, this time using it like a javelin to bash Penter in the face. Then he crouched down, reached inside, and unlocked the door.

A couple of other demons opened the door and pulled Penter out. Though I couldn't see what happened next, I could *hear* it, and it was awful.

Sometimes, in extreme situations, you find yourself saying incredibly stupid things. I could've left this out of the narrative, but no, I will confess that as Quinn and I sat in the back seat of the police car, the question that emerged from my lips was: "Are these the other demons?"

And, to show just how terrified Quinn was, her answer, without a trace of sarcasm, was: "Yes, they are."

One of the demons knocked on our window, then waved to me with a severed hand. More and more of them gathered around the vehicle.

"I wasn't expecting them all at once," I said. I spoke softly, even though nobody outside seemed particularly interested in our conversation.

"It's a portal," said Quinn.

"Right. I just...I guess I thought they'd be driving separately, and that we'd be dealing with them one or two at a time. I didn't realize it would be the whole cult."

"Sorry. I should've explained better. I didn't think you assumed they'd be road tripping."

“My fault. It seemed reasonable at the time, but now it does seem kind of silly.” This would’ve been a good time to crawl into the front seat, start the engine, and try to speed off. Unfortunately, we were in a police car, which is not designed to allow its back-seat criminal passengers to crawl up there with their arresting officers.

“It’s okay.”

There were at least ten demons surrounding the car now. They began to shake it. A couple of them were whooping and hollering like frat boys.

“I’m not sure what’s happening to me,” I said. “I feel weirdly calm. I don’t know if it’s because I *am* weirdly calm, or if it’s because I’m scared to the point of being numb.”

“You’re definitely numb.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“We have an advantage over the cops,” said Quinn. “The demons want us to die a slow, torturous death.”

“That doesn’t really sound like an advantage, but do continue.”

“They don’t care about the cops. Don’t get me wrong, they enjoyed slaughtering them, but they were just in the way. They aren’t going to kill us. Not yet. So we might be able to make a run for it.”

“You don’t think they’ll, like, slash our legs open with a meat cleaver?”

“They might.”

“Then I’m not sure getting out of the car and trying to outrun them is such a great plan. I mean, it beats my current plan, which is to sit here and die, but I’d like to believe we can come up with something better.”

“Do you still have your gun?” Quinn asked.

I reached into my inside jacket pocket. “Yeah. Since they can’t be killed, it’s not super helpful, though.”

“They can be hurt. And we’ll have a distraction soon.”

“What kind of distraction?”

“Don’t you hear the sirens?”

She was right! Sirens were approaching. I hadn’t heard them over the sounds of the devil-masked demons rocking the vehicle.

“Wait for our chance,” Quinn said. “Run for the house.”

“Why the hell would we go back to the house?”

“Our only way out of this is to persuade Vic to call off the holy mission.”

I couldn’t think of any conceivable reason that Vic would be willing to tell his demon buddies to leave us alone. But that was a problem for later. For now, the demons did seem to be trying to scare us more than actually kill us, so I supposed that their plan of subjecting us to endless torment did have a plus side.

Two more police cars pulled onto the street.

I suddenly had a major crisis of conscience. There were probably four new cops about to arrive, and all four of them were likely to die. This was all my fault. My attempt to rid the world of the Toledo Trasher had ended the lives of Darla and five police officers already.

But what could I do? I was helpless. I couldn’t call dispatch and say, “Hey, you’ll want to ignore their requests for backup, because it’s going to be total carnage.” If I got out of the car and waved the other cops away, they weren’t going to take my suggestion.

They were going to die because of me.

I wasn’t a piece of shit. I mean, yeah, I’d behaved like a piece of shit when I decided to flee with Herschell. But in the overall scope of my experience as a human being, I hadn’t set a precedent of being the kind of scumbag who would celebrate the arrival of a few cops who were about to unknowingly sacrifice themselves to give me a better chance out of this mess.

Still...what could I do?

“I have an idea,” said Quinn.

“I have one, too. I’m going to use mine.” If we’d had, say, fifteen extra seconds, I’d have listened to Quinn’s idea and decided which one was better. Since we didn’t, I was going to go with my own idea, which I thought was fairly decent considering how deeply screwed we were.

I waited for the police cars to pull up to the house, or at least as close as they could get with all the other cars parked nearby.

The demons stopped shaking the car and turned their attention to new prey.

Four new cops got out of their cars and immediately drew their guns. These cops wouldn’t have known that it was essentially a riot at this point, and I assumed they didn’t conveniently have a cannister of tear gas in their car. Or maybe they did. I was no expert on what police kept in their car. It would be awesome if they did.

Hell, maybe there was tear gas in this car! Not that it would be in the back seat within reach of criminals.

“Everybody on the ground!” one of the cops shouted. “Now!”

None of the demons obeyed.

Now it was time for my effort to save the lives of these police officers. It wasn’t much of an effort, but I had to do *something* to keep them from underestimating the danger they were in.

“Bomb!” I shouted. “They have a bomb! Stay away!”

My plan was to take this moment to fling the door open as hard as I could, bashing it into at least one of the demons, and giving me that ever-useful element of surprise. But, because I was stressed the hell out and not thinking clearly, I reached for a door handle that wasn’t there. I had literally just thought about how a cop car wouldn’t have tear gas in the back seat where the passengers could get at it, but I neglected to consider that I wouldn’t be able to open the door myself. Again, in my own defense, my stress level was off the charts.

Though I wasn't sure how seriously the cops were taking me, at least they weren't approaching the crowd.

One of the demons peered at me through the window. His sadistic smile was painted on the mask, but it still felt like he was smiling at me.

He threw open the door.

This demon was holding a knife. He wasn't the demon that I wanted to go after first, but I had to make the best of it, so I shot him in the head.

He stumbled against another demon, which *was* the one I wanted to go after first. I scrambled out of the car and shot that demon in the head as well.

Neither of them even fell down, but all I wanted was for the demon to react poorly enough to getting shot through the skull to lessen his grip on the machete he was holding. The baseball bat also would've worked, but the machete demon was closer.

The cops didn't know that these people in devil masks were, in fact, supernatural creatures. So to them, I had just shot a pair of people who were celebrating Halloween in March. My hope was that the cops would take note of the fact that both of these mask-wearing individuals had taken bullets to the head at close range and remained standing.

"You prick!" the one with the machete shouted at me, further conveying to witnesses that something not-of-this-world was going on.

I shot him point-blank in the middle of the face. Blood sprayed from a hole in his mask, underneath which I hoped his nose was completely obliterated. He shouted something else at me, but it was unintelligible, and did sound very much like somebody might sound if their nose was bloody pulp.

I grabbed the machete out of his hand.

I had to grab it by the blade, which hurt, but then I spun it around and took it by the handle. I swung it at the nearest demon, slamming the blade into her shoulder. It didn't chop her arm off, but there was blood.

I could feel blood trickling down my wrist. Damn. I'd cut my palm. Oh well. Considering that I was going to try to fight my way through a horde of demons while also trying not to get shot by the police, if I died in the next minute or so, it wasn't going to be the result of a cut on my hand.

"Vic's car. You both have keys to that, right?" I asked.

"No."

Of course not. But they were inside, either conveniently on a key ring or inconveniently in Vic's bloody pocket.

His car had Darla's dead body in the trunk, but that was a problem for later. The current problem was that Vic's car was boxed into the driveway by the police cars. I could probably do a hard right swerve and speed across her front lawn, maybe running over a few demons in the process. On the other hand, I didn't know how these portals worked, and perhaps we'd speed off, only to have the demons materialize on the front hood.

I liked the "steal Vic's car idea," but still, Quinn knew what was going on better than I did. So after we got back into the house, we'd first see if we could make Vic listen to reason.

I swung the machete at the nearest demon, ready to battle my way to the front porch.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I really hoped that the four new cops didn't shoot me. From an objective standpoint, if you were trying to determine who the bad guys were, you'd go with the people wearing devil masks. Yet, I was the one who'd shot a couple of them, and I was about to start slashing my way through the crowd with a machete, so I had to make peace with the idea that I might take a bullet any second.

Quinn got out of the car and stood behind me.

We weren't quite surrounded, because several of the demons had turned their focus to the cops. The cops were yelling the same stuff we'd been hearing about dropping our weapons and getting down on the ground, or they'd shoot. Nobody listened.

Then one of the demons, the one closest to the cops, did drop to his knees. After that, he leaned forward, lying flat on the sidewalk. I assumed that he simply didn't feel like getting shot...until he started doing push-ups. The asshole was just trying to be funny.

I slashed the machete back and forth as if I was trying to clear a path through the jungle. Quite a bit of blood sprayed, but no limbs or heads fell onto the lawn.

"Cut off his arm!" Quinn told me, pointing to the demon who'd smashed the front windshield. He stepped on Penter's body, which made a wet squishy sound as his foot sank into the dead cop's mangled chest.



I swung the machete at him, aiming for his elbow. Direct hit. I lopped the lower half of the demon's arm off, and he threw his head back and bellowed in pain.

“His other arm!” Quinn said. “The one with the bat!”

Oh. She wanted his bat. Duh.

The demon was so busy reacting to his spurting stump that he didn't make any real effort to dodge my next swing. I hit his other arm at the elbow—I was getting good at this—and both his arm and the aluminum baseball bat fell onto the grass.

Quinn picked up the bat. She didn't thank me, but to be fair, there wasn't really time for manners.

Gunshots. The cops, realizing that the devil-masked maniacs had no intention of getting on the ground as requested, had opened fire. They were, for now, firing warning shots into the air, but that wouldn't last.

I swung the machete at a demon whose cheap plastic mask was the comic character Hot Stuff the Little Devil. I was trying to cut his head off, but he ducked, and my blade sailed harmlessly over his head. I swung it back, and this time it connected. It got him on the side of the head, and it wasn't a very good hit. All it really did was sever the string that held the mask in place. The mask fell away.

Underneath, his face was a blur.

Or, maybe not quite a blur. More like it was *shifting*. The glowing eyes remained in place, but his other facial features were moving. Changing.

“Ignore that!” Quinn shouted.

I very much wanted to take her advice, but it was difficult to completely tune out the fact that this guy's face looked like it was melting and reforming every split-second.

Instead of making another attempt to chop his head off, I shoved him out of the way and ran.

I didn't get far. Not even three steps. That's when the woman in the black jacket thrust her pitchfork at me. She was

aiming for my leg, but I managed to block it with the machete, like we were sword fighting.

Somebody tackled me from behind.

We both landed on the grass. It knocked the wind out of me, and I rolled onto my back, gasping for breath. The demon who'd tackled me rolled onto his side, groaning with pain. He'd landed on the machete, and it cut deep into his belly.

Even though I couldn't draw a breath, there was enough fight in me to punch him in the jaw. I'd used my injured hand, so flecks of blood sprayed all over my face.

The woman raised her pitchfork, ready to slam it down upon me. Again, she was aiming for my legs, because she didn't want to rob me of my eternal torment. I moved, but, most likely, at least one of the metal tines would have skewered my flesh; fortunately, Quinn whacked the pitchfork out of the way with the bat before it could puncture me.

Another gunshot. One of the demons shouted "Shit!" The cops were no longer firing warning shots.

Quinn smacked the bat into the woman's head. Her head flopped to the side, her neck broken. She made a grotesque choking sound and began to flail out with the pitchfork. She lunged with it once. Missed. Twice. Missed. The third time slammed the tines deep into the side of an overweight demon with a mask that was decorated with silver glitter.

I forced myself to get up.

More gunshots rang out. More demons cursed.

One of the demons, presumably from a much warmer state than Ohio, wasn't wearing a shirt. This may have been to show off his impressively muscular chest. I swung the machete diagonally, slashing him from his left nipple to the right side of his waist, creating a big red line. He cried out in rage. I think he was more upset about the aesthetic damage to his six-pack than the pain.

Somebody let out a high-pitched shriek. It was one of the cops, who may or may not have used up all his ammunition before the demons reached him. Either way, he would not be

firing that gun anymore. He took a spiked mace to the face and then dropped out of view.

Another cop screamed as well.

I heard a car door open, which may have been one of the other cops getting the hell back into his vehicle, but I didn't look over to see. I may also have heard wrong—there was a lot of noise out here.

I stabbed a demon in the chest, and with that I'd mostly cleared out the fuckers who were in my immediate path. Quinn and I rushed for her front porch. I wondered how much of our survival over the past couple of minutes was due to my exemplary machete skills versus them simply wanting to keep us alive.

The front door was closed. Hopefully this would not be a problem. Most likely, it would.

Quinn stopped for a moment to crack her bat into the skull of one of the demons, so hard that one of its glowing eyes popped through the eyehole in its devil mask. The demon began to scream in Spanish. I remembered some of my high school Spanish but couldn't understand what he was saying. I suspected that the basic gist was "You fucking bitch!"

An arrow swished right past me. That wasn't good.

I'd say that I picked up my pace, but I was already running at full speed, so I kept running at the same speed but with more urgency.

Quinn let out a yelp. I glanced back at her and saw an arrow protruding from her upper leg. I couldn't tell who was shooting at us, but he was apparently confident enough in his archery skills to know that he wouldn't inadvertently accidentally shoot us through the ear canal.

Though Quinn didn't fall, she stumbled badly.

Yes, we'd had our differences. Still, of course I wasn't going to just leave her behind. She put her arm over my shoulder and I kept her from toppling over as we ran over to the front porch.

An arrow struck the front door.

We went up the three wooden stairs, Quinn wincing in pain with each step, and made it to the door. I tested the doorknob. Locked.

I pounded on the door. “Let us in!” I shouted. “Let us in!”

Vic would obviously not be opening the door for us, but unless I’d lost track of the participants, Officer Tichy was still in there.

The door opened. Quinn and I rushed inside, and Tichy slammed the door behind us, locking it again.

“What the hell is going on out there?” he demanded.

Quinn ignored him and limped over to Vic.

I noticed that there was some overturned furniture blocking the living room window. “I’ve been barricading the place,” said Tichy, “but there are still ways they can get in.”

I was glad he’d been working to secure the house, although it also would have been nice if he’d tried to help Quinn and I escape our little pickle. Tichy looked kind of stunned, which I supposed was fair considering that he was in the same house as a glowing-eyed dismembered torso.

I hurried into the living room and peeked out the window. Now that I was very temporarily safe, I might be able to see just how bad our situation was.

We’d put a hurting on plenty of the demons, but I didn’t think we’d taken any of them fully out of commission. Maybe the woman with the broken neck was fairly harmless—at least until her neck healed—but the wide array of gunshot wounds and machete slashes didn’t seem to put us in less danger. I guess if that weren’t the case, the demons would have made a greater effort not to get shot or stabbed.

Credit where it’s due: I’m not saying that I felt any genuine admiration for these monsters. I’m simply saying that, in their position, I’m not sure I would’ve been devoted enough to the cause to let people shoot me, even if the wounds would heal.

I tried to count the demons. It wasn't easy, because they weren't staying still, some were busy murdering police officers behind automobiles, and the living room window didn't give me a full view. Though Quinn had said there were a dozen demons, or as many as twenty, I was counting twenty of just the ones I could see.

"More backup's on the way," said Tichy.

"Tell them that these things can't be killed," I told him. "You'll sound insane, and they won't believe you, but they need to know this, or we'll have another bunch of dead cops."

"I sent some video."

"Oh. Good."

I returned to the hallway. Vic's good eye was open, but not glowing. His stumps looked like they'd already scabbed over. The best I could say was that my palm had mostly stopped bleeding.

"Please," said Quinn.

Vic smiled. "Why the fuck would I want to call them off?"

"Because I don't deserve this. I don't deserve to die, much less die the way they're intending."

"I don't agree with that."

"Vic, I didn't do anything!"

"You had your boyfriend chop me up."

"He's not my boyfriend, and I didn't tell him to do anything." She looked over at me. "Corey, tell him what happened. You did it all yourself."

I'd sort of hoped that Quinn would try to talk Vic out of calling off the holy mission on behalf of us both. Maybe I was misunderstanding her intention right now, and she wasn't necessarily trying to make the point that I should be dragged to Hell by myself. "Yes," I said. "It was all me. If I'm being honest, she was a complete asshole about it."

"See?" asked Quinn. "It was him."

“Maybe,” said Vic.

“No, not maybe! It was! He decided that he was going to be Mr. Hero and rid the world of the Toledo Trasher, and he didn’t say a word about it to me.” Quinn sounded almost hysterical. Sweat poured down her face. Vic’s refusal to play along was making her frantic, but I was also sure that the arrow in her leg *really* hurt, and she was trying her best to fight through the pain.

Also, I want to point out that though I’m not constantly describing my mental state, I was *not* used to the fact that there was a dismembered torso lying in a pool of blood in the hallway. I was not coping well at all. Believe me.

“But how did he know who I was?” asked Vic.

“He figured it out,” said Quinn. “I had to go into work the morning after your last kill. I didn’t want to. I didn’t have any PTO left. I was distraught, and he figured it out. I didn’t say anything.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m serious!”

“Your platonic co-worker decided, entirely on his own, to stab me in the throat?”

I suppose I could have taken this opportunity to confess that I’d been in love with Quinn at the time, but I wasn’t sure how well that would help us plead our case.

“Yes!” Quinn insisted. “Corey, tell him.”

“Yeah, her story is accurate,” I said. “I figured out who you really were and decided that I didn’t want you to kill any more women. Sue me.”

“All right,” said Vic. “I believe you.”

“Good,” said Quinn. “Because it’s the truth.”

“And do you want to take a guess what this big bold new revelation has changed? Go on, take a guess. Actually, I’ll give you three guesses. Three guesses to tell me what has changed now. I bet you can do it.”

“Please, Vic.”

“Look at me. Take a good long look. In what universe do you think I’m going to help you?”

“But I didn’t do anything!”

“You sucked my cock to distract me!”

He was right. She had. This morning had been eventful enough that I’d forgotten about that.

I was very interested in how this conversation was going to continue, but I also needed to check on the whole “demons outside” issue. I returned to the living room to take another peek out the window.

They were still out there, of course. The cops were, as far as I could tell, all dead. A few of the demons were mangling their corpses. I suppose I should’ve been relieved that they weren’t defiling the bodies even worse.

The rest of the demons were standing on Quinn’s front lawn, facing the house.

If their goal was to scare the shit out of me, they were supremely successful. I wondered what the neighbors—and there *had* to be neighbors home and aware of the commotion, right?—were thinking as they saw these people in devil masks with glowing red eyes staring at the house.

A couple of them had lost their masks. Their faces were doing the same ever-shifting trick as the first one. I guess that explained why these people, who did in theory have private lives, friends, families, and co-workers, were able to perform their holy mission. If Albert J. Walton, a plumber from Texas, went through a portal and slaughtered some cops in Ohio, the shifting face would keep him from being identified. The devil masks, presumably, were to keep people from immediately realizing they were having an encounter with the supernatural. Also, the masks looked scary.

What about fingerprints? DNA?

Not my problem. I’m sure Satan had it figured out.

I returned to the hallway. Officer Tichy walked from the other end, looking more than a little shellshocked.

“Can they get in?” I asked.

“There are a lot of them out there,” he said. “If they really want to get in, they will.”

“Okay, great, thanks.”

“What are they doing?” Quinn asked me.

“Just standing there, looking creepy.”

She nodded, as if that answer didn’t surprise her.

“There are fewer in the back,” said Tichy.

“They’re in the back?” I asked. Of course they were. They wouldn’t leave the back door unprotected so that we could simply sneak out like Herschell had.

“Yeah. Not as many, but we’re better off staying barricaded in here until reinforcements arrive.”

“Reinforcements have already arrived,” I said. “They’re all dead.”

“They know how bad it is. They’ll send in the army if they have to.”

“So, Quinn,” I said. “Remember that time when you said there could be as many as twenty of them? There are more than twenty in the front yard alone. I thought we were accountants. How did you miscount so badly?”

Vic laughed. “We’ve expanded.”



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I supposed it didn't matter that much. Whether there were twenty demons in the yard or thirty, we were all still totally boned.

Well, okay, maybe if the army did show up in the next few minutes, things might work out all right. Surely these demons couldn't reconstruct themselves if they were blown apart by a tank.

"I guess we just need to make a run for it," said Quinn. "Grab anything in the house that we can use as a weapon and try to make it to the car."

I stared at her for a moment, trying to give her the same look she'd given me earlier when she looked at me like I was the single dumbest human being on the planet. We weren't going to make it past all of them, get into her automobile, and drive away safely, no matter how many household items we used as makeshift weapons. The opportunity to speed off would've been during the chaos, but Quinn had thought she could talk her dear serial killer hubby into showing us a little mercy. I decided not to bother stating this observation out loud, hoping that my look was sufficient to convey it.

"Go fuck yourself," Quinn told me, in response to my look.

"I have a way better idea," I said.

"Let's hear it."

I hesitated. I didn't actually have a way better idea—all I had was an alternate idea, and it was the same idea I'd pitched

earlier. We should take Vic's keys, make a run for his car, and try to drive out of here.

Or, even better than that idea, we could convince Tichy to make a run for it with us, take *his* car, and speed out of here, siren blaring.

"Why don't we make a run for your car?" I asked him.

"We'd never make it."

"No, we *probably* wouldn't make it. Not the same thing."

"It's safer here."

"For now. But they're not going to stand out there all day."

"You have no say in this," Tichy informed me.

I shrugged. I couldn't force him to go along with my plan. I mean, technically I could, since I had a gun in my pocket, but though I'd crossed a great many boundaries today, I wasn't ready to go with "force a cop to do my bidding at gunpoint."

"Why has this become an all-out slaughter?" I asked. "I thought at the last holy mission they just kidnapped the family?"

"Who are you asking, me or Vic?" asked Quinn.

"Doesn't matter."

"I don't know," said Quinn.

"Then I'm asking Vic."

"It's pretty simple," said Vic. "At the last holy mission, we were able to show up in the middle of the night and quietly do our work. My brother didn't have somebody sneaking in and chopping him up with an axe."

"Not his literal brother," Quinn clarified. "The other people in the cult."

"He knew that," said Vic.

I nodded. "Right. I did."

"If we could've dragged you away in secret, that's how we would have done it. But when you make a ruckus and cops

show up, it turns into a slaughter.”

“Understood,” I said. “The ruckus was unintentional.”

For a moment I expected Vic to quote *The Breakfast Club* (“Could you describe the ruckus, sir?”), because in my normal life people would throw related movie quotes into conversations all the time. But Vic did not quote *The Breakfast Club* and I doubt he was even thinking it. He probably hadn’t even seen the movie.

“When are they coming in?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Vic. “Why don’t you ask them?”

“Call them off. We can work this out.”

“You’ve confused me with somebody who wants to work this out.”

“Seriously. Call them off.”

“I don’t think you’re getting it,” said Vic. “I don’t want a happy ending. I want this shitshow to keep getting shittier and shittier.”

“Fine,” I said. “Well, since they haven’t come inside yet, I guess we’ve got time for some torture.”

Vic gave me a bloody smile. “You get that you chopped off both of my arms and both my legs, right? What exactly do you think torturing me is going to do?”

“I don’t know. Pass the time?”

“You’re not torturing anybody,” said Tichy. Then he walked into the living room, apparently not having any real intention of stopping me from engaging in torture. His glazed-eyed zombie look was that of a guy whose entire perception of the world has changed, and not for the better.

I wasn’t sure how, exactly, I would torture Vic. “What do you think we should do?” I asked Quinn. “It’s not like we can pull out his fingernails or toenails.” I wasn’t legitimately trying to solicit her input; I just thought it would be intimidating for Vic if we discussed his fate out loud.

“We could jam knives into his stumps,” Quinn suggested, crouching down beside him. Then she groaned in pain, apparently discovering that crouching down with an arrow in your leg really, really hurt.

“Yep, yep, we sure could.”

“Empty all of the kitchen drawers.”

“What do you think about that, Vic?” I asked.

Vic gave us a fake yawn.

“I don’t think you’re taking this seriously,” I told him. “Quinn, jab your fingernail into his other eye.”

Quinn shoved her fingernail deep into his eye. I’d been bluffing, figuring that we’d bring up the eyeball puncturing idea a couple of times before we actually did it, but nope, blood and eyeball goo spilled down Vic’s cheek as he screamed.

“How does it feel to be blind, asshole?” Quinn asked.

Vic called her a bitch a few times.

Tichy didn’t even bother to come into the hallway to investigate.

“Do you get now that we’re not playing around?” I asked. “We can do way worse. Call off the holy mission.”

“Fuck you!”

“Call it off, Vic. Your eyes might heal if we leave them in there, but they won’t heal if we scoop them out of the sockets.”

“Fuck you!”

“We’ll do it. I’ll find a grapefruit spoon and scoop those eyeballs right out of your head.”

“We don’t have a grapefruit spoon.”

“Then I’ll carve a hole around them with a knife and scoop them out with a regular spoon,” I said. I wasn’t sure this torture idea was going to work. A newly blind man should not

have the presence of mind to inform me that he didn't own a grapefruit spoon.

"Fuck you," said Vic, though it was less energetic than the previous two fuck-yous.

"You're leaving us with no choice but to cut your head off," I said. "You understand this, right? I know you're a big tough guy, but do you really want to just be a severed head? Wouldn't that be unimaginably awful? We could bury you alive, like I said before, but we could also just keep your head around. Do you want to be a helpless severed head on the nightstand while I fuck your wife?"

To be clear, even if Quinn and I embarked upon a sexual relationship, which was *extremely* unlikely at this point, I would not do her with her husband's severed head resting on the nightstand. It simply would not happen. This was all talk.

"I might enjoy it," said Vic. "See how much fun you have with that frigid bitch. Hope you don't mind icicles on your dick."

"I'll go get the knife," said Quinn, standing up.

"Wait." I wasn't ready to take things that far yet. If we sawed off his head, and he could no longer speak, that was pretty much the end of the negotiation phase. It didn't sound like Vic was willing to call off the holy mission, regardless of what we did to his body, but decapitating him removed the option to make him see reason.

"What?" asked Quinn.

"The other demons. What exactly do they want?"

"To subject us to excruciating pain."

"Do they only care about vengeance? Is it possible that their top priority might be to save Vic?"

"Nope," said Vic. "All they care about is vengeance."

"Shut up. I wasn't asking you." I looked at Quinn. "Let's say we held a hacksaw to his throat. Would the threat of cutting off his head be enough to hold them back?"

“I have no idea.”

“That’s not the same as saying no. They call each other brothers and sisters. There’s a bond. They don’t want to see him suffer a fate worse than death. Maybe—and I may be totally wrong about this—they’ll stay away long enough for us to get to the car.”

“I doubt it.”

“Again, ‘I doubt it’ doesn’t mean you know for sure. Do they even know what happened in here? Maybe those demons all think Vic is in one piece. That could also work to our advantage. We get a few seconds of them being shocked at seeing Vic as just a torso. This could work.”

“So you’re saying that we should bring him with us?” Quinn asked.

“Right.”

“You want us to carry Vic’s limbless body out to the car?”

“Exactly. It shouldn’t be that heavy. I mean, I guess it’ll be heavy even without his arms and legs, but the cop will help us carry him. We can do this.”

I waited for Quinn to tell me I was an idiot. Instead, she sighed. “You know what? It’s the best idea we’ve got. But we have to get a head start. No pun intended.”

“I don’t get the pun.”

“It’s not important. You stabbed him in the throat a bunch of times, and he’s fine. So we can’t go outside and start trying to cut off his head. Otherwise we’ll just be standing there, sawing away and hoping that they wait politely for us to finish. We have to get most of the way through first.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“I’ll get a hacksaw from the garage.”

“Okay. Be quick. I mean, as quick as you can be with an arrow in your leg.”

Quinn limped down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“It’s not too late,” I told Vic.

“It was too late as soon as you shoved that knife into my throat,” he said. “That was your point of no return. Not now.”

“We’re talking about *your* point of no return. Call it off. Send them away.”

“You talk a lot.”

“I don’t think I talk more than any normal person,” I said. “Right now I’m trying to solve this problem through words instead of violence. As the recipient of the violence, I’d think you’d want to work with me.”

“Nah.”

“Fine. Hopefully your brothers and sisters will be more reasonable.”

Officer Tichy stepped out of the living room. “Did you poke out his other eye?”

“You didn’t hear him screaming?”

“I guess I did.”

“I’m going to need you to help me carry him. I’ll take the top, you take the bottom, and Quinn will hold the saw that we’re going to put in his neck. If we’re lucky, the demons won’t come too close as we get in your car.”

“They’re already close. They’re on the front porch. I think they’re planning to break in any minute now.”

“Then we need to move fast. Are you on board with the plan?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Tichy, as if I’d asked him if he wanted fries with his burger. This guy’s therapy bill was going to be immense, unless the psychological evaluators just went straight for a padded cell.

Quinn returned with a hacksaw.

“He says they’re on the front porch,” I told her.

Quinn nodded. “Then let’s get started.”

She crouched down and held the blade of the saw against Vic's neck. He flinched.

“Don't cut through his vocal cords,” I said. “We want him to be able to talk.”

“Where are the vocal cords located?”

“Ummm...” I looked over at Tichy. “Do you know where vocal cords are?”

The traumatized police officer shook his head.

“I think they're in the front. So start in the back.”

“Lean him forward.”

I leaned Vic forward. His torso was a lot heavier than I'd expected. I guess I'd assumed that his arms and legs were a larger percentage of his body weight.

“This is your last chance,” I told Vic. I'm not sure why I kept trying to converse with him, but it felt like a moral imperative that I offer him one last opportunity to not have his head cut off.

His response, predictably, was “Fuck you.” I thought he might have sounded a bit nervous when he said it, although that could also have been wishful thinking on my part.

Quinn placed the blade against the back of his neck and began to rapidly saw back and forth.

Vic winced. Gritted his teeth. And then cried out in pain.

I watched the saw blade dig into his neck. When it was in deep enough that the saw would remain embedded in his neck without Quinn holding it there, I said, “Stop. That's good.”

“Are you sure? I think I should go in another half-inch.”

“We've wasted a lot of time already. We should get going.”

“All right. So how are we going to do this?”

I gestured to Tichy. “He and I will pick him up. You keep your hand on the saw and do a slice on my signal. Let me do the talking.”



Tichy, still looking like a zombie, helped me pick up Vic. Because his stumps had mostly scabbed over, we didn't get as much blood on our clothes as I would've expected. But he was heavy as crap, and because we couldn't hold him by the extremities, it was hard to get leverage. As we struggled to carry him toward the front door, I was starting to believe that we were going to lose our intimidation factor by accidentally dropping him.

The front window shattered.

Shit.

Vic was already slipping out of my hands. Quinn opened the door, and, yeah, the front porch was filled with people in devil masks. I suspected that things were about to get very interesting.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Get the fuck out of the way!” I shouted, trying to sound angry instead of terrified. “Back the fuck up now!”

“I’ll cut his fucking head off!” said Quinn. She, like me, seemed to believe that the word “fuck” conveyed the proper sense of rage.

“Now! All of you! I won’t tell you again!” Technically, I *would* tell them again if necessary, but there was no reason to share that.

“I’ll cut his fucking head off!” Quinn repeated.

The demons on the porch just stood there. I couldn’t see their faces, so I couldn’t gauge their expressions. I liked to think that when the door opened, they hadn’t expected to see me and a cop carrying the dismembered torso of Vic while Quinn held a hacksaw that was deep in his neck. If we were lucky, their current state of mind was “What the hell am I looking at right now?” instead of “Devour them all!”

“Do it,” I told Quinn.

She pulled the saw toward her.

The three of us took a step forward. The demons didn’t move.

Quinn pushed the saw away from her, cutting even deeper into Vic’s neck.

“Listen to them!” Vic shouted. “Get out of the way!”

So he *was* scared of having his head cut off. Good.

The demons continued standing there.

Instead of the slow strokes, Quinn began to frantically saw at Vic's neck.

"Get off the goddamn porch!" Vic screamed.

The demons began to carefully back away. Quinn stopped sawing as we moved forward. Vic's body came *very* close to slipping away from me, but I kept my grip on it and hoped that nobody noticed.

"Completely off the porch!" I shouted. "This is your last warning!"

"Do it," one of them said. His devil mask looked like it was made out of gold.

The demons stepped off the front porch. There were a lot of them. I didn't have time to do a head count, but there were at least twenty-five of them in the front yard.

The three of us walked out the door. A couple of demons were standing by the broken living room window, probably disappointed that they didn't get to drag any screaming victims through it.

"Keep backing up!" I shouted.

"Listen to him!" Vic shouted.

The demons backed up, but only a little. They clearly had no intention of giving us much personal space. We walked across the porch. There were only three steps, but maneuvering them while carrying Vic's heavy-ass torso was going to be a challenge.

"I'm losing him," said Tichy.

So was I. We should've been wearing gloves or something.

Also, Quinn had an arrow in her leg, and I worried what would happen if she let go of the saw so that she could go down the steps ahead of us, instead of beside us. Would the demons seize that opportunity to pounce?

I was pretty sure they would. So we were going to have to get his body down the steps with Quinn staying right next to us. This had the potential for some slapstick with deadly repercussions.

“Go fast,” I whispered. “Don’t even think—just go.”

I heard sirens in the distance. More prey for the demons.

I was in the lead and was going to have to go down the steps backwards. I stepped down, landed with solid footing, and realized to my relief that I’d successfully navigated the first step without catastrophe. Yay me.

The second step. No problem. Quinn was keeping pace. She hadn’t slipped, and her hand remained firmly on the handle of the saw.

The third step somehow managed to also go fine. This was going far better than I’d expected. All I had to do now was step down onto the cement driveway, and then I’d be on level ground again. Simple.

“Shit!” said Tichy.

Vic’s body popped out of his hands. The stumps of Vic’s legs struck the second step, landing hard, causing him to let out a scream of pain that he probably wished he hadn’t emitted in front of his fellow demons. I, in turn, lost my grip on him, so he pitched forward and bashed his face onto the stairs. The hacksaw Quinn was holding slipped out of his neck.

You may think I’m making this up as a dramatic beat, but it’s absolutely true: For three full seconds, everybody just stood there staring at what had happened.

Then Tichy and I dove back down and frantically tried to pick Vic up again. After what I’d estimate was another two seconds, I decided that we should get him off the stairs first. We dragged him down the remaining steps, leaving a thick red streak, and onto the driveway. When we rolled him over, he spat out several broken teeth and resumed screaming.

Quinn grabbed the saw and waved it at the demons. “Stay back!” she shouted, as if twenty-five demons would be scared of a hacksaw. I was too focused on trying to pick up Vic to see

what they were doing. I assumed they were seconds away from dragging the three of us away to our doom.

Somehow, most likely the result of the adrenaline blasting through my veins, Tichy and I were able to pick Vic back up again. The police cars weren't many steps away. I couldn't remember which one Tichy had arrived in, but we wouldn't have to hold off the demons much longer to reach it.

The cop flinched.

Blood sprayed.

The arrow did not go in one ear and out the other, though I believe that's what the shooter was going for. It struck his head about an inch above his left ear and did not emerge from the other side.

Tichy let go of Vic's body, which, again, landed leg-stumps first.

The cop stood there for a moment, looking vaguely confused by the arrow in his skull. He reached up and touched it like it was a mysterious object. Then he grabbed it and gave it a gentle tug. The arrow didn't budge. Tichy fell to the ground, dead.

Quinn wasted no time. She got down beside her husband's body and slammed the blade of the saw against his throat. "We're back to this!" she shouted. "Don't make me cut his head off!"

Honestly, Quinn would have to have incredible lumberjack skills in order to saw off his head before the demons pulled her away. If somebody shouted, "Kill them!" we'd be dead in seconds.

"Tell them to back off," I told Vic.

Vic said something that I couldn't understand. He turned his head and spat out a very large glob of congealed blood...or what I thought was congealed blood until I realized it was actually most of his tongue. Apparently he'd bitten it off when we dropped him.

"Louder," I said.

Vic said something louder. He was completely incoherent.

“He’s telling you to back off!” I shouted.

Quinn began to saw Vic’s neck. I supposed it no longer mattered if she cut through his vocal cords.

Vic shrieked. Again, he seemed like the type of person who’d always want to be the toughest guy in the room, so letting loose with these kinds of shrieks meant that he was in *serious* distress.

“Enough!” shouted the demon in the golden mask.

“Tell them to stop moving first!” said Quinn, shouting to be heard over Vic.

“Nobody is moving.”

“Tell them to back up!”

“Everybody take two steps back,” said the demon. I wondered if he’d been appointed to a position of authority, or if the others listened to him because he had the most expensive-looking mask. “Give them room to breathe.”

Surprisingly, the demons—at least those who were almost upon us—each took two steps back.

Vic’s shrieking turned into more of a wailing.

“The next batch of cops will be here soon,” said the demon in the golden mask. “What is your goal?”

“We want to get into that car,” I said, pointing to the closest police car. I hoped it was the one Tichy had come from.

“So you’re saying that you want us to let you go?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll let you *leave*,” he said. “We won’t let you go.”

I wasn’t completely sure I understood the difference, but it didn’t matter right now. Any discussion that didn’t involve “We’re going to rip your bodies apart the first chance we get” was a productive one, in my opinion. I didn’t ask for any further details, I just hurriedly patted Tichy’s pockets, trying to locate his keys. Found them on the second try.

Vic continued to wail.

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” the demon in the golden mask told him. “Quit being such a pussy.”

Vic was immediately silent, save for a soft weeping.

I rushed over to the police car, desperately hoping to avoid the awkwardness of the keys not fitting and explaining that I actually meant that we wanted to get into a different car. The key fit.

“Help me carry him,” said Quinn.

“No,” said the demon. “He stays with us.”

“He’s our leverage.”

“I don’t care. I just gave you permission to leave. This offer expires as soon as those police cars show up, and from the sounds of the sirens, you’d better run.”

I opened the driver’s side door and got the hell into the police car. Yes, we were losing our leverage, but I also didn’t much want to be driving around with a dismembered body.

Quinn hesitated.

I honked the horn. “Get in the car!” I called out to her, as I started the engine.

She left Vic behind and got in the car with me.

I thought they might just be messing with us, and that the twenty-five demons would swarm the vehicle as soon as we got in. But they let us close the doors, and as I backed out of the driveway, nobody stood in our way.

Four police cars pulled onto the street, two from each direction.

I rolled down the window. As I passed the first car, I shouted “Don’t fight them!”

What else could I do? Tichy said he’d sent video showing what these demons were like, so if the reinforcements put themselves in danger, there wasn’t much I could do to save their lives. Hopefully they’d all stay in their cars.

I drove away from the carnage and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“What was that?” Quinn asked.

“What?”

“That sigh.”

“It was a sigh of relief.”

“You’re relieved?”

“At this particular moment, briefly, yes.”

Quinn shrugged. “I wish I lived in your brain. It must be a blissful place.”

“Don’t act like that,” I said. “We should be dead now. There’s nothing wrong with taking five seconds to enjoy the moment. I was going to breathe a sigh of relief and then go right back to being stressed out.”

“All right.”

“Where to now?”

“Stay in the area.”

I frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“Because we can’t drive around in a stolen police car. We need to get my other car back. It’s not traceable to me. It’s our only way to get out of town.”

“Can’t you get another car from the other place?”

“I am not prepared to do what it would take to get another car without any money. You’re welcome to give it a shot, but in the best-case scenario, all you’ll earn us is a small discount.”

“But the car is only two houses away from yours,” I said. “They’ll see us get in, and we’ll be just as screwed as we would be in a police car.”

“Right. That’s why we have to wait for the cops to be distracted or dead.”

“I don’t like that idea.”



“I don’t like it, either. I literally don’t like anything that’s happened today. There has not been a single moment of this day that hasn’t completely sucked shit. So if you have some master plan for how we can get into the car and save the lives of those police officers, I’m ready to listen.”

As I’ve already said, I did not have a plan to save the officers. My plan was to let them know that they were up against unkillable demons, but apparently that message hadn’t been properly conveyed. If we were lucky, one of the cops would shoot a demon in the head and recognize the supernatural horror that they were confronting, but that was pretty much out of my hands.

“What are you thinking?” I asked. “Park around the corner and watch for our opportunity?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t like this as much as speeding off to freedom, but she was absolutely right that we wouldn’t get very far in a stolen police car. I wanted to believe that getting arrested and taken into custody would save us from the demons. However, twenty-five of them had miraculously appeared outside of Quinn’s house, so, in theory, there was no reason they couldn’t miraculously appear inside of a prison cell. Also, I didn’t actually want to go to prison if I could help it, though I wasn’t sure how much of an option it was at this point. I’d worry about being punished for my crimes later.

I drove around the block and parked right before we reached Quinn’s street. It was in front of a fire hydrant, but most likely the authorities in the area would be too busy to write a ticket.

We got out of the car.

There was lots of screaming. I hadn’t yet heard any gunshots.

“I think they’re distracted,” said Quinn.

We scurried around the corner, as quickly as we could when one of us had an arrow sticking out of their leg. There was a thin cloud of smoke in the air—had the cops used tear

gas? I'd assumed that this new batch of police officers were all going to die horrible deaths, but maybe they'd come prepared.

Demons were choking and coughing. At least one of them wasn't wearing a mask, and had the same blurred face as the others. (Unless it was one I'd already seen. It was hard to keep track.)

Perhaps our problems were over, and all of these supernatural beings would be apprehended by the law and incarcerated.

We hurried to Quinn's car. She opened the driver's side door.

"Shouldn't I drive?" I asked. "You've got...you know, the arrow."

Quinn shook her head. "I'm driving."

We got in. As she started the engine, I hoped that the cops were too busy quelling the demon riot to look back at us.

One cop did look back at us. An instant later, he got a Samurai sword through the chest. The demons might be coughing, but they weren't defeated.

We sped away.

"Oh, no," said Quinn.

"What's wrong?"

She tapped the rearview mirror. "Look."

Instead of using the rearview mirror, I glanced behind me.

All of the demons were gone.

"Is that good or bad?" I asked.

It was my turn again to receive the "you must be the stupidest human being on the face of the planet" look. Which, I suppose, meant that this was bad.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“**W**here’d they go?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Did they give up?”

“Yes, Corey. That’s what happened. Once we got a block away from the massacre, they all said, ‘Well, there’s no sense trying to catch them now!’ We’re lucky enough to be hunted by unambitious demons.”

“I get that it was a stupid question,” I admitted. “But I don’t understand the need to be so unpleasant. Like, we’re both in this mess, why be antagonistic toward each other? Why not work as a team?”

“If not for you, my biggest problem today would be that the coffee maker in the break room isn’t working.”

“No, no, no,” I said. “Don’t pretend that your life would be all hunky-dory magically happy if I hadn’t messed things up. You were married to a psycho killer who murdered his latest victim less than a week ago. And if anything, we bitch about our jobs all the time, so even if we removed the whole idea that your husband is the frickin’ Toledo Trasher, your biggest problem would *not* be the broken coffee maker.”

“*Was* the Toledo Trasher,” Quinn corrected. “I don’t think he’ll be doing any more serial killing now.”

“You’re sure his limbs won’t grow back?”

“Pretty sure.”

“What if the other demons collected them and held them against the stumps? Would they reattach?”

“I’m not...” Quinn thought about that for a moment. “Shit. Maybe he *will* kill again.”

“I should’ve chopped up his limbs even more.”

“It’s all right. We were busy.”

“So this portal thing. How do they use it? Can they just pop up anywhere?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t think so before, but I do now.”

“But did they know to pop up at your house because Vic told them that’s where we were? What I’m asking is, will they be able to find us anywhere?”

“I don’t know.”

“It seems like a pretty important detail if we’re trying to go on the run.”

“I agree,” said Quinn. “But as we’ve discussed, Vic wasn’t in the habit of giving me information that would protect me from him. I truly don’t know if they can just *find* us, or if they have to know where we are first. For the sake of my mental health, I’m going to pretend it’s the latter.”

“That seems reasonable. I mean, wouldn’t one of them have materialized in the back seat already?”

“Maybe.”

“They let us go, so they’re pretty confident in their ability to find us again,” I said. “But the whole ‘no demons in our back seat’ thing seems to indicate that they have to put in some detective work to find us first. I think that as long as we don’t have a news helicopter broadcasting our whereabouts to the world, we might be okay for a while.”

“I hope so.”

“Also, they’d want to take some time to heal, right? A lot of them got shot. If I were a demon on a holy mission, and I got shot in the face, I’d want to recuperate a little bit before I went after my targets again.” I recognize that I was speaking

with great authority about supernatural beings that I didn't even know existed when I woke up that morning, but it all seemed to make sense. If our torment was going to last for eternity, there was no rush for them to get started.

"You could be right," said Quinn. "Or a half-dozen of them could drop onto our car any second now. I don't know."

"Speaking of which..." I started to bring up the fact that she'd said there'd only be about a dozen of them, or as many as twenty, but then I decided it was the kind of pedantic observation that would piss me off if Quinn made it, so I didn't finish my sentence. "I think we did pretty well, all things considered."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm not saying we had a good day. I'm saying that we're both still alive. How many of our co-workers do you think would have survived? Do you think Larry would still be alive right now? Patty? Stacey?"

"I get your point," said Quinn. "I just think it's a dumb point to make."

"Well, I'm looking for a silver lining anywhere I can find one. I don't expect a medal or even for somebody to say something nice about me, but because of me, the Toledo Trasher may have claimed his last victim. Or they might fuse his arms and legs back on. Either way, I think that any day where you chop up a serial killer is a day where you did *something* productive."

"Then kudos, I guess."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't sincere."

"I don't care," I said. I glanced up at the rearview mirrors. "No demons in our backseat yet."

Quinn said nothing.

"Do you think the dead cops had families?" I asked.

“Of course they had families. Six dead cops, and none of them had families? Yes, Corey, they had loved ones.”

I’m not sure why I asked Quinn that question. I guess I thought she might try to assure me that the dead cops were all single, dedicated to nothing but their job. But even if she’d said something like that, it would’ve been sarcastic. The question was just something that blurted out of my mouth without being vetted by my brain.

“It was at least seven,” I said. “But maybe only seven. God, I hope it was only seven.”

“Who was the seventh?”

“One got impaled by a Samurai sword, right before we got in the car.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. But if the tear gas kept them away, there may not have been an eighth or ninth. Which, I guess, means that you probably have cops inside your house.”

“Lovely.”

“I’m torn, because I want them to be spared the sight of a pile of body parts lying against the wall. But if the body parts are gone, that means the demons took them, and I want that even less. So I guess technically I want the cops to see the body parts.”

“How about you shut the fuck up for a little bit?” asked Quinn.

“No,” I said. I didn’t want to be annoying—I *never* wanted to be the annoying guy in any social situation—but I couldn’t shut the fuck up until I knew our plan. “What’s our plan?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s what you said last time. There has to be some kind of plan. We have to be headed somewhere.”

“For right now, I just want to get as far away from them as possible.”

“That’s a good start,” I said. “But at some point we’re going to need more than that. So let’s discuss it. We need a place to go. Where can we best hide?”

“I don’t know.”

“How about Canada? That’s a decent first thought. Let’s say we’re driving to Canada, and if a better idea comes up along the way, we can always change our mind.”

“Do you really think we can cross the Canadian border if the cops are after us?”

“No. That’s why I left it open to a better idea.”

“Just stop talking,” said Quinn.

“I don’t believe you when you say you don’t have a plan,” I told her.

“Fine! I have a plan!”

“So tell me.”

“You don’t need to know.”

“Are you planning to hand me over to the demons? I know we haven’t really discussed it, but you did try to sell me out earlier. I was going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you were just faking it.”

“I’m not handing you over to the demons.”

“Then what is your plan?”

“How have you not figured this out yet? If the demons catch you but not me, I don’t want you to be able to tell them where I’m going. Okay? I don’t want you to know the plan because you might blab it to them. It’s really a simple concept.”

“You could’ve just said that.”

“I didn’t want to say out loud that I don’t trust you. I figured you’d be able to work that out for yourself.”

“I wouldn’t tell them.”

Quinn glanced over at me. “Oh, really?”

“Really.”

“If they bit your fingers off, one by one, you wouldn’t tell them where I was going?”

I hesitated a bit too long before I said, “No.”

“You would tell them before they even broke the skin.”

“I don’t believe that’s true,” I said. Maybe I *would* resist them as they...no, actually, I’d start talking as soon as the demon opened its mouth, before my finger even went inside. There’s no shame in admitting that. If you know you’re going to talk before all ten fingers are bitten off, why let them bite off the first one?

“It’s totally true. And biting your fingers off isn’t even where they’d start. They’d start by burning them. As soon as your left pinky started to sizzle, you’d tell them everything they wanted to know.”

Okay. She was right.

“Don’t tell me, then,” I said.

“I won’t.”

“Can you give me a general idea of how far it is? Are we fifteen minutes away? Are we going to be driving all night?”

“I’m not even giving you a distance radius.”

“Okay. Suit yourself. I understand. But we should really learn to trust each other.”

“Maybe we will. We’re not there yet.”

I decided that I would spare her my voice for a while. I sat quietly while Quinn drove. Before too long, we were back on the highway.

“You should check what the news has to say,” Quinn told me.

I took out my cell phone and pulled up my local news app. “We’re the top story,” I said. The breaking news story was about a huge disturbance at the suburban home of Vic and Quinn Fielding. Seven police officers, whose identities were



being withheld until their families could be notified, had been killed. Witnesses reported many gunshots, and numerous people in devil masks outside the home. Inside the home was a bloody scene of gruesome carnage.

“Did it say anything about Vic being found?”

I scrolled to the end. “Nope.”

“What about his limbs?”

“Nothing. It says ‘a bloody scene.’ That doesn’t mean they weren’t there.”

“Do you know any cops?” Quinn asked. “Anybody who could give you inside information?”

“How would I know any cops?”

“Why wouldn’t you know cops? People know cops. Cops don’t just hang out with other cops.”

“If I had a cop buddy, I would’ve said something by now.”

“I didn’t mean a corrupt cop. I meant a cop that you could call and...actually, no, you shouldn’t be calling cops that could trace your phone. I’m sorry. That was a ridiculous idea. It was like...never mind.”

“It was like what?”

“I said, never mind. I’m trying to be nicer.”

“You were going to say that it’s like something I would’ve said, weren’t you?”

“I said, I’m trying to be nicer! If I censored myself before I made a bitchy comment, why are you still trying to drag it out of me? You’ve spent this whole time complaining about my attitude, but when I try to fix it, you won’t let me.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” I said. “I appreciate your effort.”

“Good. Anyway, all we have to go on right now is the news report. They know it’s my house, obviously, and they know that Vic and I are nowhere to be found. That guy Herschell probably told the cops that we tried to kidnap him,

so that's not great. But they also have eyewitness reports of lots of people in devil masks outside, so they won't be able to completely focus on us. They'll try to track us down for questioning, but they know we aren't responsible for the slaughter—at least not alone. They'll do DNA testing on all the blood and find out that it came from a lot of different people. I have no idea how long it takes to DNA test blood. Do you?"

"Not a clue."

"I guess it doesn't matter."

"Will they be able to identify the demons based on their DNA?"

"I'm not sure," said Quinn. "Maybe?"

"I'm asking because none of them seemed very concerned about spilling their own blood at the scene. They're wearing masks to cover their funky faces, but if they have families and jobs at home, they wouldn't want their blood to turn up at a crime scene. So I was wondering if maybe their blood would sizzle away, or if it somehow wouldn't identify them."

"Vic and I never discussed his DNA, but it wouldn't surprise me a bit if it was reconstructed after his change. Maybe none of the demons have their DNA records on file, but you're right, they still wouldn't want to splash blood around a place where seven cops were murdered. I don't actually know this, but I'm going to say that, no, they can't be identified by their DNA."

"Okay."

"How would knowing their identities help us? Were you going to track them down one by one like a vigilante?"

"No," I said, although to be honest I couldn't imagine returning to a life of accounting spreadsheets after this, and hunting demons would contribute more to the world. "I just figured that the more information we have, the better."

"True."

"Do you think our co-workers are worried about us?"

“Look, Corey, I just explained that I’m trying to be nice. But if you’re going to keep throwing questions at me like a five-year-old, I’m going to lose it. I may look like I’m keeping it together, but I promise you, I’m hanging on by a thread.”

“You don’t really look like you’re keeping it together,” I said.

“If you have legitimate questions that I can answer, or you have important observations to share with me, or if you want to make conversation in a way that doesn’t make me want to run this fucking car right into the median, I’m all ears. If you want to ask me if I think the cops are okay or if our co-workers are worried about us, keep it to yourself. Make up an imaginary friend and ask them.”

“I really don’t think you want me to have an imaginary friend right now.”

“The message I’m trying very hard to communicate right now is, until you have something worth saying, shut up.”

I nodded. “That’s a reasonable request.”

I was quiet for at least two full minutes.

“I have something worth saying.”

“What?” Quinn asked.

“There’s somebody in a devil mask driving right next to us.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Quinn glanced over. Our car swerved a bit, and she quickly corrected.

But, yeah, right next to us, on my side, was a snazzy red sports car. (I'm not purposely withholding the make or model; I just don't know much about cars. I'm lucky I knew it was a sports car.) The driver was wearing a cheap plastic devil mask, with the red of its face *so* red that it looked fluorescent. The driver, noticing me staring at him, gave me a friendly wave.

I almost asked "How did he get a car?" but there was no reason to ask that out loud. Quinn wouldn't know. Maybe the demon had stolen the car from somebody in Quinn's neighborhood, or maybe it had already rented one before it showed up at her house, or maybe Satan let the demons drive cars out of Hell. All that was truly important was that the driver next to us was wearing a devil mask.

"Is he alone?" Quinn asked.

"Unless another one is in there hiding, yeah."

"Thanks. Dammit."

"Is this good news in a way?" I asked. "If he's driving a car, at least he's not teleporting."

"I guess if you want to take that attitude, we could look at it as good news, yeah. But it's not good that they've already caught up to us."

"Well, again, not trying to be *too* optimistic, but so far it's only one."

“Do you recognize the mask?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Think. It would be nice to know if it’s one of the demons from before, or a different one.”

“I’m not one hundred percent sure,” I admitted. “The mask is really bright, so I’d remember it, but it might have gotten lost in all the devil masks I saw. I may have caught just a glimpse of it. Sorry.”

“I guess that’s good enough.”

“Are you going to ram him off the road?” I asked, hoping the answer was no.

“Not unless he comes at me first.”

I glanced at the rearview mirror, then adjusted it.

“Is there a demon behind us?” Quinn asked.

“Ummmm...their windshield is really dirty, so it’s hard to say, but...uh, yeah. Actually, there are two demons in that one. And I recognize them—it’s the lady in the black leather jacket, and the one with the golden mask.” I supposed it wasn’t completely impossible that they acquired vehicles and followed us using the normal laws of time and space, but that’s not the assumption I was making.

“Let’s stay calm,” said Quinn. “For now we’ll just drive. There’s not much we can do.”

“I could try to shoot their tires out.”

“Do you have ammo left?”

“A couple more bullets, yeah.”

“No, let’s not start shooting tires out quite yet. If there are two cars following us, there could be a whole line of them.” Quinn took each of her hands off the steering wheel in turn to wipe the perspiration off on her pants. “Be calm. Just stay calm.”

“I’m staying calm.”

“I was talking to myself.”

“Maybe they’ll get pulled over,” I said. “The cops will be looking for people in devil masks.”

Quinn shrugged. “I don’t *think* the solution to our problem is that the authorities will pull over all of the demons who are pursuing us, but I guess it’s not out of the question.”

“I’m not saying that we should relax and let the authorities handle it. But, they are wearing devil masks, and drivers who have been paying attention to the news will call 911 if they see people in devil masks. They’d probably be better off with the blurry face thing.”

I checked the rearview mirror again. The car behind us was still there. Not tailgating. Not being aggressive. Just following at our speed.

A green truck pulled up next to us, on Quinn’s side. The windows were tinted. But when they rolled down, somebody in the passenger side waved the devil mask they were holding at us. Their face was blurred and melty.

“All right,” said Quinn. “I’m going to have to take evasive action.”

“What kind of evasive action?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to try not to kill us. But we can’t just let demons surround our car on all sides.”

“I agree. I totally agree.”

“Should I go for a race or a crash? Floor the gas pedal, or try to knock one off the road and hope it has a domino effect?”

“I’d rather you not try to knock one off the road,” I said.

“So floor the gas pedal?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m not sure I like that idea, either. How good of a driver are you?”

“You’ve ridden with me a lot.”

“Yes, but to restaurants during our lunch break. How good do you think you’d be at a high-speed car chase?”

“Not super. But we don’t seem to have much of a choice. It’s either we try to outrun them, or we try to smash them all off the highway. I’m letting you choose.”

I took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled. “How about you do a quick test? Swerve to the right. Not a lot. Don’t actually hit the red car. Just get close enough to scare him.”

Quinn swerved to the right. The sports car didn’t budge. Quinn swerved back into our lane.

“Maybe try the other way,” I said.

Quinn swerved toward the green truck. It also didn’t budge.

“I don’t get this,” I said. “Why aren’t they scared? I get that they can’t be killed. But why would anybody be okay with being in a fiery car crash? Body parts could get ripped off or crushed or completely mangled. It’s not like Vic was impervious to pain. I don’t understand why they don’t seem to give much of a shit.”

“They’re doing it for a higher cause,” said Quinn.

“Yeah, but still. I guess maybe I’d have to join the Satanic cult to understand. To me, knowing how much pain and blood is involved, I wouldn’t want my car to crash.”

“You’d probably get rejected by the cult, then.”

A car sped past the green truck, swerved into our lane, and then slowed down. There were three people in it. The one in the back seat turned around, revealing that, yes, he or she was wearing a devil mask. This person didn’t wave. They just stared.

“We’re, uh, kind of boxed in,” I said.

“I noticed that.”

“It’s kind of like we have an escort.”

“I also noticed that. I’m not sure if they’re just trying to scare us, or if they’re going to force us to drive where they want us to go.”

“So...is it time to start smashing into their cars?”

Quinn shrugged. “We don’t have Vic anymore. So they aren’t going to protect one of their own. But we still have the advantage that they want us to endure a lot of agony. If one of them flips over on the highway, it’s no big deal, but if we do, we’ll be splattered all over the road. What I’m saying is that if we get aggressive, I don’t think they’ll be quite as aggressive back. I wouldn’t want to be the demon who gave us an instant, painless death.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m going to smash into one of the cars.”

“Okay. Are you sure you’re up for it? Do you want me to drive?”

“No, I’m not sure I’m up for it,” said Quinn. “But I’m pretty sure we can’t trade drivers right now.”

“We might be able to...but, no, you’re right. Have you ever smashed into a car before? I don’t mean on purpose, obviously. I mean accidentally, at sixty-five miles per hour.”

“Nope.”

“Me either. I’m not entirely sure what to expect. How big of a jolt is it going to be?”

“We’ll find out.”

I grabbed the handle on the ceiling, which was informally called the “Oh, shit!” handle, to be grabbed when you briefly lost faith in the driver’s skills. “Okay. I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

“I’m going to slam on the brakes first to see what happens.”

I nodded.

Quinn slammed on the brakes. The car behind rear-ended us. It was a more violent jolt than I would’ve expected—far more intense than a similar jolt would’ve been in a big-budget action movie. I flew forward, though we were both wearing our seatbelts, so I didn’t break my nose against the dashboard. Quinn floored the gas pedal again. The car remained right behind us.



She spun the steering wheel. The red sports car had pulled ahead of us after she braked, so Quinn swerved into the empty spot it had left behind. Then the sports car stole our tactic, slamming on its brakes. We bashed into the back of it. I wasn't a car aficionado, so I didn't care about the damage to such a fine automobile.

Quinn swerved us back into our original lane. The car behind us had picked up speed, and we clipped its front corner. The car wobbled, and for a glorious moment I thought it was going to go completely out of control, but all it did was wobble.

"You might as well try to shoot out some tires," Quinn told me.

I rolled down the window and took out my gun. If I was lucky, the mere sight of the gun would cause the drivers to back off, and I wouldn't have to use up my last couple of bullets.

I pointed the gun at the sports car. It really sucked that they were all wearing masks, because I couldn't tell if the driver was shocked or if he had a great big smirk on his face. Either way, the sports car didn't swerve out of the way.

I took careful aim. Well, as careful aim as I could while leaning out the window of a fast-moving car.

Squeezed the trigger.

I was aiming for the front left tire. I didn't come anywhere close. But I did fire a shot right through the windshield, which struck the driver right in the middle of his mask, causing him to lose control of the vehicle and bash into the cement wall on his right side.

There were lots and lots of sparks.

But instead of flipping over and squishing the driver, the car just kind of lost speed until we went around a corner, leaving it behind. I assumed the driver wasn't dead, though I hoped he wouldn't be rejoining our car chase.

Quinn swerved to the left, smashing us into the green truck. Both vehicles kept moving. She smashed into it again,

this time shattering her window. The green truck swerved one more lane to the left.

“I think you scared them away!” I said.

Quinn shook her head. “They just don’t want us to crash.”

“Okay, well, that’s just as good. Maybe if you drive like a complete raging psychopath, they’ll steer clear!”

Quinn opened her mouth, and I think she wanted to harshly criticize that suggestion, but then—and I’m basing this entirely on her shifting facial expression—she seemed to realize that there was wisdom to my words.

She swerved into the next lane. The green truck didn’t have another lane to its left, but it slowed down quite a bit.

One big problem was that we were in Toledo, Ohio, and not a small town on a lightly traveled highway. So there were plenty of other cars around, and we needed to get the demons off our ass without killing innocent people. Fortunately, cars whacking into each other did have the effect of making cautious drivers move away from the action, so any cars that weren’t practicing the art of defensive driving were most likely being steered by demons.

I still had one shot left. I wasn’t sure if I should save it or try to get another one of these cars away from us. I turned around in my seat and aimed behind me. The car with three demons was now behind us, and it was too close for me to get a clear shot, but as soon as Quinn swerved again, I’d be able to shoot the driver.

Quinn swerved again.

I took careful aim.

I’d assumed that she was paying attention to what I was doing and would give me the necessary time to fire. Instead, she did another sharp swerve just as I squeezed the trigger, so my shot went wild.

The bullet struck the front hood of a silver car behind us. Its tires screeched as it braked to a sudden stop.

I pulled my arm back inside the car and tried not to throw up. I didn't know who was driving the silver car. Maybe it was a demon. Maybe it wasn't. Either way, if my wild shot had gone a little higher, or their car had gone out of control as a result of me shooting it, I could've killed an innocent person. Or a whole car full of innocent people. How did I know there hadn't been a baby in that car?

"You all right?" asked Quinn.

I nodded. My crisis of conscience could wait. I'd just add this one to the list.

"Do you have any spare ammo in your bag?"

"Nah," I said. "I guess I could fling the gun at one of them."

"I'd save it."

"Yeah."

Quinn swerved into the right lane, then back into the center lane, then into the left. My theory, so far, seemed to be correct—driving like a madwoman was keeping the other demons away. They wanted to intimidate us but not start a four-car pileup.

Of course, the non-demons on the highway had probably called 911. It was unlikely that the *entire* Toledo police force was rushing to the site of the massacre at Quinn's house, so it was very possible that we'd have inconvenient law enforcement issues soon.

"I need to figure out how to get behind them," said Quinn. "If I do that, then I can take a sudden exit, and maybe lose them."

"See what happens if you slow down."

Quinn applied the brake. The green truck slowed down to keep pace.

"Slow way down," I said. "Slow down enough that we know anybody going the same speed as you is a demon. The regular drivers will pass us."

“That’s a good idea,” Quinn told me. She sounded totally sincere. Maybe this was a breakthrough for us.

She slowed down even further. A few cars passed us. Other cars did not. After about a minute of going thirty miles per hour, I noticed that we seemed to be leading a caravan of about eight vehicles. I couldn’t say for sure that they were all demons, but it was a reasonable guess.

I didn’t know if the demons were able to communicate with each other. However, two vehicles on each side simultaneously pulled up alongside us, boxing us in again.

“Hold on,” Quinn said.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to floor the gas pedal, get everybody up to about eighty or ninety miles per hour, then I’m going to slam on the brake and hope that all of them pass us. There’s an exit coming up in half a mile, so I’ll brake right before that.”

I grabbed the “Oh, shit!” bar again.

Quinn floored the gas pedal.

All the cars around us burst into flames.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“**W**hat the fucking shit from hell?” I cried out, as we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by flaming vehicles.

I should clarify what I meant, in case you interpreted this as all of the demon cars exploding. That would’ve been nice. The demon cars could’ve all exploded into balls of fire, leaving Quinn and I to casually take the next exit and proceed to our destination.

Alas, no. I meant that the cars burst into flames but continued to drive like they weren’t on fire. I’d stopped being a skeptic much earlier that morning, when Vic didn’t die from having his throat hacked apart, but if I *had* been a skeptic, the fact that these cars all simultaneously caught on fire would’ve been a very rude awakening.

Quinn screamed.

I spent about five seconds joining her, because it was exactly the kind of situation where we should just scream for a bit.

Then I tried to calm down—which did not happen instantly—and figure this shit out. I peered at the flaming car next to us. Okay, it wasn’t that the entire car was engulfed by flames; it was just the outside. Granted, it was the *entire* outside, all the way down to the tires, but I could see—just barely—that the demon inside wasn’t on fire.

I wasn’t sure what to do with this information. But I guess knowing that the people inside the vehicles were not

cheerfully on fire made it seem a bit less like we were literally driving through Hell.

And yet, I had this very clear mental image, where the pavement in front of us suddenly swooped downward like the first drop of a roller coaster. We'd fall hundreds, thousands, millions of feet, eventually plunging into a river of lava that wasn't burning our flesh away but certainly felt like it was. Then demons—not these devil-mask wearing lunatics, but actual red, scaly-skinned, fanged, winged, prehensile tail-waving *demons*—would tear us apart, scattering our remains into the air, only to repeat the process again and again and again...

Yes, I was prone to thinking inappropriate thoughts. But the sheer vividness of this image made me think it wasn't just me imagining Hell at a time when eight vehicles had suddenly burst into hellfire.

“Did you...” I started to ask Quinn. Then I decided against it, because I didn't want her to think that I'd gone insane. Then I remembered everything that had happened today and realized that a vision of Hell was rather minor, all things considered. “Did you see Hell?” I asked.

“No, I saw a bunch of flaming cars.”

“But not a vision of us actually plummeting into Hell?”

“No.”

“Okay, good.”

The cars around us were all still very much on fire. This was terrifying, but also oddly convenient, because it was now extremely clear which ones were being driven by demons and which ones were civilians. All of the cars around us were demon-driven, and if any civilian automobiles had been nearby, they were sure as hell keeping their distance now.

I really hoped there were satellite photos being taken of us right now, or maybe a news helicopter was broadcasting live footage. At the moment, my primary concern was to avoid dying a horrible death; however, we did still have to explain

all of this if we survived, and the more evidence of the supernatural, the better.

The flames were touching both sides of our car. I'd read that cars didn't really explode the way they did in movies, but that was really more about exploding after going over a cliff, and not so much about exploding after extended contact with fire. But we were still boxed in. Were they trying to cook us?

Quinn slammed on the brakes.

The car behind us smashed into our car, shattering the rear windshield. It immediately got a lot hotter inside.

Quinn floored the gas pedal, then slammed on the brakes once more. The car struck us again. We began to wobble out of control. She jerked the steering wheel, and we smashed into the flaming car directly to our right, shattering both of the passenger-side windows. I brushed safety glass off my shirt and leaned toward Quinn, so as not to catch my clothing on fire.

The impression I got, and I saw no need to ask about her motives, was that Quinn had decided that the best tactic was to simply go berserk and turn this into a demolition derby. She was working under the continued theory that the demons weren't actually trying to murder us yet. I'd been on board with that theory, but the Hell vision made me wonder if it was also perfectly fine for us to die, and suffer our misery in the afterlife.

Quinn bashed the car to the right again. It careened into the cement wall, spun around, and was suddenly driving in the wrong direction. I watched in the side mirror as it kept going. A civilian car swerved out of the way, seemingly missing by inches (though I was watching this in a mirror—it probably wasn't *that* close), and then I lost track of where the car went. Hopefully it would smash into the wall again and stop moving.

Quinn swerved to the left. The car next to us also swerved to the left, trying to avoid us, and in the process plowed into another flaming car, knocking it into the median. The car lifted up onto its side and then was airborne, leaving a trail of flames in its wake. It smashed onto the pavement, sending two

flaming tires into the air, and then struck the median again. If it had been a normal car with normal passengers, I would've said quite definitively that everybody inside was dead.

What was happening to those demons? Were they screaming in pain as their flesh burned? Were they gaping in horror at their mutilated bodies, watching their gushing blood boil in the flames? Were they having a good laugh?

Didn't matter right now.

Quinn floored the gas pedal. Not too far ahead I could see some non-burning automobiles.

"Don't go too fast," I said. "We don't want to catch up to those cars."

Quinn nodded. Then she looked in the rearview mirror. "Aw, fuck."

"What?"

She tapped the mirror. I turned around instead. "Aw, fuck," I said. Actually, that wasn't strong enough, but I couldn't think of a harsher profanity right then.

A garbage truck was barreling down on us, completely engulfed in flames.

"It'll be okay," said Quinn, in the least reassuring and soothing tone of voice I'd ever heard.

I'd never driven a garbage truck, or even ridden in one, but I didn't think they could maintain "highway car chase" speeds. Yet this one seemed to be going *really* fast. Satan-powered?

We were good. We were fine. Everything was fine. If that thing ran into us, both Quinn and I would be dead for sure, so of course it wouldn't run into us. That would be ridiculous.

"How did they get a garbage truck?" asked Quinn, usurping my role as the asker of needless questions.

I didn't answer.

The obvious course of action would be for Quinn to continue flooring the gas pedal and drive away from this nightmare truck as fast as we possibly could. Maybe we could



outrun it. It was much faster than a garbage truck driven by mortals, but perhaps not as fast as our car. Although I could envision that thing destroying a hell of a lot of cars as it pursued us.

I could, I suppose, argue that the other drivers on the highway also had the option of driving really, really fast, and that their inability to out-maneuver the truck wasn't our fault. I could also put my hands over my ears, go "*La la la la la!*" and pretend that no innocent people would die.

But, no. It was my fault that this death truck was on the highway, and drivers with spouses, children, and pets were going to perish if our plan was to simply try to outrun it.

That said...what were we supposed to do? I had an empty gun.

"How can we make it crash?" I asked.

"I'm sure you're not asking *me*," said Quinn. "If we ram it, I'm going to say that we'll lose."

"There has to be a way. What about...I don't know...what about...what about God?"

"God?"

"Why not? God doesn't approve of that thing. Maybe prayer has been the answer all along."

"Be my guest."

"How do you start? I know you end with 'Amen' but I'm not sure how you start. Am I supposed to close my eyes?"

"I'd rather you keep your eyes open and watch for danger."

I put my hands together in a praying position. "Dear God. I'm sorry I haven't come to you before. I don't think my prayer requires a lot of explanation. If you could see fit to use your divine influence to make that garbage truck go away—and also the other demons, but I'd be happy with just the garbage truck right now—I'll be in the front row of church every Sunday for the rest of my life. Thank you. Amen."

Nothing happened.

“Also, charity,” I continued. “So much charity. Every evening. Every weekend. I’ll make you proud, God. And I’ll stop fornicating, unless you give me a sign that you’re okay with it. I don’t know all the rules. Anyway, that’s it. Amen.”

Still nothing happened. The garbage truck was still engulfed in flames and was getting closer and closer. Before too much longer, it would be upon us.

“It was worth a shot,” I told Quinn. “If we’re up against agents of Satan, it made sense to try to get the opposite guy on board.”

“Vic put years of effort into his subservience to the dark lord. All you did was a super quick last-minute prayer.”

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

The garbage truck was very close. If I crawled into the back of the car and out onto the trunk, I could almost leap onto it.

Not that I would ever consider such a...

It was a terrible idea. Perhaps the worst idea I’d had over the past few days, and I think we can agree there were some humdingers in there. Jumping from a fast-moving car onto a fast-moving garbage truck was a poor idea on its own, but this was a *flaming* garbage truck, so the idea was spectacularly bad.

Which meant that I had to get moving before I changed my mind.

“Is there anything really heavy in here?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“Something like a tire iron. But not locked in the trunk.”

“I just bought this car. I didn’t put anything in here but my bug-out bag, and that’s just clothes and emergency supplies.”

I unfastened my seatbelt. “Okay.”

“What are you doing?”

“It’ll be fine,” I lied. I turned around and began to crawl into the back seat. “I’m going to jump onto the truck.”

“You’re *what?*”

“You heard me. If I say it out loud again I’ll chicken out.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, are you fucking serious?”

I made it into the back seat and hurriedly opened my suitcase. There was nothing particularly heavy in there that could be used to smash the front windshield of a garbage truck, but I grabbed a couple of shirts and wrapped them around my hands.

“The truck is on fire!” Quinn said.

“That’s what the shirts are for.” Though these cotton/polyester T-shirts were not going to put up a major line of defense against the flames, I figured they might give me a couple of extra seconds. There was no time to tie them properly, and they’d come off if I flapped my arms too vigorously, but this was the best I could do right now.

I started to climb out the shattered rear windshield.

“Cody!” Quinn shouted.

“Who’s Cody?”

“I mean Casey! Corey! Shit! Get back in the car!”

That did seem like the much smarter thing to do. But no. This might end in my splattery death, but I was—unless I changed my mind in the next few seconds, which was a distinct possibility—ready to take that risk. Not only would it be nice to no longer have the garbage truck right behind us, but using it against the other devil-powered cars would be *sweet*.

“Stay right in front of it,” I said.

I climbed out onto the trunk of the car. I suddenly felt a lot less steady than I had when I was inside the vehicle. I’d been very comfy inside that car. I missed being in there.

I steeled my resolve. Yes, I was going to leap onto the front of this flaming garbage truck, whose front hood was

much higher than I expected. But at least it had a hood. It wasn't one of those garbage trucks where the front is flat and there's nothing for a person to jump onto if they're leaping from the car directly in front of it.

This was going to have to be quite a jump.

This is where I sort of hoped that the voice of God would speak up, assuring me that He was going to take care of everything, and that there was no need for me to do something so silly, but He remained silent.

I leaned back inside the car. "Slow down a bit," I told Quinn. "Don't let it actually bump us, but get close enough that it almost does. Know what I mean?"

"Yes," she said. I assume she'd given up on me at this point. She'd allow me to leap to my death, then formulate her own plan for getting out of this scrape.

I returned my full attention to the garbage truck. I couldn't see the driver through the flames, and if I could see him through the flames I wouldn't be able to see his face through the devil mask, but if I *could* see his face, I'm guessing that his expression was "What the hell is this suicidal idiot doing?"

The suicidal idiot stood up and jumped.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

I did not leap onto a burning garbage truck.

Oh, I leapt onto a garbage truck, and what a leap it was! The fact that I'm telling you this story myself implies that I survived the experience, although, considering the subject matter, there's no reason I couldn't have perished and am narrating this while crimson pitchforks jab my ass.

Quinn did an excellent job with her driving duties, and the jump itself wasn't that far. It wasn't like jumping up onto a stationary garbage truck, but we were going the same speed, and the truck was close enough that a quick tap of the brakes by Quinn could be enough for a collision. I'm not trying to downplay my accomplishment, which did indeed involve leaping off one moving vehicle onto another moving vehicle, but in the interest of "suspension of disbelief" I'm trying to make sure you understand that this wasn't a superhuman feat of agility, though still impressive as hell.

So...the fire.

My plan was to leap on the front of the truck and smash through the windshield as quickly as I could. During which time, yes, I'd receive serious burns. The hope was that I could move efficiently enough to get into the truck before I was consumed by flames. Jump. Cry out in pain. Kick the windshield open. Get into the truck. Beat the shit out of the driver. Use the flaming garbage truck to knock the other demons off the road.

I knew it might not work like that, which is why I was determined to do this before I took the time for a full risk/benefit analysis.

I jumped.

An instant later, a fragment of time so small that it cannot be measured by any human standards, I wished I hadn't jumped.

Then the flames dissipated.

They vanished as if somebody had turned off a gas grill. Or as if somebody said, "This moron is going to immolate himself—cancel the flames!"

I successfully landed on the hood of the garbage truck. The driver was no longer blocked by flames, and it genuinely pissed me off that I couldn't see his expression under the devil mask, because I'm sure it was priceless.

Now, the flames had disappeared, but not without a trace. The front of the truck was still extremely hot, as if I'd jumped on a gas grill that had just been turned off. I yelped as pain shot through my hands and knees. Fortunately, my pants and the cloth covering my hands kept me from leaving sizzling flesh behind as I crawled up to the windshield.

My plan had been to kick the windshield, but the lack of flames gave me the luxury of taking a few extra seconds to get the job done, which meant I didn't have to stand up and risk flying off the truck onto the pavement. Though I didn't have a brick or a club, I did have my gun. I took it out of my pocket and slammed it against the windshield as hard as I could. The glass spiderwebbed but didn't break.

The driver gestured at me as if to say, "Dude, what the hell?"

I slammed the gun against the windshield again. It still didn't break.

Nor did it break on the third or fourth hits, although the spiderweb was getting bigger.

This was my first time trying to break a windshield. Apparently I'd misjudged how difficult it was. If the flames hadn't vanished, I would've been a charred corpse by now.

Shit, what if the flames came back?

I bashed the gun against the glass a couple more times. Then I braced myself against the roof of the truck, hoping I wouldn't burn my hands too badly in the process, stood up, and kicked the windshield in the center of the spiderweb.

It shattered.

The truck swerved so sharply that I nearly flew off. But I didn't, and in a move that wasn't quite up to the standards of a Hollywood action hero but was pretty damn good for an accountant, I leapt into the truck.

I immediately elbowed the demon in the face. He was wearing a thick rubber mask, so it didn't seem to have much effect. I grabbed his mask by one of the horns and tore it off, revealing another blurred melty-faced guy. I elbowed him in the face again. I would've expected this sensation to be really weird and off-putting, but it felt like elbowing a normal person's face. I guess the blur was an illusion.

"You're gonna get us both killed!" he said, keeping his hands tightly on the wheel and doing his best to watch the road.

Oh, so they could be killed? That was interesting information, unless he simply hadn't mentally adjusted to being immortal.

I reached behind him and tickled his side, saying "Coochie coochie coo!" as I did so.

I was not trying to tickle him to death. I was trying to get him to look at me like I'd gone mad, which is exactly what he did. This meant that he was distracted from my true intention: opening his door.

He turned toward the door as it flew open. This meant that he was distracted from my *other* intention, which was to press the button on his seat belt.

Sadly, he didn't just fly out of the truck like somebody sucked out of an airplane. I spun around on the seat and kicked him with both feet, so hard that I thought I might have pulled a muscle. But he kept a tight grip on the steering wheel and refused to cooperate.

I kicked him over and over and over, but the son of a bitch wouldn't fall out of the truck. I switched to trying to push him out with my legs, which also didn't work.

Then, because he was paying more attention to not getting kicked out of the garbage truck than driving it, we smashed into another vehicle. It careened into the median. I had a moment of horror, but the car we'd struck was completely engulfed in flames, so it was a demon and not a civilian, and it was totally okay.

The highway had been conveniently straight for quite a while. That was no longer the case, and we were hurtling toward a great big concrete barrier as the road curved to the right. The driver, trying to keep us from crashing, violently jerked the steering wheel. I, in what I'll freely concede was a dick move, took advantage of this to kick him again. His hands popped free of the steering wheel, and he almost fell out of the truck.

"It's a stick shift!" he said, in what I assume was a last-ditch effort to keep me from kicking him out of the truck. It wasn't a bad tactic—I didn't know how to drive a stick—but it didn't work. I kicked him in the face, finally knocking him out of the vehicle. He screamed as he grabbed some part of the truck that I couldn't see, and then lost his grip and fell. The truck jolted as if it went over a demon-sized bump.

I immediately scooted into the driver's seat, then pulled the door closed.

Was he dead? Or was he alive and totally aware that he'd been smushed?

Didn't matter.

Nor did it matter that I didn't know how to drive a stick shift. For now, all I needed to do was bash this truck into the



flaming cars on the highway. Even if I wasn't killing the demons, I'd be destroying their means of transportation, at least temporarily.

I buckled my seat belt. Safety first.

I wasn't sure where Quinn was, but I could see several flaming vehicles. I was glad that this feature had only been turned off for the garbage truck, because, again, it would allow me to ensure that I was only purposely smashing into demon cars.

Then the truck burst into flames again. Had I done that by thinking about it?

Not gonna lie—I felt like a badass driving a truck that was on fire. I wasn't going to be reckless about it, at least not more reckless than necessary, but you can't be behind the wheel of a vehicle that's completely consumed by flames and not get *some* kind of thrill out of the experience.

Now my plan was pretty straightforward: break the other cars.

I swerved into the right lane, crashing into the green truck. It went out of control, crashing into another flaming car, and both of them stopped. Two for the price of one!

I accelerated, trying to catch up to another flaming car that was just ahead. It switched lanes, trying to get away from me, but I switched lanes to stay right behind it. It switched lanes again, and its advantage in maneuverability became clear when I was unable to match it. It slowed down in an apparent attempt to get away from me, and I shifted lanes again. The truck jolted as I clipped the front of the car. I couldn't see what happened, but I heard a loud crash that I assume was the car smashing into the concrete barrier. Good.

My cell phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket and checked the display. It was Quinn, so I took the call and put her on speaker.

“Slam on your brakes,” she told me.

I slammed on the brakes. Something smashed into the rear of the garbage truck.

“Thank you,” said Quinn.

“How many are left?” I asked.

“At least two of them are ahead of us, but I have no idea how far. One is trying to sneak up on you to the left. Don’t do anything until I tell you.”

“I won’t.”

“One of them is leaning out the passenger window with a crossbow. Okay, so it’s that asshole. I think as soon as they can get a good angle, they’re going to try to shoot you, but don’t swerve yet. Just wait. Keep waiting. And...*now*.”

I swerved to the left. The car successfully swerved to avoid me.

An arrow slammed into the driver’s side window, shattering it. I let out a less than masculine sound and ducked out of the way. Of course, I couldn’t drive with my head ducked down, so instead I slid back, trying to keep my head out of arrow range while still watching the road. I couldn’t really keep my head completely hidden, but at least I hoped I was giving the archer a smaller target.

The truck jolted again. For a moment, I happily thought that I’d run over a demon, but then it kept jolting, over and over, and I realized that the archer had shot out my front tire.

“He shot an arrow into your tire,” said Quinn, over the phone.

I drove back into the left lane, missing the car again.

“I can’t see that well because I’m trying to keep my head down,” I said.

“He’s right next to you.”

“Should I swerve?”

“Yes.”

I swerved. There was no crash.

“Stay down,” said Quinn. “Looks like he’s going to shoot again. Wait, he’s not aiming for your window. I think he’s

trying to shoot out the back tire. When I say to—”

The garbage truck had another large jolt to go along with the little ones.

“Sorry,” said Quinn. “I thought he was going to spend more time aiming.”

“It’s okay.”

“Swerve...now!”

I tried, but thanks to having two tires with arrows in them, the truck wasn’t steering very well.

“Swerve to the right,” Quinn said.

I did. The truck gradually moved into the right lane, and I could sort of see in the mirror that Quinn had been trying to get me to bash into another flaming car.

“I’m going to slow way down,” Quinn told me. “Try to get all the way over to the side and stop. I’ll pick you up.”

“Wait.” Yes, it wasn’t operating correctly, but I still wasn’t in a hurry to abandon my garbage truck. “Let’s keep trying.”

“Then try a hard right turn. Basically, don’t give him anywhere to go.”

I nodded, even though Quinn wouldn’t be able to hear me nod over the phone. I applied the brakes and spun the steering wheel clockwise, turning the truck as quickly as I could. So quickly, in fact, that the right side raised into the air and I realized with no small amount of terror that it was about to flip over.

Then it smashed into the car that I’d intended to smash into, and this apparently was enough to keep the truck from toppling. I kept up the hard right turn, which essentially squeezed the unfortunate car between the truck and the concrete wall, sending up a shower of sparks that went even higher than the flames. I hoped it was disintegrating the crap out of the guy in the car, but I’d settle for ruining his method of transportation.

I noticed red-and-blue flashing lights in the rearview mirror.

Well, this was a bummer, but I was surprised the cops hadn't shown up long before this. I wasn't sure which one of us the police officer was specifically asking to pull over, but it was most likely the garbage truck over the much smaller vehicles.

The police car pulled up alongside me.

I honked, trying to alert the cop to the flaming car that was coming right at him from behind.

My honk didn't work. The car crashed into the police car, causing it to careen into the garbage truck, causing it to careen back into the first car. Both of them crashed into the median. I left them behind, wondering how they'd work out their differences.

"Are you there?" Quinn asked.

"Yeah."

"Get off at the next exit."

"The one that's right there?"

"Yes!"

A bit more notice would've been appreciated. I steered the garbage truck, which was going way too fast to safely get off of a highway exit, onto the ramp, then immediately slammed on the brakes because a non-flaming car, traveling at a safe speed, was also exiting.

I was pleased that I did not strike this car.

I was less pleased when it became clear that while I'd avoided toppling the garbage truck over thus far, that lucky streak was about to end.

I didn't know what kind of maneuver would stop the truck from falling, so I tugged on my seat belt to make sure it was secure, and thought about the Scholastic Book Fair.

They say that moments like these happen in slow motion, and it was absolutely true, giving me plenty of time to absorb

the incomprehensible terror of thinking that I was about to die. Since I would be dying in the service of battling demons, I hoped that I'd show up at the pearly gates. "You didn't vanquish the evil; still, you gave it your best shot," St. Peter would tell me. "You don't get access to the best part of Heaven, but you can hang out in the main part, which is still a pretty sweet deal."

(This hypothetical conversation with St. Peter was not actually what I was thinking as the garbage truck went off the road. I'm just presenting it now, for entertainment purposes.)

I screamed in slow motion.

Chunks of safety glass tore across my face.

Then everything went black.

I thought I was dead. I didn't want to open my eyes, because I was unsure if I'd be opening them to the vision of winged angels holding harps or a river of lava. I could hear the crackle of flames, which implied the latter, but it could also just be that the truck was still on fire.

I opened my eyes. Yeah, I was still in the truck, which was on its side. I was on the raised half, hanging by the seat belt.

"Corey!" shouted Quinn. I could see her through the broken windshield. Either she'd teleported, or I'd briefly lost consciousness. "Corey, you need to hurry!"

I pressed the button on the seatbelt, causing me to fall to the other side of the truck. Then I crawled through the windshield, moving as quickly as possible to avoid catching my clothes on fire. I wasn't successful, but frantically waving my arm in the air put out the flames.

"I'll take him to the hospital," Quinn told the people around us as she took my hand.

"I've already called an ambulance," said a Good Samaritan.

"Thanks, but this will be faster." Quinn quickly led me to our car. A couple of the onlookers protested, but nobody

physically tried to stop us as she opened the passenger door, shoved me inside, then ran around to get into the driver's seat.

"Close your door," she told me.

I looked at her, confused.

"Close your door."

"Oh, yeah." I closed the door. Quinn sped off before I could fasten my seat belt.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Did you get injured when the truck rolled over?"

I touched a few random body parts. "I don't think so. My arm hurts where it caught on fire. I'm a little dizzy."

Suddenly we were on a different road. A rural road, with trees on each side.

"Did we teleport?" I asked.

"Oh, good, you're awake," said Quinn. She opened the center console and took out a bottle of water. "Drink this."

I unscrewed the cap, realized that I was unbelievably thirsty, and gulped down most of the water. Warm but refreshing. "So we didn't teleport?"

"No, Corey, we didn't teleport. You passed out for a few hours."

"Are we in a different car?"

"Yes. Thanks for that."

I gave her a confused look, which was the only kind of look I was capable of giving anyone at the moment.

"I'd like to say that I'd repay the money I took from your bag, but we both know that's a lie."

"Oh," I said. "That's okay. Where are we?"

"We're almost there."

"Are we out of danger?"

“Do you *think* we’re out of danger?”

“No.”

“That’s the correct answer. So I guess your brain is working again.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I didn't talk during the rest of the drive, because I lost consciousness again. When I woke up, we were parked outside of a very small cabin. The place looked like you could bring the entire structure down by throwing a medium sized rock.

Quinn continued prodding me with her index finger. "Wake up."

"I'm up."

"We're here."

I blinked a few times. "A cabin in the woods?"

"Yeah. Deep in the woods."

"Oh."

"What were you expecting?"

"Something better fortified, I guess. Some sort of compound. I thought maybe you had allies."

"This place wasn't meant to be a hiding spot from demons," said Quinn. "We have a couple of better ones, but those are for Vic and me together, in case we ever need to hide from the police. This one he doesn't know about. That's why it's a piece of shit. But maybe it's a piece of shit that Vic and the others won't be able to find."

I hurriedly patted my pocket. "What if they trace our phones?"



“Oh, your phone is long gone. Your laptop, too. Don’t worry about that.”

“Okay. Good.” I didn’t really mean that. I was going to have a nervous breakdown without my cell phone. But I obviously didn’t want unexpected visitors at the cabin.

We got out of the car. I noticed that Quinn had removed the arrow from her leg and had wrapped it in thick gauze. She was limping badly but, despite a large red spot on the dressing, didn’t seem to be in danger of bleeding to death.

The woods were thick and scary, with the kind of trees that looked like they’d scoop you up and devour you. It was still daytime, but there wasn’t much daylight left.

“Are you sure the demons can’t find us here?” I asked.

“I’m not sure of that at all,” said Quinn. “Not even a little bit. I wasn’t sure even before they started chasing us on the freeway with Hell Cars, so as far as I know, we could have fifty demons show up at any second.”

“Then I guess I won’t treat this as a fun cabin vacation.”

“Nope.”

We walked up to the rickety front door. It was locked with one of those metal hooks that goes into a metal loop, but the lock was on the outside, so it wouldn’t do much to keep intruders out. Also, I was pretty sure I could break the door down by yelling at it.

Quinn unlocked the door and swung it open.

The inside of the cabin was covered with dirt and leaves. There was a couch that looked like the local wildlife had claimed it for their own, a bed with most of the mattress stuffing scattered all over the floor, and a wooden chair. The smell was sub-par.

We stepped inside what I was going to call “the living room” until I realized that there were no other rooms. The floor creaked. I reached for a light switch.

“There’s no electricity,” said Quinn.

“That’s okay,” I said. “Electricity’s for losers.”

“Do you want to sit down? I assume, since you were unconscious for several hours, that you had a concussion, but I couldn’t just take you to the emergency room.”

“I’m fine,” I said. I knew that if I sat on the chair, it would collapse, and then I’d break through the floorboards, and then I’d plummet straight down into Hades.

Quinn walked to the far corner, where an oval-shaped, moth-eaten, dried-feces-covered rug rested. As far as I could tell, it had once been maroon. She pulled it away, revealing a trapdoor.

“Ooooh, nice,” I said. “Does that lead to the luxurious bunker?”

“Nope.” Quinn knelt down and opened the trapdoor. “Could you help me?”

I crouched down next to her. The trapdoor didn’t lead to a basement or anything like that. It simply concealed a chest. It was heavy as crap, but Quinn and I got it out with a lot of grunting and groaning.

She spun the dial on the combination lock three times, then popped open the lid. Inside were four handguns and a lot of ammunition.

“You have a preference about which two you get?” Quinn asked.

I didn’t. We each took a pair of guns and loaded them. I put one in each of my inside jacket pockets.

“We may be here for a while, so we should clean this place up,” Quinn said. “Do you want to sweep, or do you want to get rid of the dead animals?”

For some reason, I decided to go with the chivalrous answer. Fortunately, Quinn had packed some rubber gloves, so I didn’t have to pick up the raccoon carcasses with my bare hands. Good fortune was also upon me in that only one of them had a significant maggot presence.

After about ten minutes, the cabin was still a hellhole, but less so. Quinn had also packed air freshener, and by spraying about half of the aerosol can, I no longer felt like I was going to throw up.

“I wish you’d given me a little more information,” I said. “I would’ve packed an inflatable mattress.”

“I packed one.”

“Oh. Okay, good.”

“I’ve got enough water and canned goods to keep us alive for about a week. If we’re here longer than that, we’ll have to do a supply run, which will be dangerous because our faces will be all over the news.”

“Is this really safer than a motel?” I asked.

“It is for the other people at the motel.”

“I’m not trying to be a whiner. I appreciate that you had this place. I just feel like we’d be safer and more comfortable if we slept in a storage unit.”

“You’re welcome to leave anytime you want,” said Quinn.

“Nah.”

“That’s good, because I didn’t really mean it.”

I glanced around the cabin. “This place isn’t completely terrible. At least there aren’t any grizzly bears in here at this specific moment.”

“Right. Gotta look at the plus side.”

“And it’s better than being at work.”

“Also correct.”

It really wasn’t. I would give anything to be back in my cubicle right now, typing numbers. Oh, the numbers I would type! Big numbers. Small numbers. Even ones. Odd ones. If I somehow got out of this mess without dying or going to prison, I’d devote my life to being the best accountant who ever lived. Accountant Man: a superhero for corporate workers everywhere!

“Is it a good sign that the demons haven’t shown up yet?” I asked.

Quinn shrugged.

I decided that I may have spoken too soon about demons not having shown up. I walked over and peeked out the window. But the window was too filthy to see through, so I opened the door. A quick stroll around the cabin indicated that there were no demons currently visible. Also, no outhouse.

I went back inside the cabin.

“It might be good,” said Quinn. “They might also just be healing up, in which case the delay is bad for us.”

“How far are we from civilization? Specifically, how far are we from a hardware store?”

“The nearest town is about half an hour away. I don’t know if it has a hardware store.”

“Are we completely out of cash?”

“No.”

“Okay,” I said. “I know there’s a risk involved, but we can’t fight them off with guns. We need *tools*. And if they also serve the purpose of letting us fix up this place, all the better.”

Quinn shook her head. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I completely disagree. What’s too dangerous is waiting for the demons without the ability to defend ourselves.”

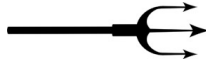
“We’re all over the news.”

“So what? How many people are watching the news? Are you always able to recognize outlaws on the loose? It could be one of those deals where we’re at the checkout counter when our pictures show up on the TV screen that’s right there, but I think it’s worth the risk.”

“You should’ve said something sooner.”

“I was unconscious.”

Quinn sighed. “All right.”



“YOU LOOK FAMILIAR,” SAID THE TEENAGED CASHIER, AS SHE rang up my purchases.

“I get that a lot,” I told her.

“You look like that one actor from those old movies. Who’s that guy? You know him. Chris something. Looks like that other guy.”

“Christian Slater?”

“Yes! Thank you!”

“Well, I appreciate that. I’m glad you enjoy my movies.”

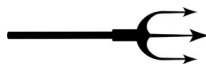
The cashier narrowed her eyes. “You’re just kidding, right? You’re not really him.”

“No, I’m not. But I appreciate the compliment.”

She finished ringing up my merchandise and looked annoyed that I paid in cash. But she gave me the correct amount of change, mostly, and nobody pointed and screamed at me as I wheeled the cart out of the store and into the parking lot.

“Did you buy up the whole store?” Quinn asked, as we put a pair of woodcutting axes, a nail gun, a couple of top-quality hacksaws, and various other items into the trunk.

“We’re ready to fight now,” I said. “Well, no, we’re not ready to fight. But we’re less likely to die within seconds.”



ONE THING I DIDN’T THINK TO PURCHASE WAS A FOOT PUMP, so I was totally out of breath by the time I blew up the inflatable mattress.

“I don’t want to make things uncomfortable,” I told Quinn. “But it’s okay if we both sleep on this thing, right? Fully

clothed. I'll stay on my own side. No spooning. All we'll be doing is sleeping, I promise."

I couldn't quite interpret the look she was giving me. It didn't seem to be a positive one.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We're not sleeping at the same time. One of us has to keep watch. We don't want the demons to show up while we're both fast asleep, right?"

"Right. Yes. Of course. That makes perfect sense. Sorry."

"I'm glad you made it clear that we aren't going to have sex, but I can't believe you thought we were going to leave ourselves defenseless like that."

"I wasn't thinking."

"Obviously."

"Just to be clear, I've spent this entire day completely focused on our demon problem," I insisted. "I may have slipped up in our downtime, but I didn't think about the bed situation until just now. I haven't been obsessing over it or anything." It occurred to me that the best way to stop digging myself into a hole was to simply stop talking, and so I did.

"Are you finished?" Quinn asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe when this is all long over, if everything works out okay, we'll become friends with benefits. God knows I could use the stress relief. But not now."

"Okay," I said, not sure what my reaction should be.

"For now, it's time to get some sleep. Since you slept on the way here, I'll sleep first."

I wasn't sure that being unconscious, and possibly concussed, counted as sleeping on the way here, but I did agree that she should take the first sleep shift. She lay on the mattress, and I placed the blanket she'd brought (which depicted "Groggu" to me, "Baby Yoda" to her) over her. I

wished her pleasant dreams, and, without a goodnight kiss, I went outside to sit in front of the cabin.

I was seated on the wooden chair, tending to a small fire in front of the cabin. We'd discussed whether or not it was safe to have a fire going, and decided that if the demons managed to find us all the way out here in the middle of the woods, it wouldn't be the flames that ultimately tipped them off to our location.

The tools I'd bought from the hardware store were hidden around the area. I had a gun in my lap and both an axe and a hacksaw at my feet.

I didn't have my phone, and neither of us had brought a book, so my entertainment consisted of my own thoughts. It was very poor entertainment. Would not recommend.

We hadn't actually decided on the length of a shift. Without phones, I'd only be able to find out what time it was if I started the car and checked its clock, so I assumed that at some point Quinn would come outside and tell me that it was my turn to sleep. Or I'd wake her up screaming about a demon attack.

I'm not going to describe all of the thoughts that went through my head as I sat there. I'll summarize: Very few of them were good. Attempts to go to my happy place kept failing. I tried to hum some of my favorite songs, but I kept ruining the songs in my head, so I gave up. I settled for a fun night of staring out into the darkness, waiting for somebody to try and kill me.

Approximately ninety-five hours later in mental time, the sun began to rise. Quinn hadn't gotten up to take a shift, but that was fine. I knew I'd successfully stayed awake the whole time, because this night had moved forward with such excruciating slowness that there couldn't have been any time jumps from falling asleep.

Quinn slept so late that it became annoying. Finally, she emerged from the cabin. She yawned, stretched, and asked me how my night went.

“It wasn’t super great,” I said. I almost made a joke about how the demons had shown up a couple of hours ago and I defeated them all, but I wasn’t sure that the joke would be well received and rejected it.

“Should we have breakfast?”

“Do you mean lunch?”

Quinn yawned again. “What time is it?”

“According to the sun, it’s almost noon.” I had only the most basic skill at using the sun to determine time, but that felt right.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“You should have woken me up.”

“It’s fine. I wanted you to be well-rested. But, yeah, I’m starving.”

I was so hungry that I gobbled down the disgusting can of beef stew that Quinn gave me. We were far from rich, but we made decent money, so I’m not sure why she went with an off-brand that was probably mostly rat meat. But I supposed it would keep me alive for the rest of the day.

After lunch, I went to sleep, while Quinn kept watch outside.

She woke me up at sunset for dinner, which consisted of a can of spaghetti that had lost all of its structural integrity, so it was just pasta slime mixed with tomato sauce. If I’d known about this dismal selection, I would have gone grocery shopping when we got the hardware supplies.

“When do we decide we’re in the clear?” I asked.

“We stay here another week,” said Quinn. “After that, we’ll switch to one of the better safe locations, one that was intended for Vic and me. If he doesn’t find us there, after a week or so, I think we can assume he’s no longer looking for us. Then we have to figure out if we’re wanted for murder, or



just for questioning, and decide if we can go back. We'll work out a cover story before we go home. We've got time."

"So are you saying that if we hang out at the other place for a week, and Vic or the other demons never show up, then we're safe from them?"

"Um, no. We'll be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives."

"Shit."

"You're the one who decided to kill Vic."

"Go to bed," I told her.

I sat beside the fire, wishing I had marshmallows to roast. My thoughts were all still unpleasant and whiny. I hadn't slept well, so this was going to be a much rougher night, but I was confident that I wouldn't fall asleep and tumble into the fire.

This really sucked.

This really, really sucked.

I tried to sing a mental song, along the lines of "100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall," where I counted one hundred "reallys" in front of how much this sucked, but I lost count very quickly and moved on to simply staring at the fire, seeing if any cool images would form in the flames. None did.

Like I've said, I had no idea of knowing what time it was. So though I had this sudden sense that it was the stroke of midnight, I didn't know that for sure when Vic came strolling toward the cabin.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I stood up and pointed a gun at him. “Stop!”  
Vic put his hands in the air.

Yes, he had hands. And arms and legs. And, from what I could tell, both eyes, although he wasn’t close enough for me to see for sure.

“Get down on the ground!” I shouted.

I didn’t think Vic would actually get down on the ground. I just thought that was a little better than shouting, “Quinn! Wake up!”

“Nah,” said Vic. He continued walking toward me.

“I told you to stop!” I shouted.

“I’ll stop before I get too close,” Vic assured me. “But there’s no reason we can’t have a conversation without yelling at each other. I’m going to walk close enough that I can warm myself up with your fire, but I won’t cross past it. Is that all right? Are we good?”

I shook my head. “Take one more step and I’ll shoot.”

“If you shoot, then we’ve lost the ability to resolve this without violence. I’m all in favor of violence, but I suspect that you’d rather talk this out. I’m not asking you to stop pointing the gun at me; I just don’t want you to actually shoot me.”

The cabin door opened, and Quinn stepped out. I mean, I assume it was Quinn—I didn’t look away from Vic to see who

it was.

“Don’t come any closer!” Quinn shouted.

“I’ve already been over that with your boyfriend,” said Vic. “Just chill out, okay? It’s all good.”

I didn’t shoot him, but I kept my finger on the trigger as he walked over to the fire. If he tried anything that made me nervous, I was going to shoot him right in the mouth.

He held out his hands. “Ah. This is nice.” When he spoke, I could see that his teeth had also healed themselves. Satan had quite a dental plan.

“What do you want?” Quinn asked.

“Aren’t you going to compliment me on my limbs? Not bad for somebody who was dismembered not too long ago, huh?”

“Did they grow back?” I asked.

“Nah. A couple of the guys collected them from the house. If you hold them onto the stump long enough, they reattach, sort of like when you’re trying to make Super Glue set.”

“Next time we’ll just have to make sure that nobody gets to collect them,” I said.

“See, you think we’re headed for another bloodbath. Which one of us is truly the monster?”

“The serial killer with the nickname The Toledo Trasher.”

“That’s fair, that’s fair.”

“She asked what you wanted.”

“What I want and what I’m here for, are two very different things. I *want* to drag both of you kicking and screaming into the pits of Hell, but, as I keep trying to say, I thought I’d work out a more or less peaceful resolution first. Quinn, what I’d like to offer you is a ‘No harm, no foul’ deal. We forget everything that happened. We go back to our loveless marriage as if the last couple of days were nothing more than a dream.”

“I’m listening,” said Quinn.

“In exchange, you turn Corey over to me.”

“And what will you do to him?”

Vic smiled. “Horrible things. I’m talking about *really* horrible things. But the key point I’m trying to make is that I’ll be doing horrible things to him and not to you. Doesn’t that sound nice? You can just get back in your car, turn on some peaceful music, and drive away from here.”

“Get bent,” said Quinn.

“You’re refusing my offer?”

“Yeah, I’m telling you to go fuck yourself.”

Vic shrugged. “All right. Message received.”

“You were never going to let me go,” said Quinn. “You’re just playing around. If I’d said you could have Corey, you’d still torture and kill me. You’d just get to enjoy that I had a guilty conscience.”

“Busted,” said Vic.

I have to admit that if I was Quinn, I wouldn’t have told Vic that I knew he was lying. She should’ve accepted his offer and then tried to figure out a way to use it to her advantage. Yeah, I would’ve been pissed, but she might have found an opportunity to scream, “No deal, asshole!” and chop his head off with an axe.

Oh well. Too late now.

“Is it okay for me to shoot you now?” I asked Vic.

“I guess I’ll offer you the same deal I put on the table for Quinn,” he said. “Step aside. Let me give her what she deserves. I’ll let you go.”

“You literally just admitted that you were lying to her.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m lying to you.”

“Kiss my ass.”

“Very good. Neither of you are so stupid or cowardly that you’d take my deal. Honestly, if you had, I would’ve thought, wow, what fucking idiots, so I’m glad that you told me to kiss

your ass.” Vic cracked his knuckles. “Wow, that is a shitty, shitty cabin. Did this belong to your junkie grandfather, Corey?”

“It’s Quinn’s.”

Vic raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You bought it without me knowing? What did it cost you, twenty bucks and a handjob?”

“If you must know, I don’t—”

“I don’t give a shit,” said Vic. “Not even a little bit of one. I’m surprised you bothered to start to explain how you got this place.”

I was extremely tempted to take this opportunity to shoot Vic in the mouth, but decided to hold off just a bit longer. I still didn’t know what he wanted.

“Are your friends here?” I asked.

“Don’t call them friends,” said Vic. “They’re my brothers and sisters.”

“Is that why you look so inbred?”

“That was weak, Corey. That was not good at all. The greatest gift I can give you is to pretend you never said that. It’s not funny, it doesn’t make sense...it was just a lame comment in every possible way. I truly don’t know what Quinn sees in you.”

“She doesn’t see anything in me.”

“She’s right about that.”

“Answer my question,” I said.

“I don’t remember your question. I got distracted by your pathetic ‘Is that why you look so inbred?’ joke.”

“Are your brothers and sisters here?”

“Ah. That’s actually a very good question, Corey. I’m surprised it took you this long to ask. The answer is, no, they are not, but yes, they can show up at a moment’s notice. The holy mission is still on. But because this is all kind of

personal, what with you dismembering me and all, I asked that they let me handle this myself.”

I grinned, hoping I looked like I was feeling confident and amused. “So what you’re saying is that you’re here to fight us alone, but if it’s too hard you can beg for help.”

Vic glared at me. “I won’t need any help.”

“Oh, I’m sure you won’t. But I bet it feels good to know that the other Satanists can save your ass. Just a little security blanket, right?”

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Very much so.” I didn’t have a specific plan to capitalize on Vic being pissed off, but I figured that an angry and possibly flustered demonic serial killer would be easier to outwit than one in complete control of his emotions.

I shot him in the face.

My goal had been to shoot him right in the teeth. Whether they grew back or not, nobody wanted a mouth full of shattered tooth fragments. But my aim wasn’t quite good enough for that, and I shot him next to his nose.

A generous squirt of blood came out of his face. Vic cried out in pain and/or rage.

I shot him in the face again, obliterating his nose.

The third got him *almost* directly between the eyes. It was close enough that if I said, “I shot him between the eyes,” you’d have to be really pedantic to argue.

I shot him three more times. I’m not trying to brag, but all six shots struck him in the face, though admittedly none of them got him in the teeth. Or, for that matter, the eyes. But I seriously fucked up his head, overall.

I put the gun back in my pocket.

He just stood there for a moment, touching the various gushing holes in his face. Several smartass comments occurred to me, but I was frantic and terrified and they were kind of in a

jumble, and I didn't want a reprise of the "Is that why you look so inbred?" disaster.

"That..." said Vic. "That...that all...that..."

"Are you trying to sarcastically ask if that's all he's got?" asked Quinn.

Vic nodded, spraying some blood into the air as his head bobbed.

It wasn't all I had. I had a second fully loaded gun in my other pocket, and plenty more ammo hidden around the area. I picked up the axe that had been resting on the ground next to my chair.

"Here's my offer," I told him. "Get the fuck out of here."

Vic waited for the rest of the offer. I'd assumed that "... and I won't hurt you anymore" was understood and hadn't bothered to continue speaking.

Then, without warning, Vic charged at me.

He ran right through the fire, but unfortunately didn't set his legs aflame.

Throughout this narrative, I think I've made it pretty clear that I have a lot of flaws. In this case, my flaw was hubris. Having shot Vic six times, leaving him with an almost unrecognizable face, I assumed that I was in the power position. And I was holding an axe—a *better* axe than the one I'd previously used to lop off his appendages. In the Vic versus Corey battle, I was confident that I'd emerge the victor.

Too confident.

Because it surprised me when he charged. Don't get me wrong. I knew the guy was going to attack me at some point. But his shift from "guy standing there bleeding from a half-dozen bullet holes in his face" to "rage-filled assailant" happened so quickly that I wasn't quite ready for it.

Oh, I swung the axe. It's not like I froze in place going "Durr...". But the expectation would be that I'd mightily chop off one of his arms, or perhaps even a leg, or, in a true

stroke of heroism, his head. I still believed that Vic minus a head would prove to be no real threat.

While I wasn't anticipating Vic charging at me, he very much *was* anticipating me swinging the axe at him. So he blocked the swing. Grabbed the axe by the handle, right underneath the blade. Yanked it out of my hand. Smiled.

I backed away from him as quickly as I could, almost crashing into Quinn, who was still standing in the doorway to the cabin. She handed me another axe and shoved me forward.

I swung my axe. Vic swung his axe. Both of our axe blades collided.

I'd swung as hard as I possibly could, and I assume that Vic had done the same. He was a much bigger guy than me, so the force of our axes smashing into each other was so intense that it felt like he'd shattered the bones in my hands. My axe fell to the ground. Vic's did not.

He took another swing at me, *very* narrowly missing my arm.

"Ready to become a torso?" he asked with a sneer.

I had this horrifying vision of being an armless, legless, living torso, hung up for display on Vic's wall, used as a makeshift dartboard when he needed to blow off some steam after a hard day at work. Of course, this vision was completely illogical, since I'd bleed to death long before he chopped off all four of my limbs, but it was still a nightmarish thought that scared the shit out of me as Vic swung the axe again.

He missed. I don't think he was actually trying to hit me, though. It was meant to be a scary swing that foreshadowed what was going to happen very soon.

We circled around the fire. Blood was still dripping off his face, and it sizzled as it hit the flames.

Should I just make a run for it? Flee into the woods and hope that he didn't fling the axe at me, striking me in the back and severing my spinal column?

No. I'd fight this out.



He raised the axe. Though I could not see into his mind—thank God, because I'm sure it was a dark and diseased place—I was confident that he intended for this to be the swing that took off one of my arms.

His body twitched as a gunshot rang out.

Quinn shot him again and again, hitting him in the chest most of the time but also getting in a shot that went right through his left arm. Vic grunted in pain and gave Quinn a look of pure fury. This time he didn't call her a bitch. I have presented an uncensored account of the events so far, but I do have my limits, so I'll just say that he called her the c-word.

I took advantage of Vic being distracted by getting shot a few times and picked up the axe.

"I'm going to reload now," Quinn told him. "We've got tons of ammo, so if you want me to shoot you until you're just scraps of flesh on a skeleton, I'm happy to do it. Or you can admit that you're a chickenshit and call for help. Your choice."

My first thought was, what the hell is she doing? Why was she reminding him that he could bring in demon reinforcements? Then I thought, well, no, she's playing on his fragile male ego and trying to make him *not* call the others.

I lunged at him with the axe, trying to do the thing he'd done earlier where I wasn't expecting him to charge so soon. It wasn't very effective. He dodged with relative ease, despite having been shot a dozen times. I swung again. He dodged that one, too.

Then he swung his axe at me. I stepped backwards to avoid the swing, and though that part was successful, I tripped.

I have no idea what I tripped on. A rock? A clump of dirt? A random molecule? No clue. But I fell on my ass, which wasn't great when I had a hulking serial killer coming at me with an axe.

He raised the axe once again, and I was sure he meant to split my skull in half.

But, wait, weren't we supposed to suffer more? Getting my head split in two would be almost like a mercy kill.

Did I have his intention wrong?

Didn't matter. I remembered that I had a second gun. I reached into my jacket, fumbled for a split-second, and pulled it out. Pointed it at Vic. Squeezed the trigger.

Right in the fucking chin.

Vic's eyes went crossed as I followed that with a second shot that hit him in almost the same spot. He was handling things pretty well for a guy who kept getting shot in the face, but nevertheless, he *was* getting shot in the face a lot this evening, and I hoped it was starting to take its toll.

I kept shooting until I was out of bullets again.

Then I flung the gun at him.

It struck him in the mouth and—I swear—stuck there, hanging in the strips of flesh that dangled from his face. The flesh tore, and the gun fell to the ground.

Vic didn't drop the axe.

I still had mine. I jumped to my feet, hurting my back in the process, and took a swing. Missed. The axe popped out of my hand, maybe because my hand was all sweaty.

I decided that the best tactic was to just go full-on raging animal on the guy. His advantage was that he was much bigger and stronger. My advantage was that I had not been shot twelve times in the face.

I tried to tackle him like a football player. He swung the axe yet again, but hit me with the handle and not the blade. It still hurt.

I reached for his mangled jaw, trying to dig my fingers into it. His tongue slithered across my fingers, but I was too focused on the task at hand to think about how gross that was. I was going to rip his jaw clean off his face.

He bit down on my fingers. Hard. I mean, really hard. Though it wasn't quite hard enough to actually bite off the digits, his teeth sunk in deep and drew blood. I screamed and tried to pull my fingers out of his mouth, but his dental grip was too tight.

A nail struck him in the forehead.

Then another.

I didn't have to look back to see that Quinn was using the nail gun. I was simultaneously happy for the distraction and upset that she was shooting nails so close to me. We had shot a couple of them earlier to make sure we knew how to use the thing, but there certainly hadn't been any target practice involved.

I yanked my fingers out from between Vic's teeth, taking off a lot of skin in the process.

Then I punched him in the stomach. This made him throw up whatever he'd eaten for dinner, mixed with plenty of blood. It splattered all over my jacket, but I was more pleased than disgusted.

A nail swished dangerously close to my ear.

"Stop it!" I shouted at Quinn.

One of the nails had gone all the way into Vic's head, but the other one had about an inch visible. I slammed my fist into it, trying to drive it in the rest of the way. That was quite a mistake. I howled in pain.

A nail went into Vic's eye. Okay, I was happy about that, even though I'd asked Quinn to stop shooting nails so close to me.

I punched Vic again in the stomach. He dropped to his knees.

I grabbed his bald head with both hands—this would've been easier if he had hair—and tugged him forward.

Then I slammed his face into the fire.

His entire body began to thrash around, but I climbed on his back and used every bit of strength I possessed to keep him in the flames.

I'd heard Vic make a lot of agonized sounds since we first made our acquaintance. These were the worst by far. I almost—but not quite—felt bad. The fire was extremely

uncomfortable for me as well, but some singed arms were worth it.

Vic continued to scream and thrash.

Then he stopped screaming and thrashed less violently.

Then the thrashing became more of a twitching.

I got off of him and stepped away from the fire.

I assumed he wasn't dead. Maybe the pain had been so intense that he passed out. I'd just leave him there and hope that it cooked him down to a hollow skull.

We'd won.

I mean, there were still a couple dozen demons to contend with, but for the next few seconds at least, we'd won.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**A**pproximately three seconds later, people began to step out of the woods.

They were all wearing devil masks, and their eyes glowed beneath them. I was right—this was much scarier in the darkness. They all carried weapons. I recognized many of the demons, and they all appeared to have completely healed from their injuries.

This wasn't ideal, obviously.

I pointed to Vic's body. "I beat him fair and square," I announced, even though technically Quinn had given me an assist with the nail gun. "I shouldn't be punished for this. I think this is deserving of your respect."

None of the demons said anything, so I continued speaking to fill the awkward silence.

"He's way bigger than me. And he has plenty of experience killing people. If he's still alive, then I've technically never taken a human life. I'm an accountant. But I stepped up, and I vanquished my foe, and I honestly believe that you should congratulate me and go back to your lives."

The demon with the golden mask stepped forward. "That's a very interesting argument," he said.

I almost said "Thank you" like a total dweeb, but I switched to "It's the truth" at the last second.

The demon removed his mask.

Underneath, his face was blurry. Shifting. Melting.

I think he was unaware that I'd seen a couple of the other demons without their masks and was trying to be really scary.

"We reject your argument," he said.

Okay, well, I'd kind of suspected that. Worth a shot.

I suppose that I could've taken that opportunity to try to flee into the woods, but they would've caught me and dragged me back to my inevitable fate. The only way Quinn and I were escaping that night was if we somehow got into the car and sped off without them stopping us, which was unlikely. And then, because they could apparently find us anywhere we went, they'd show up at our next hiding spot.

We were utterly fucked.

And the acceptance that you're utterly fucked comes with a sort of freedom. If I was going to die tonight—or at least begin the process of a slow agonizing death—why not at least make it as difficult for these assholes as possible?

I jumped into the air, landing on Vic's skull with both feet. It crunched underneath me, but I jumped on it a few more times, making a horrible sizzling mess out of it. Then I kicked his bone chunks and brains, scattering them as far as I could.

I stepped out of the fire. My shoes were ruined, and my legs felt like they had a really bad sunburn. "Maybe he can come back from that," I said. "But I'm not going to make it easy for you to scoop him up."

"And are you planning to do that to all of us?" asked the demon.

"If I have to."

"I look forward to your effort."

I picked up the axe, let out a cry of rage, and ran at him.

I knew this wasn't going to work, and it wasn't my actual plan. As he braced himself for my arrival, I ran right past him and over to a large tree. I dropped to my knees and scooped up the ammo clip I'd hidden there earlier.

Because I was so absurdly outnumbered and my opponents couldn't be killed, I hoped the demons didn't think of me as much of a threat.

They didn't just stand there and watch me, but they didn't aggressively come after me while I snapped the new clip into the gun. Then I opened fire, hitting demon after demon. They all cried out in pain, though none of them fell.

Quinn, who'd also apparently had an opportunity to reload her gun, began to fire.

I hadn't just hidden extra ammo by that tree. I picked up the cordless circular saw I'd purchased for \$139. I knew from the test that it was extremely loud, so I said, "Come and get me, assholes!" before I turned it on.

Then I proceeded to go batshit, bugfuck insane with it.

I slammed it into the demon's blurry face. His blood sure wasn't blurry as it sprayed into the air.

A demon tried to pull it out of my hand, and I sliced the spinning blade across his wrist. His hand flopped forward, spurting blood. He foolishly tried with the other hand, and an instant later that one was missing four of its five fingers. I kicked the fingers out of the way after they landed on the ground.

I ran back to the fire and picked up the axe. Several demons followed me. I spun around and swung the axe with one hand while I thrust the circular saw with the other. I created deep gashes and cuts galore. Blood was spraying everywhere. And I was only getting started.

I noticed one of them pointing a crossbow at me.

An instant before he pulled the trigger, Quinn shot him in the head. The arrow pounded into the ground. I let out a battle cry and rushed at the archer, who held up his hands to defend himself. That was a mistake. Both hands, plus the crossbow, fell to the ground.

I swung the axe at a demon. The blade slashed across both of his glowing eyes.

The demons were all starting to come at me at once. But I'd gone rather feral, and even though they were supernatural beings, it's tough to subdue a crazed adrenaline-fueled guy going berserk with an axe. There weren't enough severed body parts flying around for my liking, but there were plenty of wounds and there was blood galore.

I still don't believe they were actually trying to kill me. Right now I wasn't worried about the hellish fate that was in store for me after I inevitably lost this battle.

I got a demon in the face with the circular saw. His rubber mask fell off his face in two parts, as blood began to spray from his chin to his scalp. But then the saw got stuck in his skull. I tugged on it, and when it wouldn't come free, I was forced to leave it behind.

I chopped a demon's arm completely off with one swing. Granted, she was a lady with thin arms, but I was proud of the accomplishment.

"Eat my dick, Satan!" I shouted. I was less proud of that.

I glanced back to check in on Quinn. She had a large pair of garden shears, and she was stabbing the shit out of them with it.

I started to think that we might win this.

Then I saw that there were still demons everywhere, and the only one I'd completely subdued was Vic. We were still totally screwed. We were simply trying to make things extremely unpleasant for the demons in the meantime.

I spun around in circles, swinging the axe. I hit a couple of demons, but as I started to get dizzy I realized that this hadn't been my most intelligent strategy. I stopped spinning and swung the axe at a pair of identical twin demons who I immediately realized was just one demon. But I hit him in the chest, and I think I splintered some of his ribs, so I was satisfied.

"Why don't you surrender?" a demon asked.

"Why don't you get a better mask, you cheap piece of shit?"



The demon tapped the plastic mask. “This is vintage. These are impossible to find now. This cost way more than the rubber masks.”

I slammed the axe into his vintage mask.

Like the circular saw in the other demon’s face, the axe blade was buried so deep that I couldn’t wrench it out. I sprinted toward the cabin, hoping nobody would stop me before I made it to the rear of the structure. A demon ran at me, but I weaved at the last second. He crashed into the side of the building, and I honestly worried that the whole thing would come crashing down, but it stayed upright for now.

I grabbed my tool, yanked the starter cord, and let out a primal whoop as it roared to life. That’s right, bitches, I had a chainsaw!

I ran to the front of the cabin to introduce the demons to my new friend.

I’d guess I was a frightening sight. A man whose last trace of sanity had fled his mind. I’m glad that no video exists, because I think it would be incredibly disturbing to see myself then. Crazy eyes for sure. Perhaps a deranged grin. These were cultists who’d struck some sort of bargain with the Prince of Darkness, but I’m sure they were thinking that there was something seriously wrong with me.

I described my behavior with the circular saw as “batshit, bugfuck insane.” So I’m not entirely sure how to describe the escalation with the chainsaw. Batshittier, bugfuckier insane? I don’t know. Let’s just say that I wasn’t being shy.

A very large number of body parts were hitting the ground. I’d become desensitized to carnage. Quite a bit of blood was getting in my mouth, because of all the mad laughing I was doing, and I swallowed it with glee.

And then...a moment of lucidity.

I was drenched in blood, waving around a chainsaw while cackling like a madman.

What had I become?

The moment of lucidity vanished, and I resumed the slaughter.

I hoped Quinn was getting into this as much as I was.

I was sawing a demon across the waist, his intestines unspooling out like...actually, I can't think of a comparative description. If you've read this far, you probably can imagine what unspooling intestines look like. Anyway, as I was doing that, a demon smashed a spiked iron mace into my back.

I fell forward, knocking the demon that was being chainsawed over. The chainsaw finished the process of cutting him in half before shutting off, but I couldn't enjoy it, because the demon with the mace struck me again. I dropped to my knees.

Quinn screamed.

The demon raised the mace as if to bash in my skull, then changed his mind and lowered it. "Let's take him inside," he said.

Some demons—and I'm pleased to say that it took four of them—carried me into the cabin. I struggled as violently as I could, although I'll admit that being bludgeoned with a spiked iron mace twice had taken away some of my vigor.

Once inside the cabin, they dropped me onto the floor. I didn't break through the floorboards, so apparently the cabin was much sturdier than I'd thought, and I owed the construction team an apology.

Several demons were holding Quinn down on the floor.

One of them popped the inflatable mattress with a pitchfork, presumably just to be a dick.

I'd known it was going to come to this. At least a lot of the demons were in really sorry shape, and maybe I'd be dead before they healed up.

I accepted my fate, and I was at peace.

Very briefly.

The peaceful acceptance of my fate transformed into sheer terror and panic. No! No! I wasn't ready! I didn't even want a merciful axe blow to the head, much less an eternity of torment.

Quinn let out a shriek, as one of the demons slammed a knife into her ankle.

"Leave her alone!" I shouted.

The demon laughed. "Oh, this is just the beginning. This is *nothing*. Whittling her foot down to the bone is the easy part."

"Worry about your own problems," a demon told me, bashing my head against the floor. "Your life, what little is left of it, is about to become nothing but pain."

"And do you want to know the irony?" asked another demon. He took off his rubber devil mask and tossed it aside. "You were *so* close to stopping this. You quit at dismemberment, but Vic couldn't have recited the incantation to summon us if you'd destroyed his head. Think about that while you're suffering a fate worse than a thousand deaths. It didn't have to work out like this."

Quinn continued to shriek as they sliced off an inch-thick strip of flesh from the bottom of her foot.

"I said, leave her alone!" I screamed.

"Seriously, Corey, you have no concept of how bad things are going to get for you. The knife work is nothing."

Quinn screamed and sobbed and begged for mercy.

I was sure I'd be doing that soon. But, God, her screams were unbearable to hear. I didn't even *like* Quinn very much at this point, but still...

"Let her go," I said. "Take me instead."

Several of the demons laughed.

"I mean it! This was all my fault! I'm the one who attacked Vic! I'm the one who should suffer! Let Quinn go and drag me to Hell instead of her!"

"We're already taking both of you."

“So make my fate twice as bad!”

More laughter from the demons.

“I’m serious!” I screamed. “She was going along with Vic! She was *helping* him! I’m the one who went after him! Leave her alone! Leave her alone! Goddamn it, leave her alone!”

I was crying now. Ugly crying, with snot and everything.

The demons thought this was absolutely hilarious. I didn’t care.

They sliced off another strip of flesh from Quinn’s foot. The demon who cut it off crawled over to me and dangled it above my mouth. “Open wide!”

“Leave her alone!” I screamed. “It was all me! Leave her alone! Leave her—”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The demons froze.

The room turned dark red.

Somebody—*something*—hovered above me.

“*Why?*” asked a low, rumbling voice that I may have only heard in my head.

I didn’t know how to answer. My entire body was trembling in fear.

“*Why?*” the voice repeated. The thing above me was ever-shifting, but I could almost see a face, one that looked like a combination of all the devil masks.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“*Unbearable misery. Incomprehensible agony. Why offer yourself?*”

“She doesn’t deserve it.”

“*Do you?*”

“No.”

The thing was silent.

“Are you Satan?”

“*I am not. I am close enough.*”

More silence.

“*I don’t like this.*”

“Like what?”

*“Sacrifice.”*

“Oh.”

*“I see you. I see inside you. You meant what you said.”*

I did. I truly did. Although the madness I was experiencing may also have played a part.

*“Putting others above yourself. Those who join me do not behave this way. My realm is filled with those who are selfish. Cowards. I do not want you there.”*

Suddenly the cabin was back to its normal lighting. The demons, seeing the floating figure, all dropped to a prone position.

*“You have served well,”* the thing told them. *“Yet it is the wrong prey.”*

“But—” said the demon who’d told me about the irony of my situation. An instant later, all of his skin was gone. Muscles and tendons and organs sloughed off his skeleton, which collapsed into dust.

A red swirling vortex appeared. It was only about the size of a human head.

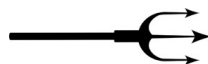
The demons began to scream as their bodies snapped, broke, tore, twisted, and were invisibly crushed into something big enough to fit through the portal.

One by one they were sucked into the vortex.

When all of them were gone, the vortex vanished.

Quinn looked over at me, wide-eyed with horror. And then she faded away, as if she’d been a ghost along.

*“I shall undo all you have done,”* the thing told me. *“You may live in peace. I do not want you.”*



I WAS IN THE OFFICE, STANDING BY QUINN’S CUBICLE. SHE looked positively sick to her stomach. “I’m fine,” she told me,

noticing my confused and concerned expression. “Stomach flu, I think.”

Patty and Stacey walked into the department with their morning coffees. “Does pepper spray go bad?” Patty asked.

“I can’t imagine that it does,” said Stacey. “I’ve never heard that you need to do routine maintenance on your pepper spray. I’ve got a Taser.”

“Are we allowed to have a Taser in the office?”

“Of course we are. Sometimes we have to walk through the parking lot at night.”

I just stood there in shock. Was I really back in the office, right before the moment where I suspected that Quinn was married to the Toledo Trasher?

Patty told me that another body had been found.

Quinn bent over, pulled over her wastebasket, and dry heaved.

“It’s okay,” Stacey told her. “We’ll watch out for each other.”

When I went to lunch with Quinn, I didn’t say a damn thing about what I knew. There was absolutely no evidence that she remembered what had happened to us.

I spent the rest of the day waiting for the illusion to vanish, for police to swarm my cubicle or for me to wake up in Hell, having the flesh flayed from my bones by red winged demons. But when the workday was over, I told Quinn goodnight and returned to my apartment. The clothes I’d packed for our escape out of town were in the dresser drawers.

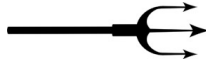
Holy shit, I’d been given a second chance.

*Unholy* shit, I supposed.

I could resume my normal life. I could pretend that none of this ever happened.

It was over. My nightmare was over.

I lay on my bed and wept with relief.



MONDAY MORNING.

I sat in my car, parked across the street from Quinn's house.

The front door opened. Vic and Darla left the house. They got in his car and drove away.

On Friday, I'd had lunch with Quinn. Right after we placed our order, I apologized and told her that I forgot that I needed to pick up a card for my aunt's birthday. The Thai restaurant was in the same strip mall as a Target, so I promised that I'd hurry over there and grab a card really, really quickly. I'd be back before the food arrived.

And I was. It didn't take long to make a copy of her house key that I swiped. We spent the rest of lunch talking about how work was going.

I placed a yellow padded envelope next to the front door, then let myself in and waited for Vic to return.

While I waited, I cursed the fact that I didn't know any lottery numbers or sports teams' scores from the days I was reliving.

About twenty minutes later, the door opened and closed. I heard him tear open the envelope. Then he muttered, "What the fuck is this?"

I heard him stomp through the hallway, a hallway that was much cleaner than it had been the last time I saw it. He walked into the living room. I assumed he was putting in the DVD that I'd labeled *Watch Me Immediately*.

Yes, it was a DVD. I'd rather have sent the video to him via e-mail or social media, but obviously I didn't want the digital trail.

He turned on the television, then I heard him plop down into a recliner.



I listened for the sound of my voice. It would be soft at first, so he'd have to turn the volume way up to hear me.

"Hello, Victor," I said on the television. I was wearing a devil mask. Halloween was long over, so I'd had to go to a costume shop to get one. It wasn't cheap, and I took it off about five seconds into the video, but I really liked the dramatic touch. "I know who you are. I know what you've done." That's where I took the mask off.

"What I'm saying to you may not make sense, but I've beaten you three times. The first time, you ran like a scared little bitch. The second time, I left you a limbless freak." I would never, under normal circumstances, describe somebody as a limbless freak, but I needed this to be in language that Vic could relate to. "The third time, I held your ugly head in a fire. The fourth time is going to be the worst, and I want it to be clear that this is a direct result of your actions. This is payback for the women you killed. You're *done*, Victor."

I didn't know if calling him Victor pissed him off, but I liked to think that it did.

Another dramatic touch would have been saying, "Your reign of terror ends...*now!*" but I didn't want to time the video to my actions and risk having it all get messed up. Instead, on the video, I smiled at the camera and put my devil mask back on. Death metal music blasted from the television, far louder than my voice.

The song was all about Satan. But it was less of a creative touch than a practical one, since it covered the sound of me walking up behind him.

I bashed Vic in the skull with a sledgehammer.

He tumbled forward out of the chair and onto the floor. I bashed him a few more times, until his skull was a splattery mess that could not recite incantations. I removed his tongue, just in case.

Then I quickly went to work with the hacksaw.

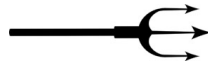
After cleaning up the crime scene as well as I could, I put the bags of Vic into my car and drove away.

I buried his limbs in a shallow grave in the woods. I buried his torso in a different shallow grave in the woods. I dropped his head into a very deep hole, put large rocks over it, then covered it with dirt. Even if his severed head did heal, I didn't think he could chew his way out of that.

His tongue I'd sliced into very thin strips back at his home, flushing them down the toilet one by one.

Though there were no guarantees, I was fairly confident that the Toledo Trasher had claimed his last victim.

R.W.P., A. (Rest Without Peace, Asshole.)

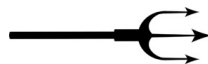


QUINN LOOKED SURPRISED WHEN SHE WALKED INTO THE parking lot and saw me standing by her car. "Feeling better?" she asked.

"Very much so. Wanna go for a quick drink?"

"Oh, I really should get home. Vic doesn't like it when I'm late."

"He won't care. I promise."



I WAITED FOR HER TO TAKE A SIP OF HER STRAWBERRY margarita before I broke the news to her. "I solved your problem."

"What problem?"

"The big problem in your life."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," I said. "And by problem, I mean the whole 'made you take bites out of his victims' thing."

Quinn's eyes widened. "How did you—?"

“No questions. I’m not going to answer them. What I need you to do is work with me. I cleaned up your living room as best I could, but I’m sure it’s not perfect. I need you to say that he left you. You had a big fight, he drove off with some stripper, and you don’t care if you ever see him again. Tell his job he won’t be coming back. Did he have any close friends who’ll miss him?”

Quinn just gaped at me.

“Work with me, Quinn.”

“No, he didn’t,” she said. “Nobody liked him.”

“Good. Now, you know a pretty shady car dealer, right? One who could get you a quick car if you needed to flee town?”

“How the hell do you—?”

“No questions. Will they also get rid of a car?”

Quinn nodded. “I think so.”

“Excellent. Get rid of Vic’s car.”

“All right.” She took another sip of her margarita. “Are you *sure* he’s—?”

“I said not to ask any questions. So let me just say that there are things you could tell me that a normal person would not believe, and I would totally believe them. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure there are a lot of other details we have to work out, but I think we’re off to a good start. For now, I think the only thing left is for you to start thinking about what charity, or charities, you want to volunteer for.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Vic made you do the horrible things. But still, I would feel better about the whole situation if you did a *crapload* of charity work from now on. Any ideas?”

“I...I could volunteer at an animal shelter.”

“Yes! Perfect! Volunteer at an animal shelter. Make life better for cats and dogs. I like that. Anyway, call me if you need me, and I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

## EPILOGUE

**I**n case you were wondering, Quinn and I didn't fall in love, or even hook up. In fact, we stopped going to lunch together, though we remained cordial with each other, and I've got to say that we worked really well as a team when we took care of the last details to make Vic disappear. She did have to talk to the police, of course, but they didn't have a forensics team go through her house, and as far as I could tell, we'd gotten away with it.

Quinn did indeed spend her evenings and weekends volunteering at an animal shelter. I think she enjoyed the work. Which is good—this wasn't punishment, just karmic balance.

I sold most of my belongings and took a leave of absence from work.

The demons could've come from anywhere, and all of their faces had been covered and blurred. Not a single one of them was recognizable.

However...it didn't take long to research the victims of the massacre in Grand Rapids. You know, the other holy mission that Quinn had told me about. And from there, it was very easy to find a record of the guy who'd run a red light and hit the father's car, an accident that had apparently made him so angry, he summoned his fellow demons to get vengeance.

Blake Walls was going to receive a visit from me very soon.

I'd work out the details during the drive. I needed a private place where I could "talk" to him, and I needed to be ready to

chop off his head if he started reciting incantations. But, with sufficient planning, I was sure I could get him to reveal the names of his fellow demons. Maybe not all of them, but enough for me to get started.

If he did call a holy mission and the demons arrived...well, I'd gone on a major shopping spree, and I had a car full of the most destructive (but legal, of course) tools I could find.

Bring it on, motherfuckers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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