

HELLSCIOUS

CRYSTAL-RAIN LOVE

Hellacious

Hellacious: Book One

Crystal-Rain Love

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About the Author

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CHAPTER ONE

What the... Where... Why...

“Where the hell am I?”

“Not quite Hell, dear, but it’s not the worst guess I’ve heard.”

What? What did that mean? I stared at the pretty blonde woman sitting behind the gray executive desk, doing her best to ignore me while she flipped through a file folder. She was very thin and pale, her eyes an almost unearthly shade of light silvery blue, and her long nails, although nicely polished and manicured, were a little too pointy for my taste. Her no-nonsense dark gray pantsuit suggested she was a professional, but a professional *what* I had no idea.

I looked around the office for a clue, but all I saw were gray walls and gray tiled floor. I was in a small gray cube with nothing but a desk and two chairs. The woman didn’t even have a computer or telephone, let alone a nameplate to identify her.

“Where the hell am I?!”

She lifted her eyes from the file, looked at me, and sighed. “You don’t remember. Don’t worry. This happens sometimes when you die really fast and unexpectedly. It’ll come back to you.”

“When you—when I... *what?* I’m dead?!” I gripped the arms of my chair and started breathing fast, panting like an old, ill dog. “I’m... I’m going to... I’m going to hyperventilate.”

“Well, it can’t hurt if you do. You’re already dead.”

“Stop saying that.” I slammed my hands on the desk. “I am not dead! I’m sitting right here.”

“Yes. Here in Purgatory.”

“Purgatory?” My mind went blank right before it filled with images from season eight of *Supernatural*. Then I started laughing. “Oh, this is great. You really got me. I suppose one of my friends is going to run in here dressed like a leviathan or a vampire? Who arranged this?”

The woman sighed again. This time, the sound was huffy and loaded with irritation. “Your death wasn’t arranged. You weren’t murdered.”

I rolled my eyes. “I meant the prank. Who arranged this prank?”

“It’s not a prank. You’re dead, Miss Malvada, and so far from what I’m seeing in your file, you don’t really have a lot of friends.”

Sadness pierced my heart quick as a blade, but I shoved it down and straightened my shoulders. Then I got mad, because being angry felt better than being confused and scared. “So, then what, *Candid Camera* is being revived? Bring out the cameras because I’m not falling for this bullshit. I think I’d remember dying no matter how unexpected. A person should remember dying.”

“They usually do, but sometimes it happens too suddenly to process right away.” She looked at me for a moment, twisted her lips in thought, and released another of those sighs. “All right, so technically you’re not officially dead yet, but you’re on your way, hence your presence here. You’re mostly dead, so I’m just going to get a head start on your paperwork if you would be so kind as to quietly sit there until your memory of what happened comes back.”

“Mostly dead? *Mostly* dead?” I ignored the thin woman’s frustrated hiss of breath. “What is this, *The Princess Bride*?”

“This is Purgatory,” she said in a clipped tone. “I think I have been very clear about that.”

“So how did I die? I’m twenty years old and in good health, so I’m not going to buy a heart condition.”

“Twenty-year-olds die from heart conditions too, dear. You, however, were hit by a bus.”

Suddenly, I heard a horrible screech, and it all came rushing back.

“Dunce. Dunce!”

I looked at my watch while tapping my foot on the tile floor and wondered how long it took to pour coffee into a cup and add six squirts of cinnamon dolce syrup, six squirts of chocolate syrup, and six shots of espresso. I couldn't function at my job without my morning coffee, but if I didn't get it and get moving, I was going to miss the bus. I could *not* be late for work.

“*DUNCE!*”

Suddenly aware of snickering and the heat of someone's focused attention, I raised my head to see nearly every customer in the busy coffee shop staring right at me. I quickly checked myself. My silky white button-down blouse and black slacks looked in order. My black heels matched. I'd used the mirror to put on my makeup and my dark hair had looked fine when I'd left my apartment that morning. I couldn't have anything in my teeth because I was still waiting for my pumpkin spice muffin and coffee.

“Dunce! Hey, you want your coffee or not?”

The people staring continued chuckling, except one woman who was nice enough to point toward the counter where the same mousy-haired barista who'd given me so much attitude while taking my order stood glaring at me, a large coffee I assumed to be mine stretched out toward me. Seriously? *Dunce?*

“It’s *Dul-say*,” I snapped, and stormed up to the counter. Heat filled my cheeks and started to spread, now realizing the woman had been calling me a dunce in front of everyone and I’d just stood there oblivious while being pointed and laughed at. “D-U-L-C-E, almost like the D-O-L-C-E syrup shots in the coffee I get here every weekday morning. It shouldn’t be that hard to read, even with a limited intelligence quotient.”

“Are you calling me stupid?”

“No, but I am calling you rude. I come in here almost every single day. You know my name, and I’m not sure what that glare is all about, but if I wasn’t running late already, I’d be having a chat with your manager about it.”

“Whatever, Karen. Do you want the coffee or not?”

She turned away as my jaw dropped open, my coffee held hostage in her hand. I all but leaped over the counter to snatch it out of her hand before she could toss it into the trash. I had no idea what the woman’s problem was, given I’d never so much as raised my voice in the café before and I was a regular and a damn good tipper, but I didn’t have time to find out. I was also quite over being stared at and I was pretty sure some jerk was filming us on his iPhone. Coffee finally in hand, I turned on my heel and rushed past the entertained strangers to get to the door.

“What about my tip?” the woman called out behind me, making sure to draw attention to the fact I hadn’t left one, the one time in my life I hadn’t tipped.

I skipped the verbal response and raised the middle finger of my free hand in the air to the mixed sound of boos and applause as I pushed through the door. At least some people seemed to notice the unfair hostility I'd been treated with and were on my side. Sadly, the boos nearly drowned them out.

Halfway to the bus stop, I realized I'd never gotten the pumpkin spice muffin I'd paid for. I turned back toward the café just in time to see my bus zip past. *Crap!*

Forgetting the muffin and the wasted money, I ran like the devil toward the bus stop, shouting, "Hold the bus! Hold the bus! For the love of all things holy, hold the friggin' bus!"

I could not be late. I worked for S&R, a large fashion store in the mall. Retail wasn't my dream, but it beat working in food service or collections, two other jobs I'd had and never wanted to go back to, and if I got a management or visual position, I could make decent money instead of just scraping by. The bigwigs were coming to the store today, so it would be the absolute worst day to show up late. "Hold the bus!"

I sprinted my way to the stop just as the last person got on and the door closed in my face. I pounded on the glass. "Wait! I'm here! Let me on!"

The doors opened, and I met the glare of the very annoyed bus driver. Geez, like that one second was going to throw him off his schedule for the rest of the day. I tapped my fare card on the panel and made sure to smile prettily with my sincere apology and thanked him for letting me on. I got a grunt in return, and before I could make it to a seat, he floored the gas

and sent me tumbling forward. A quick-handed man caught me before I face-planted in the aisle, but not before coffee sloshed out of my cup to splash the front of my white blouse. Just what I freaking needed on the day the bigwigs would be arriving. I was so peeved about that, I barely noticed the way the hot liquid scalded my skin.

I thanked the man and found a seat. Unfortunately, it was next to a man in a ratty old jacket that smelled like urine. Fortunately, he was asleep, so at least I wouldn't have to worry about him talking to me. If I'd learned anything about public transportation in the past two weeks, it was that bus riders were a mixed bag, and that bag was full of nuts in the morning. At least it was on my route.

I made a mental note to call the garage working on my car first thing when I got to work. Well, second thing. First, I had to grab a clean shirt. Meeting the bigwigs in a brown-stained blouse wet enough to now be partially see-through would not do. I took a much-needed drink of coffee I hoped hadn't been spit in and tried to relax... just in time for the smelly man to fall over into my lap.

By the time I reached my stop, I was sure I smelled like pee, but all I could do was hope the sweet scent of delicious coffee covered it up. The bus stop was at the edge of the mall parking lot, so I'd had to sprint across it and through the closest mall entrance, which, of course, was the most crowded one. I swerved around people walking like turtles and moved as fast as my legs and pumps would take me. I glanced at my watch,

only to see my wrist bare. What the... *Sonofabitch*, I thought, pretty sure the smelly guy had swiped it.

“Am I late?” I asked with what felt like my very last breath as I raced past my co-worker, Brittany. She stood at the counter, gawking as I sped past.

“Right on time, but you need to do something about that shirt. What the heck happened to you?”

“It’s been the morning from hell,” I called back as I snatched a shirt off a rack and ran into the dressing rooms. I sped into one, yanked my purse strap over my head, and ripped off my soiled shirt. The one I’d grabbed was burgundy and long-sleeved with a scoop neck. I was just pulling it over my head when I heard the store manager, Chaz, introducing Brittany and asking where I was. The man couldn’t speak in a normal tone if his life depended on it.

“Right here,” I announced as I stepped back out onto the sales floor with my soiled shirt stuffed into my purse. Chaz glanced at the purse in my hand and scowled, figuring out that I’d just arrived at work. I ignored him and beamed a smile at the man and woman with him, both of them tall and very thin, which only made Chaz’s short, rounder stature more noticeable. “I was just helping someone in the dressing room and found this purse.”

Chaz narrowed his eyes, knowing damn well I was carrying my own purse, but let it slide as he introduced me to the regional managers, Jon Peterman and Natasha Harlow. He didn’t miss the opportunity to shoot me what I felt was my last

warning look before he ushered them toward the back of the store, where his office was located.

Brittany, the pretty blue-eyed blonde who'd started working at the store a few weeks ago, released a breath of relief. "That was close."

"You wouldn't believe my day." I set my purse on the shelf under the counter just as a Hispanic woman somewhere in her late thirties to early forties slapped a small pile of underwear on the counter in front of my register with a receipt and said something in Spanish.

Ah, here we went. "I'm sorry. I don't speak Spanish."

She looked at me as if I were covered in dog crap. "Sad youth. You know nothing of your culture."

I didn't have a culture. I was an orphan, not that it was any of the woman's business, but I kept my thoughts to myself. I'd been through this before. I had Latina features, but I couldn't tell you whether either of my parents had been Mexican, Puerto-Rican, or Columbian. For all I knew, they could have been Narnian. I'd bounced around from foster home to foster home, and they'd all been white or black families. I didn't speak Spanish. I'd taken Spanish class in school and could never get past the numbers and colors, and some of the words that sounded close to the English versions. I just wasn't good with languages. Hell, some days I felt challenged enough with English, especially before my coffee kicked in.

"How can I help you?"

“I want to return these.”

I looked down at the pile. “These are underwear.”

“Yes, I’m not stupid. I’m returning them.”

“We don’t take returns on underwear.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because they’re underwear. We can’t resell underwear that has left this store.”

“Since when? No one has denied me before. Do I need to speak to your manager?”

I thought back to my visit to the coffee shop and wondered if I’d seemed as horrible as this lady when I’d brought out the manager card, even though that barista had been a little *bee-yotch* before I had.

Today was not the day to call for a manager. I took a deep breath to calm my temper, which was already on a very short leash after the events of the morning and reached for the receipt on top of the panty pile, carefully picking it up with two fingers. With my other hand, I pointed at the fine print on the bottom. “It says right here that we do not take returns on undergarments.”

She started yelling at me in Spanish. I didn’t understand the words, but I was pretty sure she’d just called me three kinds of bitch. “Ma’am, you will have to calm down or leave the store.”

“I’ll leave when you give me my money back. These are still like new. Smell them!” She picked up a handful of the undergarments and shoved them toward my face.

I backed up, just barely missing getting some strange woman’s panty crotches shoved under my nose. “That’s it! Ma’am, you’re going to have to leave before I call security.”

“Call security? Call security?!” She placed her fisted hands on her curvy hips and puffed her chest out. “I’ll call security. *Security! Security!*”

I shared a panicked look with Brittany as the woman started screaming for security and drew a small crowd of customers to the front to gawk at the floor show. Chaz had to be able to hear it. I was *so* fired if I didn’t get rid of her. “Ma’am, I’m very sorry, but—”

“You’re about to be sorry!” The woman leaped over the counter and down I went with her on top of me.

Before I had time to process what was happening, my back hit the floor, knocking the breath out of me. Then my head hit, and I saw stars. Then I only saw the screaming, ranting pit bull on top of me and a flurry of claws as I struggled to defend myself from her acrylic daggers steadily swiping at my face and yanking at my hair.

What felt like an hour later but couldn’t have been because I was pretty sure the psycho would have killed me if she’d been given that much time, she was finally yanked off of me by Brittany and a mall security guard. Chaz helped me up, growling under his breath the whole time that I was fired.

“What? The woman attacked me. You can’t fire me because a woman attacked me! Especially considering she attacked me for not going against the company’s return policy.”

“But what of the company’s policy regarding theft?” The stuffy female regional manager, Natasha What’s-her-face, reached under the back of my collar and pulled out the tag. “I thought I recognized this blouse as part of our new collection that just went on sale this morning. Chaz, she must have been in the process of stealing it before we were introduced this morning. That’s what she was doing in the dressing room.”

“No! I fell on the bus and my coffee splashed all over my blouse. I wanted to look nice, so I grabbed this shirt when I got here. I was going to pay for it, but that crazy woman flung her underwear at me before I could!”

“I’ll show you crazy!” The woman lunged for me, but the security guard wrestled her under control.

“Are we pressing charges?” he asked.

“Yes.” Chaz made a shooing motion. “Call the police to collect her and get her out of here. We’ve put on enough of a show.”

That was when I noticed the crowd of people openly watching, many of them recording. I was really starting to hate cell phones.

“You’re fired, Dulce, and unless you pay for that blouse right this second, you’re going to jail with that woman.”

My jaw dropped open, and I felt tears burn the backs of my eyes as I looked at an equally gobsmacked Brittany. What the hell had just happened? “But—”

“Guard!” Chaz raised his index finger in a gesture for the security guard to wait a moment, then stepped closer to me. “Pay for the shirt and leave on your own without embarrassing the company any further or you can be dragged out by the guard too.”

I took a deep breath, willed back my tears because I damn sure wasn’t going to let him or anyone else standing there see me cry, and grabbed my purse.

“Check her purse,” the snotty regional manager said, and it was snatched out of my hand.

Chaz did a thorough search, unfolding my soiled blouse and checking it for tags before Brittany snapped that she’d seen me come in wearing it and knew I hadn’t stolen anything. He gave her a hard look, but fortunately, didn’t scold her.

Once he handed my purse back to me, I tore the tag from the back of my shirt and started to scan it.

“No!” He yanked the tag from me and pointed in front of the counter. “You’re no longer an employee. Pay like a customer.”

I bit my tongue and kept my head held high as I rounded the counter to pay like a customer, even when I heard some jackass behind me all but yell, “*Dayyyyum*. Fired the girl after that lady beat her ass and then took her money too!”

Paying like a customer meant I didn't get the employee discount. Just my luck, I'd snagged a sixty-dollar blouse in my desperation to change before management saw the coffee stain. S&R rarely even sold items above twenty dollars. I should have just allowed myself to get fired for the stain. At least that might not have been recorded. By the time I stepped out of the mall, a migraine was forming and the last thing I wanted to do was get on a bus and risk sitting next to another smelly man.

My boyfriend lived close enough to the mall. I took my cell phone out of my purse and called the garage as I headed toward Barry's apartment.

"Sal's Garage." Ugh. I'd had to call the garage so much over the past two weeks, I was far too familiar with the owner's voice, and it grew more irritating to me by the call. His voice, and the dollars that kept getting added to the initial estimate I'd been given.

"Hi, Sal. It's Dulce Malvada. Is my car ready yet?" *Please, please be,* I silently begged. I was so tired of the bus and since it looked like I was about to be going through the job interview cycle, I preferred more reliable transportation, the kind that came without the risk of smelly men falling asleep on me... or faking it so they could rob me. Thank goodness I always carried my purse with the strap crossed over my torso.

"Ah, Missus Malvada. Yes, yes. No, my love. We're going to have to replace the carburetor."

“The carburetor?” I felt my temperature rise. “You said the problem was the alternator, and before that, it was the... something else-a-nator.”

“A car this age, my love, it has issues. Sometimes we don’t see a problem until we fix the problem hiding it.”

Yeah, I was pretty sure I was getting screwed, but I didn’t have enough knowledge about cars to actually call Sal out on it. “I think I’ll just pick it up today and take care of the carburetor later.”

“If you wish to, my love. Do you need me to recommend a tow service?”

“A tow service?”

“My love, it will not run until we replace the carburetor.”

I stopped and clenched the phone so tightly in my hand I could almost hear it cry out in pain. I took a deep breath and slowly pushed it out, pretty sure if I gave in to the emotions raging inside me, I would completely lose it. When I spoke again, I spoke slowly. “I just lost my job, Sal. I need my car to go to interviews, so just do whatever the minimum is to get my car running for the least amount of money because as of this hour, I am unemployed. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my love. I will call you as soon as we have her running.”

“Looking forward to it.” I disconnected and shoved the phone back into my purse. “And quit calling me ‘my love.’”

I continued to Barry's apartment, trying to pump myself up with thoughts of Barry wringing the mechanic's neck. I didn't like the thought of running to my big, buff boyfriend to solve my problems with his big, meaty hands, but if Sal dared tack on another couple hundred dollars to my bill, I just might make an exception.

I reached Barry's apartment building and cut across the street before entering. He lived on the third floor, so it wasn't too much trouble to take the stairs. I usually took the elevator, but after the way my day had gone so far, I was not about to tempt fate by getting in the elevator. I'd either get stuck in it or the whole thing might fall to the basement and kill me on impact.

I hoofed it up the stairs and took out the spare key Barry had given me, knowing he was at work. That was fine. I was sure he wouldn't mind me using his shower and borrowing his computer to look for a new job until he got home. Then he could drive me back to my apartment. I didn't want to even see another bus after the morning I'd had.

I heard sultry music as soon as I opened the door and grinned. Barry was always leaving the radio or TV on. He was a great-looking guy, had a decent job, and drove a nice car, but he was kind of lazy and a bit on the messy side. I headed toward the bedroom where the music seemed to waft from, picking up his clothes along the way, but stilled as I reached a red, lacy thong that definitely wasn't mine. I'd barely finished following the rest of the trail of clothes when I heard the

unmistakable sound of a woman reaching the big O... or an alley cat. It was a little hard to tell.

I pushed the door open so hard it slammed against the opposite wall, and stood there, jaw hanging open, heart stopped, and eyes glued to the absolute horror in front of me. As if my morning hadn't already been a royal shitfest, there was my boyfriend's pasty-white naked ass jiggling as he pounded away inside some woman with pink hair and a very impressive octave range.

"What the hell?" she stopped caterwauling long enough to screech as our eyes connected over Barry's left shoulder. "Who is this bitch?"

"This bitch is his girlfriend," I snapped as blood rushed back into Barry's brain and he realized he and his morning bang had an intruder. Shock filled his eyes before he scrambled out of the woman and off the bed to stand next to it, stark naked.

"Dulce! What the hell are you doing in my apartment?"

"You gave me the key and told me to use it anytime, asshole. What the hell are *you* doing in your apartment, with whoever the hell that is?!"

"You didn't say you had a girlfriend!" The woman yanked the sheets over her buoyant breasts and curled her lip as she looked at me. "She doesn't look like much."

I'll show you much, I thought as my hands curled into fists of their own accord and I heard a snarl escape me, but before I

could lower myself to the point of actually fighting over a man who'd just proven himself not worth it, I came to my senses and shook my head. I didn't know the woman, and I didn't care to know her. My beef was with Barry, and he could go to hell.

“Dulce, honey, it's not what it looks like.”

“Don't you 'honey' me, you piece of shit, standing there with your boner still pointing north!” The overwhelming urge to yank the appendage off and slap him around with it overcame me, but I sucked in a breath and threw my hands up in the air. “You know what? Fuck this! I'm not even going to ask how long this has been going on or waste another second of my time wondering anything about it or about you. You can drop dead!”

I turned and fled the apartment, my head screaming with every angry step. Now I had no choice but to take the freaking bus, which only made the migraine rage harder. From the looks I received from people as I stormed out of the apartment building and down the sidewalk, I knew I looked a sight, and I probably had bloody scratches on my face from the fight at S&R along with the tears in the stupid sixty-dollar blouse that had been damaged before I could even pay for it, but I didn't care. All I cared about was getting home, getting some painkillers for my headache, and finding a new job so I could pay my rent and get my car out of the damn shop. To hell with what anyone thought about me, and to hell with Barry!

There was a coffee shop across the street. It wasn't my usual one, but I was sure they could make a decent cup of coffee and after the day I'd had, I deserved a second cup. And I could get a muffin and finally get some food in my stomach. I stepped off the curb, looking forward to at least one good thing finally happening, and heard a horn blast and the near-deafening screech of brakes squealing as the scent of burned rubber filled the air.

“Based on the complete loss of color in your face, I'm going to assume you just remembered what happened.”

“I was hit by a bus.”

“Yes.”

“I was hit by a bus!”

“Again, yes.”

“I was hit by a bus.” I ran my hands over my body, checking my torso and each limb.

“I'm starting to realize you're not the brightest crayon in the box.”

“I was hit by a freaking bus!” I checked my head, relieved to find it still firmly planted on top of my neck. “I'm all in one piece. My clothes are even all right, except for the tears already there from that pit bull at the store, so it couldn't have been real. I'd be broken and bloody.”

“Dulce, I assure you it happened. You need to accept it. Your mortal life is over. You were hit by a bus. You don’t walk away from that.”

“But I’m not a broken mess.”

“Of course you’re not a broken mess.” The woman rolled her eyes. “Your physical body is in an emergency room in the realm of the living, winding down to its final gasp of breath. Do you really think we’d want you here in that condition, all twisted and bloody and reeking of urine and feces?”

“Reeking of urine and feces?! Why the hell would I be reeking of urine and feces?”

“You were hit by a bus,” she said slowly and clearly. “What do you think happens to a person’s bladder and bowels when they get slammed into by over twenty-five-thousand pounds of metal? Everything breaks and bursts. If you were a cartoon, you would have been scraped off the pavement with a spatula. Your breasts would have been between your shoulder blades, your cooter would have been hanging out your pooter, and you’d be able to see behind you without having to turn your head. You were hit by a bus. Steamrolled. Splattered. Flattened. Killed.”

“*Ohmahgawd*, I’m dead.”

“I give up.” The woman waved her bony hand in a shooing motion. “Just sit there quietly, please. I am trying to calculate.”

“Calculate what?”

“How long I can put up with these interruptions before I lose my temper and give you a second death by my own hands,” she snapped, and her oddly colored eyes flashed like twin balls of pale blue fire.

Deciding that was creepy and the frail-looking lady might be scarier than she appeared, I zipped it and just chewed on my lip until she felt inclined as to speak to me again. The lip-chewing did nothing to ease my nerves as I watched her flip through the papers in the file folder, making little disapproving grunts here and there as she did. Whatever calculations she was doing, she must have been doing them in her head because at no time did she break out a calculator or even a pen and piece of paper.

I felt myself nodding off and had nearly fallen asleep when she gasped and quickly shuffled back a few pages before returning to the page that had apparently caused her alarm. She looked at me, looked down at the paper again, looked at me, looked down at the paper again, flipped the sheet, scanned the next one, and then stared at me as if I’d grown a second head.

When she just sat there gaping at me with what seemed like no intention of speaking anytime soon, I opted to risk her wrath. “Um... is there a problem?”

She blinked, snapping out of the staring spell, and quickly gathered the file and all its papers up. “This has to go to the big guy.”

“The big guy? You mean...” I pointed up toward the direction I assumed the heavens would be.

“Petie.”

Oh. Petie. Of course. Nothing said big guy like the name Petie.

“Stay here.” She held the file tight against her flat chest and quickly shuffled toward the door.

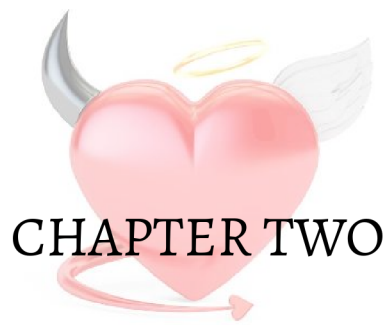
“Wait just a minute.” I stood to follow her. “Maybe I should —”

“Stay here!” she roared as she pointed her bony finger at me and those oddly colored eyes turned into blazing blue fireballs. Her face elongated and wrinkled as her thin lips peeled back to reveal a cavernous black hole outlined with a rim of tiny, sharp teeth.

I screamed and jumped back until my butt hit the desk, and she left the room, the door disappearing behind her. Like, completely just vanishing as if it had never been there at all, leaving me completely sealed-in within the gray cube. “Oh, sure. Like scaring the bajeezus out of me was necessary to get your point across when there’s not even a freaking door I could get out of if I wanted to!” My voice steadily rose until I yelled the last part. I checked to make sure I hadn’t pissed my pants before I sank down into the chair. Well, on the bright side, my day couldn’t possibly get any worse.

I was only allowed a few precious minutes to believe that before an alarm blared and the walls started flashing red.

“Well, shit. What now?”



CHAPTER TWO

Everything disappeared in a bright flash of light and I felt a hard yank before I found myself sitting across from another gray desk in another gray room. This one had bookshelves, though, and windows. However, I couldn't see anything beyond them because the gray shades were drawn.

The woman who'd been calculating whatever the hell she'd been calculating in my file stood next to the gray marble desk and a man in a silvery gray suit and tie sat in the gray leather chair behind it.

I yelped, surprised by the abrupt change of venue, but quickly gathered my wits. "Let me guess. Petie?"

The man nodded as he stared at me.

The "big guy" was kind of a runt. He couldn't have been any more than five feet tall, if that. He was kind of plump, with jowls and a round, balding white head. He looked an awfully lot like Leslie Jordan and if he wasn't so busy scowling at me while tapping his stubby little fingers on the open file in front of him on his desk, I might have given in to the urge to pinch his cute little cheeks.

“Do it and I’ll eat you,” he said.

I gasped and heat flooded my cheeks. “Did I say that out loud?”

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

“Can something be done about that alarm?” the woman asked. “It’s making my skull hurt.”

Petie, the adorable little “big guy” whose personality I got the distinct impression wasn’t as cute as he looked, snapped his stubby fingers and the alarm dulled.

“Uh... I know you’re not all that crazy about questions, but would anyone care to tell me what that alarm is about? I kind of have the feeling it has to do with me.”

“Your physical body is on its last leg, so to speak,” the woman answered, before turning her attention to Petie. “What do you make of it, sir?”

“I don’t know.” Okay, the small guy even kind of sounded like Leslie Jordan, right down to the Southern accent. He folded his hands and narrowed his gaze, seeming to study every square inch of me. “What do you know of your parents, girl?”

“My parents?” I blinked. “I don’t have any parents. I never did.”

“Yes, I saw in your file you were in the foster care system. So, you’ve had no contact with your birth parents or discovered anything about them?”

I felt my temperature rise as the familiar anger and hurt rose inside me. “Like I said, I never had parents. Whoever birthed me threw me in a dumpster and walked away. I never wanted to know the woman who could do that or the man who could want a woman who would do that.”

Petie and the thin woman shared a look. I wasn’t sure exactly how to describe the look, but it didn’t give me a very good feeling, not that anything about the place I was in could give me a good feeling.

“Do you ever feel you’re meant for something?”

I didn’t bother hiding my confusion or annoyance. “What does that even mean? What’s with the questions? And why am I in Purgatory? If I’m really dead or on my way, why am I not headed to wherever dead people go? Isn’t it supposed to be either up or down?”

“In most cases, yes,” the woman said. “In other cases, such as when the numbers are too close, I am called in to calculate the person’s deeds and intentions. I am the accountant.”

“Wait, so you’re saying my soul is like, being audited or something?” I felt dizzy. “I know I’m no angel, but I couldn’t have done anything bad enough for you to even consider throwing me into hell! I’m a good person.”

“Do you recall what your very last thought was right before you died?” the accountant asked.

“No, but I’m going to take a wild guess it was something along the lines of ‘Oh, shit, a bus is about to hit me’ or maybe

just a really spirited ‘Ouch’?”

The woman looked over at Petie and rolled her eyes before continuing. “No. Your very last thought was that you should have castrated your boyfriend and left him to bleed to death.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. “Yeah, that sounds about right, and he was my ex-boyfriend as of like the moment before I walked out in front of the bus.”

The accountant and the little guy shared another look, and this one was definitely a judgy look.

“Oh, what? Of course I wanted to castrate the bastard. I’d just caught him porking some woman when he was supposed to be at work. If I hadn’t walked in on them, he would have gone right on cheating on me without me ever knowing about it. Like you haven’t ever thought of ripping a guy’s nuts off. And for the record, I’d been insulted, robbed, attacked, and fired right before walking in on him. This has been the worst day of my freaking life.”

“It appears you’ve had quite a few bad days in your lifetime,” Petie said, scanning through the pages in my file. It was a pretty thick file. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “And you’ve had mixed reactions. Lots of thoughts of murder and violence, a little arson here and there.”

I blinked. “What the hell are you talking about? I have never once attempted to kill anyone or set anything on fire.”

“No, but you have certainly thought about it.”

“Of course I have. I’m a human being. We get angry and the first thing we think is, ‘I want to kill that bitch’ or ‘I’ll burn this whole place to the ground.’ Wishing someone was dead or even wanting to kill them for like a split-second doesn’t mean anything.”

He ran his finger down one of the pages and tapped it before looking back up at me. “Do you ever feel you were meant to be someone else, like you’re being *called* to be someone else?”

I felt a weird shift inside my chest and fought not to visually react. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His big, round eyes glowed. “Do you see yourself as someone different in your dreams?”

My mind suddenly filled with an image of me standing naked in a pillar of flames. My hands were wrapped around me, each finger tipped with a long, sharp claw, and snakes slithered around my body, but I wasn’t afraid of them. It was an image of myself I’d seen in dreams for many years, starting sometime around the onset of puberty, the image becoming clearer with each passing year. The image was always so warm and welcoming. Then I woke up covered in a sheen of cold sweat and so afraid I trembled.

Petie looked at the woman. “If we take out the calculations for her paternity, she would be in the black, yes?”

“Yes, sir, but had she not stepped in front of that bus when she had, who knows what might have happened.”

“Yes. Who knows what might have happened. That is the point. It wouldn’t be very fair to calculate in negative points that have not truly been earned by her own choices and desires.”

The walls started flashing red again, as had happened in the other room. This time, the flashing was a much faster speed. The accountant and the little big guy in charge both looked at the flashing walls, then at each other.

“This is it, sir. Whatever you want to do, we need to act fast.”

He nodded and pursed his lips in thought. When he spoke to the accountant again, I could barely make out anything over the blaring alarm that was back with a vengeance. All I made out were the words: hunt, damned, back, Reese, train, watch, and deeds.

Then Petie looked right at me and snapped his fingers.

I sucked in air and felt my breath burn like molten lava inside me as multiple voices above me yelped and gasped. I opened my eyes to see confused, surprised faces hovering over me.

“What the hell? She was dead,” a thin, brown-skinned man in a surgical mask said. “I was just about to call it. The time of death was literally right on the tip of my tongue.”

“Well, she changed her mind,” a heavysset woman with a thick Hispanic accent standing on the other side of me said before leaning down to speak very close to my face. “Be still,

Miss Malvada. You are at the U of L Trauma Center. You were in an accident.”

“I know, I know,” I said, my voice sounding like little more than a croak. “I was hit by a freakin’ bus.”

And then I lost consciousness.



Where the hell was I at? And why did it smell like the inside of a perfume bottle? I started to sit up, when a rather chesty, plump black lady with box braids popped into view and placed her hands on my shoulders. “Slow down now, Miss Malvada. Let’s try easing up gently. Do you know where you are?”

The woman grabbed a remote attached to the bedrail of the bed I was in and pressed a button which made the upper portion of the bed rise, settling me into a sitting position.

“Apparently, I’m in the hospital,” I murmured, noticing the IV delivering a clear liquid into my arm. I looked around the room. It was a private one, based on the fact I was occupying the only bed in it. There was a sink to the side outside of a door I assumed led to a bathroom. A rolling tray was next to the bed, and there were two nightstands. One held a telephone and a pitcher of water. The other held a large bouquet of red roses with a big teddy bear and a red Mylar balloon that said ‘I Love You’ sticking out of the vase. Similar bouquets filled every other available surface of the room, rested in chairs, and some perched on the floor. The sentiments ranged from ‘Get

Well' to 'I Miss You.' It was the 'I'm Sorry' one attached to the yellow roses that brought the scene in Barry's apartment flooding back into my brain.

"Somebody missed you a lot," the woman said as she set the control down and gestured toward the abundance of flowers. "Or else they feel really bad about something they did."

"The latter," I said, and allowed her to prop me up enough that she could fluff my pillows. Once done, I settled back against them and tried to pick through which images swimming around in my head were real and which were figments of my imagination. I knew catching Barry cheating on me in the worst way possible was real. I wanted to knee him in the balls far too much for it not to have happened. Then, of course, there were the flowers. He wouldn't have been sorry if he hadn't done something wrong, and he wouldn't have sent so many unless the something wrong was something really wrong. "I'm pretty sure I caught my boyfriend playing hide the salami with someone he shouldn't have. My ex-boyfriend, I mean. We are so done."

The woman, whose name was Lorraine, according to the badge clipped to her scrubs, clicked her tongue. "Men. I swear, they—Hold up." She studied me a little too intensely for my comfort. "You didn't try to kill yourself, did you?"

"What? Are you kidding? No. Why would you even think —" Holy crap! I might have had a crazy dream about Leslie Jordan and some scary accountant, but I'd really been hit by a bus. I grabbed the collar of the thin hospital gown I wore and

stretched it out far enough to look down. “Oh, thank goodness. My boobs are still there.”

“Well, honey, where exactly did you think they’d be?”

“I don’t know. I thought someone said something about them being on my back and my pooter was in my cooter. Or was it my cooter in my pooter? Where exactly is my pooter? Is it what it sounds like?”

The woman just stood there blinking with her mouth parted. I held my arms out as best I could, considering one had a tube in it, and flapped them. They appeared three-dimensional enough. “Did I have to be scraped up with a spatula?”

“Okay, I think you should drink a little water, and I’m going to call in Dr. Patel.” She lifted the pitcher of water and poured a small amount into a paper cup before handing it to me. “Drink that nice and slow. How are you pain-wise?”

I sipped the water, although I really didn’t feel all that parched. “I feel great.”

“You feel *great*?” Her voice rose high enough on the last word to startle me.

I frowned, not sure what I’d said to get that type of reaction. “Was that the wrong answer?”

“Well, no. It’s what we’d like to hear.” She blinked and shook her head. “But, honey, you were hit by a bus. You have been healing amazingly, faster than anyone would believe if they didn’t see it with their own eyes, but still; *you were hit by a bus.*”

“Yeah.” I finished the water and looked down at myself again. “Shouldn’t I be a little broken?”

“Ya think?” She took the paper cup and set it on the rolling tray. “Sweetheart, I don’t know if you’re a miracle or an upcoming episode of *Unexplained Mysteries*. I’m getting the doctor. You’re sure you don’t feel any pain? Not even a headache or any discomfort anywhere?”

“Nope. My head’s good.” I stretched my limbs and wiggled my bottom, which caused an immediate wince as I was suddenly stabbed with pain in the hoo-ha region. “Uh, something feels a little weird around my nether regions.”

“That’s the catheter.”

“The cath-a-what?”

“Honey, you’ve been unconscious for two weeks. We had to put a catheter in you so you could use the bathroom.”

My mouth kept opening and closing as I struggled to decide which thing to freak out about more: the fact I’d been unconscious for two weeks or that someone had shoved a tube up my hoo-ha. After a moment of processing, I went with what I could do something about. “Whatever the hell you put in me, get it out!”

“Miss Malvada, it’s there for—”

“Do I look like I can’t just get up and walk to the bathroom if I need to?”

“Yeah, you look capable of going on your own,” she said, not sounding too thrilled by the fact, and pulled back the

blanket and sheets covering my lower half. “To tell the truth, it’s kind of freaking me out just how healthy you seem right now.”

It was freaking her out? I felt like I’d just stepped off a curb and been told a second later that I’d lost two weeks of my life, and now I had visions of people putting stuff in me without my knowledge or consent. And beneath that, somewhere in the back of my mind, I got the feeling a few tubes weren’t the only things put in me during those two weeks.

Two weeks. Ugh. There went all my vacation time, all used up on a hospital stay. Wait. I suddenly felt nauseous as I remembered what had happened before I’d caught Barry cheating. I’d lost my job! I’d lost my health insurance. I grabbed Lorraine’s forearm. “Get this thing out of me, get the doctor, and let me get the hell out of here before you charge anything else onto my bill.”



“Extraordinary,” Dr. Patel said for what had to be the sixtieth time after he’d thoroughly examined me, both physically and, I was pretty sure, psychologically. Step out in front of a bus after catching your boyfriend bumping uglies and everyone thinks you’re suicidal. Heal within two weeks and they think you’re a science experiment. He continued flashing his little penlight into my eyes. “I’ve never seen anyone heal so fast from such a horrible accident. How you’re not paralyzed is an

absolute medical miracle. The scans all showed your spinal cord was hanging on by a thread.”

“Yes, well, it’s right where it’s supposed to be and feels pretty darn sturdy, so can I go now?”

The short and husky Indian man clicked off his penlight, stuck it in the front pocket of his lab coat and hit me with the full wattage of his disapproving stare. “Although you feel fine, you were hit by a bus just two weeks ago, Miss Malvada. You had many breaks in your bones, head trauma, and you coded twice. You were about to be pronounced dead when your heart suddenly came back online at the last minute and you woke up only for a few seconds before falling into unconsciousness, never waking for longer than a few minutes at a time until just this morning. You should stay here and be observed.”

“My bones are all fine and dandy now, and if I stay here any longer, you’re going to observe me right out onto the street. I told you I lost my job and my insurance.”

“And we told you the health insurance information on file for you is active and we’ve called your employer. You are employed.”

“And I told you there’s been a mistake. I am unemployed and my insurance would have terminated immediately. I can’t afford another minute of inpatient care. I have to get out of here.” I did the math in my head. “And if I’ve been in here for two weeks, my rent is due. Believe me, my landlord won’t hesitate to put me out on the street if I don’t get out of here and pay her.”

“The fact that you seem so confused about your state of employment concerns me. I believe this confusion is from the head trauma. If you leave, it will have to be against medical advice.”

“Works for me.” I flipped the covers off my legs and swung them over the side of the bed. “Where are my clothes?”

“You don’t have any,” Lorraine said. She’d been standing behind Dr. Patel, watching with her hands folded under her bountiful bosom.

“What do you mean, I don’t have any? What about what I had on when I was brought to the hospital?”

“What was left of your clothes got cut off in the process of trying to save your life. Not that you’d want them anyway. They were drenched in blood and other body fluids. At least, what wasn’t already shredded. The EMTs couldn’t find your shoes. As hard as you were hit, they figured they went flying. *You were hit by a bus.*”

“Yeah, yeah. I got that part.” I looked down at my tan legs covered in a thin layer of black hair. I needed to shave, but first I needed to find clothes and get the hell out of here. But my cell phone had been crushed during the accident, and I didn’t have anyone to call anyway. I sure as hell wasn’t calling Barry. I didn’t care how many flowers the jerk sent me.

I heard a rap on the doorframe and a pale strawberry-haired man of medium height in light blue scrubs walked in with a canvas tote bag. It was light gray with a dark gray letter D on

the front. “This was left at the front desk sometime late last night. Nobody saw who left it, but it has your name on it.”

I took the bag and checked out the luggage tag that had been affixed to one of the handles. My full name was scrawled across it in big block letters written in black ink. Dulce Nina Malvada. A shiver raced up my spine. Not many people knew my middle name. I could only think of foster families and anyone else who had ever processed paperwork for me.

I looked inside the bag to find underwear, a pair of black leggings, black socks, my black Adidas, and a Marvel’s Black Widow T-shirt, all of which I recognized from my very own wardrobe. What the hell? Barry had given me a key to his apartment, but I’d never given him a key to mine. The only person who might have one would be my landlady, and she certainly didn’t have enough kindness in her heart to even consider bringing me clothes. For all I knew, she had no clue what had happened to me. I was sure the only reason Barry seemed to know was because I’d been hit crossing his street. “It was just left at the desk? Nobody saw anything?”

The man shook his head, nodded toward Lorraine, and left.

“Everything all right?” Lorraine asked, genuine concern in her eyes.

I nodded, sure I’d probably gone pale. The already crazy situation I found myself in just kept getting weirder. I wanted to go home to something familiar, lock myself inside my bedroom, and just hide until I could make sense of things. “I have clothes now. I’m leaving.”



There was no way in hell I was getting on a bus, so I called a cab after signing myself out of the hospital. I left with nothing but my paperwork and my purse, which had been recovered at the scene and brought with me to the hospital. It was a good thing I always carried it across my torso instead of just hanging over one arm or else it might have flown away with my heels. As it was, it held my belongings, but hadn't protected them much. The bits and pieces of my shattered cell phone rattled around inside it. I had to dig through them to find the key to my apartment. The keychain was broken, and the picture of Gamora from Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* had fallen out, but the key was what mattered most.

I paid the cab driver with the cash I had in my purse and entered my building. I lived on the third floor of a three-story building that wasn't much, but it was mine. When you grew up being shuffled from foster family to foster family with all of your meager belongings in a garbage bag, you appreciated any place you could call home and mean it. Of course, I'd be losing this one too if I didn't find another job soon. I'd already gone two weeks without income and it was just a matter of time before the hospital and S&R's administrative offices figured out the mix-up and I got hit with a massive hospital bill.

I grabbed my mail from the box located inside the lobby and stuffed it into my purse before I took the stairs. I wasn't

surprised when I heard my landlady holler my name before I'd even made it to the first landing. Bretta's apartment was on the first floor and situated right where she could keep tabs on everyone who went in and out in case anyone got any ideas about stiffing her on rent, or if anyone attractive walked by. Bretta was known to be a little handsy with the maintenance workers she employed and any poor soul who didn't guard his ass while walking past her.

“Hey, Malvada! Your rent is due!”

I sighed and turned to face her. Bretta carried most of her weight between her boobs and her thighs, and she was currently squeezed into leopard print capri leggings and a lime-green sweater that dipped low enough to be scandalous. Her permed hair was currently yellow-blonde and pulled back into a severe ponytail high on her head and teased so it fluffed out like a big cotton candy cloud. “I was just headed to my apartment right now to write the check out. I've been in the hospital for the past two weeks.”

She'd been chomping on bubble gum and stopped smacking for a moment to look me over from head to toe. “Two weeks? What was wrong with you?”

“I got hit by a bus.”

“Yeah, right. I mean for real.”

“I got hit by a bus.”

She stared at me for a moment before her nostrils flared and she blew out a huge pink bubble before slurping the gum back

in and started chomping again. “You haven’t caused me much grief so far, so I’m going to let this slide. Go grab that check, and for chrissakes, learn how to tell a decent lie.” She turned away and walked back toward her apartment, muttering. “I’ve heard some sad excuses, but if you’re going to say you were hit by a bus, at least have a limp or a cast. A crooked boob. Something!”

I shook my head and took the steps up to my apartment, muttering a few choice curse words when I unlocked the door and stepped inside to find wilting roses on my coffee table along with a stack of junk mail and a card. I had thought I’d gotten lucky by not having an overflowing mailbox in the lobby, but apparently Bretta had just brought the overflow up to my apartment and let herself in. I supposed I shouldn’t have been mad since leaving the flowers and the mail piling up broadcasted my absence to the neighbors. Broadcasting my absence would have meant broadcasting my empty apartment and I wouldn’t bother kidding myself about the decency factor of the people I lived among. Some of them looked like they’d knock off their own mothers for a hundred bucks.

I looked down at my Black Widow T-shirt and walked into my bedroom, scanning the small apartment along the way. Nothing seemed to be missing, not that I had a lot for the taking, but still... something felt off.

My bed was made up just the way I’d left it. The windows were closed and locked. I went to my closet and looked through the shirts. The Black Widow T-shirt was missing. And there was an empty space on the closet floor where my black

Adidas should have been sitting. Of course there was. Because they were on my feet. But who the hell had gone into my closet and retrieved them for me?

Someone knocked on my door, and I rolled my eyes before going to answer it. “Good grief, Bretta, I was about to write the damn check. Hey, did you bring my—” I was surprised into silence when I opened my door to find Brittany from S&R standing there holding a vase full of sunflowers. “Oh, hey. What are you doing here?”

Her mouth had dropped open and her eyes were wide and glossy. I thought I was going to have to poke her to activate her, but just before I did, she shook her head and blurted out, “You were hit by a bus.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You were hit by a bus,” she said a little louder.

“Yes. I remember.”

“You were hit by a bus!”

Now I knew how the accountant felt. Wait. Why the hell was I thinking of some weird figment of my imagination my brain had obviously come up with to get me through the trauma of being hit by a very large vehicle?

“Are those for me?” I asked, pointing at the flowers in Brittany’s hands, to snap her out of the repetitive questioning.

She blinked and looked down. “Oh. Yeah. I thought the ones I brought last week might have wilted, so I brought these

to the hospital, but they told me I'd just missed you by like a minute, so I brought them here."

"Thank you. They're pretty." I took the flowers and walked over to my small kitchen area to place them on the bar that served as my dining table.

"I didn't believe them," she continued, following me. "After what happened, I was stunned you were even up and about, let alone leaving the hospital. You should be all twisted and broken. Dulce, you were hit by a bus."

"I know." I turned around to face her. "How do *you* know I was hit by a bus?"

"I'm still waiting for that rent check." Bretta walked through the open door and snapped her fingers. "Clock's ticking and you know I charge late fees."

"I know, I know. I was just about to grab it."

"Seriously?" Brittany placed her hands on her jean-clad hips and glared at the woman. "Give her a break. She just got out of the hospital after getting hit by a bus."

"Oh, wow, there actually are people gullible enough to believe that tall tale." Bretta rolled her eyes. "Sweetheart, people don't get hit by buses and look that good a couple of weeks later."

"It's not a tall tale. It was caught on video."

"What?" I looked up from the checkbook I'd just grabbed out of the top drawer of the small desk in the corner of my living room. "There's a video of me getting hit?"

“Oh yeah. It’s on YouTube, TikTok, everywhere, and it’s got like over a million views.”

“Hold on. You were the girl that got splattered on Nancy Avenue?” Bretta’s eyes widened.

“Splattered would be an exaggeration,” I said, gesturing toward my all-in-one-piece body before I grabbed a pen out of the Avengers cup on my desk and started writing out a check for the rent. “I can’t believe people would actually watch that or that social media would allow them to post the video.”

“There’s a disclaimer about graphic content,” Brittany said. “Do you want to see it?”

“No,” I said louder and far harsher than I’d intended and ripped off the check I’d just written. “Sorry, but no. I lived it and somehow survived it. I don’t want to ever see it. I don’t want anyone to see it.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. The good news is a lot of people connected you to the S&R video too and they really gave it to the company for the way they fired you right before the accident. They said they drove you to walk out into traffic.”

“Oh, not that again. I wasn’t trying to kill myself. I was just too stupid to look both ways, and I was distracted by the coffee shop across the street after I’d spilled most of my coffee that morning. I needed it.”

“I knew that stuff was devil’s brew,” Brittany said, using the nickname she’d given my coffee because of its six shots each

ratio of cinnamon dolce syrup, chocolate syrup, and espresso. She crossed herself. “It lured you out in front of a bus and tried to kill you.”

“It did not lure me out in front of—” I gasped, realizing what she’d said earlier. “The jerk who was recording me getting fired uploaded the video?”

She pulled a genuine pity face. “Yeah, but a lot of the people who were liking and sharing it stopped when they saw the bus video, and they complained to S&R. Boy, Chaz was really taking heated calls from upper management after that, but then things died down again after they released a statement that you were fired for stealing a shirt and fighting customers.”

“Released a statement to who?”

“Oh. Well...” Brittany looked down at her feet. “You know. The world.”

“Ohmygawwwwd.” I walked over to the dark gray couch I’d gotten on sale at Big Lots and fell down onto it. “So while I’m looking for a job, the entire world, including the people interviewing me for work, all think I was fired for stealing and fighting customers? I’m never going to work again.”

“Never going to work again?” Bretta walked over and snatched the rent check right out of my fingers. “Sounds like you better change your name or sue the hell out of some of these people posting videos of you online because you can guarantee I’ll be back in thirty days and if you don’t have your rent, you won’t have this apartment either.”

“Well, she’s a ray of sunshine,” Brittany muttered as Bretta sashayed out of the apartment with a check I prayed wouldn’t bounce in her hand as she closed the door behind her. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t come here to make you feel bad. I saw the video and I’ve felt so bad about it. I already felt bad before I knew that was you, for what happened at work. I should have quit on the spot. What happened wasn’t your fault.”

“No, it wasn’t, but you can’t quit because of it. You have your own bills to pay.” I smiled, genuinely touched that Brittany had cared to visit at all. We’d never hung out after work or anything, and she’d only had the job for a few weeks before I’d been fired, but she had offered me a ride home once when she’d seen me headed for the bus stop in the rain. She’d never actually been to my actual apartment though. “How did you know which apartment was mine?”

She blushed. “I eliminated the ones that had names on the mailboxes downstairs and started knocking on doors of the ones that didn’t.”

Wow. She really wanted to give me those flowers. “Um, thank you for the flowers. And for checking on me.”

“I don’t mind. I can’t stand the girl they hired to replace you, by the way.” She sat in the black leather armchair I’d found at an estate sale and studied me. “I can’t believe how great you look. There’s not a scratch on you.”

Yeah, it was weird as hell, but I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. I shrugged. “I must have some damn good healing properties in my DNA.”

“Oh, does everyone in your family heal so quickly?”

“I have no idea. I was in foster care from right after I was born until the day I aged out, and I have no interest in finding the sperm and egg donors who created me.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I turned out just fine.” Brittany didn’t respond and an awkward silence fell between us, along with a dark shift in mood that even I could pick up on. I’d been told many times that I could be off-putting, and I’d never really done well with the whole forming friendships thing.

“Those are really pretty. Or they were.” Brittany nodded toward the wilting roses on the coffee table, and I could tell by her tone she was trying to lighten the mood, uncomfortable with the vibe.

“Yeah, I guess they were.” I reached over and picked up the card that came with them, wondering why Barry had bothered sending the flowers to my apartment, knowing I wouldn’t be in it. I’d been hit right outside his building and even if he’d gone back to what he’d been busy doing with the pink-haired banshee before I’d walked in on him, I imagined it had taken a while for the ambulance and police to clear the scene. He had to have known it was me who’d gotten hit before any jerk had a chance to upload a horrible video of the event. I opened the envelope to see a typed message on a gray card: *Looking forward to working with you.*

That was it. I flipped the card over and the only thing on it was a big letter D in a darker gray. Weird. “I think I actually

got someone else's flowers.”

“That's odd.”

“Yeah. There seems to be a lot of odd going on in my life lately.” My stomach grumbled, and I remembered I'd passed on food at the hospital. I'd just wanted to leave. I knew I wouldn't find much in my fridge that was edible after two weeks, but I had what I needed for comfort. “I'm going to make coffee. Want any?”

“You mean your devil's brew? No thank you. You'll be up all night if you drink that now, won't you?”

“I'll probably be up all night anyway.” I sighed as I stood and crossed the room to grab what I needed from the cabinet above the coffeemaker. “I have to go through my mail, find out if the garage that was fixing my car even has it anymore, search and apply for a job, and figure out what I'm going to do about the hospital bill when it comes in.”

“Oh, man. That's a lot.” Brittany stood. “I should get out of your way.”

“Don't feel that I'm running you off,” I said as I scooped coffee grounds into the filter, then poured water into the reservoir and hit the power button to start the percolation process. “It was nice of you to check on me. I know we didn't know each other very long.”

“Well, it was certainly better working with you. I miss griping about the mean customers together.” She was near the front door now and seemed a little nervous by the way she

fidged with the hem of the light pink T-shirt that skimmed her midriff. Seeming to make a decision, she walked over to my fridge and lifted the pen attached to the magnetic notepad on the freezer section. “Well, I know you look great but still, you were hit by a bus so I’m sure you have to at least have a headache or need a nap so I’ll go, but I can leave my number if you need a ride or something.”

“Thanks. That’s... really nice.”

She jotted down her number and replaced the pen, then smiled. “Let me know if you need anything, and please don’t forget to look both ways first the next time you want to cross a street.”

I chuckled. “Believe me, I will look left, right, up, and down next time.”

She smiled and let herself out, leaving me in the stillness of my lonely apartment, only the sound of percolating coffee to break the silence. I grabbed the bottle of Hershey’s syrup out of the fridge and squirted some into the bottom of my Gamora coffee mug. I dropped in a teaspoon of cinnamon and poured the hot liquid over it once the coffee had finished percolating and stirred it up. It was missing the espresso shots, and cinnamon wasn’t quite the same as cinnamon dolce syrup, but it would do in a pinch. I took a drink and savored the hot brew as I mentally prepared myself for going through bills and dealing with Sal at the garage, but I suddenly felt as if I wasn’t alone anymore.

I whirled around but didn't see anyone in my Spartan apartment. Still, the unsettling feeling had become a nervous energy crawling up my spine and branching out to my limbs. I set the coffee mug on the counter, quietly grabbed a large knife from the knife block, and crept across the living room, and into my bedroom... where a drop-dead gorgeous, tall and muscular black man rested on my bed with his ankles crossed and his hands folded under his head.



CHAPTER THREE

I closed my eyes, took a breath, and reopened them. Yup, he was still there. And he wasn't naked, so I was pretty sure I wasn't imagining him, because why would I cover up such a nice fantasy man in black pants and a T-shirt? And not even in a fantasy would I allow anyone to put their feet on my bed while still wearing their big, black shit-kickers. The man who looked like pure sex dipped in smooth milk chocolate was definitely real. And he was an intruder.

I opened my mouth to scream, but before I could get a sound out, he was off the bed and one of his hands was clamped over my mouth, the other wrapped around the nape of my neck, and my heart felt like it was beating at four times its normal rate.

“You live in an apartment building managed by a pretty crabby woman, and from what I've seen of your neighbors, they don't seem like the friendliest bunch. Do you really want to scream over nothing and become a thorn in their surly paws?” He waited a moment, seeming to study me, and once he appeared satisfied that I wouldn't scream, he slowly

lowered his hand, but kept the other one along the back of my neck where it sparked small fires that started at where his fingers touched my flesh and traveled to much lower regions. “I haven’t given you a reason to fear me.”

I’d been staring at his wide, full lips as he spoke. His mouth was a masterpiece, framed by an expertly trimmed dark goatee beard, but once he quieted, I allowed my gaze to travel up into eyes that looked like pools of dark melted caramel, and burned as hot behind thick black lashes. Such lush dark lashes should have looked feminine, but the man before me was all raw masculinity right down to his voice, so deep it vibrated in my chest when he spoke. I focused on his eyes again. Something about them was vaguely familiar and I could almost recall hearing his voice speaking to me before, but it was impossible. I didn’t know him.

“Why were you going to scream?”

“You’re not naked,” I blurted without thinking.

One corner of his full lips curved upward as surprised amusement flared in his dark eyes. He released a small, stunned cough before speaking. “Uh, is that an issue?”

“Huh?” I blinked a few times as my brain caught up to my mouth and I realized what I’d said. “No, no. No! I meant I was going to scream because a strange man was in my bed, and I knew it wasn’t just a fantasy because you had clothes on.”

His grin grew into a full smile. “You have a lot of fantasies about finding strange naked men in your bed?”

“What?” I shook my head, wondering why the hell I kept saying stupid, embarrassing things. “No. I... I just got out of the hospital. I had a traumatic head injury. I can’t be held accountable for the things I’m saying.”

“Your head is fine now. Medically speaking, that is. I can’t say for sure about the psychological aspects.”

“How do you know? Who are you?” I reminded myself the hot guy was a complete stranger and one who’d somehow gotten into my apartment, all the way into my bedroom, unseen and unheard, and backed away from him. To my relief, he allowed his other hand to drop from my neck. “How did you get into my apartment?”

“There aren’t a lot of places I can’t get into,” he said and looked down at my hand. “If you don’t remember me, your instinct to grab the knife when you sensed a stranger in your home was a good one, but you should have been prepared to use it instead of forgetting all about it once your hormones were titillated.”

“Once my hormones were...” Wow. Seriously? The ego on this guy! I tightened my hand around the handle of the knife and raised it in what I hoped was a believably threatening pose. “You didn’t titillate my anything and don’t worry, I’m more than ready to use this if you don’t have a damn good reason to be here in my apartment right now.”

The man leaned forward and made a show of breathing in my scent before grinning wickedly. “Smells like titillation to

me. I've grown very familiar with your scent while you recovered in the hospital, Dulce."

"How do you know my name?" Great-looking guy or not, the man was a big stranger with muscles that looked pretty capable of snapping me in half if he wanted to. My confusion was quickly being replaced with panic. I backed out of the doorway, giving myself more room should I need to run because odds were, even with a knife in my hand, I probably wasn't a match for him when it came to combat. "Who the hell are you?"

The amusement left his face, and he released a frustrated sigh. "Shit. You really don't have a clue who I am, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Great. This is going to be just fantastic. Do you at least remember Petie?" He walked past me as an image of Leslie Jordan sitting behind a gray desk in an all-gray room popped into my brain. He walked over to the kitchen and picked up the mug of coffee I'd left sitting on the counter. He sniffed it and frowned.

"Do you mind?" I stormed into the kitchen and snatched my mug out of his hand. I'd been in the hospital for two weeks, hadn't even had the pleasure of a full cup of coffee before the accident that sent me there, and I was not about to lose another cup to some stranger who didn't know how to act in people's homes. "It's considered good manners to at least ask before you go picking up things in other people's homes."

“It’s also considered good manners to be hospitable to your guests.”

“I didn’t invite you in. You’re not my guest. You’re an intruder.”

“I’m your trainer.”

“My what?” I checked out his muscles again. Okay, so he definitely looked like the type of guy who knew his way around the gym, but that had nothing to do with me. “I don’t have a gym membership, and I just got out of the hospital. I’m not about to start some rigorous exercise program now. And why are you in my apartment? Do you think someone who could afford a personal trainer would live in this building?”

“You’re not footing the bill for my services. I work for the same entity as you.”

“The same entity? I don’t work anywhere. S&R fired me.”

“That was your old job. I’m talking about your new job.”

I stood there for a moment, blinking at him as I racked my brain for what in the world he was talking about. I clearly remembered being fired and Brittany had confirmed it during her visit. I hadn’t gotten a new job because I’d been put in the hospital before I’d applied for any. Before I’d even had a chance to get a cup of coffee. I’d just gotten out and hadn’t had a moment to myself since returning home. I hadn’t even had time to go through my mail yet.

I took a big drink of much-needed coffee, fueling myself for a conversation I feared might get dangerous because either the

man in front of me was in the middle of a mental breakdown... or I was.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Do you remember speaking with Petie and the accountant?"

The coffee I'd just swallowed fell to my stomach in a heavy, sickening plop, and almost came back up again. "How do you know I had a dream about an accountant?"

"The accountant."

"That's what I said. An accountant."

"No, she's not an accountant. Her name is *The Accountant*. Like *The Rock* or *The Miz* or... *The Big Bopper*."

"The Big Bopper?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't think of anyone else that wasn't a wrestler. And you didn't dream about *The Accountant*. You were audited by her."

I gulped down the rest of my coffee before walking over to the living area, where I set the cup on the coffee table next to the wilted flowers. Little by little, bits and pieces of my dream came back to me. I remembered being told I was in Purgatory and that I was dead. Correction: I was mostly dead. I remembered the loud alarm and the walls flashing red, and I remembered meeting with a short, older man with white hair and a Southern accent who looked a lot like Leslie Jordan. And I remembered his name had been Petie.

I did not remember the man currently standing in my kitchen, the man who knew entirely too much about something

he couldn't possibly know about. At the same time, he was somehow distantly familiar, enough that I had yet to either fight for my life or start screaming my head off. "Oh, great. I'm still dreaming."

"You're not dreaming."

"Fine. I'm in a coma. Whatever." I fell onto the couch and buried my head in my hands. "I'm in the damn hospital in the middle of fucking dying and what am I doing? I'm having weird dreams about freaking Leslie Jordan, some weird accountant, and some random hot guy."

"I'm going to go out on a limb and assume I'm the random hot guy, but who is Leslie Jordan?"

"Leslie Jordan! The actor."

"Yeah, I don't know who that is."

"Your loss. He's friggin' adorable." I straightened back up and sighed. "In this dream, he's this Petie guy."

The man standing in my kitchen frowned and shook his head. "I think we're having a failure to communicate here. You are not dreaming, Dulce. You are not dead. You were nearly dead, and you were in Purgatory where you were audited by The Accountant. She found something questionable in your file and you spoke with Petie. I was advised that before he could fully fill you in on the arrangement, he had to send you back before the window closed. I'm just now realizing how very little you were told."

“What window? What arrangement? What in the world are you talking about?”

“The window between life and death. Your last spark of life was about to fade when Petie sent you back to give you a second chance rather than condemning you to Hell for something out of your control. He sent me to make sure you healed and to train you for what you have to do now.”

Oh, good grief. I rested my head along the back of the couch and closed my eyes, no longer even remotely afraid of the strange man in my apartment because he was definitely a figment of my dying brain’s imagination. Most people in my situation would probably cry or rage, react in some way to the knowledge that this was it. *Death*. I didn’t do either. I felt a little numb to it, actually, but why shouldn’t I? I’d spent twenty years alive and they’d mostly sucked. That said, if I was going to dream my way into the great beyond, I might as well make it enjoyable. The strange guy was hot, but if I was going to the other side, I might as well go for the man I’d been drooling over for the past six years. I conjured him in my head and smiled as I opened my eyes.

“Damn.” The six-foot-one hot guy stood in the middle of my living area. Right between my coffee table and the television. His arms were folded, showing off the curves of his muscular arms.

“Problem?”

“Besides the fact you’re still here?” I grunted. “You were supposed to turn into Wilmer Valderrama.”

One of his perfectly sculpted ebony eyebrows arched. “That little guy that talks funny? Fez?”

“Yeah, or, you know, the incredibly hot action hero from *NCIS*.” Damn it. This was my dream, and I was aware of it. I should be able to change what I wanted. It usually worked. I stared directly at the man and focused harder, envisioning the super-sexy Agent Torres standing in his place.

“Do I even want to know what you’re doing?”

“I’m still trying to turn you into Wilmer Valderrama.”

“Oh, good. For a minute there, I was afraid you were trying to activate your laser eyes or something.”

I glared at him. “I don’t understand. This usually works.”

“I’m sorry. Are you actually telling me you possess the ability to shapeshift other people? Maybe you need a psych evaluation after all.”

“No, jerk. I’m saying I’m aware I’m dreaming, so I should have the power to change the outcome now.” I stood so I was as close to eye-to-eye as I was going to get with the guy without the aid of high heels, and focused. I couldn’t conjure Wilmer, but maybe I could get an Avenger. I focused, imagining the hair, eyes, skin tone, smile... Damn it. I couldn’t turn him into Thor either. “Wake up!”

“I’m not asleep.”

“I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to me.” I slapped myself hard across the face and yelped. “Damn it, that actually stung.”

“No shit, genius. Are you done abusing yourself now?”

I looked down at the knife in my other hand. I'd never set it down.

“Whatever you're thinking right now—”

“There's one guaranteed way of waking up from a dream that refuses to end.” I grabbed the knife handle in both hands and turned the weapon toward myself.

It was snatched out of my hands in a blur of movement just before I could plunge it into my stomach, and the next thing I knew, I was next to the couch with my back against the wall, and the tall hot guy's free hand wrapped around my throat, pinning me in place. His eyes were warm with anger as they glared directly into mine. His nostrils flared before he growled, “Despite the fact that I don't really want this job and you've already proven you're going to be a major pain in my ass, I'm not supposed to let you die so you're going to have to catch up and start accepting your new fucked-up reality, however crazy it may seem. Do you understand?”

I couldn't nod if I'd wanted to. His hand was wrapped around my throat like a steel band. A warm, living steel band. I reached out tentatively until my fingers connected with his chest, then I settled my palms flat against the fabric covering his hard pectoral muscles and pressed. His chest was firm but gave a little where flesh covered muscle. Heat transferred to warm my suddenly clammy palms. The heat of a living, breathing being. Despite my best effort at denial, the man in front of me was really real.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” he said in his deep, smooth voice as he loosened his grip on my throat and let his hand drop, but he didn’t step away.

“What?”

“This is real. You’re not dreaming and you’re not in a coma. It wasn’t a dream when you went to Purgatory either. You were really there in spirit. You just left the physical part of you behind in a hospital emergency room.”

“Because it was broken.”

“Right.”

“But it’s not broken anymore?”

He shook his head. “No, but it can break again. You can still die, but I’d really prefer that you not do so before I train you.”

I swallowed and tried to wrap my mind around what he was saying, and what he’d been saying since I’d discovered him in my bed. “How did you know what I was thinking just now?”

“It’s a skill that I have.”

“You can read minds?”

“Yes. I can pick up thoughts when they’re attached to strong emotions. Or when I have a connection to someone.”

“Yeah? So, which of those two conditions were met to enable you to read my mind?”

“Both.”

“Shit.” I stepped forward, and to my relief, he stepped back, allowing me the room I needed to get over to the couch before

my weak knees gave out. I wasn't entirely sure if the guy had literally read my mind or he was just really good at picking up on the general idea of a person's thoughts by reading their body language, but he'd known exactly what I was thinking. He'd also known I was so convinced I was dreaming, I was about to freaking stab myself and stepped in to stop me. "I just almost killed myself, didn't I?"

"You just almost severely injured yourself. I wouldn't have let you die." He sat on the coffee table, facing me, the outside of his left knee nearly touching mine. "I would have cussed and yelled at you because I would have been really pissed off, but I wouldn't have let you die."

"So, do you have a name I'm supposed to call you or are you just The Trainer?" I used air quotes to emphasize the title.

"My name is Reese," he answered, and I remembered hearing the name somewhere. "However, my trainees call me Random Hot Guy."

I rolled my eyes. "Traumatic brain injury, remember? You can't take anything I say seriously right now."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself. Just keep in mind that you need to take everything *I* say seriously. Management determined they couldn't calculate your eternal resting place in a fair manner, so they've given you another opportunity to change where you will end up. It's going to take hard work, and a lot of it will be very dangerous. Besides being your trainer, I will be your partner. I'll do my best to keep you safe, but sometimes things happen and I may get caught up with my

own life or death situation. You can die doing this job, and if you die again, that's it. Petie won't send you back a second time. Even if he wanted to, he doesn't have enough authority to keep throwing fish back into the lake."

"Wait, wait, wait." I held my hands up to silence him as I tried to process what he was saying against what I remembered from the meeting in Purgatory that I had thought was a coma dream and had shoved into the recesses of my mind. I remembered there being something in my file that seemed to have alarmed The Accountant, something she'd taken to Petie, who I gathered was like the head boss of Purgatory, but things had gotten really kooky after that and I'd awakened in the emergency room without much of an explanation why. "I'm still trying to wrap my brain around all of this. From all I've gathered about Purgatory from what little time I was there myself, and what I've seen on television or movies, or read in books, it's a place lost souls go to when some emotional attachment to this world holds them back or it's a place for monsters who don't have souls or some weird stuff like that. Why was I there? And why was there any issue with determining where I would go? I'm just a normal woman."

Reese shook his head, but his dark caramel eyes, which never left me, had softened. "You are far from a normal woman, Dulce. You never had a chance of that."

Something in his tone made my stomach dip, and I recalled The Accountant's reaction to whatever she'd seen on that page in my file. And I remembered something Petie had said after

she'd brought the matter to his attention. He'd mentioned paternity. "Something in my file freaked that accountant out. What was it?"

"Man, they're going to really owe me for having to be the one to explain this to you." He set the knife beside him on the table, scrubbed a hand down his face and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Gaining entrance into Heaven or Hell is a bit of a numbers game with points awarded for deeds and desires. Needless to say, someone who has overwhelmingly positive deeds and desires gets passed right through to Heaven. Someone with overwhelmingly dark deeds and desires gets cast into whatever layer of Hell is most appropriate based on their numbers. When their numbers are too close to call, they end up in Purgatory where they are then audited."

"So, kind of like a recount, like in an election?"

"Yes."

I pondered that as I tried to tally up my own deeds and desires. I couldn't fathom my dark deeds and desires being nearly equal to my good ones. I mean, I gave to charities all the time. I never hurt animals. I tipped well. I let people merge. Maybe my dark desires were just so powerful they outweighed the good? I mean, I had really, *really* wanted to staple Miley Cyrus's mouth shut so she'd quit doing that stupid tongue thing and who didn't want to make the Kardashians disappear? I'd been in my fair share of fights, but

never without good reason. I remembered the paternity thing again. “That Petie guy said something about my paternity.”

“Yeah.” Reese took a breath, seemed to steel himself for delivering bad news. It made me a little queasy. “There are other conditions that can land a person in Purgatory. Outliers and special circumstances.”

“Reese?”

“Yeah?”

“Grow a pair and just tell me why I got audited.”

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t let any temper into his tone when he spoke again. “Sometimes it all comes down to genetic makeup, like in your case.”

“Of course.” I barked out a laugh that held a lot more disgust than humor. “I knew whoever my father was, he couldn’t have been a very good person. Actually, I think I always knew he was pretty terrible, but I never thought he’d keep me locked outside the pearly gates when I keeled over.”

“I thought you knew nothing about your biological parents. Petie said you had no knowledge of who you came from.”

“You don’t always have to know who a person is to know what they are,” I advised. “All I was ever told about either of them was that I was found in a dumpster. That’s all I needed to know. I’m aware of the many scenarios in which a woman could give birth to a baby she doesn’t want, but what scenarios lead to that baby being tossed into a dumpster while still alive? Either the biological mother was heartless and evil, or the

father was so heartless and evil, she hated what he'd planted inside her so freaking much she'd left the innocent child to die. And if she was the horrible one, what did that say for the guy she'd be with?"

Reese had been watching me closely the entire time I spoke, and when he responded, his voice was soft, and he seemed to be carefully choosing his words. "That's what you really believe to be true?"

"Yes." I didn't hesitate to answer. "I put a lot of thought into it over the years, and that is what I have firmly come to believe. I wasn't put up for adoption. I wasn't left at a fire station or a hospital. I was thrown away. For a lot of years, I thought that meant I was garbage, but I finally realized I was just the product of garbage."

"I see," he said, voice soft. The gentle sound of pity.

My hand automatically curled into a fist. "So, what was dear old dad? I imagine it must be really bad if he and his progeny all have to go through a review process in Purgatory."

"Just his offspring. There's nowhere else but Hell for him."

"Oh." I swallowed, struggling to get past the lump that had just formed in my throat. "So, I was definitely right about the evil thing. Come on, Reese. It's not like I didn't already figure out I must have come from pure scum. Whatever he is or was, I can take it. Murderer? Rapist? Politician?"

My attempt at levity didn't bring out so much as a hint of a grin from Reese. His silent stare and what clearly looked like

an internal struggle to tell me the truth of my paternity hollowed out my stomach. I'd quit caring about my biological parents years ago. Quit wondering. I used to wonder who my mother was, what had led her to give me up. What terrible thing must have happened to her, what she must have blamed me for. I felt that guilt, heavy in my soul, and then I'd learned the truth. I'd been thrown away. So, I quit caring. I cut them off. They were whoever they were, and I was me. Just me. My own person. Completely separate.

“Whatever it is, I can handle it. Just say it.”

Reese met my gaze and nodded once. Licked his lips. Took a breath. And finally spoke. “Demon.”

“Yeah, okay? So... rapist? Pedophile?” My stomach flipped. I'd prepared for murderer or garden variety rapist, but pedophile was going to be a lot harder to come to terms with.

He shook his head. “Demon.”

Now I was just getting annoyed. “I don't understand what you're getting at. Just say what he is.”

“I'm saying your biological father is a demon, Dulce. An actual demon.” He took a breath and expelled it roughly. “And that means so are you.”



CHAPTER FOUR

“Get the hell out of my apartment.”
“Dulce.”

“Get out!” I rose from the couch and pointed toward the door. “Get out and take all your crazy bullshit with you.”

Reese sighed heavily and stood to tower over me. “I know this must come as a shock to you.”

“A shock? What comes as a shock? That I let a crazy person in my home and actually believed him for a moment just for him to make a fool out of me? Well, congratulations. You really had me going for a while there.”

“Dulce, it’s true, and deep down inside, you know it’s true.” He looked directly into my eyes, holding me captive with his dark stare. “Because you’ve always felt it. You’ve always felt it and you’ve always fought it. That’s why you wake up shaking and drenched in the cold sweat of pure fear when you see what your future holds in your dreams.”

My heartbeat came to a dead stop. “How could you know about my dreams?”

“I know a lot about a lot of things. I can help you through this if you let me. Bottom line, you were headed to a very bad place for a very unfair reason, and you were given a break. You can take advantage of the big boss’s empathy and let me help you earn your way out or you can just piss all over this opportunity and live it up while you can, knowing that when you die again, and you will die again because you’re human enough to die like one, it’s a one-way ticket to Hell.”

“The *big* boss?”

Reese shrugged. “Yeah, I know. Petie’s a little guy in stature, but that little guy carries a lot of weight in Purgatory. Also, you should probably know he’s a lot bigger when he’s angry.”

I stood there blinking for a moment before I shook my head and stepped away. I needed space and Reese didn’t appear to be walking out of my apartment anytime soon. “So, you’re telling me I’m a demon, but I’m human enough to die, and even though I’ve never killed anyone or as far as I know, done anything truly evil or demonic, it’s a one-way ticket to Hell for me all because of my biological father who was a ... a demon?”

“Yes. Well, you’re actually only half demon, but that’s enough to have landed you in Purgatory. As far as the not having done anything truly evil or demonic thing, you haven’t grown into your full demonic power yet. Petie and The Accountant suspect it’ll either happen on your twenty-first birthday or when your demonic half is provoked into waking.”

I was pretty sure I was doing the standing there blinking thing again because I had no idea what the man was talking about.

“You’re wondering what the hell your twenty-first birthday has to do with anything and what I mean by your demonic half waking, aren’t you?”

“There you go with the mind-reading again. You should take that trick on the fair circuit. You’d make a killing.”

“I have other talents that keep me flush.”

“Would any of those talents happen to be getting to the point? I’d love to see that one.”

He grinned. Almost. His lips curved upward about a hair. “You know, when you unleash that smart-mouthed attitude of yours, I can really see the demon in you.”

“I’d tell you to bite me, but things have been just crazy enough lately, I’m almost afraid you’d actually do it.”

If what I’d seen on his face had been a grin, it was gone now. “Yeah, anyway... I’m sure you’ve heard how the devil’s got this thing for the number six-six-six?”

“The mark of the beast. Yeah, I think everyone’s heard about that.”

“Right, well, that is a number that comes up often with demons. However, it’s not just the three sixes together like that. Pretty much any number with a six in it, or any combination of six, or any factor, or multiple, or any number that can be added together to form a six. Your paternity is very

rare and in order for it to work at all, you had to be born human. A demonic entity brought into this world as a child would be complete chaos. You'd be useless to the entity that you came from. That is, if you even made it through your toddler years before someone was sent to take you out. In a sense, you can say you've carried the demonic gene as if it were a recessive one. You won't show your demonic traits until that gene comes to maturity, which, knowing how demons work, will be an age that coincides with the number six or a multiple of it. Six would be too young, and sixteen not much better. Three, twelve, thirteen, fifteen, all of those are too young. The earliest logical age for you to come into your power would be twenty-one, which is also why a lot of deals made with demons become payable at the age of twenty-one or in twenty-one years."

"Wait. Just..." I held my hands out and shook my head. The man had successfully talked me right into a black hole of confusion. "All I heard was a bunch of gibberish about numbers. You had me at the six-six-six part, but then you started throwing out numbers that made no sense at all."

"Factors and—"

"Factors and multiples of six. Yeah. I got that part. I don't get where twenty-one comes in though. I mean, yes, I failed every math class I ever took, but I'm still pretty sure six is not a factor of twenty-one."

"No, but if you add the two and the one together, you get three, which is a factor of six."

I grabbed my head and turned away, heading to the kitchen to grab a bottled water out of the refrigerator. “Okay, moving on to the other thing because you just exploded my brain with whatever the hell that was.”

“It was basically numerology.”

“Well, it sounded like math, which is just a discreet way of torturing people with numbers, hence why it’s called math. M-A-T-H, Mental Abuse To Humans,” I clarified as I opened the refrigerator door. I might have heard a soft chuckle come from him, but I was too stunned by what I saw in my refrigerator to really pay attention to whether he thought I was funny. Apparently, I’d been so desperate for my coffee fix, I hadn’t even noticed when I’d grabbed my chocolate syrup out of it earlier. “There’s food in my refrigerator and it’s not green and moldy.”

“Yeah, I thought you might need something to eat when you got out of the hospital. We’re going to be training pretty hard, so I got the grocery shopping out of the way.”

I grabbed a bottled water and closed the refrigerator, feeling something a little odd in my chest, but I couldn’t put a name to it. “You’re the person who brought my clothes to the hospital.”

“I’m pretty sure those assless hospital gowns count as indecent exposure. If you got arrested before you got home, that would have been yet another delay in our training.”

“And we couldn’t have that,” I muttered. “And the other thing you mentioned? You said my demonic half could be provoked into awakening. How?”

“Extreme anger to the point of rage.”

I laughed. “Yeah, well, catching my boyfriend dick-deep in another woman right before getting hit by a bus didn’t make me Hulk-out into a demon, so I think I’m safe from the awakening thing. Maybe you guys are wrong about the whole demon paternity thing too.”

“The management in Purgatory doesn’t make that type of mistake, and you’re just saying that because you don’t want it to be true, but you know it is. You’ve felt it for a long time. You’re different. You have a darkness deep inside calling out to you. Hell, your very name is practically an announcement of what you are.”

“Dulce?”

“Dulce Nina Malvada.” He grunted. “You have no idea what your name translates to, do you?”

“Learning the meaning behind my name was never a big desire for me. It was given to me by the state, not passed down like some precious family heirloom. It’s not like a lot of thought was put into it.”

“That’s what you think. There’s no way a state official came up with that name on their own and just happened to assign it to you.”

I’d just taken a drink of water and I swallowed wrong, choking on it. I coughed until my throat cleared. “What are you saying?”

“People can be possessed. Possessing an official long enough to assign your name wouldn’t have even been hard for a high enough level of demon. Dulce Nina Malvada basically translates to Sweet Wicked Girl. A perfect name for a child who was half demon offspring and half innocent child.”

My knees went all wobbly again, so I moved over to the bar and pulled out a barstool to sit on. I set the water bottle on the bar, afraid drinking even just water at the moment might make me sick. “You make it sound like the demon that fathered me had a hand in naming me.”

Reese nodded.

“Why would he want to name me?”

“Why do you think?”

I grew very cold, and a trickle of icy sweat cascaded down the length of my spine. As hard as it was to believe I’d been sired by a demon, once I had, I’d naturally assumed the demon in question had just gone about his wicked business. I’d assumed I was a mistake that was made and forgotten about. But people generally didn’t name chickens they were going to eat, and I doubted demons named children they were going to just forget about either. Hopefully, being given a name meant the evil entity didn’t want to eat me, but that didn’t sound much worse than the next option: actually being a part of my life.

“Please don’t tell me my dear old dad is going to roll up in an El Camino on my twenty-first birthday with a bouquet of black roses and some lame-ass apology for never taking me

fishing and tell me to hop in so he can take me to meet my horde of demonic half-siblings.”

“Wow. You actually kind of painted a full picture there, didn’t you?” His mouth twitched at the corners. “Why an El Camino?”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. It just seemed like something a demon would drive.”

Reese stared at me a moment longer, mouth twitching and eyes shining. I thought he might laugh, but the light in his eyes settled down before he spoke again. “I don’t know about the El Camino. Some demons are low profile and others are pretty damn flashy. What I do know is demons don’t just randomly create children on this plane and let them live out the rest of their lives in peace. As long as you are breathing, you are a tool the demon can use.”

“For what?”

“Whatever he wants.” He slid his hands into his front pockets. “But we’re not going to worry about that right now. We’re going to focus on your training.”

“Yes, my training. You don’t look like the type of guy who sits in a cubicle all day, so I’m going to take a wild guess that you’re not training me to do clerical work in one of those gray rooms in Purgatory.”

“Purgatory isn’t the type of place one just goes in and out of freely, so good call.”

“Yeah, the general sense of foreboding that’s been lingering in the air since I found you in my bed and has only increased since we had our little Maury Povich paternity revelation moment kind of helped.” I drummed my fingertips along the bar edge to hide the way my hands trembled. “So, what exactly am I being trained for?”

“You’ve been offered a position with Purgatory’s Demonic and Malevolent Nefarious Entity Division.”

“That’s a mouthful. And kind of redundant.”

He did that almost grin thing again. “I know, but Purgatory likes its acronyms.”

“Demonic, Malevolent—”

“You skipped the And.”

“I thought And was always left out of acronyms.”

“They needed it to make this one work.”

I started over. “Demonic And Malevo—D.A.M.N.E.D. *Damned*. Seriously? That doesn’t sound disconcerting at all.”

“There are worse divisions.”

“Well, lucky me. I can’t imagine what divisions would sound worse. Were any of the other words thrown into the division’s title just to make it a good acronym, or am I really working in a department dealing with demonic, malevolent, nefarious entities?”

“I’m sure they were all thrown in just to make the stupid acronym, but that doesn’t make them any less accurate. The

department is sort of a way for select individuals to earn enough points to stay out of Hell by neutralizing undesirables here on this plane. We're like an undercover police force."

"So we're like *21 Jump Street*, but with demons and no classes?"

"Something like that."

"Do we have badges?"

"No, nor would we ever need to show one. We work more like bounty hunters."

"Bounty hunters have badges."

"Yeah, some do, and they're about as necessary and authentic as badges for bikini inspectors. You don't need a badge. You just need skill, intelligence, determination, and some bravery. Plus, I'm going to teach you how to fight."

"I know how to fight."

"I'm going to teach you how to fight better. The type of entities we'll be sent after don't go down easily and they sure as hell don't fight fair."

"Hence the demonic and malevolent part." My stomach took a dip, but I didn't want the big, strapping guy in front of me to know that. I'd learned a long time ago that no matter how scary a situation was, even if you knew without a shadow of a doubt you were about to get your ass kicked, never show your soft underbelly and never, ever show your fear.

Reese's eyes narrowed as he studied me, and I got the sense he was trying to read me. And I wasn't in the mood to share the current thoughts swirling around in my head, so I moved on. "And what about compensation?"

I stood and moved over to the coffee table to rummage through the stack of mail there, all junk and bills. I never got anything of a personal nature. I picked up the bill I knew would be the biggest. "I have bills to pay, and I've been unemployed for two weeks with nothing coming in. I need to get my car out of the shop, if it's even still there."

"Working for D.A.M.N.E.D. isn't your normal nine-to-five, hourly wage kind of gig, but you will have medical coverage to take care of any injuries you sustain that are more than can be treated on-site and your health in general, given you're still a mortal being."

"So that's where the insurance the hospital was talking about came from?"

He nodded as I slipped my finger under the flap of the bill from the auto shop and unsealed it.

"And what about actual money? This fabulous abode of mine doesn't pay for itself."

He glanced around the small apartment, and I could tell by his expression he didn't see anything fabulous about it, which was my whole point. Maybe he didn't pick up on the sarcasm. Or maybe he did, but was so appalled by my residence, he couldn't keep snarky commentary from automatically populating in his head. It was entirely possible. "Staying out of

Hell upon your death is your payment for work given to you by D.A.M.N.E.D., so you'll have to get another hustle to pay your bills. You'll want to make sure whatever you do, you stay available for D.A.M.N.E.D. because they don't take kindly to being told you're not available. In fact, you not being available doesn't exist anymore."

"So, no regular shift work?"

"Not unless you're good with the fact you may have to quit without notice if you're called to run down a target in the middle of your workday."

"Looks like I'm going back on the pole," I said as I removed the papers from inside the envelope in my hand. I noted the way Reese now looked at me with a lot more interest, his gaze roving slowly over me from head to toe, lingering in key areas, and I rolled my eyes. "That was a joke. I am not, nor have I ever been, a pole dancer."

He shrugged. "It wouldn't be a bad gig as far as scheduling around D.A.M.N.E.D. work. You have a decent enough body for it."

"Well, thank you, Reese. You know just the way every woman wants to be descr—son of a bitch." I was pretty sure the whole rage-awakening thing Reese had mentioned wasn't going to be what brought out my full demon power because if ever there was a time I was filled with rage, it was then.

"Problem?"

“Yeah, this damn auto repair shop is clearly run by a low-life hustler.”

“What’s going on with your car?” Reese walked over and took the bill out of my hand, and along with it, the notice that my car would be going up on the auction block or broken down for parts if I didn’t show up by the end of business that very day with an extra thousand dollars tacked on to the price I’d already been quoted, and the price I’d been quoted before that price. “This seems like an awful lot of money for a simple repair. I don’t see an itemization. What did you have done?”

I threw my hands up. “I don’t even know anymore. The last time I called, he said I needed my carburetor fixed. Before that, it was the alternator, and before that, it was the percolator or the denominator or something.”

“Man, he must have seen you coming a mile away.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked, instantly offended by his tone.

“I’ll explain it to you when you can show me where the percolator is on a car.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know that’s not what it was, but it was something with an -ator in it.”

“Sure. So, what was wrong with the car?”

“If I knew what was wrong with it, I would have fixed it myself, don’t you think?”

“I highly doubt you would have fixed it,” he said dryly. “I mean, what was it doing to make you think you needed to take

it to the auto repair shop in the first place?”

“Oh. It was going *boom bum grrrrr tsssss* and it wouldn’t start anymore after hitting the dashboard.”

He stared at me for a moment, and I was pretty sure he was having some sort of mental debate with himself over whether he should quit his job as my trainer. If not for the one blink I caught, I would have thought he’d been frozen in place. “Why would you hit the dashboard?”

“That’s what gets it going and turns on all the lights on the dash.”

“The lights on the dash?”

“Yeah, you know. So I can see the speed, the gas level, the thing that shows if it’s too hot—”

“What about the check engine light?”

“Oh, that one always stayed on whether I hit the dashboard or not. That’s the only one that always works.”

“How long did you notice the check engine light on before you—nevermind.” I noticed a line form in his jaw as he clenched his teeth and shook his head. “I’ll take care of this. You should get some food if you’re hungry and get some rest. I’ll be back at dusk to start our training.”

“I’m not tired, I’m not hungry, and Sal will not talk to you. You’re not the owner of the vehicle.”

“He’ll talk to me. I have a way with people.” Reese folded the bill and notice from the repair shop and shoved it into his

back pocket. “You’re going to need energy for what I’m going to put you through to get you into shape, so eat something anyway and lie down for a while. You’ll thank me later.”

I knew the guy was probably talking about making me hit a punching bag or teaching me some self-defense techniques, but his words sent a hot flash right through me. I quickly reminded myself that if I wasn’t having one hell of a hallucination, that meant the man in front of me worked for D.A.M.N.E.D. too, and I was pretty sure that he didn’t get the job from a staffing agency recommendation. He had to have been given it the same way I’d been.

“Food. Rest. Later.” He dipped his head and turned to walk toward the door, presumably to see a guy about my car.

I followed him halfway. “Hey, Reese.”

He stopped with one hand on the doorknob and turned toward me. “Yeah?”

“You said I have to do this job to stay out of Hell. Why do *you* have to do it?”

He looked at me in silence so long I didn’t think I would get an answer, but just as I was ready to give up, he lowered his gaze and spoke. “Long story short, I made a mistake, and now I need to earn my way out too.”

And then he was out of my apartment, and I was alone, chilled to the bone as I wondered what he’d done to make Hell a likely eternal resting place for him, and what he was capable of.

And how safe I was with him.



CHAPTER FIVE

I stood naked in the center of flames, my arms folded to cover my upper body. The flames engulfing me covered everything below my waist. The fire didn't burn. It was warm and strangely comfortable, like being wrapped in a thick blanket on a chilly day. I belonged in the flames. Even the snakes slithering over my body and through my hair seemed like they belonged with me. I understood them and they understood me. We were one.

A dark figure hovered in the distance, watching me. Waiting. For what, I did not know, but I knew I didn't trust or like him. And I knew it was a *him*. It might not be a person, but it was definitely a male. It was dark, angry, and clever, and I felt an invisible tether between us, and knew whoever, whatever, it was who watched me, it had given me the sharp, black fingernails stretching from the ends of my fingertips, the fiery glow in my eyes, and the dark scales covering my forehead, which slightly protruded, giving my brow a menacing arch.

“No!” I said and closed my eyes against the fiery dark energy and the bitter cold hovering around me.

When I reopened them, I was blinded by bright white light shining directly into my eyes. I tried to turn away from it, but I couldn't turn my head. I attempted to get up, to move in some way, but couldn't. My body didn't work. A dark shadow moved over me, and I felt something lift my head. The pain was excruciating, but I couldn't cry out.

“You're going to be all right.” The light behind the shadow faded enough I could make out a man leaning over me. He had brown skin and amber eyes, but my vision was too blurry for me to make out any other details. I was transfixed on his eyes, the way the amber seemed to glow as warmth spread through my body like fire burning through my veins. I reached for him.

“Dulce.”

My arms must have remembered how to work because my hands connected with a firm, warm body and I grabbed on tight.

“Dulce! Time to wake up.”

Suddenly, my brain was rattling around in my head and I looked up to see the glowing eyes had simmered into warm caramel. Then I realized I was covered in icy cold sweat and the eyes I looked up into were from the very real nightmare I'd really hoped to be done with by the time I awakened from my nap. “Ah, shit. You're really real, and you're back.”

“Let’s not start the disbelief thing again,” Reese said as he finally, blessedly, stopped shaking me. “You know I’m real and I told you I’d be back at dusk. Get up.”

“I am up. Get off of me.”

“I’d love to. Let go of me.”

“What?”

He looked down at where my hands were curled around his biceps. “Let go of me.”

“Oh.” Heat filled my face as I relaxed my hands and released him, allowing him to stand from my bed, where he’d been leaning over me. “Why are you even in here? Don’t you ever knock?”

“When it suits me. For your information, I did knock this time, but you didn’t answer. I came in and found you thrashing around in here, moaning. I couldn’t tell if you were having a really bad dream or a really *good* dream. However, judging from the way you pulled me down on top of you—”

“Don’t even attempt to finish that sentence,” I snapped as I sat up and pulled the hem of my T-shirt away from my body, hating the feel of the cold, sweat-soaked fabric against my skin. “I was obviously deep in a dream and had no idea you were here. And it was not a sex dream.”

“Must have been one hell of a nightmarish dream then to cover you in that much sweat without anything kinky going on.”

I shivered, recalling bits and pieces of the images I'd seen while I'd slept. I'd seen myself surrounded by fire and covered in snakes more times than I could remember, but no one else had ever been with me in the dream before. At least, if they had been, I'd never picked up on their presence. And I'd never had the dream transition to another before. I always woke up straight from it, sweating and panting. I never went somewhere else after having the snakes and fire dream. I couldn't say why, but the bit of dream that happened after the snakes and fire scared me more than what came before it.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No, I do not want to talk about it,” I snapped, and got to my feet. I pushed Reese aside when he made no move to step out of my way and stormed over to my closet to grab fresh clothes. “You already know what I was having a nightmare about. What the hell else would someone have a nightmare about after being told they were bred by a damn demon? What am I supposed to wear for this training anyway?”

“Anything comfortable that you can move well in and don't mind getting blood on.”

I spun around and stood before him with my finger planted firmly in the center of his chest less than a blink later. “Is that supposed to scare me? You can taunt me all you want, tease me with ideas of blood and violence and some demon father biding his time until he comes for me, but I do not scare easily. Got it?”

“I just answered a simple question with an even simpler answer, Dulce, and even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t need to scare you.” He grabbed my wrist and lifted my hand away, dislodging my finger from his chest, but held it up long enough for me to see the way it shook before he let my wrist go. “You’re already terrified, but you don’t need to be. I’m going to train you well enough to handle anything.”

“I don’t need that kind of training because I’m not afraid. So what if I’m a little shaky? I was hit by a bus, you know.” I moved back over to the closet and grabbed a black T-shirt and a pair of old jeans that were snug but not tight enough to restrict movement, then moved over to my dresser and opened my underwear drawer. I looked back over my shoulder at the tall, muscular intruder and narrowed my eyes. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

“You’re very rude.”

“I can be a lot worse than rude, especially when my time is being wasted. I’ve been in that drawer before and seeing your underwear didn’t exactly make me want to jump you so just get what you need, take the shower you’re dying to take, and get ready like you should have already done before I arrived at dusk.”

“You’re the one who told me to eat something and rest,” I reminded him and snatched a pair of underwear and a sports bra from the drawer, along with a switchblade I kept there, before slamming it closed.

I called him every cuss word I knew of, making sure he heard me, as I made my way into the bathroom and locked the door behind me, but once I was in the shower, letting the hot water drain the last remnants of icy cold sweat from my body, I calmed down enough to realize I'd been too harsh.

Did it completely suck that my biological father was a million times more horrible than I'd ever imagined? Yes. Was it Reese's fault? No. Was it Reese's fault that my coping mechanism when scared was to get smart-mouthed and snarly? No. Was it Reese's fault that I was in the situation I was in? No.

"Fine," I muttered to myself as I toweled off from the shower and used the blow dryer on my hair. There was no way of getting around the fact that I was in a mess and I needed whatever help I could get. It wasn't like I could tell anyone else any of the crazy stuff I'd learned since waking up in the hospital, not that I even had anyone to tell it to. As nice as it was of Brittany to drop in, I would probably never see her again. I wasn't a people person. Never had been.

I dressed, brushed out my hair, put on some lip gloss, and stepped out of the bathroom, prepared to apologize to Reese for the things I'd called him on my way into the bathroom and all the anger and false bravado I'd unleashed on him before that.

"About damn time." He stood from the couch as I entered the living area, a scowl on his face that could stop a wolf in its tracks, and folded his arms as he looked me over. "And what's

with the makeup? We're going to train, not go out to dinner and a movie."

"As if I'd go out to dinner and a movie with you," I snapped, all thought of apology gone as I covered the distance to stand in front of him. "And I'm wearing lip gloss. Sue me. I didn't take that long, and again, you're the one who told me to rest, and it's not like you said when you would be back."

"I told you I would be back at dusk."

"And when the hell is dusk? What are we, farm people? Show me where it says dusk on a clock."

"Oh my—" He reached out as if he were about to wrap his hands around my throat and squeeze, but growled out a very foul set of cuss words and turned away instead, still cussing up a blue streak as he headed toward the door. "Let's go."

"What?" I caught up to him as he exited the door to my apartment and closed it behind us. "I can't even grab something to eat?"

"I told you to eat when I was here earlier."

"You also said to rest. I can't do both things at once."

"Unbelievable," he muttered as he started down the stairs. "I am not compensated enough to deal with you."

"I'm not caffeinated enough to deal with you." I fell into step alongside him. Not easy given the fact he was angry-jogging down the stairs and his legs were longer than mine. "I need coffee. I can't concentrate without coffee."

“Then why didn’t you put some on before you got in the shower?”

“How was I supposed to know you’d be in a rush? And I want good coffee. I want coffee from the coffee shop around the corner with the cinnamon dolce syrup and the chocolate and the espresso shots.”

“All right, all right.” He stopped just after we exited the building and looked down at me. “We can walk over to the coffee shop. That’s as good a place as any for the first part of our training.”

“We’re going to fight in the coffee shop?”

“With your disposition, we’re probably going to fight everywhere.”

“No, I mean the training. You said we were going to fight.”

“I said I was going to train you and I was going to teach you how to fight better. I never said fighting was the only training you would get. There’s more to the job than just fighting.”

Lucky me. I glanced over at the apartment’s parking lot as we walked in the direction of the coffee shop. “And we’re walking because I still have no vehicle? I see you weren’t able to get it back.”

“Actually, I did get your car back.”

“Oh?” I scanned the parking lot again the best I could from the angle I had. “Where is it?”

“In the junkyard. It’s probably getting flattened as we speak.”

“What?” We’d reached the corner of the street and were about to cross. I came to a stop and grabbed his arm, too angry to appreciate the muscular contour of it. “You got my car back and then took it to a junkyard? Why would you do that?”

“One, I had it taken to a junkyard. Taking that piece of shit to the junkyard myself would have required cutting out holes in the floorboard so I could Flintstone that jalopy there and I have a reputation to uphold. I can’t be seen doing that. Two, I did it because somebody needed to call the time of death on that thing, and it wasn’t going to be you or the conman charging you ridiculous amounts of money to do a quick bubble gum and duct tape job on that hunk of metal. That man saw an easy scam the moment you entered his lot. The next time you have an issue with a vehicle and need something checked by a professional, find a less shady-looking place and take a man with you.”

“Oh, you sexist piece of—”

“I am not sexist, I’m simply pointing out that—”

“You’re saying that I got taken advantage of just because I’m a woman.”

“I made that man go over every single item he billed you for and he was charging you for things he didn’t even do and things you didn’t need, not to mention charging you for repairs that cost more than the actual worth of the car without ever

informing you of that. He played you. You were taken advantage of. How else would you describe it?”

“Of course I was taken advantage of,” I said, fully aware I was nearly shouting and people on the other side of the street were watching us, drawn by my raised voice, “but it wasn’t because I happen to be a woman. It was because I’m ignorant when it comes to cars. My ovaries have absolutely no correlation to my stupidity!”

“Do your ovaries have any correlation to this tantrum and pissy-ass attitude in general?”

My hands tightened into fists of their own will and I gritted my teeth against the urge to throw a few punches directly into the man in front of me’s chiseled jaw. “Oh, is that some not-so-subtle insinuation that I’m not all smiling and pleasant, therefore I must be on the rag? Sure. You’re not the least bit sexist. Not at all.”

I stepped off the curb to cross the street, only to be yanked back, Reese’s tight grip on my bicep. He reached into his pants pocket and a moment later, an envelope was slapped into my hand.

“What is this?”

“Every dollar you paid that hustler. Just so you know, I have female friends who can completely take apart any vehicle and put it back together again. I don’t think you got taken advantage of just because you’re a woman, but you clearly know nothing about mechanics and anyone who talks to you about cars can tell, so you should have taken someone with

you who does. According to the information I was given about you, you don't have any female friends. Or male friends. You do, however, date men. Hence, I suggested you bring one of them the next time you need to buy a car or have one checked out."

"Oh." My cheeks flamed up. Once he put things that way, his statement wasn't quite as sexist.

"Yeah." He reached into his other pants pocket, extracted an iPhone, and handed it to me along with a new driver's license that looked as legit as the one I already owned. In fact, I would have thought it was mine if not for one small detail. "That's a replacement for the cell that got broken in the accident. My number is already programmed for you. The license is for if we need to enter bars to do our job. Let's go get you your damn coffee and see if caffeine makes you a little more likeable so we both can get through this first night's training without racking up any negative points wanting to kill each other."

Well, hell, now I felt bad. I quickened my step to catch up to him as he stormed across the street, but didn't say anything. I wasn't sure what to say. Yes, I'd had an attitude with him, but he'd had an attitude with me, too. And I was under a lot of stress. Learning your biological father was a demon and his DNA might get you sent straight to Hell the next time you died was a lot to deal with, and who did I have to talk to about that? Reese? I was clearly just an assignment to him, and one he really didn't want.

He reached the door to the little café before I did and held it open for me. I might have considered it a thoughtful gesture if not for the way he yanked it open with so much force, he nearly yanked it right off the hinges. Yep, I had thoroughly ticked the guy off. Not the best way to start a new working relationship and since I had no idea how long I was going to be stuck with him, I decided I should try to make amends or else my second chance at life wasn't going to be much better than whatever my ever after would have been like in Hell. "I'm buying. What do you want?"

He looked at me, eyebrows slightly raised as if surprised, before flicking a glance toward the front counter. "I'm good. I'll get a seat while you order."

I sighed and got in line. So late in the day, the line was nothing like the morning rush I always got caught up in before heading off to work in the mornings. I supposed that was a silver lining to getting fired. No more morning rushes to the mall. Of course, those morning rushes meant I got paychecks regularly deposited into my bank account.

The line moved quickly, and I soon found myself next in line behind a man rattling off one of those obnoxiously specific and complicated drink requests. By the time he'd finished, the same mousy-haired woman who'd given me so much hostility the last time I had been in the café came out of a back room and our gazes locked. I saw pure shock in her eyes this time, but in the next blink, the hostility was back.

The man with the complicated order paid for his drink and moved over to wait for it, and then it was my turn. Of course, the mousy-haired woman switched places with the teenaged guy who'd been taking orders up until then. Lucky me.

"I thought you got hit by a bus," she said without a single drop of sympathy.

"I did get hit by a bus." I looked at the small nametag pinned to her brown polo shirt right underneath the café's logo. Her name was Denise. It didn't ring a bell, and I still couldn't place her from anywhere other than the café. I certainly couldn't remember doing anything to cause such animosity while in the café, except for flipping her off the last time, but hey, she'd started it by being so rude to me. "That happened in another neighborhood. I wouldn't have expected it to be common knowledge in my local coffee shop."

"There's a video of it," she said. "I've watched it several times."

Good grief. I wondered if she'd cheered when I'd gone splat.

"You don't look like you got hit by a bus."

"It takes a lot more than a bus to keep me down," I said, adding a little warning to my tone. I still wasn't sure why the woman had such a problem with me, or if she intended to do anything about it, but I thought a little warning was needed, just in case. "The line is building up, so I'll order now. My name is Dulce. D-U-L-C-E. I'll take two tall dark roasts with six shots of cinnamon dolce syrup, six shots of chocolate

syrup, and six shots of espresso, and I'll take two slices of lemon pound cake.”

Denise did a quick scan of the room as if searching for whoever I was with, her eyes dark and angry, but they simmered down as she rang up my order and processed my payment. I noticed her giving me a thorough once-over as I walked over to the order pickup area and imagined I'd be going through that every time I ran into someone who'd been aware of the accident. Fortunately for me, I didn't have a huge crowd of friends, so I wasn't too worried about it.

Denise stayed at the cash register, leaving the teenaged boy to make the drinks, much to my relief, although I still watched him carefully to ensure he got them right. Unlike Denise, I at least didn't have to worry about him spitting in the drinks.

The drinks were made and deposited on the counter along with my two slices of lemon pound cake in a decent amount of time, and my name had been spelled correctly on the cups. I left a good tip, only growling a little under my breath at the thought of Denise getting some of that money, and grabbed my purchases.

Reese had bypassed the small round tables scattered about the shop and instead grabbed a seat in the corner at the long counter that ran the length of the front window. He'd positioned himself so he could watch the street as well as the interior of the café, reminding me of a cop, always sitting with their back to the wall, eyes taking in everything at once.

“I brought you a peace offering.” I set my goodies on the counter and slid one of the coffees and pound cake slices over to him before taking the seat next to him. “I know you said you were good, but it’s kind of rude to just eat and drink in front of you.”

“Not really,” he said, “but I appreciate the thought.”

The look he gave the offering didn’t have me convinced he was all that appreciative, but I supposed it was the thought that counted and at least I’d made an effort. I took a long draw from my coffee and barely held back a deep moan of appreciation as the delicious nectar slid down my throat. The two weeks of time I’d lost may have felt like a blip to me, but my body definitely seemed to know it had gone too long without my favorite drink.

“You might as well drink it while we’re sitting here because I don’t plan on working on any fighting techniques or whatever you have planned for my training until I’ve finished, and I like to savor my coffee.” I rolled my gaze down his body. “You’re not one of those tofu and bean sprouts, *my body is a temple* kind of guys, are you?”

“I don’t think so. What are bean sprouts?”

“Hell if I know. I’m a Hostess cupcakes and super-sized onion rings kind of girl.” I punctuated my statement with a big bite of lemon pound cake.

“That’s what you eat for energy before a training session? Lemon pound cake?”

“No. I napped for energy. I eat for enjoyment.”

“And what is the coffee for?”

“The coffee turns my brain on.”

A ghost of a smile curved his lips.

“Whatever smartassed comment you’re about to make, don’t do it. I’m trying to play nice here. I even bore gifts, which you are rudely ignoring, by the way.”

He sighed and picked up the coffee cup, looked at it dubiously, and took a drink, which he quickly gagged on before setting the cup back down and grabbing a napkin to wipe the liquid dribbling down his chin. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s coffee,” I said, watching him mop up the liquid streaming through his chin hair.

“I’ve had coffee. That is not coffee. What did you do to it?”

“I didn’t do anything to it. That’s the way I take my coffee. Dark roast with six shots of chocolate syrup, six shots of cinnamon dolce syrup, and six shots of espresso.”

He paused in his cleanup to look at me. “Have you ever noticed that the number of—”

“Yeah, I know. I got the whole six-six-six thing going on with my coffee. It wasn’t intentional. It’s just that I like a lot of each. My former coworker called my coffee devil’s brew.”

“Because of the six-six-six thing or because it tastes like devil’s ass?”

I grabbed his cup and slid it next to mine. “I was trying to be nice. I can’t help it if you don’t have good taste in coffee.”

“After drinking that, I don’t have good taste, period.” He picked up the slice of pound cake I’d set in front of him and took a big bite.

“You don’t have to act all overenthusiastic now.”

“I’m not,” he said around the mouthful of cake. “I’m trying to get this nasty taste out of my mouth. I’d eat a rabid possum’s ass right now if it would get this taste out of my mouth.”

“I’m really glad we had this opportunity to get to know each other better, Reese, although I must say, your apparent knowledge of and affinity for eating a gross variety of ass doesn’t seem like something I’d need to know to do whatever this job is we’ll be doing together.”

He actually chuckled before swallowing the cake, surprising me, because up until then he hadn’t seemed to have all that much of a sense of humor. “Actually...”

My heart plummeted to somewhere in the vicinity of my stomach and the horror I felt must have shown on my face because his chuckle turned into an actual laugh, but he took another piece of the pound cake, so I was grateful he at least attempted to accept my peace offering, even if it was to sop up what he thought was bad-tasting coffee. The man was clearly nuts when it came to the way things should taste. “That was not a nice joke.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You implied.” I took another drink of my coffee, a big one since it appeared I’d be drinking two tall cups and I didn’t like it when it cooled. “I can get you something else to drink if you want. They have teas and juices. Or just bottled water.”

“No, thank you. If I get thirsty, I can get something myself, and you’ve been unemployed for two weeks, remember?”

“Yes, but you got me back the money I’d already paid for my car. Thank you for that.”

He shrugged a shoulder and sat back as if to say it was no big deal. “Any time I can stick it to a jerk like that, I will. We need to start your training.”

I grabbed my fork. “All right. I’m eating, I’m eating.”

“You can train and eat at the same time. Actually, eating is good cover.”

I turned toward him with a big chunk of cake in my mouth. “Huh?”

“This job isn’t all about fighting and capturing. It often involves tracking, and there are times you may act very much like a private detective. You need to learn how to watch people and be aware of your surroundings. Many times, the targets you’re after may be after you. We generally don’t go after carefree, normal people. The assignments we get will know they have a target on their back, and they’ll be watching for someone trying to take them down. You need to learn how to watch without being noticed because many of these targets

aren't above using human shields to save their asses. You never want to show your hand because if you do, even for one second, that might be the one second they need to grab an innocent person and do whatever they have to do to avoid the takedown."

The takedown. Human shield. Whatever they have to do. These words rolled through my head and my stomach started doing flips.

Reese slid my coffee toward me. "Clear your mind. Take a drink. Calm your nerves."

"My nerves are just fine, thank you very much," I snapped and picked up the cup. I took a healthy drink, fully aware Reese watched me intensely, frowning.

"This tendency you have to throw attitude when you feel vulnerable could be a problem. You need to nip that shit."

I glared at him. "I do not feel vulnerable around you, nor would I have any reason to."

"Sweetheart, I assure you there are reasons for you to." His eyes darkened to a degree that didn't seem humanly possible, and I nearly choked on my tongue before he visibly relaxed and his eyes cooled to their normal shade of dark caramel. "If we're going to be partners, and there's no choice in that because D.A.M.N.E.D. put us together and they don't give a shit if we like each other or not, we're going to need to have each other's backs, not be at each other's throats. You don't know me, and I get that, but you have to trust me and, more importantly, work with me. Enough with the attitude."

“Fine,” I grumbled and wrapped my hands around the coffee cup, absorbing its warmth. “I’m really not trying to be so snippy.”

“I know, and I know you’ve had a lot thrown at you all at once. You’re actually handling it better than most would, but the attitude as a defense mechanism when you’re scared isn’t going to get you very far.” He held his hand up when I opened my mouth to dispute his claim. “There is no shame in admitting when you’re scared, and this shit would scare anyone.”

“It doesn’t scare me. Does it scare you?”

“Not often, but I’ve been at it for quite a while.” He sighed. “You just can’t admit to fear, can you?”

“I would admit it if I felt it,” I lied, and wondered if I’d just gained negative Purgatory points for fibbing. I had good reason, though. Surely Purgatory couldn’t hold self-protection against me. I finished my coffee and picked up the cup Reese had so dramatically declined. I paused with it halfway to my mouth, realized I was about to drink after someone I’d just met, but somehow that didn’t really bother me as much as it should have. I glanced his way before taking the sip. What the hell. Irritating or not, he was hot. If I’d swap spit with him, drinking after him couldn’t hurt. I noticed the corner of his mouth twitch as I set the cup down. “What?”

“What?”

My eyes narrowed as I studied the twinkle in his eyes. “You look amused. What’s funny?”

He held his hands up as if to say he had nothing and relaxed his posture. “Now that you’ve taken the edge off your thirst, are you ready to get to work?”

Something about the way he’d phrased his question seemed odd to me, but I decided not to pick it apart. I was pretty sure I was stuck with the guy until he got in a training session, and I figured the sooner I allowed him to show me something, the sooner I could get rid of him for a while. “I’ve been waiting for you to start. You’re the one that’s supposed to be doing the training, remember?”

His jaw popped, but he didn’t reply with any witty rejoinders. Instead, he scanned the coffee shop before letting his gaze fall back on me. “I’ve been working the entire time I’ve been sitting here.”

“Please. All you’ve been doing is sitting there, watching or talking to me.”

“Yes, and that has been my cover. There are twelve customers in this coffee shop right now, and four employees. The man in the corner opposite us has a cold. The woman ordering right now has been awake for days. The couple in the back corner are having an affair, but only the man is married. The teenage boys at the table closest to the bakery display are friends, but one wants to be more. He’s scared to admit to his feelings. The older gentleman staring out the window on the other side of the door is in mourning, the blond employee is stealing from the tip jar when no one is looking, and the brunette who took your order really, really hates you.”

I started to turn my head to see who he was talking about—minus the brunette employee, of course. I was well aware of her hostility—when he grabbed my chair and pulled me close so that my legs were trapped inside the vee of his, and leaned forward, gazing into my eyes as he reached over and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, letting his warm fingers linger. I may have stopped breathing.

“Don’t make it so obvious you’re looking,” he said, voice low, but not a whisper, before he leaned back, giving me much needed space. To anyone else, he would have looked very relaxed, but I sensed he was actually very focused and alert, ready to spring into action at the slightest hint of danger. “This is lesson one. You need to always be aware of your surroundings. Observe, but don’t let yourself be observed observing. See without looking.”

“And how in the world am I supposed to see something if I don’t actually look at it?”

“Look without your eyes.”

“Again, how in the world am I supposed to—”

“Close them.”

“No.”

His eyebrows raised a fraction, and I knew I’d responded more forcibly than I’d intended to. “I’m here, Dulce. I wouldn’t let anything or anyone sneak up on you.”

“I’m not afraid to close my eyes.”

“Good. Then you’ll have no trouble doing it. As I stated before, this is a dangerous job. You need to learn how to look with more than just your eyes if you want to survive it, and you need to learn to trust your partner.”

“Oh, fine. If it will keep you quiet.” I took a deep breath, mostly to keep from shaking, and closed my eyes. I immediately wanted to open them and bolt. I wasn’t some chicken-shit crybaby who was afraid of the dark, but I’d learned the hard way about what happened when you allowed yourself to be vulnerable. Give a predator an opportunity and they would pounce. My heart raced, my mouth went dry, and my shoulders drew in as I fought against the urge to curl into a ball. Something touched my hand, and I jerked, my eyes flying open as my other hand formed a fist.

Reese’s free hand covered the fist within a blink as the fingers on his other hand intertwined with mine. “It’s just me,” he said softly, eyes warm and nonjudgmental as they stared into mine. “You’re not floating in the darkness alone. I got you. Close your eyes so you can learn this, but don’t worry. I can see what you can’t.”

The automatic reflex to respond with something snarky was right there on the tip of my tongue, but he rubbed his thumb along the back of my hand, and I relaxed. I didn’t let people see my fear of the dark or my absolute terror of being vulnerable. I deflected. I threw a lot of attitude around, even if it cost me relationships. I did what I had to do to feel safe behind my walls, but somehow, Reese saw through them. And I could already tell he wasn’t so easily pushed away. I didn’t

trust him completely. I barely knew him, but in that moment, I felt a small bit of comfort. I trusted him enough to close my eyes again and breathe evenly. “Now what?”

“Relax.” His fingers stayed intertwined with mine, that thumb rubbing the back of my hand, calming me, while he released the fist I’d made so I could let it go slack. He spoke in a soft, calming tone. “Breathe in, breathe out, and just let go. Let go of everything in your mind and feel the atmosphere. If there is malevolence or danger near, you will detect it this way far easier than trying to spot it with sight alone. Don’t be hesitant to find it. I’m right here.”

Again, I wanted to snap back that I wasn’t afraid, that I didn’t need him, but his presence was comforting, and calmed my temper before I could lose it. I took a deep breath and released it and tried to just let go. I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant by that, but I figured I’d start with clearing my mind, so I did.

With my mind clear, I picked up bits of conversation better than I had before while I’d been focused on my interactions with Reese. Nothing jumped out at me as particularly important, just a steady stream of general conversation, so I allowed my mind to drift away until the surrounding conversations became a dull hum. I sensed I was being watched. I could feel a warm, gentle gaze on me from just before me, and knew it came from Reese. I could also sense when the intensity of that gaze waned and knew he was keeping his word, scanning for threats while I was vulnerable.

A far more intense gaze burned through the side of my face, and it didn't take a lot of talent to know it came from Denise, the mousy-haired barista. That woman definitely did not like me, but despite her general contempt, I didn't feel anything from her I would classify as a genuine threat. "How long am I supposed to do this?"

"As long as it takes you to find the predator I've already picked up on, the one I didn't mention while I was filling you in on what else I've observed since arriving here. Keep your eyes closed," he said quickly just as I started to open them instinctively. "I have you, Dulce. You're safe, but someone else here will not be if we don't handle the situation. Feel your surroundings. Find the predator."

Before he finds you, a voice whispered in my mind. A voice that had been with me since I was a child, since I'd learned how dark and evil people could be. But how was I supposed to—wait a minute. The voice in my mind had said before he finds you. Not she, not it, but *he*. The predator was a male. I didn't know how I knew that. I just did.

I relaxed my body, steadied my breathing, and allowed myself to just feel. I hadn't sensed a thing before because the predator wasn't after me, and the barista's animosity had overshadowed the other negative energy in the coffee shop, but there was something dark and menacing in the room with us. "Near the refrigerated drinks case, at a table."

"What is it?"

I shook my head, not exactly sure what I was sensing. “I don’t know. It’s a man, and he’s... stalking prey.”

“Good job. You can open your eyes now, but control the urge to turn right around and look at him.”

I opened my eyes and tugged on my hand. With the darkness and vulnerability no longer an issue, I didn’t feel the need for the security blanket Reese’s hand in mine had provided. He let go easily, not seeming the least bit offended, not even when I wiped my hand on my denim-clad thigh. “So, is he a target?” I asked, just above a whisper.

“Talk normally, but low. Whispering draws more attention than simply talking.” He lifted the coffee cup I’d drained and faked a drink so well I’d have sworn he’d really swallowed liquid if I hadn’t known for a fact the cup was empty. He set it back down and twirled it as if bored or just very relaxed. No one would have ever suspected he’d sensed danger in the room.

“Is he?” I asked at a normal but low volume. “Is that why you were all right with stopping for coffee here?”

“I was all right with stopping for coffee here because I sensed you were going to be a pain in my ass unless I did.” He grinned that barely there grin of his. “I thought, however, this would also provide a good place to practice observing discreetly. Finding an actual predator wasn’t planned, but now we must follow through.”

“Follow through?”

“You didn’t choose to be what you are, but you can choose how you use the abilities it gives you. When we are assigned targets, we must go after them. When we happen upon them ourselves, we have to make a choice. We can do the right thing and use our abilities to protect others, or we can allow evil to happen, which isn’t viewed any differently than doing the evil ourselves.”

“We can’t just call the police?”

“Not always. They wait until after someone has been hurt or killed to actually do a damn thing. We can stop the bad thing before it occurs.”

“And in this case, what is the bad thing? I can sense someone...”

“Malevolent?”

“Yes, I guess that fits. I can sense someone malevolent, but I don’t know why.”

“You detected the wickedness was here without looking, successfully completing lesson one. Now, you may look deeper.”

“I can use my eyes?”

“You can use your eyes, just don’t use them obviously.”

“And how can I not be obvious when I’m supposed to be here with you talking casually, but your position is making me have to look in the opposite direction of where I sense the source of this really bad feeling?”

“Although I generally prefer working alone, the benefit of having a partner is that you can use them.” Reese hooked the bottom of my chair with his foot and pulled it closer before turning me around and pulling me against him so my back rested against his chest and his arm draped over my shoulder. He raised his leg, settling his foot on the rung of my chair, an action that left me cocooned within the frame of his body, and to all the world we were a young couple, nauseatingly in love or lust. Two things that made me very uncomfortable.

“Relax,” he said, lending just enough command to his tone to keep me from jumping out of the chair or turning on him. “I’m not touching you inappropriately, nor will I. People naturally look away from couples in intimate proximity because it makes them uncomfortable. As long as you don’t stare, you can observe our target better from this position. You might want to do that. We’ll be taking him down tonight.”

“Taking him down as in...”

“He won’t get a trial.”

Oh. So that’s why he’d told me to wear something I didn’t mind getting blood on. What the hell had I gotten myself into?



The source of the dark and malicious energy I'd picked up on was a rather attractive man. He was Caucasian with golden skin, chestnut hair cut short in a preppy style that involved a lot of product to get just right, and teeth so white he could have been a spokesperson for whitening strips. He had deep dimples at the corner of his mouth that I might have called adorable, but adorable was not a word I would use for him. Ever.

Despite the man's stain-free white polo shirt with a logo that showed he could afford the pricey stuff, neatly pleated khakis, and Italian leather loafers that probably cost at least half my monthly rent, I knew he was absolute gutter slime. It was his eyes. The way the green orbs darkened when they fixated on the small sandy-haired woman with him, and I mean *fixated*. He didn't just glance at her or hold her gaze long enough to show he was listening. He was hyper-focused to a degree that would have made me feel very uncomfortable, but the young woman with him didn't seem to notice.

“How can she not notice there’s something off about that guy?” I tried to appear relaxed, but the hungry-eyed man sitting at the table across the room wasn’t the only man in the room making it hard for me. I was in a cocoon of warm, brooding man, and I actually hadn’t noticed how good Reese smelled until he’d practically draped himself over me. It was hard for me to put my finger on what exactly he smelled like, but if I closed my eyes and just inhaled his scent, I imagined it would smell like a forest around midnight after a good rain. It was the kind of scent you just wanted to curl up and sleep in, and that made me want to run.

“Relax. If your heart were beating any faster, I’d be taking you to an emergency room.” Reese’s warm breath danced across my cheek as he spoke, which did not help matters any as far as my heart rate was concerned. I wasn’t timid around men, but I chose who I wanted and for how long, and I never fell hard for them. That way, when they screwed up, I could leave with nothing more than anger. I didn’t do heartache. And I didn’t do crushes or infatuation. I didn’t do... whatever it was about Reese that was making my nerves so damn jittery.

It’s the fact he’s a killer, the voice in my head said. And he’s going to train you to be one too.

“Not everyone can see inside a person,” Reese said. “And some people see only what they want to see. That young woman is so wrapped up in the thrill of receiving his attention, she can’t see it’s the type of attention that will leave her shattered. He’s very charismatic as well, a talent his kind usually has in spades.”

“He’s too pretty,” I said, speaking normally as Reese had instructed, but not loudly. Having seen with my eyes all I needed to see, I gratefully sat up, separating myself from Reese, and turned around to finish what was left of the lemon pound cake, knowing Reese would keep an eye out on the man and his victim. “He’s too neat, and too much the picture of what a good guy would be. He’s all charming Ivy League boy next door, but with the hungry eyes of a serial killer. I look at him and clearly see he is a very handsome man, but I don’t feel the slightest bit of attraction to him.”

“You can sense the darkness in him. Your instincts are good, which will come in very handy in this job.” Reese did the fake take-a-drink thing again, and I felt his gaze on me while he settled the cup back down. “You sense the evil in him, but do you know what his intentions are?”

I wanted to glance back over at the man, a natural habit when talking about someone, but I kept my focus on my cake instead. I had a small chunk left, but the thought of what the guy was made my stomach queasy. I twirled the fork in my hand and waited for the nausea to pass.

“He’s looking at her like he wants to possess her, consume her, take every bit of joy and power inside her and feed off of it until he leaves her broken, bloody, and devastated. He wants to take her life and leave her still breathing so she can suffer for the rest of her days, always looking over her shoulder, instead of giving her the gift of death so she can at least be free of the constant fear and nightmares. He wants to rape her... but he won’t.”

I stabbed the remaining cake with the fork and left it there. I could feel Reese's stare on me, feel him look inside me, searching me, checking on me like I was some sort of wounded puppy he wanted to treat or at least pat on the head and say everything would be all right. And suddenly I wanted to take the plastic fork out of the cake in front of me and stab him in the neck with it. "Don't think you know me just because you have a file on me."

He was silent long enough for it to be uncomfortable, then he pulled out a cell phone and appeared to be texting.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm calling this in to an associate. This one isn't for you."

I turned to face him directly, and although I kept my voice low, I let a growl slip into my tone. "What do you mean, it isn't for me? Are you seriously babying me right now? I thought I was supposed to be getting trained, yet you pull me off the first target we get?"

"We haven't been assigned a target yet. D.A.M.N.E.D. didn't send us after that man."

"No, but you said we can't just turn a blind eye when we know someone like that is going to hurt someone."

"No, we can't, but handling the situation doesn't always mean we have to be the ones to get our hands bloody. There's a bit of a loophole in situations like this, when we stumble upon someone that needs to be neutralized but we haven't

been assigned to take them out. We can call in another party to do it.”

“At best, the police will just hold the guy for questioning and let him loose by morning. If that.”

“If I’d called in the police, I would have actually called them, not texted. I reached out to an associate.”

“Yeah, I know. I assumed by associate you were just referring to the police. Wait. Are there more D.A.M.N.E.D. people in the area?” It had never even crossed my mind that there could be more people like me in the city. Obviously there had to be others since Reese had been available to take me under his wing, but I couldn’t imagine a group of what was sounding more and more like lethal vigilantes secretly patrolling the streets of Louisville in order to save their souls from going to Hell.

“I know a man who lives nearby and runs a security company that handles these matters. He does not work for D.A.M.N.E.D. and, to my knowledge, knows nothing of its existence, but he works in a similar manner. Rapists and pedophiles are his favorite catch of the day.”

“And he doesn’t turn them over to the police?”

Reese shook his head, and that cooled my temper some. I hadn’t set out intending to kill anyone. My stomach had even taken a dip when I’d realized that was what Reese meant we’d be doing when he’d said we’d be taking the man down, but the thought of being able to save a young woman from what I knew in my gut the man intended to do to her, and save

countless others by ending his reign of cruelty had chased away any reservations I'd had. "I could do it, Reese. I can handle this."

"I'm training you to be an avenger, Dulce, not a ruthless killer. There's a difference."

I nearly rolled my eyes, knowing his word choice had been because of my love of Marvel heroes, particularly the heroines, which anyone who'd ever spent five minutes in my apartment could tell. Probably half of my wardrobe consisted of graphic T-shirts featuring the characters, as did my coffee cups, and I owned every single movie on Blu-Ray. The framed *Endgame* poster above my couch was a dead giveaway of my adoration as well as the poster of Black Widow, Gamora, Okoye and Captain Marvel on my bedroom wall.

Reese looked at his phone, tapped the screen, and slid it back into his pocket. "They're on their way. We can observe until then, trail the man if he leaves, but we're going to let the other guys take care of him."

"How am I supposed to learn anything if you don't actually let me do anything?"

"You learned how to see without looking and you did a fairly decent job on that. Tonight hasn't been a loss, and it's not over yet."

"Oh boy. More fun with you."

"Has it really been terrible spending time with me?" His eyes developed that gleam again, the one that made me think

he was laughing at me, yet I couldn't imagine why. "You partially learned an important skill."

"Partially learned?"

"Yes, partially." The gleam left his eyes as he glanced over my shoulder and grabbed the coffee cups. "They're on the move. We need to follow them without being detected."

Follow, my ass, I thought as I grabbed the plates and forks. We discarded our trash and slipped out the door to follow the man and woman. I refused to think of them as a couple because I knew the woman wouldn't have been with the man at all if she knew what he truly was.

They had turned right, so I did as well. A moment later, Reese's arm slung around my shoulder and he pulled me into his side, forcing me to slow my stride to match his easy-going, carefree one. "Relax, Malvada. This is just cover."

"I am relaxed."

"Then why do you jump any time I barely touch you?"

"I don't know. Maybe you're repulsive."

Reese's mouth curved up enough to classify as a full grin. "No, that can't be right at all."

The man we followed turned right at the corner and I tried to quicken my step, but Reese held me back with his heavy arm. "We're going to lose them. You suck at following."

"No, I excel at following. I use more than just my eyes."

"Oh, good grief. What, can you sense them out here too?"

“Yes. With time, you should get better at it too. Especially after your demon powers come in.”

Demon powers. As much as I loved the Avengers and all their heroic friends, and thought their powers were cool, I wasn't so sure I wanted my own. Not if they came from a demon daddy. Not if I was the product of what that demon had done to some poor, unfortunate woman. Images from the nightmare I'd been having before Reese awakened me flooded through my mind and I gritted my teeth together and focused all my energy into shoving those images deep down. I couldn't change anything that had happened in the past, but there was a woman in the present I could help.

We rounded the corner, and I was relieved to see the man and woman up ahead. Despite what Reese had said about being able to sense them, I'd feared losing them before whoever he'd called in to take over for us arrived. “How will these people you contacted know who they're supposed to take care of if we left the coffee shop?”

“The minute I contacted them to pick the guy up, they started tracking my phone in case that happened.” He glanced down at me, and I realized I must have been gawking. “I've worked with them before. It's their normal operating procedure.”

“You don't mind them having access to your whereabouts like that?”

“Not if it helps stop a rapist, and if Rider Knight ever wanted to hunt me down, he could, with or without tracking

my cell phone. Sometimes I think that man has more resources than D.A.M.N.E.D.”

We passed my apartment building on the opposite side of the street and continued following the man. He turned his head, looked back at us. Reese pulled me closer against him and ducked his head to whisper in my ear, “We’re a young couple who can’t wait to get back to your place and tear each other’s clothes off.”

“You could have just said we’re a young couple out for a stroll,” I whispered back as I gazed adoringly up into his eyes long enough to ensure the man we followed didn’t pick up on the fact we were trailing him, then elbowed him in the ribs.

Reese grunted, but never broke stride. He didn’t let me go either, but he did take out his phone and check a message that had just popped up on the screen. Then he discreetly raised the phone and started recording the man and woman. A moment later, a black SUV rolled past us, screeched to an abrupt stop just ahead of where the man and woman were, and three men jumped out.

The woman screamed as they tackled the man, then ran away as fast as her low-heeled boots would take her. Reese quit recording and put his phone away. The man we’d been following resisted, but it didn’t do him any good. One of the men who’d tackled him was built like a tank. The other two were thinner, but still muscular. All three wore black T-shirts, pants, and boots, and gave off an air of being people you did

not want to miss with. “Are those the guys you expected, or did they just crash our party?”

“Those are the guys.” Reese had stopped walking and removed his arm from around my shoulders, but he stepped in front of me, partially blocking me as the biggest of the men approached him while the other two got the man we’d been following into the SUV.

“How long have you been in the city?” the big man asked as he neared us. His hair was buzzed short, his facial features about as broad as his body. If he had a neck, I sure couldn’t find it. The man was a solid, massive wall of muscle.

“Not long,” Reese answered.

“The boss will want to know if you’re staying, and the offer to work for him still stands.”

“I’ll be staying a while.” That was the only information Reese offered.

The man stopped short of us and gave me a once-over that felt pretty invasive. “Who’s your friend?”

“No one you or your boss need to worry about.” Something in Reese’s tone set off alarm bells in my brain and I discreetly braced myself to fight if I needed to.

“Can you guarantee that?”

“She’s with me,” Reese answered. “I’m training her to do what I do and nothing more.”

The man looked at me again, taking his time. I'd never felt so thoroughly assessed in all my life, not even while sitting in an office in Purgatory with an open file telling my life story in front of me. "Keep her in line... or he will."

Not in the habit of taking threats idly, I tried to muscle my way past Reese, but he had a lot more muscle than me, so I didn't make it more than a step. The human tank turned and walked back to the waiting SUV, and Reese grabbed my shoulders to turn me in the opposite direction.

"Settle down, tiger. Hank is not a man you want to just start throwing punches at. He punches back a lot harder."

"Hank?" I glanced back over my shoulder just as the real-life Juggernaut slid inside the car, lowering it about a foot. His mass had to be hell on the shocks. "Hank the Tank. It fits. Who is this Rider Knight person, and why do I feel like he's some kind of mob boss?"

Reese grinned a little as he checked traffic, which had conveniently been light enough to allow a man to be kidnapped right off the street with no trouble, and led me to jaywalk across the street toward my apartment building. "Mob boss isn't really that bad of a description. Rider Knight runs a company called MidKnight Enterprises. He specializes in the type of security issues the police don't even know about, or handle laxly. When Knight's men capture a rapist or pedophile, that monster never sees daylight again, and it doesn't cost the state a penny."

"He kills them?"

“Thoroughly.”

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what Reese meant by *thoroughly*. I thought death was death, but then again, I had been to Purgatory and back, so who knew? And I knew there were ways to die that were gentle, peaceful even, and ways that were bloody and violent. I was guessing this Rider Knight person leaned toward the violent end of the spectrum.

I thought we were returning to my apartment, but Reese grabbed my arm when I started to turn toward the entrance and guided me to a black Dodge Charger parked along the curb a few feet past. He withdrew a set of keys from his pocket and used the button on the fob to unlock the vehicle before opening the passenger side door. “Get in.”

I did not get in. I planted my feet on the ground and looked at him. “Where are we going?”

“To train. You didn't think that one brief lesson made a full night of training, did you?”

“I'd hoped.” I lowered myself into the car with a heavy sigh and buckled in while Reese enclosed me in the vehicle and walked around its front to reach the driver's side. I took the opportunity to admire the fluid way he moved, like a panther stalking through the rainforest. The image that created in my mind reminded me that he'd smelled like a forest after the rain. He'd smelled really good wrapped around me. Suddenly, images of other ways he could wrap around me filled my mind, and I quickly shut them down. No way. No how. Not with him. *Ever*.

Reese slid inside, closed his door, and that twinkle was in his eyes again as he looked at me, but he said nothing as he fastened his seatbelt and started the car. “We’re going to get in some physical training.”

And with that remark, the images I’d just shut down a moment ago came rushing back. I thought I might have heard him chuckle, but when I risked a glance his way, I found his face all hard lines as he pulled away from the curb and headed to who-knew-where. I turned my attention to the outside, finding it a safer view than the one in the vehicle with me. “I could have handled that guy.”

“You know that when I use terms like neutralize and take down, I’m saying we kill the person, right?”

“Yes, I figured that out.”

“And it doesn’t give you any pause?”

“It did.” I drummed my fingers along my thigh. “But what that man was, what he does to innocent women... I don’t think anyone would miss him.”

“Maybe not, but the price for you to end him would have been too great.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He glanced at me, and I saw enough pity in his eyes to want to rearrange his face. I hated pity. I’d rather be belittled than pitied.

“When we’re given a target to take out, it’s a sanctioned kill. The target is so vile, we are doing a service to humanity

by killing them. We are protecting those who can't protect themselves. We are ridding the world of an evil entity. Most of our targets will not be regular human sleazeballs like that man was. They'll be an entity that needs to be wiped off this plane and sent back to Hell where they belong. When we target a human, even a rapist, murderer, or pedophile, it gets trickier because they still have some trace of humanity, even if it's dark and twisted. If we destroy them purely to protect the innocent, it's sanctioned. We earn the kind of points we want to earn. If we kill them out of vengeance, that is murder, and you get a hell of a lot of negative points for murder."

"Those men are just going to kill him anyway. You said so. How is giving him to them to kill any different than me being the one to do it?"

"It isn't as personal for them," he responded, his voice carefully neutral, and glanced at me. "It is for you."

I felt my blood boil in my veins as I clenched my fists tight. "They really gave you one hell of a file on me, didn't they?"

"That wasn't in your file, Dulce. You told me yourself back in the coffee shop the moment you found the guy."

"I didn't tell you a damn thing."

"Yes, you did. You've told me a lot more than you know."

I started to ask what he meant, then remembered our conversation back in my apartment and suddenly I was trying to remember every thought I'd had since I'd met him. The twinkle in his eyes I saw from time to time made sense now, if

he really was doing what I thought he was doing. “You can actually read minds.”

“I told you I could.”

“I thought you just meant that you could read body language or facial expressions or something like that and figure out the general idea of what people were thinking, but you actually read their minds.”

“Yes.”

I thought about that as we drove. I’d thought he was so good at reading people’s behavior, but he’d been reading their minds the whole time. And mine. Well, I sure gave him plenty to feel good about, going on in my head about how good he smelled and ... oh man. Had I really thought he moved like a panther? I slowly turned my head in his direction and delivered a glare he studiously ignored as he kept his eyes forward on the road, pretending like he hadn’t done anything underhanded. What a jerk, I thought clearly enough for him to pick up on, and punched him. Or at least I would have if he hadn’t caught my fist in his hand.

“Do you mind? I’m trying to drive.”

“Why don’t you just drive the car with your mind control power?”

“Uh, because I don’t have mind control power? I’m a pretty talented guy, but not quite that awesome.” He released his hold on my fist, shoving it back toward me in the process, effectively forcing me to sit back in my seat. “Keep your

hands to yourself over there, would you? And quit looking at me like I'm a supervillain. I told you I could read minds. It's not my fault you didn't believe me."

"How was I supposed to understand that you meant you can literally read minds? Until just now, I didn't think that was even a real thing. I mean, you knew what I was thinking, but some people are just perceptive like that." My heart rate tripled as the implications set in. "Oh shit. So there really are people out there who can read minds? Any random person can just know what I'm thinking at any time?"

"Calm down before you hyperventilate. No, there are not a lot of people just walking around reading people's minds randomly. It's not a common ability and even though I can do it, I can't read every single person in the world's mind just because I want to. I told you I can do it when emotions are high or if I have a connection to the person."

"You read those people's minds in the coffee shop." I fought the urge to slug him again. "And you had the nerve to make me find someone without using my eyes, acting like it was easy, yet you have superpowers, and I don't."

"I taught you to do what I do. To listen to your own gut, to be aware of your surroundings, and to use whatever abilities you have access to. For the record, a lot of what I picked up on in that coffee shop just came from observing and picking up energies, which is exactly what I was training you to do. I could only hear the thoughts of a few of the people I told you about. I could only hear the thoughts of the guy afraid to tell

his friend how he felt about him because he was terrified, and I could read the barista because man, did she hate you.”

“Wait. You read her mind about hating me. So, you know why she hates me?”

He nodded, then looked over at me. “You don’t know why?”

“I have no idea why she hates me so much. I’ve been going there forever, and she’s worked there a while and didn’t seem to care about me one way or the other until that day I was hit by the bus. She was just rude to me for no reason that morning.” I watched him expectantly. “Well? Why does she hate me?”

He grinned over at me. “Ask me nicely with a pretty please and a cherry on top.”

“You know what? It’s not that important.” I folded my arms and stared out the window. “Where are we going anyway?”

“Somewhere quiet where we can train without distraction.” We drove on in silence for about another minute before he shook his head and huffed out a breath. “You know I can feel your curiosity.”

“Can you feel my desire to hit you?”

“Yes, but I’m getting used to it.” He glanced over at me before returning his attention to the road. “Sometimes I hear people’s thoughts as actual words. Sometimes I get images or emotions. In the barista’s case, it was a mixture of all three. Apparently, you were or are dating some big blond guy who

liked to flirt her up while picking up your coffee for you. She figured out who you were when she went out to her car on a break one day and saw him walking into your apartment building with you.”

“Ugh. Barry,” I said. “I caught him in bed with another woman right before I got hit by the bus, so yeah, he’s an ex.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s with the barista now. She wasn’t happy at all to see you up and about, all in one piece.”

“Yeah, I got that impression. I just didn’t know why she felt that way.” I shrugged. “Oh well. At least I can see her when she’s making my coffee, so I don’t have to worry too much about her spitting in it.”

Reese eyed me curiously until I used two fingers to turn his face back toward the road.

“What?”

He shrugged. “This is your first day awake after being hit by the bus. It just seems like you would be more emotional if these two weeks went by in a blink for you. The breakup and what you walked in on should still be pretty fresh in your mind.”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal. He cheated. I dumped his ass. End of story.”

“It doesn’t bother you at all that he apparently didn’t wait very long to replace you and on top of that, he did it while you were fighting for your life in the hospital?”

“First of all, Denise the barista is not a replacement for me. Neither was the pink-haired woman I caught doing the operatic solo under him in his bed. I can’t be replaced. They are *extras*. Apparently, Barry likes to spread himself thin and he can do that all he wants now because once I discover a man I’m with has extras, I drop his ass. I’m not sure why you think I would be emotional. I have no use for him anymore, so I don’t care about what he’s doing or who he’s doing it with.”

“Damn, that’s cold.”

“What? I’m cold because I don’t want to sit around crying into a gallon-sized tub of ice cream while listening to sad ballads when a guy proves himself to be a worthless cheating piece of shit?”

“No, but I assumed if he was cheating on you, that would imply you were actually in a committed relationship, which would usually involve feelings. The kind of feelings you don’t just get over so quickly.”

“I don’t have to explain what I do or don’t feel to you. I’m pretty sure my sex life has nothing to do with this job.”

“You mean your love life?”

“Whatever.” I shrugged my shoulder and went back to looking out the window. Looking at the infuriating man driving made it far too tempting to throw punches. I’d go through his little training exercises, but being judged was where I drew the line.

“I’m not judging you.”

“The hell you aren’t,” I snapped, “and ever hear of a thing called consent? I do not give you permission to dip into my mind.”

“It’s hard for me not to when you’re emotional. The calmer you are, the less I will accidentally overhear.”

I fought the urge to sling a bevy of filthy words and insults at him, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath, willing myself to simmer, but just thinking of all the things he’d overheard me think already and the fact he was putting the blame on me for being emotional made calmness a very difficult state to achieve. “Instead of worrying about why I’m not mourning the loss of a relationship with a jackass, why don’t you clue me in on what that little exchange was back there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play coy, Reese. It doesn’t suit you. You know what I mean. You know everything in my head.”

“Not everything,” he murmured.

“Why was that man so interested in who I was? And why did he threaten me?”

“He didn’t threaten you.” Reese had the decency to look a little sheepish when I glared at him. “Hank is one of Rider Knight’s guards. He works security, hence why he was available for tonight’s pick-up. We’ve crossed paths a time or two while going after the same entity.”

“The same entity?”

“Yes.” Reese pulled into a parking lot between two buildings in a commercial district and parked. “D.A.M.N.E.D. usually assigns me to go after the worst of the worst. Mostly demons. Rider Knight’s men have been known to go after them too. They know how to spot them. Hank saw you and he recognized what you are.”

A cold chill washed over me and I looked down at myself, trying to see myself through the eyes of others. “You mean people can just look at me and see I have demon DNA?”

“No, but certain types of people can sense what you are.”

“Certain types? Like, specially trained or...?”

“Paranormals, Malvada. You are not the only person on this plane who isn’t fully human. You’re not even the only person here in Louisville. Hank is one of many.”

I didn’t know which word in that explanation freaked me out more, but *many* definitely had a disturbing quality to it. I had to take a hard swallow before I could speak again. “That giant-sized Hulk clone was part demon?”

“No.”

I swallowed again. Harder. “A whole demon?”

“No. Whole demons have lost all shred of humanity and are therefore irredeemable. Hank is something else.”

“What else?”

Reese studied me for a moment, narrow-eyed, and shook his head. “That will be a lesson for another night. Tonight, we’re

going to go over some basic fighting techniques and get you brushed up on demonology.”

“Uh, no. Tell me now.”

“Not tonight.” He unbuckled and stepped out of the car, forcing me to hastily get out and catch up to him as he walked toward the building on our left.

“Why not tonight?”

“Because you dropped about four skin shades when I mentioned the word *paranormal* and your heart rate concerns me,” he said as he stepped through the side door of a large building and walked straight over to an elevator where he pressed the up button.

“What do you know about my heart rate?” I asked as the elevator doors opened and we stepped inside. “It’s not like you can hear it.”

He said nothing as he pressed the button for the sixth floor and the doors closed. We began our ascent up and a very worrisome thought entered my mind, bringing a wave of cold sweat with it.

“You can’t hear my heartbeat, can you?” When he didn’t respond, I gripped the handrail for support, my knees suddenly wobbly. “What are you?”



CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’m your trainer.”

The man was an infuriating, evasive piece of work, but he appeared to be my only contact for all things Purgatory-related, so I had no choice but to follow him after the elevator stopped, the doors opened, and he stepped out into a dimly lit hallway with black-tiled floors and dark gray walls.

He walked to the only door and inserted a key he’d withdrawn from his pants pocket. Realizing all the things he’d withdrawn from his pants pockets that night alone, I understood why he liked the cargo style. He opened the door and stepped inside first, leaving it open for me to follow.

“And they say chivalry is dead.”

“I’m your trainer, not your date,” he said as he closed the door behind me. “Besides, if my friend can’t free herself up for a little bit of fighting practice, it’ll be me trying to knock you on your ass, so you might as well get used to equality. I won’t pull my punches just because you’re a girl.”

“What do you mean, trying to *knock me on my ass*?”

“What do you think I meant when I said I was going to train you to fight better?” He grinned as he pocketed the keys and stepped deeper into the room. “Relax, Malvada. You’re half demon. You can handle anything I throw at you, and I’m going to teach you some defense techniques. Besides, you want to hit me, remember?”

“Well, when you put it that way, training directly with you doesn’t sound so bad.” I looked past his annoyingly handsome grinning face to take in my surroundings. The room was massive, taking up almost the entire sixth floor, with a lot of open space. The entire back wall was mirrored except for two doors, which, according to the signage, were bathrooms. There were columns spaced throughout that appeared to be more for structural support than design, and very little by way of furnishings. Other than a small sitting area toward the back left near what looked like a break area with cabinets, a sink, and a small refrigerator, I only saw gym equipment on the far right near an unmarked door, and a small table next to a whiteboard in the front left corner. The center of the room was mostly open space. “What is this place?”

“D.A.M.N.E.D. rented it for your training and for me to have a place to stay.”

“You stay here?”

He tilted his head toward the unmarked door. “I’m not a very fussy guy.”

I checked out his basic all-black attire. “I’d probably agree with that statement if not for how perfectly trimmed your

facial hair is.”

“That’s just natural talent,” he said, stroking his beard. “Doesn’t take long to shape up at all.”

“Whatever.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and got back to more important things. “Who is this friend you want to fight with me? Another demon operative?”

“Demon operative?” Amusement flashed in his eyes. “No, she’s not a demon, but she’s a scrapper, and I want her to *spar* with you.”

“Spar. Fight. Either way you say it, isn’t it just two people throwing punches?”

He shrugged. “In a way, but I’ll be supervising and giving instruction.”

“To which one of us?”

“Give me a little credit, Malvada.”

“How can I? I don’t know you and you don’t answer questions.” I stepped farther into the room and ran my hand along a column as I walked around it to place myself across from Reese. He stood in the same spot I’d left him in, arms folded over his chest, watching me.

“Funny. I feel like all I’ve been doing today is answering questions.”

“What are you?”

“Your trainer,” he answered. “Or random hot guy. Take your pick.”

I knew the second answer was thrown in to annoy me, and he hoped that annoyance would make me lose focus on the kernel of truth I was after. I didn't take the bait. "Are you a demon too?"

"No," he answered. "Not half and definitely not whole."

"But you're not human either, are you?"

"I am as human as you are."

"According to you, I'm only half human," I replied. "So, what are you half of, if not demon?"

Reese scrubbed one of his big, long-fingered hands over the ultra-short hair tightly curled against his scalp and inhaled deeply, his body language radiating his frustration. "I am your trainer and your partner. That's all you need to know right now."

"I think I—"

"You don't know what to think!" he snapped. "This is the first full day you've spent conscious since you got your ass scrambled by a bus and took a trip to Purgatory. You haven't even had time to wrap your mind around what you are and come to terms with it yet. How about we work on that before moving on to other things?"

"I'm half demon. There. I just said it out loud. I think I've wrapped my mind around it."

"Have you?"

“Duh. Why else would I be here?” I spread my arms to indicate the spacious room. “I’m not here for your sparkling personality and witty conversation.”

“That’s a little rich coming from you.” He stepped closer. “All right then. If you’ve wrapped your mind around it, do you mind telling me how you were born?”

“How the hell would I know how I was born?” I snapped as my body went cold, then quickly warmed. “Some woman had me and threw me in a dumpster.”

“Some woman?”

“What, do you want me to call her Mommy or something?”

“Why are you getting so angry and defensive right now?”

“I’m not.”

“Then why are you yelling?”

“I’m not,” I said and realized I was in fact yelling and had been since he’d first asked about my birth.

“You know the truth about your paternity now and that brings more knowledge about your maternity. Who do you think your mother was?”

“Still a heartless bitch who threw a defenseless, innocent baby into a dumpster,” I said, keeping my voice neutral, as if I didn’t care. “Maybe she was a devil worshipper. Maybe this demon was her boyfriend. Maybe I was her offering.”

“I suppose it has yet to cross your mind that your biological mother could have been just as innocent as you in all of this?”

I saw something flash through Reese's eyes, something that caused my stomach to take a dip and unsettling thoughts to sprout to life in my head. I shook my head as my temperature rose. "No."

"She gave you life."

"She threw me away."

"She could have aborted you or killed you after you were born."

"I didn't ask to be born, and again, she threw me away." The words came out in a growl. My teeth ached from being clenched so tight.

"She gave you a chance. Despite knowing you were half demon, that the demon half of you would one day awaken, she gave you a chance."

"Why are you defending her?" I narrowed my eyes and studied him, wondering about that flash of emotion I'd seen in his eyes. "Do you know her?"

"No." He moved his head from side to side, stretching his neck as he visibly relaxed. "I don't think you know her either, not like you think you do."

"Of course I don't know the bitch. She threw me away!"

"She wasn't a bitch, Dulce. She was a nun."

The world around me seemed to disappear. I was in a dark tunnel with no sound except for Reese's words echoing all around me. The tunnel grew smaller as I stopped breathing.

My head completely emptied, going all light and airy. I struggled to put together a coherent thought as I shook my head adamantly.

“Dulce.”

The tunnel evaporated along with the suffocating fog clouding my brain and I snapped back to myself to find Reese’s hands clamped around my biceps.

“No!” I shrugged out of his hold, pushing him away. “No. You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You said you don’t know her.”

“I never met your mother. I did, however, read about her in what was shared with me from your file.”

“No.” I continued to shake my head as I fought against the thoughts flooding my mind, thoughts I had banned from it years ago. “No. I don’t care that she was a nun. She threw me away. She threw me in a dumpster. If someone hadn’t found me—”

“She never threw you in a dumpster,” Reese cut me off. “That was just where she claimed to have found you, and that story made it back to you. She was a nun, Dulce. She’d taken a vow of chastity. She was a virgin before your father—”

“Don’t call that monster my father as if it were any kind of actual father,” I snapped.

Reese held his hands up placatingly. “She was a virgin before the demon raped her. Raped, Dulce. You know something about that, don’t you?”

“Shut up.”

He nodded. “You do. You know very well about that, about choices being taken from you, about the pain and fear that never go away.”

“Shut up!”

“It happened to her too, and she was an innocent, just like you were.”

“I said shut up!” I swung at him, connecting my knuckles to that chiseled jaw hard enough to whip his head sideways despite our height difference, and I ran for the door. I was out of it in the next breath. To hell with D.A.M.N.E.D., to hell with Reese, and to hell with it all. To hell with me too, if working with him was the only thing that would keep me out of Hell.

I bypassed the elevator, not wanting to get caught by Reese while waiting for it, and took off through the stairwell at the end of the hall. I ran down the stairs, my eyes and lungs both burning with the urge to cry and the inability to draw a full breath as I kept those traitorous tears in by the force of sheer willpower. And raw anger. I focused on the anger, imagined punching Reese a few more times, maybe even that accountant and the head honcho, Petie, despite how cute he appeared, and I imagined ripping that file they had on me to pieces before I did. I focused on anything that would take my thoughts away

from the nun who'd given birth to me, the faceless, nameless woman I'd learned to not care about. The woman my brain kept trying to conjure images of now that I knew she was a nun thanks to that jerk.

I reached the landing for the fourth floor and turned just in time to run into Reese coming up from the third-floor landing. Before I could register surprise at running right into him coming from the opposite direction or figure out how he'd managed to get there, he lurched forward, effortlessly picked me up and slung me over his shoulder before continuing up the stairs at a brisk pace.

“Hey!” I beat on his back with my fists. “Put me down! I’m done with this shit! I quit! You hear me? I quit! Let the hellhounds come drag me down to Hell!”

“Scream and yell all you want. D.A.M.N.E.D leased the entire building and the lower floors have been sublet to businesses that shut down well before dark. No one’s going to come help you.” He pushed through the stairwell door and stormed through the sixth-floor hallway, not even grunting as I continued to pummel his back and elbow the back of his head, walked through the open doorway to the office or training room or whatever it was that D.A.M.N.E.D. had assigned for him to use, and unceremoniously dumped me onto the floor. By dumped, I mean the jackass flung me off him as if I were nothing, doing so in such a careless manner, I landed on my side and jarred my hip before I rolled backward and hit the back of my head on the hardwood forcefully enough to see

stars. “Training isn’t over. You don’t leave until you’re excused.”

I blinked rapidly to help the stars disappear and rolled over, getting to my hands and knees. I watched Reese over my shoulder as he walked back over to the door and closed it, then turned the deadbolt and slid the barrel bolt into the locking position for extra measure.

I heard a vibration, and he removed a cell phone from one of his cargo pockets, looked at the screen, and raised it to his ear as he eyed me. “Yeah? Cool. Looks like I’m going to work with her one-on-one tonight anyway.”

He said a few more things to whoever was on the other end of the call as I turned toward him and got one knee up off the floor to plant my foot in a good position to lunge.

“Looks like you get to fight me tonight after all,” he said as he ended the call and returned the phone to his pocket. “You like to fight, don’t you? You like to do anything but face your issues head-on.”

“Fuck you.”

“No thanks. Let’s finish our discussion, shall we?”

“Finish this!” I lunged, not sure what I planned to do. I only knew my fists and fingernails were ready to draw blood and his would do.

Reese palmed me hard in the forehead as I neared him, knocking me back down, putting a little distance between us. I was back on my feet quickly, fueled by anger and maybe a

little indignation, but he was ready for me. I rushed toward him and swung my fists, and he blocked. We kept this up, his ease at blocking me only making me angrier. I raised my knee, going for the money shot and he blocked that too. The bastard even did it with a look of genuine disappointment.

“Knee to the balls? Really? You’re a woman, I’m a man. That’s the first shot I’d expect a woman to take. I thought you would be better at this, Malvada.”

Okay, now he was insulting me. Wrong move, dickhead. I pretended to spin away, headed toward the door, and when he grabbed my arm, I threw myself back at him, hitting him dead center with all my weight hard enough to knock him right back into the column that had been behind him. I heard the back of his head connect with the column and stepped to the side as I brought my hands together to create one meaty fist that I swung down right into his nards in a blow that dropped him to his knees.

“Did you expect that, asshole?” I turned away and this time when I headed for the door, I meant to leave, but he quit sucking in air and holding his junk long enough to lurch forward and grab my calf. With one good jerk, he had me prone on the floor.

“Nope, and I’d probably be impressed if I didn’t really hate you at the moment,” he said, his voice coming out on ragged pain-filled breaths as he crawled forward, crawling over my body before I could get up. “Where were we? Oh, right. Your mother’s name is—”

“No!” I screamed as his body fully settled over mine, caging me below him, vulnerable to whatever he might want to do to me. Panic set in first and my elbow shot out as I twisted my upper body. My elbow hit him between the eyes, causing a loud crunch as his nose broke. Blood poured from his nostrils and his face twisted in anger as he bit out a slew of cuss words before he twisted me around and pinned my shoulders down.

“Get off of me!” I screamed as I bucked wildly under him. I saw the surprise in his eyes right before I delivered a punch to his jaw and then ... the blackness took me.

The next thing I knew, I was struggling to breathe. I was sitting up, but something was cutting off my air supply. I saw blood on my hands as I raised them to grab at what had me. An arm, slick with blood.

“Shhh...”

I turned my eyes toward the hushing sound as much as I could and just barely made out Reese’s bloody, battered face. His muscular arm was wrapped around my throat, suffocating me, and I realized I’d fallen into the blind rage.

I’d never known what else to call it. It was something that happened when I felt trapped or caught, when I was sure I was going to be violated. It was a fight for my life that I never stayed conscious through, nor recalled. In the past, I’d come out of the blackness to discover myself being pulled off of someone I’d left bruised, broken, and bloody. Sometimes I looked pretty bad too, but sometimes I came out unscathed, my opponent never having had a chance to touch me. From

what I'd been told, I was a bit of a whirlwind when the blind rage took over me. The blind rage had gotten me kicked out of multiple foster homes and I hadn't been a stranger to expulsions from school. Now, as my air supply ran out and unconsciousness settled in, taking my will to fight with it, it looked like the blind rage had gotten me killed.

I hadn't made it through one training session before Reese had had enough of me and decided to send me right to Hell.



I was naked in flames, draped with snakes. They slithered around me, their skinny forked tongues flicking out, but they didn't seem volatile, so they still didn't scare me. I got the sense they were waiting for something from me. Instruction, maybe? How nice. I got to have pets in Hell. Maybe I could sic them on anything that tried to attack me. I stretched out one of my arms and watched a snake slither around the length of it as I looked around, marveling at how comfortable the temperature was right there in the center of the flames, how each lap of fire against my skin was like a soft caress, leaving my skin unmarred.

Was this real now? Was this what the dream had been about all these years, a premonition of my being cast into Hell? Hell couldn't possibly be this nice, this... *right*.

It can be, a deep voice spoke, seeming to come from everywhere at once. *But this is not Hell. This is you. This is*

your power waiting to be called upon. This is who you are meant to be, who you will become when you come into your reign.

No! a softer voice cried out, one that carried an ice-cold breeze with it severe enough to fan the flames. *Run, Dulce, run from his influence! Don't let him have you. You have a choice. Run or fight, but do not accept him!*

The deep voice bellowed a rage-filled roar and suddenly the flames were no longer comfortable. They burned my skin, causing my flesh to scorch and the snakes to hiss as they slithered in a frenzied state, searching for somewhere cooler.

Come to me, the softer voice called out. *Dulce, open your heart. Let me in.*

Let it in? I turned my head to look over my shoulder and saw the smaller silhouette I'd seen in an earlier dream. I could tell it was a woman by the voice and the shape, but I couldn't make out her features. She stretched her arms out to me, calling me to her. Yeah... I might not be an expert in demonology, but when anything asked for me to let it in while I was standing naked in a sea of flames, I didn't really think it was a great idea. Especially when whoever the woman was, she felt colder than death.

I was no longer sure if I was having another dream or if I'd really gone to Hell, killed by Reese, but I knew I didn't trust either voice and I didn't want to stay where I was any longer, so I closed my eyes and took a flying leap into who-knew-where.



“Come here. Look at this.”

“What?”

“Right here. Didn’t she have a lot more discoloration here just last night?”

I listened to the alternating voices, one male, one female, as I fought to open my eyes, move, do anything more than draw air into my lungs while I tried to figure out where I was. I picked up on a steady beeping and the smell of flowers mixed with antiseptic. Was I still in the hospital? Reese and Petie and the whole Hell and Purgatory thing had been a dream?

“Discoloration?” the male said. “Hell, this woman was a completely broken mess a few nights ago and you’re concerned about her bruises clearing up fast? This woman is a freak.”

“Don’t say that,” the woman admonished him. “You know they can often hear us while unconscious, and she’s been slipping in and out all week.”

“She should have died at the scene. Hell, she almost died three times on the table.”

“I know. This one has an angel watching over her.”

“Or something else,” the man muttered.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Look, all I’m saying is I’ve never seen anyone heal this fast, especially after taking the degree of damage she took, and it’s weird as hell the woman to do it has a name like this one’s.”

“What’s wrong with her name?”

“I’m guessing you don’t speak Spanish.”

“Enough to get by. Why? What’s Dulce mean?”

“Dulce means sweet, but when you put it with the Malvada, this girl’s name is Sweet Wicked. Sweet and wicked. Or sweet and evil. It can mean that too.”

“Oh, boy, stop,” the woman said, and chuckled. “You watch all those vampire and demon shows and they got you making things up. This girl is just lucky and blessed.”

“Or cursed,” the guy muttered. “I just know I’m not coming in here to check on her alone. One of these nights we’re going to come in here and find her floating above the bed, head spinning all the way around.”

I heard something that sounded like a hand smacking flesh before the woman let loose another laugh. “Come on, Benito. You’re just awful. This poor girl is not evil, but if it makes you feel better, I’ll be sure to keep pea soup off the menu when she comes out of this long enough to eat.”

There were a few more noises, but I couldn’t gather the energy to turn my head or even open my eyes to see what the pair were doing. Despite not being able to open my eyes, I sensed the light disappearing, leaving me in total blackness,

and listened to the footsteps moving away from me, telling me the pair were leaving me.

Was I dreaming? Had I never left the hospital? I thought hard, recalling everything I thought had happened since the moment I'd thought I'd woken up and left. It seemed so real. So, what was happening now? I tried to think, but grew more tired with the effort, and drifted off into blissful sleep.

Something was in my mouth. It gushed something warm and coppery. The liquid flooded my tongue, a strange taste I couldn't put a name to. I swallowed, greedily pulling in more, and with each swallow I felt fire surge through my veins, relieving aches in every limb it reached. The fog in my brain seemed to clear, leaving me less groggy.

"Enough," Reese said, and I felt pressure on my cheeks. My mouth was forced open and whatever I'd been drinking from was taken away.

What was Reese doing here? I thought he'd killed me. Had he just put me back in the hospital instead? What was that I was drinking? Awakened and energized enough from the drink, I cracked my eyelids open and looked up. He stood above me, a dark shadow illuminated by the palest of light coming from somewhere across the room, but between the light reflecting off the monitors and the odd glow in his eyes, I knew it was Reese standing at my bedside without a doubt.

"Go back to sleep, Dulce Malvada. You have more healing to do before we can start," he said... and raised his wrist to his mouth to glide his tongue over the slit across it. I watched as

the skin healed after his tongue cleansed it of the blood. Blood, I realized with great horror, that I had just swallowed.



My heart beat frantically as my eyes flew open. Everything was dark, pitch black except for a beam of moonlight shining onto a blank wall and section of hardwood floor directly in front of me. I was on my side, on something soft. Cold sweat covered my body, and I was alive. Now that my brain was clearer thanks to the air in my lungs, I realized Reese hadn't killed me. He'd knocked me out before I could shred him to pieces. Well, I guess that was one way to settle down a Tasmanian devil gone crazy. But, had he needed to if he was what I thought he was? Ice filled my veins.

I'd once nearly hit a deer while driving home at night from getting takeout on Bardstown Road. I'd had to turn on South Hurstbourne to get back home, a street with a long section of wooded area on each side where deer lived and seeing them dart out into the multilane street was a common occurrence, as was, sadly, seeing their bodies bleeding on the street, having been hit. One night, one seemed to appear out of nowhere in the dark. My tires screeched as I slammed the brakes into the floorboard, nearly standing on the damn things in desperation to avoid hitting the poor animal and all the while, with my headlights shining in its eyes, the car horn blasting away as I held it down while begging the animal to flee, and the smell of burning rubber filling the air, the deer just stood there, staring

at the machine that would bring its death hurtling toward it. Thankfully, my car came to a smoking stop just shy of the animal, and the deer continued to stare at me for at least another three minutes before it turned and trotted away.

Deer were beautiful, gentle creatures I would never harm, but for the life of me, I had never understood why such intelligent creatures turned into total idiots when they got caught in headlights. Yes, I knew they were blinded, but still... I couldn't wrap my mind around how they must have been able to sense the strange light coming toward them and instead of running, they just stood there, staring right back at it.

I understood the inability to move while caught in fear's grip now. Everything in my body screamed to run, to flee, to get the hell out of wherever I was and just escape, but my brain couldn't send the message to my body to just move. I was petrified. I could sense Reese's presence behind me, and when I took a moment to force myself to calm down, to breathe in and out steadily, I realized I could smell him too. He was close, literally at my back. The man who had fed me his blood was close enough I could feel the heat coming off his body.

I thought vampires were cold.

Was I really thinking this? Was I really suggesting the man was a vampire? I recalled the dream, which I was now sure wasn't a dream. It had been far too real. It was a memory, one that, for whatever reason, my brain had kept from me until now. I had seen him and thinking back to the moment I found

him in my bedroom, I remembered that fleeting memory I couldn't quite grasp at the time. Something about him had seemed familiar, something about his voice and his eyes. Those dark caramel-colored eyes that had seemed to glow a little in the dark of the hospital room. It couldn't have been a dream because I had remembered him before the dream. I just hadn't realized it.

But vampires weren't real. Maybe that sounded like a dumb thought coming from someone who was supposed to be half demon, but demons were in the bible. Billions of people all over the world believed in a Heaven or Hell, and they believed in angels and demons. People with college degrees, respected jobs and places in society. Nobody would bat an eye if someone said they believed in the existence of demons, but vampires? That was a one-way ticket to the psychiatric ward. Reese had mentioned paranormals... but *vampires*?

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I clearly remembered drinking his blood. I swallowed hard, fighting down nausea, and quickly shoved that image and the memory of the coppery taste deep down into the recesses of my mind. Vampires had healing capabilities in all the books I'd read and movies I'd seen. That was kind of the whole point of them needing blood. It kept them alive, and it healed them, along with sleep.

I had been hit by a bus, nearly died multiple times, yet somehow, I walked out of the hospital two weeks later without a single bruise on my body. Not one broken bone. Maybe it hadn't been a medical miracle after all, or even the demon

DNA I'd been told I had. Maybe it had been the blood. The vampire blood. Even if it wasn't vampire blood, it was some kind of uncommon blood with healing properties. Why else would he ...? Oh, damn. The connection. When he'd said he could read my thoughts, he'd said he had a connection to me. I'd assumed he meant because we were partners. He must have meant the blood. Was he in my head all the time? Was I bound to him? Did he own me now? Was that what the exchange between him and that Tank guy was about? Ownership? He hadn't killed me yet, but was he going to eventually?

Okay, I mentally said to myself. First, you have to get away from him. You saw the blood on him after you came out of the blind rage. He bleeds. If he can bleed, he can be injured. If he can be injured, he can be killed. Or at least hurt enough to allow an escape. But first, Dulce, you have to calm down and you have to move your body.

I hadn't moved a muscle or even a hair since I'd awakened, only my eyelids, and thankfully, I'd awakened facing away from him. Despite the panic, as soon as I'd realized he was near, I'd forced myself to breathe slowly and evenly, afraid the panicked breathing would alert him to my being conscious. I continued to breathe evenly, careful to stay as quiet as possible, and I cleared my mind of all the scary thoughts invading it. I needed to take stock of the situation without drawing any attention to myself.

With my mind clear, I took a shot at sensing the environment around me, like Reese had told me to do in the coffee shop. It was quiet enough I could hear him breathing

softly. That was a good thing, wasn't it? Why would a vampire need to breathe? And I hadn't seen fangs. Feeling a little better, I let my gaze rove over what I could see without moving my body. I was pretty sure I was on a mattress that rested on the floor. Based on the otherwise bareness of the room, I assumed it to be the one behind the unmarked door in the building Reese had brought me to for training.

I knew he was on the mattress, stretched out behind me, because I felt his body heat from back to feet and smelled his scent, thick and strong. I didn't sense any malevolence from him or feel the weight of a stare on me. I assumed he was asleep, although I would have felt better about my assumption if he would at least snore. Almost as if I'd spoken it into power, a soft snore escaped him and he shifted a little, but there wasn't enough movement for it to have been a complete rollover. I was pretty sure he was flat on his back. Perfect position for me to get answers, I realized, remembering I'd shoved my switchblade into my front jeans pocket after I'd showered, and I could feel its familiar weight once I focused on it.

If I ran as originally intended, he might catch me like he had earlier. If I was going to have to end up fighting him anyway, I might as well start with the element of surprise instead of being forced into the fight after getting caught. I wiggled my fingers, relieved to find the fear had thawed enough for me to move, and slowly reached into my pocket for the knife. I carefully extracted it, took a deep breath as I flipped it open,

and rolled over... to have Reese's hand immediately clamp around my throat.

He rose from the bed in one inhumanly possible, fluid motion and held me above him in his one-handed grip. He held me just tight enough to keep me firmly in his grasp without choking me as I kicked and flailed, careful to hold me far enough away from his body that I couldn't connect my feet to his stomach or stab him from above, no matter how hard I tried.

"Dulce, you have some 'splaining to do," he said in a Ricky Ricardo impersonation before grabbing the knife away from me with his free hand and flinging it across the room where, from the sound of it, it embedded itself in the wall. "I calm you down, heal you, let you rest, and this is the first thing you do after waking up? You try to kill me again?"

"I never tried to kill you," I managed to get out while using both hands to pry at the one he had my throat trapped in.

"The hell you didn't. You broke my nose, busted my lips open, took a bite out of my throat, and tried to gauge my eyes out, and that was just you getting started. I think you cracked a rib."

"You look all right now." He looked more than all right. There wasn't a bruise, cut, or drop of blood on him, and I was sure it wasn't all because he'd taken a shower and changed his clothes. He'd actually healed. "I saw you. You were bloody. Your nose was smashed."

"I heal fast."

“What are you?”

He angled his head to the side and narrowed his eyes, studying me, and I got the impression he was reading my mind as I recalled the dream I was sure wasn't a dream at all, but a memory. “I think you already know what I am. You might as well say it.”

I attempted to shake my head, getting nowhere. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because the moment I say it, a group of men are going to bust in here, cram me into a little white jacket that ties in the back, and haul me off to a padded room.”

“You're not crazy, Dulce.”

“So, it's true. You're a ... you're some sort of vampire-like creature.”

He stepped off the mattress and lowered me, releasing his grip on my throat when my feet settled on the floor, and didn't grab for me when I instinctively stepped back, putting a few feet of space between us. “Not vampire-like. I am a vampire.”

No sooner had my lips parted to release the scream his confirmation had brought to life, he moved in a ridiculously unbelievable burst of speed to cover my mouth with one hand while gripping the back of my head with the other, preventing me from any means of escape. “I healed your body when it was broken, and I guarded it while it was vulnerable. Why do you fear me?”

“You’re a vampire,” I said after he uncovered my mouth, my voice just above a whisper. I didn’t even bother denying the fear. Who would believe me? I was facing off with a real-life creature from a freaking horror movie. “You’re a monster that preys on people.”

“And what do you think a demon is, sweetheart? That’s why I need to train you. To make sure you know how to fight the part of you that wants to hurt people because believe me, from everything I’m learning about you now, when your demon powers awaken, you’re going to be the real monster here if you don’t get rid of those damn walls you think you’ve been protecting yourself with.”

I stood there for a moment, shocked into silence as I processed what he’d just said. He was a vampire, the scary monster little kids had nightmares about, and he was calling me a monster? Worse, he was calling me even more of a monster than him, the blood-sucking fiend? “I am not a monster. I don’t care what kind of evil thing possessed the sperm that made me. I am not a monster and no awakening or whatever is going to just make me one. I still have my own mind. I don’t care what you think you know about me just because you read some file. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“Oh, I don’t?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you have a pet?”

Once again, he surprised me into stunned silence, this time due to the absolute confusion of such a seemingly pointless question out of nowhere. “What? What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s got to do with everything. Why do you not have a pet? A dog, a hamster, even a goldfish? Why not a single pet?”

“Because I don’t.” I shrugged. “A lot of people don’t have pets.”

“A lot of people don’t donate to multiple animal charities. Why do you donate to so many charities that help animals, yet won’t give one a home yourself?”

“I live in an apartment,” I snapped. “I can’t have a pet.”

“Yes, you can. I smelled cats in your neighbors’ apartments and no landlord would have an issue with a fish. Why do you not have a pet? Why do you move on from men so easily? Why did you get so upset when I tried to tell you the truth of the woman who gave birth to you, gave you your first name, and made sure you were—”

“Stop!” I covered my ears and shook my head, trying to erase the picture forming in my mind from the information he gave me about the woman who had birthed me. “Just stop it. None of this matters. What could my lack of pet or knowledge about the woman who gave birth to me possibly matter? None of that has anything to do with who or what I am.”

“It has everything to do with who and what you are!” He stepped closer, obliterating any space between us, and stared

down at me, his eyes burning with anger. “I know you better than you know yourself because you actually think these walls you’ve built are protecting you. They’re not. They’re doing the exact opposite. You have to let them fall, Dulce. You have to allow yourself to care about something, someone. You’re not a bad person, but you’ve allowed your past pain to close your heart. You’re so busy protecting yourself from ever getting hurt again that you won’t allow yourself to feel a damn thing. Once you start to, you put another brick in those damn walls of yours.”

“So what? No one ever protected me. I do what I have to do to survive, just like anyone else.”

“Your mother protected you the best she could given the circumstances,” Reese said, his voice a little softer despite the burning anger still in his hard eyes. “But you don’t want to hear that because you’ve taught yourself to hate her. Hating someone is easier than loving them because then you don’t have to forgive. You don’t have to admit that you were wrong. You don’t have to feel the sadness or compassion that comes with understanding why she did what she did. You don’t have to acknowledge that you’ve spent years hating a woman for surviving the same thing that once happened to you.”

I opened my mouth to snap out a response but couldn’t get anything past the choked sob I quickly swallowed before gritting my teeth to keep the tears burning my eyes from spilling over. Damned if I wanted Reese to see me cry and think he’d won this argument.

“You move on easily from the men you date because you never allow yourself to truly care about them in the first place. You don’t have any friends because you push everyone away. You’d rather be alone than risk caring about someone who might leave or hurt you, and you don’t have a pet because you know you would love it and that’s something that despite all your tough girl attitude, you’re too damn terrified to let yourself do, and that is what’s going to be your undoing.” He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before he reopened them and continued. “If you don’t let yourself be vulnerable enough to care about someone other than yourself, if you don’t learn how to let go of pain and forgive others, you aren’t going to have anything in your arsenal to fight against the demon power you’re going to come into after your awakening. You can’t fight against something that vile if you can’t love anyone. You will truly be a monster in every sense of the word, and I won’t be able to keep you as my partner.”

I took a moment to gather myself, not responding until I was sure I absolutely wasn’t going to cry, focusing on anger to fight back any other emotion Reese had done his damndest to pull out of me, just as I always had. “If that’s true, then why bother trying to help me at all, as you claim? You should be happy to get rid of me.”

Something flashed through his eyes as he frowned, something that made my heart sink.

“No,” he said, staring straight into my eyes. “If D.A.M.N.E.D. splits us up, it will be because I failed to train you, and once you’re no longer my partner, you’ll be my

target, and I really, *really* don't want to be the one to have to kill you.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Kill me?” I stepped back and glanced at the closed door, trying to calculate my odds of reaching it before Reese could stop me.

“You can’t outrun me,” he said. “Not yet anyway. Maybe you’ll be able to after your awakening. We won’t know what all abilities the awakening will give you until it happens, but that doesn’t matter right now. I’m not going to hurt you, Dulce. I just told you I don’t want to have to kill you. I don’t want you to become a target. I’m trying to help you. That’s all I’ve been trying to do.”

I looked at the mattress on the floor, the one he’d been lying on next to me in the dark and felt the walls of the otherwise bare room with its nearly closed blinds over the one window and the two closed doors, one I assumed led to a closet, and the other, to enough space to breathe, closing in on me. “I don’t want to be in this room anymore.”

He glanced back at the mattress before returning his gaze to mine and nodded. “We can go back into the training space. Just don’t run. You need to trust me so I can help you.”

He walked over to the door and opened it, stepping back to let me enter the other room first. The overhead light had been left on and just stepping into the wide open, well-lit space took away some of the tightness that had been coiled in my chest since I'd awakened next to Reese on the mattress. I looked at the area I last remembered fighting with him and didn't see any trace of blood, nor did I see any remnants on my hands when I looked down at them, but I smelled it on my black T-shirt.

"I cleaned you up, but I wouldn't remove your clothes without your consent," Reese said as he stepped around me, turning to stand directly in front of me so we were once again eye to eye, or eye to chest unless I looked up, which I did. "You can borrow a shirt of mine if you want to change out of that one. I only cleaned off what I could get to without crossing any lines, and once I cleaned everything out here, took a quick shower and changed, I rested on the mattress next to you long enough to let sleep and blood heal me."

Panic flared inside me, causing my heart to skip a beat. "You drank from me?"

"No. I have never taken blood from you, nor would I without your permission," he said, and the look on his face made him appear offended I'd even suggested such a thing. He blew out a soft breath and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his fresh pair of black cargo pants. "And speaking of permission, I told you I can pick up on your thoughts. Right after I pinned you on the floor earlier, I realized my mistake. I saw what that brought forward from your memories. I swear,

Dulce, I was about to get off you, but you just... you went *crazy*. What the hell *was* that?"

"You didn't see that one in my file?"

He shook his head. "I saw you were in a lot of fights between school and your foster homes. You were suspended a lot, even expelled. Most of your foster home reassignments came after violent outbursts and the medical reports on your opponents suggested you seriously beat the shit out of them, but I don't think anything typed into a report could do justice describing what that was. I saw in there where you'd often claimed to not even remember attacking anyone after getting pulled off the ones you went after. Do you remember fighting me?"

I remembered him on top of me and forced down the flare of panic it provoked. "Not after you got me down and caged me in underneath you, other than when I came to, sitting with my back to your chest and your arm around my throat, taking my breath away. I thought you were killing me."

"No, just getting you unconscious before I knocked you out so I could heal before you damaged another of my ribs."

"*Before* you knocked me out? The sleeper hold wasn't enough for you? You had to hit me after I was down?"

"Contrary to what you see in the movies, a chokehold will only put someone out for about ten or twenty seconds. I needed time to heal a broken nose and cracked rib, as well as the other wounds you inflicted, which meant I needed blood and a nap. I needed you out for hours, not seconds."

I looked around the room, searching for a clock, and found none. I reached for the cellphone I'd shoved in my back pocket earlier but didn't find it there.

"Five hours," Reese answered my unspoken question, "and the phone is on the table. It fell out while you were trying to crush my windpipe."

I winced. "Really?"

He nodded. "For a moment, I thought I was seeing your awakening, but your demon side didn't register as any stronger and your eyes never shifted. Turns out, you're just batshit crazy when you're really pissed off. And fast. I feel bad for any human who messes with you. I'm a vampire and I could barely keep up with you."

Not just pissed off, I thought. Scared. Maybe that was why the blind rage hadn't triggered my awakening. I might have called it a blind rage for lack of a better term, but I had always been more afraid than pissed off when it happened. But I wasn't going to tell Reese that. Despite the argument he'd made for letting down my walls, I wasn't ready to. "What do you mean by my eyes didn't shift?"

"Demons' eyes tend to glow red or bleed black when they draw on their power. After your awakening, you'll likely do that too."

I thought of the image that came to me in my dreams. "My eyes are gold in my dreams."

Reese's brow knit together. "So you *do* see yourself in your demonic form in your dreams?"

"My demonic form?" Geez. He made me sound like some sort of shapeshifting creature. "I guess. I just see myself naked in flames, with snakes slithering over me and..." I immediately shut down all thought of what I saw in my dreams, replacing the image with a reel of kittens and unicorns, and every cute, fuzzy thing I could think of. "Don't you dare try to see in my head and look at that image!"

"Why?" Reese asked, removing his hands from his pockets as he shrugged, his expression suggesting he didn't know what the big deal was.

"Because I'm naked in it," I reminded him, then gasped, realizing something. "Shit! Does this mean that when I have my awakening thing, I'm going to be naked? Am I, like, going to just Hulk-out randomly and shred my clothes?"

Reese chuckled, then grunted and placed his hand over the side of his abdomen, giving the impression he wasn't quite as healed as I'd believed him to be despite the lack of a broken nose or open wounds. "I highly doubt it. Do you have the dream often?"

"Yeah, often enough," I answered. "I've had it off and on over the years."

"Did it start around the onset of puberty?"

I nodded.

“Yeah, that’s the demon part of you calling. I wouldn’t take what you see too literally. Do you still look human?”

“Of course I still look human. I mean, my forehead protrudes some and I have these long black claws where my fingernails should be, and of course, the golden eyes, but I still look like me.”

“That’s good. Some demons look like really freakish swamp monsters, and then there are the hellhounds...”

“Are you saying I could turn into a dog?”

“Gives all new meaning to the expression, bitch from hell, doesn’t it?”

My mouth dropped open and when I tried to speak, only a squeak came out, which made Reese chuckle more.

“Relax, Malvada. You’ll be fine as long as you listen to me.”

“I’ll be fine? How can you tell me I’m half demon, I’m going to go through some weird-ass metamorphosis that gives me freaky eye colors, then say I’m going to be fine? Am I going to really have those long black claws and the weirdly adoring snakes? Am I going to be a monster? Am I going to drink blood and create an army of the possessed?”

“I hope not. I’d have to take you out if you created an army of the possessed,” he said seriously, but the way his mouth curved up at the corners took away any threat. “And demons do not need to drink blood to survive, although you’ve drunk blood before, so you should know it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Not that big of a...” My stomach roiled, and I clamped my mouth closed until it settled enough, I could talk without the fear of immediately spewing the pound cake I’d had earlier. “For someone with the nerve to talk about consent, you still made me drink your nasty blood.” I gagged and slapped a hand over my mouth.

“Okay, that’s a little offensive.” He folded his arms. “You should be glad I gave you my blood. How else do you think you left the hospital after only two weeks with no physical therapy needed? I did that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. You healed me, but I’m sure with time, I would have healed just fine on my own.”

“Not without looking like something Picasso painted in the dark while drunk, which was how you looked the first time I saw you, by the way.”

“I did not!”

“Yes, you did. You were hit by a bus. Do you think everything was where it was supposed to be after they scraped you up off the street?”

“Fine. I suppose I could say thank you for healing me in the hospital, even if it was in a totally gross way.”

“Yes, you could. A little appreciation would be nice. For what I did then and what I did tonight.”

“What you did tonight?” I couldn’t hold back a sarcastic huff. “What exactly should I thank you for doing tonight? Having an attitude from the moment I met you? Shoving your

nose far deeper into my business than it needs to be? Or maybe I should thank you for literally throwing me on the floor before provoking me into a fight you have the nerve to call training.”

“Me have an attitude?” He pointed toward himself and laughed. “Sweetheart, you haven’t exactly been a delight to work with, and I wouldn’t have had to toss you on the floor if you hadn’t tried to run off while I was busy trying to help you deal with the absolute shitstorm that is bearing down on you. Your awakening will not be a piece of cake, especially if you refuse to let go of all this anger and fear—”

“I’m—”

“Yes, you are,” he cut me off, his voice a loud slap. “You are afraid. You are afraid to know anyone, to feel anything. You’re afraid to actually live, but you can’t hide in the fortress you’ve built around yourself anymore. If you insist on doing that, you might as well not waste my time and just go to Hell, because that’s where you’re headed.” Reese paused for a moment, his chest rising and falling heavily as his eyes burned. “You’re not training for a marathon or a cushy little office job. You’re training for how to control your demonic power after it breaks free, and you’re training for how to track and take out entities far more dangerous than anyone you’ve ever encountered. Some of my methods may be questionable, but they work. As for why you should thank me for tonight, I had to heal you again.”

“Again?” My stomach did a somersault as I realized what he meant. He’d... *Oh, gross.* “You made me drink your blood again?”

“You were uncontrollable,” he said in exasperation. “I told you I had to knock you out. You didn’t give me much of a choice.”

I swallowed and realized my tongue tasted a little coppery. Sweat broke out along my hairline as my stomach seemed to tumble around. “And you thought I needed blood for that?”

“I knocked you unconscious,” he explained again, and spread his arms out. “Look at me. I’m a lot bigger than you, so of course knocking you out did some damage.”

“Jerk!”

“Hey, you were trying to tear my throat out with your teeth before I got you in the chokehold! Believe me, there’s a lot worse I could have done other than just give you a nap, and it’s not like I didn’t take the pain and bruising away.”

“Next time you want to help me with pain, give me a Tylenol, not—” A gurgle escaped me as a wave of vomit rolled up from my stomach, and I clamped a hand over my mouth, my other hand gripping my stomach.

“Whoa. Are you... Oh, *hell* no. Not here. Bathroom!” He pointed toward the marked bathroom doors at the back of the room, and I sprinted for them.

As I passed the little kitchenette area, I knew I wouldn’t make it. The nausea overpowered me, and I felt the imminent

eruption, so I cut to the left and gripped the edge of the kitchen sink.

“Whoa! Not there! Not... Oh, hell. Seriously?”

I ignored Reese’s ranting as I heaved the contents of my stomach into the sink. Better here than the garbage can, I thought, unable to put the thought into words as my stomach tightened and convulsed, spewing far more than I imagined I could have eaten considering I’d only had coffee and pound cake in the past twenty-four hours. And Reese’s blood. The blood that came from his veins. And with that thought, I erupted again. I thought I might have heard gagging noises coming from Reese, but I was a little preoccupied.

Once I was pretty sure nothing was left in me, I spit and turned on the water to rinse out my mouth. “Quit giving me your blood, damn it!”

I didn’t get a response and turned to see that Reese was no longer there. I heard a flush coming from the men’s bathroom and grinned as I rinsed out the sink. By the time he stepped out of the bathroom with a hand covering his flat stomach and a grimace on his face, I had everything rinsed away.

“It’s all gone now,” I said, biting back a smile. A little hurling was just what he got for giving me his... *ugh*. Yeah, I was going to try not to keep thinking about what he’d done.

“The smell isn’t.” He walked over to the windows along the far wall and started raising them.

“Well, you’re to blame for it. Drinking blood might be normal to you, but it’s pretty damn disgusting to the rest of us.” My stomach rolled a little at the reminder. “I’d think a little vomit smell wouldn’t bother someone who does what you do.”

“Really? It’s a known fact that smelling vomit can induce vomit, and I’m a vampire. That smell you call little is pretty damn strong to me.” He finished raising the last window and sat on the sill. With his arms crossed, he scowled at me. “Don’t even come near me with that vomit-breath. I’ve been using that men’s bathroom as my own. You’ll find mouthwash in there. Go swish some around.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Vampires brush their teeth?”

“Yeah, we wipe our asses too. Don’t touch my toothbrush. Just use the rinse.”

“Ugh, like I would, and thank you so much for that image.”

“You’re welcome,” he said to my retreating back as I headed toward the bathroom. “Consider it payback for making this whole area smell like sour skunk ass.”

I rolled my eyes as I pushed through the door to the men’s bathroom. It looked like any other men’s bathroom, with multiple stalls and urinals and a counter of sinks that ran along the opposite wall with mirrors above. The lingering smell of vomit hit me, and I decided to just breathe through my mouth.

I saw clippers on the sink counter over in the corner where it looked like Reese kept his personal items. There was a soft-

bristle brush, a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, deodorant, a bottle of mouthwash, and a big white bottle of sunscreen with a MidKnight Enterprises logo on it. The logo was a little moon and bat. Very vampy.

I grabbed the mouthwash, looked at my reflection in the mirror over the closest sink, and stilled. Could Reese see his reflection? He clearly had one. I recalled seeing him reflected in the mirrors along the back of the training room and in the glass at the coffee shop. What I hadn't seen was a set of fangs. Maybe he wasn't an actual vampire, but one of those crazy people who got off on drinking blood and called themselves vampires. I shook my head, realizing how ridiculous I sounded. An actual vampire. Then again, there was no denying that walking out of a hospital without the aid of a single physical therapy session nor a single bruise two weeks after getting hit by a bus was pretty indisputable evidence something otherworldly was involved in my healing.

I opened the mouthwash, realized there were no cups in the bathroom, and shrugged. I'd apparently drunk the guy's blood. I could use the same cap he'd used to pour the mouthwash into. I swished the mouthwash around, gargled, and spit it out, taking time to rinse the sink out, not wanting to give the infuriating man anything else to gripe about, and left the bathroom.

Reese no longer sat on the windowsill, but the windows were still open. The cool night breeze blew in and fortunately took some of the sour vomit smell away with it when it escaped back out into the night.

The vampire stood by the small table I'd noticed earlier, glancing at me as he bent down to grab something below it. When he straightened with a square box full of books in his hands, I noticed the subtlest wince. His hand went to his side just along his ribcage after he set the box on the table.

"Are you all right?" I nodded my head toward his side as I approached the table.

"I'll be fine. I healed the worst part of the damage. I'm just a little sore. The day sleep will take care of what I couldn't repair in a nap, and I'll be good as new."

"The day sleep?"

He ignored me and looked at my shirt. "If you want to switch that shirt out for one of mine, you're free to take whichever you want from the closet back there. I can still smell the blood on that one, and I don't want you to throw up again."

"The smell of blood didn't make me throw up. The thought of drinking—" I raised my hand as my stomach protested. "You know what? I think I'll take you up on that offer."

I left him to his task of setting books out on the table and walked back into the dark room he appeared to be using as a bedroom. "You're missing an actual bed," I called out to him as I stepped inside.

"All I need is the mattress."

"Men," I muttered. My apartment wasn't exactly something you'd find in a home decorating magazine either, but at least I

had an actual bed. There wasn't a dresser or anything else in the room for that matter, just the mattress and the sheets on it, so I walked over to the door in the corner and opened it to reveal Reese's wardrobe. His very black wardrobe. Black T-shirts, hoodies, sweaters, cargo pants, and jeans. An extra pair of black shit-kickers rested on the floor below a small shelf topped with small, square straw baskets. I did a little investigating and found a collection of black socks and boxer briefs in them. No wonder the guy didn't care which shirt I took from his closet. There wasn't a lot of variety to choose from, and I doubted he had any special attachment to anything.

I grabbed a black T-shirt at random and switched it out for the one I had on, grimacing as my soiled shirt stuck to my skin. With a little scrubbing using a clean section, the blood that had soaked through it to smear on my stomach was gone and I wadded the dirty shirt up before I walked out of the room to find Reese sitting at the table, waiting for me. "I'd ask if I could throw this in with your wash, but however would you be able to tell my black shirt from all of yours?"

"Size," he said without missing a beat, seeming to totally miss my sarcasm. "If you want me to throw it in with my laundry, just toss it anywhere."

"Like... anywhere, anywhere?"

He looked up at me as if I'd asked a dumb question and nodded, so I tossed the shirt aside and left it where it fell to the floor at the bottom of one of the columns. The man had made me vomit. The least he could do was wash my shirt.

“Sit. We’re not going to do any more physical stuff tonight, so we might as well get started on your education of all things paranormal.”

I walked over to the table and grabbed a seat in the chair that would put me directly across the table from him.

“Although you’ll want to stop any predators you come across naturally in order to not earn any negative points, the targets assigned to you by D.A.M.N.E.D. are the big point-gainers. Those are usually demons escaped from Hell, so that’s what we’ll focus on first.”

I looked down at the thick, leather-bound book he’d slid in front of me and opened it to reveal pages of seemingly endless text interspersed with illustrated scenes that looked like they’d been conjured from some poor person’s nightmares. “Do you really expect me to read all of this?”

“Not a big reader?”

“Not of anything like this, and if I have to read all of this, I’ll never have time to track any demons.”

He let out a rough sound that sounded a lot like annoyance. “You’d think you’d want to know more about what you half are, and what you may become.”

I flipped through the pages, taking in the horrible illustrations of horned and scaled beasts, some of whom even had fangs, and couldn’t help staring at Reese’s mouth.

“Why are you staring at my mouth?”

“You say you’re a vampire, but I haven’t seen any fangs, and you have a reflection.”

“I said I was a vampire. I never said I was Count Dracula.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Yes. I’m real and Count Dracula isn’t.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So, you don’t have fangs?”

He took in a slow, deep breath through his nose while he stared at me, and I highly suspected he mentally counted to ten before he opened his mouth and two fangs descended from his upper gum.

I sucked in a breath as my heart raced, thumping painfully, but only stared as he retracted the fangs.

“You’re not going to piss yourself, are you?”

Irritation chased away the chill of fear.

“No, I’m not going to piss myself,” I snapped. “It’s just not every day you see someone do that. They just pop out and retract at will?”

“Yes, or they come out instinctually if I’m threatened. They’re weapons.”

“And really nifty can openers.”

The look he gave me held no amusement. “You’re supposed to be learning demonology, not vampirism.”

“Why? Are you saying I’ll never have to fight a vampire? None of you can be bad?”

“Almost every being in existence can be bad, but you will mostly be assigned demons to track, so that is what you need to know the most about right now.”

“Shouldn’t I know about vampires too, though, since I’m partnered with one? I mean, what if I accidentally give you something to eat and it’s loaded with garlic? Wait. You ate lemon pound cake. You can eat?”

“Yes, I can eat,” he said, and sighed. “If there is anything you need to know about me, I’ll tell you when the time comes. For now, focus on demonology.”

“We’re partnered. We’re working together. The time has come. I saw the big bottle of sunscreen in the bathroom. Is that, like, some industrial-vampire-strength sunscreen? Will you burst into flames in sunlight unless you have that on? What else can kill you?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Yes, it’s vampire-strength sunscreen, and no, I won’t just burst into flames if I step out into the sun. Not immediately, anyway, and it would be more of a melting or charring, but this isn’t what you need to know right now.”

I begged to differ. “So, the sun can kill you. Got it. What else?”

“I’m not sure telling you what can kill me is a good idea.”

“Why not? We’re supposed to watch each other’s backs, right?”

“Right, but I’m not sure your interest in this subject stems from a desire to watch my back or stake me in it.”

“Well, that’s just insulting.” I looked down at the big book in front of me and flipped the page, disappointed to see way too many words. “And you had the nerve to complain about *my* lack of trust.”

“You’ve already tried to kill me once tonight. My lack of desire to educate you on the ways to kill me is understandable.”

I supposed it was, but it wasn’t like I’d been aware of what I was doing at the time, and he was the one who’d sent me into a panic, so I refused to concede his point. I closed the book. “Fine. Don’t answer my questions, but if my training is just going to be a lot of reading, I can do that in my own apartment, alone. I’m leaving.”

“Wait,” he said, the one word cracking like a whip before I could even attempt to rise from my seat, and narrowed the stare he hadn’t yet lifted from my face.

“Yes?”

“You could just go home and toss the book aside. Also, assuming you do actually read it, you might have questions, so it’s best you read it in my presence.”

“Yes, because you’re so good at answering questions,” I muttered.

He sighed. “Fine. I’ll make you a deal. You can ask me whatever you want, and I will give you an honest answer.

However, for every question you get, I get a question, and I expect the same deal. If you refuse to answer a question, you read a chapter. And don't even think of lying to me because I'll know. Do we have a deal?"

Jackass, I thought to myself, not caring if he could pick up that particular thought or not, and considered his offer. If I was going to be working with the man, I needed to know more about him. Especially since he seemed able to get into my apartment whenever he wanted. And I didn't have to answer anything I didn't want to answer.

"We have a deal," I said. "But I get to go first."



CHAPTER NINE

“**W**hat can kill you?”

“It’s a little off-putting how badly you want to know that.”

“I’ve been told I can be very off-putting, so sue me.” I shrugged my shoulder and folded my arms before leaning back in my chair, hoping the casual pose would make me appear a little less bloodthirsty for the knowledge. “But first, answer my question. That was the rule, right? I ask, and you have to answer.”

He ran his tongue over his teeth as he seemed to reconsider his proposal, but he eventually nodded. “That was the rule, and I’m no shirker. Despite the whole immortality thing, vampires can die.”

“That’s kind of an oxymoron.”

“Yeah, well, I guess immortal is an easier way of saying *really hard to kill and no longer aging*, so that’s the word that gets used the most to describe vampires. Well, there are some immortals who do age, up to a point, at least, but that’s another

subject. Sunlight can kill us, but with age comes some degree of immunity. Also, I've never seen a vampire burst into flames without an actual flamethrower being involved. I've heard stories about some slayer that uses specially crafted UV bullets that can pretty much turn a vampire into a torch, or melt them. I guess it depends on the vampire's age and bloodline."

I wrinkled my nose at the image that projected into my head. "Gross. There are slayers? Like, actual slayers?"

"One question, one answer," Reese said. "Until after I've had my turn. Do you want me to finish answering your first question or not?"

I fought an eye roll and made a lip-zipping gesture, encouraging him to continue.

"Vampires generally don't do well with fire, so that's one way to kill us. Beheading is another. Bleeding out. The whole stake through the heart thing can kill us, but it's because of the blood loss, not because of the stake itself, so the stake doesn't need to be wooden. Anything sharp enough to penetrate and cause enough blood loss will do. Crosses and holy water have no effect on us. Burning, beheading, or bleeding out are the ways we can die."

"Hmm. And here I thought vampires were supposed to be hard to kill. You sound about as fragile as anyone else."

"Yeah, until you actually try to kill one of us and get to see how quickly we move, how powerful our strength is when we crush your bones, and how fast we heal. Killing vampires is

possible, but not easy, so whatever ideas you have, you may want to reconsider them.”

“Trust me that little?”

“That’s another question, but I’ll let you have it. I don’t trust you. Not yet, just like you don’t trust me. Of course, you can’t trust anyone when you don’t even trust yourself.”

“What’s that supposed—”

“Uh-uh-uh.” He waved his index finger back and forth. “You already got a two-for-one deal. It’s my turn. How in the hell did you come up with that disgusting blend of nastiness you call coffee?”

A small, unattractive sound closely resembling a snort came out of me, and I had to remind myself I wasn’t in the room to get all buddy-buddy with the man sitting in front of me. He might be my partner, and I supposed, my mentor, but he wasn’t my friend. He’d knocked me unconscious, and that made him someone I’d do well to never foolishly trust.

“Honest answer only,” he reminded me. “And thorough. No lying by omission.”

“Seriously? You just asked me about coffee. What type of lie do you think I’ll tell to avoid answering something so simple? It’s not like you asked me something personal.”

“I don’t know about that. With the attachment you have to that concoction, there must be some personal reason behind it.”

“Yeah, it’s called ‘It makes my brain do the functioning and my hands not do the killing.’” I didn’t bother holding back my eye roll.

“All right. So why the six shots of espresso, six pumps of chocolate syrup and six pumps of cinnamon dolce syrup? Why not just regular coffee?”

“Because I like the way it tastes?”

Reese raised an eyebrow. “So, one day you just woke up, went to the coffee shop, and spouted off that request? Where did the devil’s brew come from?”

“It’s not devil’s brew. That’s just what a co-worker called it.”

“I think the co-worker named it quite well. Where did it come from?”

“Oh, good grief. Fine. If you want to waste one of your questions on something so unimportant and meaningless...” I blew out a breath and opened my mouth to answer, then realized I actually had to think about it. The way I took my coffee was my own thing, not anything I’d overheard anyone else order or anything that had been suggested to me. I’d been drinking it for years, ever since I’d gotten my first job at sixteen years old.

“You sure seem to be taking your time to answer what you said was just a simple question. Maybe it’s not that simple after all?”

“I’m trying to remember.” I shot him a look I hoped told him how annoying he was at the moment, and just started thinking out loud. “I was working at an ice cream shop the first time I had it. The ice cream shop was next to a small coffee shop, so people were constantly walking by or into the ice cream shop with coffees all day and night. I’d never had coffee before, but it smelled good. Sometimes it smelled really sweet, like the cinnamon toast one of my foster parents used to make for me when I was six. One night, I just walked over to the coffee shop on my break. I didn’t really know what to get, but I thought of that cinnamon toast and the chocolate milk Ms. Harriette used to make me. I saw they had something called cinnamon dolce syrup, and they also had chocolate syrup, so I asked for that and I added the espresso shots because I could use the pick-me-up. I didn’t sleep very well back then.”

Memories of sitting up in my bed with my knees tucked under my chin while I stared at the door, praying the knob wouldn’t move entered my mind and I quickly shoved them back into the black hole where they belonged, the black hole where I shoved every bad memory I had from foster care. “Yeah, so that’s where it came from. Nothing earth-shattering about that little tidbit.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Also, you didn’t tell me why you requested six of everything you added in. That’s a lot of shots and pumps. Which is why that sludge you call coffee tastes like ass.”

I ignored his criticism. “I don’t know. I just picked six and it tasted just right, so I’ve done six of each ever since. I guess it must be the demon in me.”

His eyes narrowed a little as he cocked his head to the side, studying me. “Maybe. Or, there could be another reason why you thought of that number when you placed that first order. You said the cinnamon dolce smelled like the cinnamon toast your foster mother made for you when you were six years old, and she gave it to you with chocolate milk, hence the syrup. Was that the last time you felt safe? When you were six years old, living with Ms. Harriette? If I recall correctly from your file, that was the foster parent you were with for six months. She lived on Sixth Street. A lot of sixes attached to her memory.”

My body flooded with heat and my teeth automatically clenched. From the way the corners of Reese’s mouth subtly lifted, I knew he’d noticed and felt proud of himself for hitting a nerve. Or at least he thought he had.

“Whatever. It’s just coffee.”

“If it was just coffee, it wouldn’t have been the first thing you wanted after getting out of the hospital or what you needed when you knew you were about to learn more about what you are and start the training you were nervous about.”

“I wasn’t nervous to start training.”

“Another thing to know about vampires is that we all have our own special abilities. One of mine is that I can smell

emotions. I can smell when people are afraid, and I can smell when they're nervous."

"Yeah, I can smell when people piss themselves too, but I didn't do that, did I? I wasn't nervous about starting training. I'm not nervous now. You smelled nothing."

The vampire's mouth curved into something almost resembling a grin. "That was cute, but I think you know I'm telling the truth and you can joke all you want, but it won't make it any less true. I smelled your nervousness when we went to that coffee shop, just like I can smell your anger and irritation right now, and the undercurrent of fear that spikes every time you think I'm too close to something you don't want to admit."

"And what would that be?" I asked, and much to my irritation, I noticed I was paying extra attention to my breathing, forcing myself to breathe evenly, as if that would make me seem nonchalant. As if I believed what the man before me was saying.

"You don't want to admit that the coffee isn't just coffee. It's your security blanket. It's your link to the last time you were truly safe, the last time you felt cared for. The last time you actually allowed yourself to care about someone even a little bit, and then that someone went away and you made sure to never allow yourself to be that vulnerable again."

"Wow. You sure went wild with the coffee psychoanalysis. Are you going to do this with everything I eat or drink?"

“Only when it means something to you, like the coffee does. That was a waste of a question, by the way. I guess it’s my turn again.”

“What? Wait. No way.” I realized I was sputtering and my body temperature rose. “That wasn’t one of my actual questions and you know it. You’re cheating.”

“The deal was a question for a question. You asked me a question and I answered it, exactly as agreed upon when we decided to do this. You can also consider this to be a lesson in demonology. Demons are tricky and they pay close attention to everything that is said, just looking for a way to manipulate you. They’re also particular about how they phrase things, often trapping prey in deals they had no idea they were making. Being half demon yourself, I expected you to know better than to waste a question, be a little more careful, but on the bright side, maybe that means your mother’s DNA carries more weight than dear old dad’s genes.” His eyebrows rose and he let out a low whistle. “Man, that is some emotional surge that goes through you whenever I mention your mother. I can almost *see* you slamming a door shut in your mind.”

I opened my mouth to deny that mentioning the woman caused me to feel anything at all, but realized I’d clenched my teeth so tightly together, pain was starting to spread between my temples. I parted my lips and took a breath, giving my jaws a little relief, and uncurled my hands, letting them rest flat on the table. “You say potato, I say you cheated, but fine. Ask your next question. Cheater.”

He winked at me. Actually *winked* at me, like this was all a fun little game to him. One he felt he was winning and was quite cocky about. My fingers started to curl, but I forced them to stay straight, refusing to allow him to see me make fists while he thought he was being so clever, getting into my head and seeing how badly he set me on edge.

“What are you afraid of learning about your mother?”

“I don’t have a mother,” I quickly said. I hadn’t even needed to think of the answer before it glided out of my mouth with no effort at all.

“Whether you knew her or not, the woman who gave birth to you is your biological mother, a fact you know very well. Avoidance is the same as lying and breaks our arrangement.”

“I answered your question.”

“You answered it untruthfully.” His nostrils flared a little, although his eyes remained calm. “It’s your choice whether we continue this or not, but I will not answer your questions if you refuse to answer mine honestly.”

“You said you can smell emotions and read thoughts, right?” I didn’t bother trying to rein in what I felt, allowing the anger and frustration to roll through me as he nodded. “Well, then. If that’s true, you already know my answer to that question, don’t you? And don’t you dare count that as a question. You know damn well it isn’t.”

“It wouldn’t matter if I did count it, because you still haven’t given me an honest answer to my question. You know

I was referring to the woman who gave birth to you. You will be allowed no more questions until you give a real answer to mine. Emotions only tell me so much and when you're trying to rein them in, you tend to rein in any thoughts I could pick up on too. There is also the fact that your thoughts and emotional clues are not given to me freely. I need the words, Malvada.”

I had a couple of words for him, but I knew they wouldn't accomplish anything but pissing him off, and as much as I hated to admit it, I needed him. He had all the answers. He probably had answers to questions I didn't even know to ask yet. I highly doubted there was some way I could just dial Purgatory and get that freaky accountant woman on the line and the only other way I could think to get there again was to get hit by another bus and that was not an experience I wanted to repeat, especially if what Reese said was the truth. If I died again, without doing whatever it was that accountant and the little big guy wanted me to do, I was going to Hell. My biological parents had screwed me over pretty hard already. I was not about to give them the satisfaction of getting me thrown into Hell too.

A twinge of guilt assaulted me, and I sighed. Man, it was so much easier to just hate someone.

Reese reached over and tapped the book. “You can read it out loud so I know you're not just pretending.”

“What?”

“That was the deal. Answer my questions or read.”

I looked down at the monstrous book. It would be easier to just read. Boring, probably, based on the text I could see, but easier. It would take less time to just get my questions answered, though, and the jackass sitting across from me was my partner, so he must at least partially have my best interests at heart, if only because helping me helped him. And thanks to his abilities I sensed he wasn't bluffing about, even if he didn't have the exact answers to his questions already, he probably knew enough that nothing I said would be a huge revelation to him. And if anything I said turned out to be ammunition he could use against me, he'd probably suss all that out with or without my verbalization.

"I don't want to know who she was," I said, not sure he could even hear me, my voice was so low, but it was hard to speak up when admitting something you'd planned on taking to your grave. Judging by the interest in his eyes and the way he watched me, waiting for me to elaborate because, of course, that one simple statement wasn't nearly enough for him, I knew he'd heard me just fine. "I used to. I used to lie awake at night, wondering who she was, what she looked like, where she was. I wondered what she did for a living, how old she was, what were her likes and dislikes. I wondered if she'd ever had other children, if I had brothers or sisters. I wondered if she'd kept them. If she'd thrown me away because I was a disappointment."

My voice hitched, and I swallowed hard, took a moment to gather myself before I continued. Reese might have been able to sniff out my emotions, but I'd be damned if I was just going

to present them to him on a silver platter. “With time, I quit wanting to know. The fact was, no one was watching out for me. I only had myself and it was easier to take care of myself if I didn’t spend so much mental and emotional energy caring about someone who’d never been a part of my life. I stopped caring if there was a valid reason for her to give me up or if she’d been a good person who’d fallen on hard times. All I knew was what I had been told, which was that she had literally thrown me away like garbage. For many years now, I’ve only known her as the type of woman who would throw a baby into a dumpster. Whenever I slipped and started to wonder what was wrong with me, why I was unloved, I reminded myself that she was that person and ... it helped. If she was that bad of a person, it didn’t matter that she didn’t love me, and if she didn’t care about me at all...”

“It was easier for you to not care about her,” Reese finished, probably sniffing out my struggle to. “You built up walls to protect yourself and you didn’t allow things like love to gain entry because you felt they weakened you. If she was an awful person, you didn’t have to love her. You didn’t have to care why she gave you up. It made it a lot easier for you to exist surrounded by that wall.”

Damn, I wished I had coffee. Or bourbon. Maybe another night or two in the peaceful slumber of that coma I’d been in.

“But she didn’t throw you away, and she wasn’t a horrible person. She was a nun who was hurt by the demon who impregnated her, and despite that, she gave you a chance.”

My eyes squeezed shut as I reflexively turned my head away and wished I could close my ears just as easily without covering them with my hands. Images tried to form in my mind, images of a Latina woman with long dark hair and brown eyes, skin with the same golden glow as mine. I wouldn't let them. I couldn't let them.

“Why are you so afraid to know the truth about her, Malvada? Say it.”

“You know why,” I growled.

“I have my suspicions, but I need you to say it. Admit this one thing with complete honesty and you can ask me anything you want. Anything at all, and I will answer. Just admit this one thing. Why do you not want to know the truth about your mother?”

“I don't want to love her,” I blurted. “I stopped a long time ago. I made her the villain, and it worked. I didn't need her. I didn't need anyone. I took care of myself, and it didn't matter if no one loved me because I didn't love anyone either. I didn't need to love anyone. I was fine. I had no one to worry about but me. It was easy, dammit. One thing in my life was easy. I didn't have to worry if there was something wrong with me, if I would ever be loved. I didn't need it and I didn't need to know why she did what she did or feel any blame for it. I could just hate her and not care what she'd gone through, what I'd caused. I didn't have to feel bad about hating her if she was the terrible, evil person I made her out to be in my mind. I didn't need to care about her, to want to find her, to... I don't

want to love her. I don't want to care if she's okay or if she thinks of me. I don't want to care about anyone like that. It makes me weak, and I can't be weak. The weak get hurt. It's easier to just take care of myself. That's why I don't want to know her, why I don't have any friends or a fucking cat or a goldfish, and why I'm not going to sit around crying when I catch a boyfriend screwing someone else, okay? Are you happy now? Is that what you wanted?"

"Yes, Dulce. That's exactly what I wanted. What I'd hoped for." Reese's chair scraped over the hardwood as he stood and walked away, leaving me to gather myself. I sniffed and swiped a hand over the wetness burning my cheeks, muttering a litany of curse words under my breath as I fantasized about kicking the vampire's ass.

A travel pack of Kleenex dropped onto the table next to my hand and Reese walked around to retake his seat in the chair across from me. I glanced at the tissues and felt my anger surge as I redirected my glare at the man before me.

"Crying doesn't make you weak," he said, and his expression gave away nothing, which was good for him because if I saw sympathy or pity in his dark eyes, I didn't think I'd be able to hold myself back from leaping over the table to punch him in the throat. "Neither does caring. Or loving. It makes you human, so yes, your answer was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to know there was enough human decency in you to give me something to work with and to give you a fighting chance at saving your soul."

“I don’t need to be placated or comforted.”

“Good, because I’m doing neither. Simply stating facts and elaborating on my answer to what you asked me.”

I narrowed my eyes and clenched my teeth. “So, you’re just a big fan of crying? You cry a lot, do ya?”

“Not a lot, but I have.” He almost grinned at what I imagined was my total look of surprise. Reese didn’t exactly look like a man in touch with his feminine side. He looked like a mercenary. “I don’t burst into tears every time I stub my toe,” he clarified, “but if something moves me to tears, then yes, I will cry. I’m man enough to admit I am capable of human emotion, and it doesn’t take anything away from me to shed a tear every once in a while.”

“When was the last time you cried?”

He sat back and frown lines creased the otherwise perfect smoothness of his brow as he thought of an answer. “When Andrew Garfield caught Zendaya.”

Then it was my turn to frown. Then blink. Then bark out a laugh. “Yeah, right. You’re really trying to convince me that you cried while watching *Spider-Man: No Way Home*?”

“I’m not trying to convince you of anything. You asked a question, and I gave you an honest answer. It’s your choice to believe it or not.”

“Men don’t cry over scenes like that.”

“Well, that’s sexist.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. You’ve been in my apartment. You saw my Avengers stuff, my posters, my movie collection and all my collectibles. You’re trying to get on my good side by pretending to be all emotionally involved in one of the movies because you know I’m a fan of them.”

“The majority of your nerdy stuff features the female characters,” Reese pointed out. “If I was trying to get on your good side by sharing a common interest, I would have said the last time I cried was when Gamora or Black Widow died, but I didn’t because although I may have teared up, those sacrifices didn’t hit me as hard as seeing Garfield’s Peter Parker redeem himself by saving Holland’s M.J.”

I waited for him to continue pressing his point, but when he didn’t, choosing to simply sit there looking at me, waiting for me to say something else, I realized he really wasn’t trying to convince me of anything. “Ask your question so I can ask another.”

“I’ve asked the only questions I needed to ask,” he replied. “I told you if you answered my last one, you could ask me anything you want. Go ahead.”

I felt my eyebrows raise and knew I was doing a poor job of covering my surprise. “Seriously? Those two simple questions were all you wanted to ask me?”

“Were they really simple questions?” He angled his head to the side, a knowing look in his eyes. “You told me all I need to know at this point in our relationship.”

“Relationship?”

“Relationship. I know that word freaks you out, but deal with it. We’re partners. I’m also your teacher. We’re stuck with each other and you’re just going to have to suck it up. Go ahead and ask your next question.”

I wasn’t sure that I was buying his contentment with just two questions answered, but I wasn’t about to argue with him about it and lose my opportunity to ask whatever I wanted of him. “Why did that scene bring you to tears and not the other two you mentioned? Or Aunt May’s death? Or did you cry over that too?”

“All three of those deaths were tragic, but I didn’t cry watching any of them. Black Widow’s death was a beautiful sacrifice, made even more meaningful when you realize she didn’t do it to save the world. Not really. She did it so her best friend could keep living. I respected her a lot for that. Gamora’s death was even sadder because she fought so hard as that monster dragged her to the edge of the cliff, and she’d finally found a real family who genuinely loved her, but it didn’t get the full cry from me.” He shrugged his big shoulders. “I’m not sure why. It just didn’t, and Aunt May’s death was kind of expected because we never got the Uncle Ben death in the Holland movies. I knew they would end up killing her off at some point because she was the only blood family there was to kill off. By the time it happened, it just didn’t have any shock value to push the emotional buttons, you know? But Garfield’s Peter Parker saving M.J. hit every button I have. I’m a vampire. It goes without saying I’ve done some shit I’m not proud of. I have a lot of power I try to use

for good and sometimes I achieve that, sometimes I don't. I know what it's like to fail someone you really care about and when I watched that movie, I could put myself in that guy's place and feel what he felt. That was pretty damn moving, the way he got his redemption and, at the same time, spared Holland's Peter Parker the same kind of heartbreaking loss he still suffered from, would always suffer from... so yeah. That got me."

"Oh, fuck you," I muttered before my brain could catch up to my mouth.

"Excuse me?" He did that almost-a-grin thing again. "Are you actually upset I found that scene touching?"

"No," I admitted. "I'm just irritated that the whole thing makes you a somewhat likeable person."

"Somewhat likeable, huh?"

"Somewhat likeable. As in, I don't think we're going to be friends and I don't give a crap about your thoughts and feelings or when your birthday is or if you're living your best life, but I don't have quite the same urge to stab you with something sharp and rusty. That's all. Don't push it."

He held his hands up in surrender. "You have any more questions for me, or do you want to read me a story?"

I glanced at the thick book and knew that wasn't happening. Maybe later, when I was alone with nothing pressing to do, but not while I had a vampire in front of me actually agreeing to answer my questions. I almost chuckled, realizing the situation

was very *Interview with the Vampire*. “This is all really real, isn’t it? You being a vampire. Me being a ... me being made from a demon.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve already answered this question multiple times and in a variety of ways.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just a little hard to grasp for longer than a minute or two at a time.” I raked my fingers through my hair, felt the silky dark smoothness, and imagined it had to have come from my mother. All of my features must have if my other half was demon. Based on what I saw in my dreams, that half of me didn’t come with the most normal DNA. As the image of what I imagined the woman who’d given birth to me must have looked like started to form in my mind, I remembered something Reese had said earlier and frowned.

“Earlier tonight, you said my mother named me. I thought I’d been given my name by a government official when I went into the system.”

“I wasn’t allowed to see your entire file,” Reese said, folding his arms as he relaxed in his chair. “I saw enough to know your mother named you Dulce, and that was what she called you until she handed you over. As I said earlier, I’m pretty sure a possessed official gave you the Nina and the Malvada. It fits a demon’s twisted sense of humor to give you that name.”

“Why would she name me at all if she was going to give me away?”

“I think she named you what she saw in you and what she hoped for you to remain,” Reese answered, although I hadn’t expected an answer. I’d been talking to myself, trying to understand why the woman would have bothered giving me anything at all.

“She knew I was half demon, and she didn’t just kill me, destroy the evil she’d brought into the world against her will.”

“She brought a baby into the world,” Reese said. “Babies aren’t evil, not even ones sired by demons. You still have a mind of your own. A soul of your own. What you will or will not become is up to you. That’s why The Accountant showed your file to Petie and why he’s giving you this second chance.”

Which reminded me...

I looked straight into Reese’s eyes. “You said you’re working for D.A.M.N.E.D. for the same reason I have to, to earn points to stay out of Hell when you die. Why are you getting a second chance? What did you do to wind up there?”



CHAPTER TEN

“I’m a vampire,” he answered in a tone that implied those three words were a sufficient answer, and I recalled how evasive he’d been the first time I’d asked him the same question after I’d just met him. “That is reason enough for one to end up in Purgatory after dying.”

“When I first asked you this, you said you’d made a mistake. I believe our deal included honest answers. No lies by omission and no avoidance.”

He nodded, but still took his sweet time before he finally decided to open his mouth again and hopefully give me what was an honest answer. “My mother was a psychic who dabbled in witchcraft, but she lived in that stretch of time when those who practiced witchcraft weren’t thought well enough of to be respected yet weren’t feared enough to be protected. The fact she was a woman of color certainly didn’t make things any easier on her. We lived in a rough area where nothing paid better than crime. We tried to live honestly, to do good, but we scraped by. She did... *other work* on the side, in addition to working at a diner. She told fortunes, sold potions, and

sometimes she sold herself. She did whatever was necessary to put food on the table. My father had been stabbed to death in a mugging not that long after my little sister was born, so he wasn't there to help."

Reese ducked his eyes, and I got the impression he wouldn't be able to continue the story if he saw me listening. I made sure to stay quiet and show no reaction to anything he said, not that I judged him or his mother for whatever they'd done during that time. Sometimes you simply had to do what you had to do. If there was anything I could understand, it was that.

"A strange man started coming around at night, seeking her gifts. She made potions and charms for him, told him his fortune. And then she started selling herself, but not the way she did with the others. I woke up one night to go to the bathroom and saw them in the kitchen. I automatically started to run away, not wanting to see what she was doing, but something held me there and I watched. They weren't doing what I knew she did with other men to pay the bills. Their clothes were on, and she sat in a chair. He stood behind her, leaning over her, with his mouth on the side of her throat. As if he sensed me, he looked up, right at me. His eyes glowed as they seemed to look right through me and his lips curled into a wicked smile, revealing his fangs in her flesh and blood dripping down her neck. I knew he was going to eventually kill her. I just didn't realize he was going to keep her alive after he did."

A small gasp escaped me before I could press my lips together. I might be new to the paranormal world, but it didn't

take a genius to understand what Reese meant or how that would have affected a child. There were so many things I wanted to say. Despite my general hesitance to get involved on an emotional level with anyone, it was human nature to want to comfort someone, even someone who was still very much a stranger, after they revealed something so tragic, but I remained quiet, afraid any reaction at all would stop Reese from telling me anything else and I really wanted to know his story. I told myself it was for my own survival since I would be working closely with him. It was best to know exactly who I was dealing with.

“I tried to warn her to stop seeing the man. We could survive without his money. I’d get a job. She just laughed at me because I was only twelve and I already had a job sweeping up hair at the barber shop on the corner. Then she just got mean about it. She changed. She became dependent on the man. Don’t get me wrong, she was our mother, and she loved us. She did what she thought was best for my brother, my sister, and me, but she was attached to that man. She kept working for him until he decided to just make her his. He turned her and he took her away from us. My siblings and I went into foster care.”

So he knew. He knew what it was like, and maybe he knew even better than me the pain of being abandoned because he’d actually known his parents.

“They separated us. My little sister was still a toddler, so she got adopted right away. My brother was eight. We were together for about a year before a couple took him. No one

wanted me. It was hard enough for black kids to get adopted back then, especially boys, but throw in my age and the growth spurt I went through shortly after I entered the system, and no one wanted me. It certainly didn't help matters that I knew what had happened to my mother and I didn't keep it to myself. I spent a lot of time in counseling, not that it did any good because no one believed me.”

Reese chuckled to himself and kept going. “I actually believed she would come back for us. I thought there was probably some sort of a learning curve or something, a period of adjustment for her to get through, and then she would find us. I mean, she was a damn powerful psychic, and she was our mother. She could find us if she wanted to, no matter where we were shipped off to. As time passed and she didn't come for us, I got angry. I never blamed her. I knew she loved us. I knew the things she'd done to feed and shelter us. I blamed the man who changed her, who took her from us. I blamed him and I vowed to hunt him down and make him pay, but in order to go up against someone like that, I had to become what he was.”

Reese lifted his eyes to meet my gaze. “I chose to become a vampire. It wasn't forced on me. I sought it out, and it took years. I survived foster care, survived scraping by on what little I made fresh out of the system because I sure as hell didn't go to college. I survived a lot, all while searching for a thing that didn't want to be found. I was twenty-six years old by the time I found a vampire willing to turn me, one I thought wasn't as evil as the one who had turned my mother. I had no

idea what the turn would do to me, what the thirst would be like. I already had a lot of rage in me, and the turn didn't make it any better. I did a lot of things I'm not proud of just to become what I needed to become to save my mother. The joke was on me though. She was long past saving, and it turned out she did find her kids. Just not me. She knew I'd inherited some of her psychic gift and was afraid I'd sense her coming."

"Did she hurt them?" I asked, unable to hold back the question.

He nodded as his eyes glistened. "She turned them. My baby sister was only sixteen when she found her and turned her, then whored her out to the rest of the nest. Don't get me wrong, Dulce. I loved my mother. I still do. But what that vampire made when he gave her his blood was not my mother. My mother would have never hurt her children like that. She would have never tried to kill me, but the vampire I eventually tracked down, the one that wore her skin... That evil thing tried to kill me, and so did the two I called siblings. It was me or them and there wasn't a trace of good left in any of them, so I did what I had to do. I killed my whole family and then I killed myself for failing to save them."

Holy shit. My gaze automatically swung down to Reese's hands as I tried to picture him using them against his own flesh and blood, the family he had been raised with. Then I looked into his face, at his mouth, and imagined his fangs tearing into them, but I couldn't see it. I could only see him crying, something he appeared to be on the brink of right then.

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me because of what I did,” he said, his voice strained. “Or think you can’t trust me. They were evil, and they couldn’t be saved. The turn is different for everyone, and a lot of newly turned vampires struggle with the thirst, but some never get over that struggle. Some go horribly wrong, and they can’t be saved. I had to...” He choked up a little and cleared his throat before he could finish. “I had to do what I did to give them any kind of peace.”

“Why didn’t you go straight to Hell?” I asked, aware how blunt the question came out, and I didn’t mean to be so rude or sound accusing, but I was genuinely puzzled. “I mean, you were a vampire. You chose to become one, even searched for a vampire who would turn you, and you did it for revenge. Then you killed your own family, the ones you were supposed to be avenging. I know I’m phrasing this terribly, so just trust me that I’m not pointing fingers or saying you deserved Hell or anything like that. I’m just confused about how you ended up in Purgatory when all signs certainly seemed to point to a straight trip down under. Did you even kill the vampire who turned your mother?”

“Not then.” Reese ran a hand down his face, discreetly wiping away the moisture pooling in his eyes as he did, and sniffed before settling back in his seat, those muscular arms folded over his chest. “I committed suicide by vampire. I basically walked right up to that bastard and told him I’d killed his pets and I let him kill me. I didn’t lift one finger or bare one fang to try to protect myself. And then I woke up in a gray room sitting across from The Accountant.”

“Been there, done that. Was weird as hell.”

The corner of Reese’s mouth curved upward. “Yeah. It was. You can figure out the rest of this part. She had my file. She did her calculations, and I was kind of hung up between Heaven and Hell.”

“You must have done some really good deeds before you died.”

He shook his head. “Just one. I killed my family to save the people they used to be and to save the people I knew they would hurt if I’d let them kill me and continue to exist. It tore me apart, but I did it because it was the right thing to do. The Accountant also considers how much suffering a soul has gone through before ending up in her office. If I ever seem pushy about getting you to open up about what you’ve been through, it’s because I know what it was like. I wasn’t always a vampire, and I wasn’t always this big. Even after my first big growth spurt, I was just tall. But there were taller men in foster care. Bigger men. And there were women just as evil as they were.”

I quickly looked away before closing my eyes against the images flooding my mind. I didn’t want to imagine a young, frightened Reese. I didn’t want to see him in the same situations I’d found myself in while growing up in foster care. It was too personal, too invasive. It felt as if I were watching what had been done to him and I didn’t want to do that because I didn’t want to share that much of myself with

anyone. Imagining it with someone else in the lead role just seemed wrong.

“I’m sorry you went through whatever things you went through,” I finally said once I’d gathered enough composure to open my eyes and look at him. “No child should ever be abandoned, mistreated, or abused. I don’t want to share stories with you, though. I don’t want to compare notes or scars. If talking about things helps you, I’m glad for you, and I’m glad there are professionals for that sort of thing, so you have someone. That’s just not my way.”

Reese held my gaze for a moment before he nodded. “Fair enough. The offer stands if you ever need an ear or a shoulder, but I won’t force it. I respect your boundaries.”

Yeah, right, I thought. We’d see about that. He’d already been pushy with me. And he’d gone dipping into my file. Invasion of privacy, much?

“So,” I said. “I’m guessing you went after everyone who ever hurt you once you were turned. They must have been pretty awful if The Accountant gave you a pass on them too.”

“I didn’t get a pass on them because I didn’t go after them. The only vengeance I had in my heart when I was turned was toward the man who had taken my mother away from her children and destroyed my family. It stayed with me after the turn, but when the time came, I didn’t even avenge her. I killed the evil thing she had become, as well as my brother and sister. I didn’t do that out of vengeance. As little as it may make sense to anyone else, I did it out of love for who they were and

out of a sense of right and wrong. What they were was wrong. What they would do to innocent people was wrong. So, I did what was right to me in that moment and then, when I couldn't live with what I had done, I went to the man I'd hated for so many years, the man whose blood I'd craved to spill, and I just stood there and let him kill me. That's what kept me from going straight to Hell."

I didn't miss the way Reese's eyes narrowed just a little as he sat there holding me in his gaze, or the subtle inflection in his tone that suggested he was warning me not to track down and go all vengeance-mode on those who had hurt me. I wouldn't make any promises because it was pretty damn tempting, and wasn't part of my job description wiping out predators?

"So, they gave you a pat on the back and welcomed you into D.A.M.N.E.D.," I said, moving along. "How long ago was that? Do you have, like, an anniversary watch or your own parking space yet?"

"Long enough," he said, "and they don't do the anniversary thing. There definitely aren't parking spaces and there was no pat on the back. They had a problem with evil entities clawing their way out of Hell and they saw something in me that made them think I could handle tracking those bastards down and sending them back to where they belonged. And they had leverage to get me to do their bidding."

"They had your ticket to Heaven."

"They had my family. They still have my family."

I was glad I was already sitting because I was pretty sure I would have otherwise fallen on my ass given I'd just gone numb from the knees down. "Excuse me? They have your family? As in, they're holding them hostage in Purgatory?"

Reese took a deep breath and leaned forward, clasping his hands together on the table. "My mother's soul went straight to Hell. She'd turned her own children into monsters before doing worse things to them and that carried a lot of weight. Nothing short of a miracle would have earned her enough points to even have her file looked at. My brother and sister were under review because they hadn't asked to be turned and they had clearly suffered. Plus, my little sister was only sixteen when my mother found her and turned her. But they'd done horrible things, things I didn't want them to remember, and they would have if they were given the same deal that I was given. So, I bargained for them."

"But they're still there?"

"They're still there, and so is my mother. She was taken out of Hell and is being held in Purgatory. I argued that the woman she became after the turning was not the woman she'd been before and had she never been turned, she would have never harmed her children. I begged for her and my siblings to be given a true second chance, one where they'd have no clue what had led to them ending up where they were, so a deal was finally made that I could accept."

"They could have just thrown you into Hell for not doing what they wanted, couldn't they?"

Reese nodded. “And I knew that, but I wanted to save my family more than I wanted to stay out of Hell, so I took that risk, and it paid off. Or it will, as long as I keep my end of the bargain.”

“Capturing escaped demons and snuffing out evil in general?”

“And training others to do what I do. You see, I’m not just doing this to save my own soul. Doing what I do earns points for me, but training others to do what I do earns points for my family. I’ve trained two others so far. Now, I need to train you and if I succeed, my family will be reborn with no memory of who they were before. And I can’t help but think Petie and The Accountant deliberately gave me someone like you just to trip me up now that I’ve gotten so close.”

“Someone like me?”

“You’re not exactly easy to get along with. You’re completely untrusting, defiant, and you’ve already tried to kill me once.”

I rolled my eyes. “I wasn’t in control of myself then, so I can’t be blamed for that. Also, we’ve just met. You’ll have to excuse me for not handing over my social security number or sharing my Hulu password with you. When that happened, you’d also just thrown me to the floor after cutting off my escape with a supernatural speed that made no sense at the time, and you... you ...”

“I held you down in a way that reminded you of a time when you were vulnerable and you got hurt. I know, and I’m

sorry.” He raised his hands when I glared at him. “I’m not pushing for information or trying to remind you of things you’d rather not be reminded of. I’m just saying I understand why you reacted the way you did, and I will try to keep that in mind as we progress with your training. I will have to train you, Malvada. I’ll need to show you how to fight against the type of things we fight against, and that means I’ll have to get physical. I’ll have to touch you, get close to you, and get you into holds so I can show you how to get out of them. I’ll be as respectful as I can be, but showing you these things could be the difference between keeping you alive long enough for you to earn points to stay out of Hell or having you die soon and straight down you go.”

“And you genuinely care about that?” I snorted.

“Yes, I want to save my family,” he said, a hard edge to his voice, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to save you too. We might not have known each other long, but I know enough to know you got a real shitty deal. You don’t deserve to go to Hell just because a demon impregnated your biological mother, and frankly, I think you’ve suffered enough for that.” He raised his hand as my mouth opened to tear him a new one. “Save it. That wasn’t pity. It was just understanding. You and me, we’re not that different. Sure, I chose my dark half, but I had a hell of a lot of bad shit happen to me before I did. If I deserved Hell, it was for killing my family and the horrible thirst I let consume me when I’d first turned. It wasn’t for the shit I went through before that. And from what I can tell, you haven’t done a damn thing to deserve Hell. I’d like to help you

stay out of there. Even if my family's second chance wasn't on the line, I'd still want to help you, Malvada. I'm not asking you to help me save my family. I'm asking you to help me save you so that *I* can save my family and not have another damn loss of a good soul on my conscience."

I looked down at the thumbnail I was busy picking at. "You really think my soul is still good? Even though I have this ... *evil* inside me?"

"You have DNA inside you. It sucks that it comes from a demon, but not all demons are *pure* evil, and you have human DNA courtesy of your mother, so that will at least dilute whatever demon DNA you have." He grabbed the book he'd given to me to read and turned through the pages until he found the section he wanted and turned it back toward me. He pointed at the page, his finger resting over an illustrated picture of what looked like various creatures, some almost human in appearance, and some that looked like they came out of a really creepy Jim Henson movie. "Here. This is definitely a section you need to go over. It lists many of the various types of demons you may come into contact with in this job, and somewhere in all of this, you might figure out the kind of demon DNA you carry in your blood."

I grabbed the book and pulled it closer to me. "That wasn't in my file? I mean, The Accountant knew my father was a demon. She couldn't see who it was or what kind of demon he was? Is? I'm assuming he's still out there somewhere, terrorizing people and kitty cats."

Reese's lips twitched as he raised an eyebrow.

“What? He's a demon. An evil creature from Hell. Surely, he hates kitties and rainbows and unicorns, and ... I don't know. Mr. Rogers and Betty White.”

“You've never spent much time around cats, have you? There's a reason why those things are the guardians of the underworld.”

“Really? I thought that was just Egyptian superstition.”

“You know your Egyptian lore.”

“I know my Brendan Fraser. *The Mummy* was a classic. Fraser's *The Mummy*, not that Tom Cruise bullshit.”

“Amen.” Reese raised his hand and after an awkward moment spent just looking at it, I caved and slapped my palm against his, only slightly feeling like a dork. I may have fought a grin as I looked back down at the book to hide my face.

Okay, so he might not be all that bad. He clearly had good taste in movies, and he was easy on the eyes. Not that I was ever going there with him. But the whole reading my mind thing and bossing me around had to go. “Sometimes, you're almost kind of likeable. Notice I said *sometimes* before you get all happy. Most of the time, I just want to punch you in the throat.”

“I have that effect on women.”

“I don't doubt that at all.”

He sat back in his chair and folded his muscular arms.
“Until they see me naked.”

I rolled my eyes and muttered, “That, I doubt completely,” before ducking my head and focusing on the open book in front of me before he could see the blush I felt creeping up my neck. Cocky jerk.

“What was that?”

I jerked my head up. “Did I say that out loud?”

He tapped his temple with his index finger, while wearing the cockiest grin I’d ever seen.

“I loathe you.”

“Yeah, I’ve felt that from you a time or two, but it doesn’t seem to stick, so I’m not too worried about it. And you need me, so tough.” He reached over and tapped the book again. “To answer your question, no, the file on you didn’t include the identification of the demon who fathered you. The thing with demons, which you will learn once you finally accept the fact that you’re going to have to do some reading, is that there are many different kinds, and they all have different strengths and weaknesses. Some can appear human all on their own, but there are others that need to possess a human’s body to walk in this realm. They can also cloak themselves. Some can cloak themselves so well that not even The Accountant can identify them. Your file just shows that your mother was impregnated by a demon. The exact kind isn’t known, but that will come to light eventually.”

“When I have this awakening thing you mentioned?” I cringed a little. “Can we call it something else? Awakening sounds like how some creepy old hippie would refer to losing one’s virginity or something. It’s kind of grossing me out.”

Reese grinned, and may have even chuckled, but the moment was too fleeting to know for sure. “What would you prefer to call it?”

I gave that some thought. I supposed a possession would be somewhat accurate, but I really hoped to still have control of my faculties whenever the whatever-it-was happened, so I nixed that idea. Transformation sounded good for about a second until I thought of all the lifestyle coaches and makeover gurus who loved that word. Not to mention, transformation sounded like something a person actually wanted to go through, and going demonic was not something I desired in the least. I tossed around a few more ideas until one felt right. “Hostile takeover.”

Reese barked out a laugh and shook his head. “Yeah, sure. We can call it that, and yes, the awake—I mean, the hostile takeover—could be a moment when you learn what type of demon your father is. Or it could happen when he finds you, or when another finds you. As you’ve learned already, others in the paranormal community can sense the demon blood in you. There are some who may be able to sense exactly what type of demon or whose blood you carry in your veins. It would be for the best for you to know what type of demon sired you before any of that happens, just so you’re more prepared to deal with it.”

“And how exactly do I figure this out from looking through this book? Am I going to find a picture of myself in here?”

“No, but now that you mention a picture of yourself, care to describe what you see in the dreams you have? You said before that you’re naked in the dreams, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you will be when your demon side comes into its power. It might mean you’re a sex demon.”

“A sex demon?” I was aware my voice had risen several octaves, but I didn’t care. “What the hell is a sex demon?”

“Succubi, nymphs, and sirens are sex demons. I’m sure there are more, but those are the ones I know right off the top of my head. You mentioned snakes.” Reese stood and rounded the table before dropping down into the chair next to mine. He grabbed the book and started turning the pages, leaning close enough to me that the scent of him became impossible to ignore. “Do the snakes seem aquatic? Are you sure they were snakes and not eels?”

“They were snakes and how the hell would I know if they were aquatic or not?” I leaned into my bad temper, focusing on any annoyance I could rather than focusing on how good Reese smelled, especially while he was talking about me possibly being some kind of sex demon. I didn’t know a lot about demons, but that didn’t seem like the type I’d want to be.

Reese shot me a perturbed look and muttered under his breath before responding. “Were you in water at all?”

“No, I’m pretty sure I already told you I’m always in flames when I have the dreams. I’m naked, covered only in flames, and the snakes glide all over me. I’m not afraid of them in the dreams. Or the fire. Neither hurt me. The snakes feel like they’re part of me, like an extension of myself. I still look like myself, only I have these dark spots on my forehead, like scales or a tattoo, and my fingernails are black claws. Oh, and my hands are hideous. Actually, from just above the elbow, all the way down to my fingertips, my skin is darker, almost red, and that part of me is just monstrous.”

I stared down at my hands and shuddered, imagining those awful black nails protruding out of my nail beds, and noticed Reese’s larger, darker hand reach toward mine, only to pull away before he could make contact. “We won’t know for sure until it happens, but what you see in your dreams could all be metaphorical. There may be no claws, no changes in your skin, no snakes or fire. In fact, I’m positive the flames are just representative of Hell, since that is where demons come from.”

“Or it could be exactly what will happen to me when I go full demon. I will become a hideous, clawed monster.”

“Okay, first of all, you will never go full demon. As a half demon, half mortal, you are what is considered a cambion or a demi-demon. The most you can ever go is half, but yes, you could have some type of changes to your appearance, depending on the type of demon who sired you and what abilities have passed down to you.”

“Would those changes be permanent or are we talking like a She-Ra/Adora thing where I can summon this other half of me and change at will?”

Reese’s eyes brightened with amusement as the corners of his mouth twitched.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just picturing you on the back of an alicorn.”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t seen one of those or even a horse in my dreams, so if I did get a pet sidekick, it would probably be some kind of flying serpent.”

“Oooh, maybe a dragon then.”

“Hardy-har. I’m being serious.”

“I am too. There’s a rumor going around that there’s an actual dragon shifter here in the city, but anyway, I don’t know. I haven’t worked directly with anyone in your predicament before. The demons I’ve come across have all been the escaped ones I was assigned to send back to Hell, and those weren’t half human. They were straight-up demons who either possessed humans or stayed underground because they wouldn’t pass for human. You are something different. You’re a hybrid of sorts, so there’s no telling how your demon side will present itself once it decides to come out to play.” He lifted his gaze from the page he’d been looking at to meet mine and frowned. “What?”

I realized my mouth had fallen open, and I was blinking. I gave my head a little shake. “I’m sorry. I think I’m still stuck

on that thing you said about there being a dragon shifter in the city.”

“Yeah, but no worries. If the rumors are true, he’s one of the good guys and he’s usually just a man. Although it would be kind of cool to be assigned a dragon to hunt. How many people get to say they’ve slayed a dragon?” He grinned a little as I continued to gawk at him. “It’s a wild, wacky new world out there, Malvada. You’re going to have to get used to nightmares and fairytales being real.”

“Then I guess I need to get to studying.” I pulled the book closer to me and started down the rabbit hole of everything demonic.

There were a shit-ton of demons, I soon learned as I read through the section Reese had pointed out to me. He didn’t make me read it out loud. My steady stream of questions was more than sufficient to convince him I was taking the demon thing seriously and not just pretending to read the material. The sweat trickling down my back probably clued him in too, if vampires really were that good at detecting such things.

Once I reached the section on sex demons, I understood why he’d asked about water and if the snakes I saw in my dreams were aquatic. Sirens were demons who lured men with their voices and their ability to morph into any man’s dream woman. They dwelled in or near the water. I’d never sung in my dreams and combined with the flames, I was hoping that meant I was clear of being one of those things. Nymphs and succubi weren’t much better, but from what I read, it was

highly plausible I could be a succubus, since one could result from an incubus impregnating a human woman.

“Reese?”

“Yeah?” He’d moved back over to the other side of the table after the first hour I’d spent researching demons and had been doing something on his cell phone for the past ten minutes. When he looked up at me, I saw the tiredness in his eyes, which was no surprise. It was nearing dawn.

“If it turns out that I’m a succubus, or any other type of sex demon, I want you to kill me before I can hurt anyone. I don’t care if I go straight to Hell. Just don’t let me... just don’t let me do that to anyone.”

Shock registered on his face first, then his expression slowly softened into one that looked a little like relief. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about. The fact that you’re so horrified by the thought of doing what they do is a good sign. I don’t want to say that what happened to you in your youth is a blessing because nothing about that was a blessing or remotely good, but it says a lot about your character that when faced with the concept of being put in the position to hurt men the way you’ve been hurt, you’d rather die than seek vengeance.”

I dropped my gaze as I closed the book. “Don’t sing my praises yet. Just because I don’t want to be a rapist doesn’t mean I’m Mother Teresa. Just promise me you’ll kill me if this demon blood in me turns me into something like that.”

“I don’t have to promise, Malvada. It’s my job.”

Oh, right, I thought as his chair scraped back over the hardwood. I was an assignment, nothing more. A way to get his family out of Purgatory. I wasn't bitter about that. I just needed to remember it and to remember what little slack I had in this new job where a pink slip probably came with a beheading courtesy of Mr. Tall, Dark, and Fangsome himself.

"I still can't believe this stuff is real."

"It'll sink in eventually." He came around to my side of the table just as I yawned, and closed the book, despite the fact I'd been reading it. "Let's get you back home so you can rest before we start training tomorrow."

"More coffee shop surveillance?" I asked once he gave me enough space to scoot my chair back. I stood and stretched.

"No, I don't think we'll be doing that tomorrow night. I'd hate to have to down any more of that swill you call coffee, and furthermore..." He stepped closer to me, and it took all my willpower not to step back, breaking free of the delicious-smelling cloud of his forest rain scent he'd wrapped me in. "I owe you for that near-death experience you tried to give me tonight. Tomorrow night, it's my turn to try to kill you."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

*F*ocus. The flames danced around me, covering my nudity without harming me. I stood in the center of the fire with my monstrous deformed hands wrapped around me, my arms covering my upper body. *Focus. What do you see?*

I heard my own voice coaching my dream-self to investigate. I had to be having the dream over and over again for a reason. There had to be something I was missing, something my subconscious wanted to show me, but I'd never bothered to look. I'd just stared at myself standing there naked in the flames, watching as the snakes slithered around me.

Or cuddled, I realized, observing the way they cozied up to me, staying around my arms and shoulders, and close to my heart. Instead of ignoring them, I reached out to the biggest one, the one whose head had been resting over my breast. I held my hand in front of its face, fearless as it raised its head and let that forked tongue flick out before it slithered onto the offered hand and coiled around my wrist. It continued spiraling its long body down my forearm, over my elbow, and up to my shoulder before it glided over my shoulders and

loosely wrapped its body around my neck before raising that head to rub up and down my cheek. I wasn't sure, but it might have been giving me its version of a hug.

The smaller snakes continued to glide over me, behaving similarly. Lovingly. Obediently. They were mine to control, perfectly in sync with my wants and desires. I merely thought about one moving to another area and off it slithered.

They didn't speak, however, so I was afraid I'd learned all I was going to learn about them. I focused on the fire, eyeing the multi-hued flames that danced directly in front of me. I should have been burning, or at the very least, sweating, but I did neither. Not even when I reached out and placed my clawed hands into the fire itself. It was like dipping my fingers into a warm bath. Comfortable. Soothing, even.

A cold chill washed over me, and the flames shrank away from its presence. I turned my head to see that figure again, the feminine one that stood far in the back on my left. On my right, I sensed the other presence. The dark, threatening one that seemed to have always been there lurking, watching... waiting. It was evil. I knew it like I knew my own name, and I knew it wanted me. But I didn't fear it nearly as much as I feared the other figure.

I gasped as my eyes flew open and I jackknifed into a sitting position. Icy cold beads of sweat dampened my skin as well as the fabric of my T-shirt and drawstring shorts, and the hair I pushed out of my face was wet. I kicked my feet, growling a

bit as I fought to free them from the tangled mess of my sheets.

Finally kicking the sheets free, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood. A glance at the clock on my nightstand showed me I'd gotten a surprisingly decent amount of sleep, considering the general lack of respect the people living in my building tended to show one another and the thinness of the apartment building's walls.

Light shone through the slats of the blinds covering my bedroom window. I cracked them open, letting more of the sunshine in, not that the view was anything special, and shuffled over to the dresser, where I grabbed a fresh pair of jeans, socks, and underclothes, before opening the closet. I grabbed a *Guardians of the Galaxy* T-shirt, then remembered what Reese had said early that morning when he'd dropped me off, and decided to leave it on its hanger. I grabbed a plain black T-shirt instead, not wanting to risk bleeding on one of my Marvel shirts or marring it in any other way.

I carried everything to the bathroom, where I quickly showered and shaved before washing and conditioning my hair. I dressed, then brushed my teeth while the terry towel on my head soaked the dampness out of my hair, and moved along to the kitchen.

I debated going to the coffee shop for a few minutes before I decided it wasn't worth the risk of dealing with Barry's jealous new girlfriend, who apparently rotated shifts. I was going to have to find a new coffee shop. Or a new neighborhood, but

finding new digs would be a lot harder, especially if I didn't find a new job soon.

“One that allows me to work around demon slaying,” I muttered as I entered my apartment's small kitchen area and opened the cabinet where I kept the bagged coffee grounds.

A knock at the front door stilled my hand before I could grab the aromatic goodness. A lot of people loved to smell scented candles. I preferred to take big whiffs out of coffee bags, and I grumbled about the delay in getting to do so as I left the coffee in the cabinet and walked toward the door, knowing my surprise visitor had to be Bretta complaining about something.

Reese had said he'd pick me up at nightfall and with how jealous Denise was, I highly doubted she'd run right to Barry to tell him I was alive and well and in perfect condition for him to drop in and try to sweep me off my feet. There couldn't possibly be anyone else on the other side of my door. Or so I thought before I braced myself and opened the door to see a perfect ray of sunshine. Along with the ray of sunshine came the glorious aroma of dark roast coffee with cinnamon dolce and chocolate syrup, so I barely paid her a glance before my gaze locked onto the steaming to-go cups in the cardboard carrier in her right hand.

“Hi!” Brittany's bright blue eyes lost a little of their shine as she checked me out and suddenly looked unsure. “I hope you don't mind me popping in like this.”

“Is one of those a dark roast with six shots of espresso, six squirts of cinnamon dolce syrup, and six squirts of chocolate syrup?”

Her nose scrunched. “Yes.”

“Then I don’t mind at all.” I stepped back and gestured for her to enter. I nearly gave myself a pat on the back for not grabbing the coffee right out of her hands, a feat that showed considerable restraint on my part, especially as the delicious smell wafted up to enclose me in its loving embrace.

The bubbly blonde entered my small apartment and walked directly to the kitchen where she set the carrier on the counter and passed me one of the cups.

She’d gotten a large for me, which kind of made me want to make her a friendship bracelet, if that were my thing.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d actually want coffee at this time of —” Her eyebrows rose as she watched me turn the coffee cup up and gulp down the hot liquid inside like it was room temperature water. “Okay, so I guess this was a good time for coffee.”

“You have no idea,” I said after I marshaled enough willpower to stop at three gulps and stood there, letting the wakey-wakey take effect in my brain. “Don’t judge me, but I just woke up. I’m barely out of the shower.”

Brittany’s gaze rose to the towel on my head. “I see, and don’t even worry about that. You just got out of the hospital. No matter how great you look, I’m glad you’re getting some

rest. That's one of the perks of being unemployed, right? I miss sleeping in. The two days a week that I actually can are such a tease."

Yeah. Lucky me with the no income and no one to help foot my bills. I kept that bitchy thought to myself, however, since even with my horrible excuse for social graces, I knew that was a crappy thing to say to someone who had just brought me an overpriced coffee. But when Brittany stood there looking a little nervous and my lack of hostess skills muted my tongue as well, I started to drink again to have something to do in the awkward silence. When the coffee cup was halfway to my mouth, I recognized the name of the coffee shop on the side and halted. "Uh, when you got this, did a gerbil-faced brunette with a really bad attitude make it?"

Brittany frowned and shook her head. "There was a redhead working and two guys."

"Oh, good." I took a big drink I was confident was spit-free and made a mental note to never trust coffee from that shop again unless I knew for a fact Denise hadn't made it. Even without me there to do the ordering, my order was distinctive enough she might put two and two together. "Thanks for bringing me coffee. Um..."

As I looked around the small apartment, fumbling for how to segue into some version of "What are you doing here?" that wouldn't come off hostile or rude, Brittany must have figured out my confusion and jumped in to save me the trouble.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You must be wondering what possessed me to drop in unannounced like this.”

Yikes. Poor word choice, I thought. I would never again be able to hear the word *possessed* and not instantly think of demonic possession. Although, taking in Brittany’s bubbly personality, sunshiny demeanor, and the light pink My Little Pony T-shirt she had on under her fuzzy pink cardigan, I was pretty sure if anything demonic entered her, it would come right back out screaming.

I took another drink of coffee and set the cup on the kitchen bar before reaching for the towel I’d wrapped around my head. “I was wondering. I guess you had the day off.”

“Yes, and that got me thinking about you. Have you applied for a new job yet?”

“No, but I was about to boot up my laptop and start looking,” I told her as I rubbed the towel through my hair. “I got a little distracted yesterday.”

Yep, because finding an attractive man in your bed was pretty distracting, especially when he told you about your demon daddy and your one-use-only Get Out of Hell Free card.

“Oh, well, I might have a job for you. I know you were upset about that video and worried that S&R’s response to it might come up in interviews and keep you from getting anything.”

Actually, I'd forgotten about the video, busy trying to figure out where I could work around demon-hunting hours, but now my stomach was filled with a great big ball of anxiety. "Crap. That's right."

"No worries. I might have something you want to do. It's not the most glamorous job, but I know you don't have to worry about that video coming up. The owner never goes online. He hates technology, actually."

I dropped the towel on the bar and took a swig of coffee before extending my arm out in a sweeping gesture. "As you can see, I'm not about that glamorous life. My main concern right now is paying rent on this dump and maintaining my steady diet of instant ramen noodles and Kraft mac and cheese."

Brittany laughed, assuming I was joking. I wasn't. "Well, my great-uncle Harold owns a funeral home, and he's looking for someone to keep an eye on it overnight. He offered me the job, but I can't deal with the creepy factor. If you don't mind hanging out with dead people at night, I'm sure I can get you the job."

I must have gawked, because she quickly started selling me on the job.

"Oh, it's not that bad. I have it on good authority that the dead people almost never ever move, and when they do, it's like gas or something." She waved her hand dismissively. "And he keeps them in a cooler except when they're out for the actual wakes and funerals. He just needs someone to watch

the place because there have been some break-ins. Kids, probably. They want to see dead bodies and I guess getting into a funeral home is less risky than trying to break into the morgue. All you'd have to do is hang out there after hours and call the police if anyone tries to break in."

"Your great-uncle doesn't have security cameras or an alarm?"

"He hates technology. He has an ancient flip-phone, and that is only because the family insists on him carrying one in case he has a medical emergency. He refuses to use Life Alert. He thinks it's spying on him. Same with cameras. I'm honestly surprised the man doesn't walk around with foil wrapped around his head. He's convinced the government is spying on us and he hates the government, especially at tax time. He hates people, too. Unless they're dead. But he's not mean or anything. He just likes to be left alone."

My kind of guy, I thought, and pondered the idea. "Does the funeral home get broken into a lot?"

"No, not really. There were a few incidents, so he started staying there at night and ran off a few groups of kids. Things have died down, but he won't leave the place unwatched anymore, especially not after he caught some kids trying to graffiti one of the walls. I figure you can handle obnoxious kids after all the things you've had to handle in retail."

"And without a manager breathing down my neck," I said. "I'll be all alone at night?"

“Just you and the dead folks,” Brittany answered with a smile, then quickly grew serious. “But they’re usually locked in the cooler and once they’re rolled out for a wake or funeral, they’re good and dead. There is a night guard for the cemetery next to the funeral home, but he shouldn’t bother you. He does his patrols and sits in the guard station.”

“The cemetery guard doesn’t watch the funeral home?”

“He’ll run off anyone he sees, but if they get past him, they’re yours to deal with. If you want the job.”

I glanced over at where my laptop rested on the small desk in my living area and thought about how nice it would be to cut through the crap and get a job. I didn’t have a car and thanks to that damn video on the internet and S&R’s response to it, I was going to have trouble finding anything decent, let alone anything I could do around the assignments I would eventually be given. A nice solo job with no living witnesses except maybe one security guard who wouldn’t be paying me any attention could work. If Brittany’s great-uncle hated technology, I probably wouldn’t be monitored, so if I needed to dip out and handle something, who was going to tell on me? The ghosts?

“That actually doesn’t sound like a bad job,” I told her. “When can you get me an interview?”

“Who needs to interview when you have connections?” Brittany took a drink of her coffee, which, if I remembered correctly, would be something with almond milk and sugar in it. “I told him I had someone in mind, and he told me to just

bring you by if you want the job. You can start tonight if you want.”

Tonight? That would be great if not for expecting Reese to swing by at whatever nightfall was for training. “Um, what is the start time for this job?”

“Ten at night and your shift ends at seven in the morning when the morning staff arrives, but you’re free to sleep. I wouldn’t recommend sleeping through a break-in, but other than that, Uncle Harold won’t care what you do as long as you don’t make a mess and don’t mess with the bodies.”

“Mess with the bodies?”

“There are some weirdos out there, one of the reasons why Uncle Harold would rather hire from within the family, or at least a trusted friend of the family.” Brittany’s cheeks pinkened, and she quickly took a drink of coffee to cover her sudden shyness.

I did the same to cover my awkwardness. Brittany had always been nice to me, but I’d never thought of her as a friend. I’d stopped wanting friends long before getting hired at S&R and was just now realizing I’d lost the ability to tell when someone considered me one of theirs.

“Um, well, I have something I have to do tonight and can’t guarantee I’ll be done by then, but I could talk to your great-uncle today if he wants to meet me and then I could start tomorrow night?”

“That would be great. It’s not every night, in case you were wondering. One of my cousins is doing four nights a week, and Uncle Harold has been doing the others until he could get someone else in to handle those shifts. He’s just so old, we’d all prefer him to stay at home safe and sound in his orthopedic bed.”

“So, I would only work three nights a week?”

Brittany’s cheeks grew rosier. “I know it’s not much, but it’s an easy job, and you could keep it after finding something better, if you want. I mean, my cousin Bobby says he passes the time studying and sleeping. He’s even had friends drop in for late-night study groups. Uncle Harold never checks in and like I said, as long as you don’t make a mess or fool around with the bodies, he’s the best boss ever.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Yeah, well, that sounds pretty decent, and I don’t have anything else to do, so if your great-uncle is okay with paying me to sleep, I’ll take it.”

“Great.” Brittany clapped her hands together joyously while beaming a big smile. “And you don’t have to meet him beforehand or interview or anything. I’ll tell Uncle Harold to expect you tomorrow night at ten. I know Bobby’s off tomorrow, so that’s a good night for you to start. Did you get your car fixed or do you need a ride? Do buses run that late?”

“They do, and I can just take the bus,” I replied after getting over my initial shock at the offer. Offering me a ride home when I worked with her and she saw me waiting for a bus in the rain was one thing, but going out of her way to offer me a

ride when we no longer worked together seemed a little unusual. Then again, I wasn't used to anyone being nice to me without wanting something in return. "I just need to know where to be and when."

"Oh. Sure." Brittany looked a little disappointed, but she covered it by scanning the room. She nodded toward where she'd left her phone number on my refrigerator the day before. "Do you want me to write the address by my number?"

"Uh..." I glanced around too and made my way over to the small desk next to the seating area. I grabbed a notepad from the top drawer and my Gamora pen from the Avengers mug next to my laptop, where I kept all my pens, pencils, and highlighters. "What's the address?"

"It's Green's Funeral Home," she said and gave me the address along with her great-uncle's phone number in case I was going to be late or got lost, and then gasped. "What the heck is that?"

I looked up from where I'd been notating the information on the pad to see her plop down on my small couch and pick up the demonology book I'd borrowed from Reese.

"Oooh, this looks like something the Winchesters would use for research. Do you like *Supernatural*?"

"It's all right. I'm more into Marvel movies."

"Oh, yeah. I noticed that." She looked at the poster that hung over my couch before returning her attention to the book. "I love *Supernatural*. Those guys are so hot. I mean, they're

way too old, but they're still pretty hot for old guys. I like *Ghost Adventures* too. I think it would be fun to do what they do, but ghosts creep me out, and demons?" She did a little shiver. "That's why I can't watch the funeral home. I've seen too many episodes of *Supernatural* and *Ghost Adventures*. I'd be imagining ghosts and zombies and demons, and I just can't be around anything like that if I can't kill it."

I'd torn the sheet of paper from the notepad and had just placed it back in the top desk drawer when Brittany's threat registered and I closed the drawer with far more force than necessary and heard myself growl as I gripped the edge of the desk, my brain thankfully still in control because the urge to lunge forward and rip Brittany's bubbly blonde head from her neck was terrifyingly powerful.

Brittany's bright blue eyes widened as she looked up from the book. "Did you just growl?"

I closed my eyes and lowered my head, taking a deep breath as I tightened my grip on the desk's edge until I thought I heard the wood protest. What the hell was that sudden surge of fury? And toward Brittany? Yes, she could be overly perky sometimes, but she'd never been anything but nice to me. Hell, she'd just popped up at my door with a job I didn't even have to interview for and a large coffee, and I was thinking of tearing her head from her body?

Must get it from your daddy, I thought dryly before I blew out the breath I'd taken and reopened my eyes. "Yeah, um, I

think I did. I'm sorry. I thought I was okay, but I think I should rest for a bit."

"Oh, of course. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to barge in and make you play hostess."

I couldn't help chuckling as Brittany placed the book back on the coffee table and stood. I didn't know much about being a hostess, but I was sure it involved more than just letting someone inside so you could drink the beverage they brought.

"You're fine," I assured her as I walked her to the door. "I really appreciate the coffee and the help with getting a job. Speaking of the coffee, let me just grab some cash out of—"

"Oh, no. I would never show up with coffee, expecting you to pay for it," she cut me off. "It's my treat. Are you sure you won't need a ride to the funeral home tomorrow? I don't want you to get sick on the bus."

"I'll be fine." I opened the door and offered what I hoped was a friendly smile. I really didn't smile all that often so for all I knew, I looked like a jack-o'-lantern, or exactly like the demon the sweet young woman in front of me had mentioned killing, telling me exactly what she'd think of me if she knew what I really was. But I could hardly blame her for that. If demons were good guys, they wouldn't come from Hell.

"Oh, okay, well, let me know if you need anything. I work the day shift tomorrow, so I'll be available if you change your mind."

The sad puppy look she gave me poked my conscience, but despite her kindness, I wasn't the buddy-buddy type. I'd learned long ago it was best to keep people at arm's length, even the bubbly, kind-hearted ones who brought me coffee with no expectation of repayment.

"I will," I told her, even though every survival instinct I had in me screamed that I needed to shut down any notion she had of us being friends. For crying out loud, I'd just growled at the poor thing. Encouraging her wasn't just uncomfortable for me, it was potentially dangerous for her. "I'm sorry. I really need to rest now."

"Of course." She offered an apologetic smile as she stepped out into the hallway and turned. "If you need anything, just call or shoot me a text."

I assured her I would, knowing that I wouldn't, and locked the door behind her after she departed. I spent a few minutes scanning through the heavy book I'd borrowed from Reese before the frustration of not being able to Control-F exactly what I was searching for got to me and I set the book aside in favor of my laptop.

I logged on to the internet and Googled terms like demon, half demon, demon hybrid, and demonic entities. All I got for my trouble were pages of results featuring anime, *Supernatural* references, horror films, and porn. So much porn. I gave up after I saw enough questionable links to give me nightmares and returned to the couch to settle in with the big, fat book of demons. I was going to have to read the damn

thing. It wasn't going to remotely be fun, but somewhere in all those pages, I might find something to clue me in to why I'd growled at such a nice girl, and just how evil I was going to eventually become.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Several hours later, I'd learned quite a bit about demons. The most important thing I'd learned was that they couldn't die of boredom. Also, there were some very gross demons and I prayed I wasn't one of them. Although, the more attractive ones didn't seem all that great either, what with all the killing and stealing, and soul-sucking.

I was halfway through a ham and cheese sandwich and a quarter of the way through the big-ass demonology book when a knock sounded at my door. I lifted my head and glanced across the room to see night had fallen beyond my living room window, and instantly knew who my visitor was. At least he'd knocked.

"Come in," I called out, despite the fact the door was locked. I wanted to test something.

Sure enough, my breath stilled in my lungs and the hunk of ham and cheese sandwich I'd just bitten off stuck in the back of my mouth as the doorknob turned, meeting with resistance, and I watched as the deadbolt turned and then the barrel bolt slid to the unlocked position. The knob turned again, the door

opened, and Reese stepped into my apartment. He was dressed in his usual black shirt and pants combo, and one eyebrow raised as he did that almost-a-grin thing, knowing I'd known all along that the door had been locked.

I swallowed the now mushy chunk of sandwich and released the breath I'd been holding. "How did you do that?"

"One of my abilities." He closed the door behind him. "I told you there weren't many places I couldn't get into."

"Shit," I muttered, realizing the implications. "How many vampires are there out there like you with that nifty and frightening trick?"

"Not enough for you to lose much sleep over," he said as he approached me where I'd moved the demonology book over to the bar so I could read it while eating my sandwich. He stopped on the other side of the bar to examine my meal. "This isn't your dinner, is it?"

"It is, actually. Why, what's wrong with it?"

"This is a snack or, at most, lunch. You should eat better to build up your strength and energy. I told you your training isn't going to be easy. This is just a ham and cheese sandwich. You don't even have a vegetable here."

I picked up the little bag of kettle-cooked chips next to my sandwich. "Wrong. I have potatoes."

Reese looked as if he were fighting the urge to roll his eyes. "I stocked your refrigerator with food, including meat and

vegetables. Real vegetables and lean meat. You really should have eaten something better than this.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but as much as I appreciate the grocery shopping you did, I’m not much of a cook and other than sandwich fixings and raw veggies, you didn’t get me much to work with. I’m an instant ramen, Kraft mac and cheese out of the box, frozen pizza kind of girl.”

Reese shook his head. “My friend is available to train with you tonight, so we need to head over to the studio, but tomorrow night, I’m dropping in earlier and giving you a cooking lesson. This is just sad.”

“Vampires cook?”

“Some do, yes. And we can eat if we want. Well, not right after we turn, but eventually our systems can handle food again and we enjoy it just like anyone else, even if we don’t need it to survive.”

I scrunched my nose, fully aware of what he needed to survive, and it still turned my stomach when I remembered he’d shared that nectar of life with me, so I tried really hard not to think about it.

“Finish your pitiful little meal so we can go,” he said, glancing at the demonology book. He turned it toward himself to see how far I’d gotten. “Have you actually been reading this or are you just trying to look like you’ve been studying so I won’t nag you?”

“I’ve been reading it. I now know that there are several varieties of disgusting demons that either spew mucus or live in various forms of squalor and I now live in fear of discovering I’m one of them.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.” His gaze did a slow pass up and down what he could see of me from his vantage point on the other side of the bar. “I’ve done a lot of thinking about this since being assigned to train you. The fuglier demons are generally lower-level lifeforms with little brain power. In order to impregnate your mother, the demon who sired you would have had to either present as human, meaning he would have had similar anatomy, or it would have had to have been a demon capable of possessing a human and spreading its seed via that means.”

I cringed at the image that put in my head, and a mixture of guilt and sympathy stabbed me in the gut. I wasn’t yet ready to just let go of my hurt and anger at being abandoned, but now that the reality of how I had come to be had had time to stew in my brain, I couldn’t condemn the woman who had birthed me quite as harshly as I once had.

“Both of these conclusions would suggest the demon who sired you is a higher-level one,” Reese continued as I finished my sandwich and tore open my bag of chips. “Even if the demon impregnated your mother through a possessed human, the demon would have had to have been powerful enough to impregnate with its own DNA. Only the most powerful can do that. Others who have the ability to possess humans could pull

off impregnation, but it would be with the sperm of the body they were inhabiting, not their own—”

“I’m trying to eat here,” I said around a mouthful of potato chips, any concern I might have about manners gone in my desire to make him stop talking about demon sperm while I was trying not to lose my appetite.

Reese gave me a mildly annoyed look but kept any snippy commentary he may have had to himself. “What I’m saying is, it’s highly unlikely that you are one of the less attractive forms of demon.”

“But you still don’t know which kind I am.”

His eyes narrowed a little as he studied me. “I’m leaning toward sex demon or minor archdemon.”

“Minor archdemon?” I glanced toward the book. “I saw archdemons mentioned, but nothing about minor or major ones.”

“The offspring of an archdemon would automatically be a lesser version of that demon, or, in other words, a minor archdemon.”

A knock sounded at the door and Reese frowned as his head turned in that direction. “Are you expecting someone?”

“Just you,” I said. “Lucky, lucky me.”

I chuckled at his very unamused expression and rubbed my hands together to dust away the potato chip crumbs. “No, I’m not expecting anyone. It’s probably my landlady. Maybe my rent check bounced.”

Still staring at the door, Reese took a deep breath through his nose. “Human. Male. Around your age. Slightly elevated heart rate.”

I could only think of one man around my age who would be popping up at my door and my own heart rate elevated at the thought. Anger had a way of revving the ol’ ticker up. “Whoever it is will go away. So, you got all that info from one big inhale? Another one of your special parlor tricks?”

“Yes, but all vampires can do that one. Why is your heart rate elevated now?” His gaze had returned to me and there was a fierce, protective look in his eyes. “Why are you afraid to see who’s at the door?”

Another knock sounded. This time it was harder, louder.

“I’m not afraid to answer the door.” I crossed the room, wishing I’d been finished eating when Reese had shown up so we could have been gone before my unwanted guest arrived.

I opened the door to see exactly who I expected to find on the other side. Barry’s eyes widened as they took me in and for a moment, I thought he was just going to stand there with his mouth hanging open, but he blinked and blurted, “Holy shit. I didn’t believe the hospital when they said you were released already, but... *holy shit*. You look amazing.”

“I sure do,” I said. “Thanks for stopping by. Don’t bother doing it again.”

Barry caught the edge of the door as it came swinging toward him and stepped inside the apartment. “Dulce, I know I

screwed up, but that's no reason to—”

Barry stopped talking as he noticed the other man in my apartment. Reese stood tall where I'd left him in the kitchen, his muscular arms folded over his chest, his face expressionless as he stared right back at the man glaring at him as if anticipating Barry's next move.

As for Barry, his peaches and cream complexion had gone ruddy and he seemed to puff out his chest, which was unnecessary considering it was a solid block of muscle. He'd been a linebacker in high school as well as a champion on the wrestling team, or at least that was what he'd told me. He still worked out and played football with his friends and the evidence of his athleticism was clear in the bulk under the University of Louisville sweatshirt that stretched over his wide shoulders and Levi's that hugged his lean hips. The look he turned my way after assessing Reese was hard and blistering. “Well, you certainly didn't waste any time, did you?”

I opened my mouth to respond, and I had plenty of ammo to respond with between the pink-haired banshee I'd found under him prior to getting steamrolled by the bus and the barista he'd apparently been overly flirtatious with while we'd been together and had later hooked up with before I'd even left the hospital. Unfortunately, the audacity it took for him to have made such a comment to me stole my ability to speak.

Reese didn't have that problem. “That's rich coming from a guy who was screwing around on her before and during her hospital stay. Barry, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right, and who the hell are you?”

“I’m the guy who entered this apartment after being told to come in. Unlike you, who just barged in here, clearly uninvited. I suggest you leave now before you get thrown down the stairs.”

“Oh, yeah?” Barry managed to puff out his burly chest even more. “And who’s going to do that?”

Reese grinned before slanting his eyes my way. “Do you want the honors, or do you want me to handle this? I don’t mind getting my boots scuffed kicking his ass.”

Realizing Reese was confronting my ex as if I were some shrinking violet who couldn’t handle such a minor inconvenience myself, I found my voice. “I can handle this just fine. You need to leave, Barry. We broke up and you have no reason to be here.”

“We didn’t break up.” Barry quit glaring at Reese, and the set of his shoulders relaxed as he redirected his focus to me.

“Yes, we sure as hell did. I distinctly remember telling you it was over and that you could drop dead. You clearly don’t have the decency to do that, so the least you can do now is leave and not bother me again.”

Barry’s mouth curved into what I assumed was supposed to be a charming smile. “Dulce, honey. Think about this. I screwed up, yeah, and you were mad and said some things, but come on. We can work this out.”

“Are you serious right now? You’re already hooking up with the barista around the corner and who knows what you’re still doing with the woman I found you humping that morning and whoever else you are stringing along at the moment.”

“How do you know about the barista?” Shock registered in Barry’s eyes before they turned dark. “Did Bernice tell you about us?”

“Her name’s Denise, you filthy man-whore. How do you not even know the woman’s name?”

“Because she’s nothing to me, baby.”

Baby? *Baby?* I had been prepared to remain reasonably calm, but the ‘baby’ after such a display of absurdity combined with my own self-loathing at having been stupid enough to get involved with such a disgusting excuse for a man sent me over the edge and before I knew it, Barry’s throat was in my grip.

“I am not your baby.” I dragged his choking body into the hallway as he struggled in vain to pry my fingers away from his flesh, and didn’t let go until I flung him down the stairs where he went ass over teakettle. “And stay the hell away from me!” I yelled after him as his body tumbled down the stairs. “We are through. Over. Done!”

When I returned to my apartment, slamming the door closed behind me, Reese still stood in the same spot I’d left him in, arms still folded over his chest, but he was grinning.

“Did I just earn negative points for throwing him down the stairs?”

“Did he die?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then you’re probably good.”

I thought for a moment. “What if I lit his balls on fire?”

“That would probably get you some negative points,” Reese answered in a professional tone, as if the question had been casual and not the least bit violent. “However, considering what I just heard, you might be able to argue that such an act would be a service to other women, but still, I wouldn’t risk it.”

I huffed out a breath and walked back over to where I’d been sitting before Barry had arrived. My appetite gone, I folded the potato chip bag, saving what remained in it for later, and carried the plate I’d used for my sandwich to the sink where I made quick work of cleaning it before I settled it in the dish rack to dry and spun around to face Reese.

“I’m not an idiot. Yes, he was charming and a bit cocky, but it’s not like he was overtly flirting with every woman we passed. I wasn’t desperate to have a man or anything. If—”

“I’m not judging you,” Reese said, cutting me off. “The guy cheated on you. That’s all on him and in no way reflects on you. I was actually just thinking I probably owe you an apology for saying you were cold for not being all

brokenhearted over the breakup. He's not worth the emotion so... my bad."

I shrugged and moved past him to pick up the demonology book. "I'm ready to leave if you are."

"Sure." He took the book from my hands and set it back on the bar. "You can leave that here. Think of it like homework."

"Sure," I muttered.

Reese held the door open for me as we left and waited for me to lock it before we took the stairs down. "The lack of blood on the carpet is a good sign. I don't think you racked up any negative points for tossing him out."

I nodded but didn't say anything as we exited the building and made our way down the block to where Reese had parked along the curb.

He used his key fob to unlock the doors and opened mine for me, which mildly annoyed me, but I couldn't say why. I quietly got in the car and waited for him to round the front and take his seat. This time I was careful not to think about the way he moved or the way he smelled ... or how no one had held a car door open for me in too long to remember. Not that I needed such things. I was an independent woman. Men were great for passing the time, but I didn't need one. I definitely didn't need a chivalrous one to open my door or fight for me. I didn't need anyone.

Reese inserted his key in the ignition after putting on his seatbelt but didn't turn it immediately. He just sat there for a

moment before turning his upper body toward me. “Is your rent check going to bounce?”

“What?”

“Upstairs, in your apartment. When your ex knocked, you said it was probably your landlady complaining about your rent check bouncing. Are you not able to pay your rent this month?”

Anger—and okay, maybe a drop of insecurity—flared in my chest. “Yes, I can pay my rent this month and if I couldn’t, what business would it be of yours?”

Reese sat back and his eyes widened a little, but he quickly recovered, clamping his jaw before he shook his head and turned the key in the ignition. With a glance at his side-view mirror to ensure there was no oncoming traffic, he pulled away from the curb.

“Pardon me,” he said, his eyes looking straight ahead at the road before us. “For a moment there, I thought I could show some concern for someone I work with. How rude of me.”

“I don’t need your pity.” My tone came out incredibly harsh, but he’d hit a nerve. “I was in the hospital for two weeks after getting fired so yeah, I went two weeks without earning any money and I’m going to get a massive hospital bill no matter what insurance Purgatory convinced the hospital I have because that’s just how inpatient hospital bills work so things are tight right now, but I covered my rent just fine. I always take care of what I need to take care of. I don’t need anyone to save me.”

Reese's jaw ticked as he continued to drive us to the studio, but he didn't say anything for several blocks. When he did eventually speak, his tone was without emotion. "D.A.M.N.E.D. will pay one hundred percent of the hospital bill. We get banged up in this line of work and those who don't have a vampire's healing power sometimes need expensive medical care. They know they can't very well send us after demons if we can't afford to fix the physical damage we may incur doing so, so they take care of all of that."

"But they don't pay us to hunt their demons," I grumbled once I got over the surprise and heavy relief that came with discovering I wouldn't have to worry about that hospital bill after all. "Some of us need more than blood and darkness to survive."

"True, but as long as we're able, I guess they figure we can fend for ourselves in that regard. Besides, assignments aren't consistent. I've gone a full month without an assignment before. Just be glad they'll pay for your medical care when you're hurt on an assignment. They don't have to do anything at all for us. They didn't have to send us back for a do-over."

"How do they give us these assignments anyway? Am I going to just blink and find myself in one of those gray offices again, or are they going to email me a file or something?"

"Your assignments will come through me while you're in training," Reese answered.

"And how long is training?"

“As long as it needs to be.” He shot a glance my way before returning his attention to the road. “Based on your attitude, I’m expecting your training to go long.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not taking handouts isn’t an attitude.”

“No, but pushing away anyone who is halfway nice to you because you think they’re going to get through that prickly exterior of yours and see you’re not as bulletproof as you’d like people to think you are is.”

“I don’t—”

“Save it,” Reese said as we reached our destination. He turned into the parking lot outside the studio and parked in the same space he’d parked the previous night.

A bright yellow sports car was parked in the next space, and I gave it a once-over as I stepped out of the car, not waiting to find out if Reese was going to open my door although I felt it safe to assume he was not.

“That’s Ginger’s Mustang,” he said as he rounded the front of his car and used his fob to lock it. “She’s waiting upstairs.”

I continued toward the building, not sure what I was supposed to say to that. I knew nothing about this Ginger person, except I assumed she was waiting to spar with me.

“For the record, Malvada, I didn’t ask about your rent check out of pity. I need you focused to ensure you don’t get killed, and worrying about money is one hell of a distraction. I know you’re unemployed, in need of a new vehicle, and just got out of a two-week hospital stay. If you need a loan until you find a

new job, it's no big deal, and if you need help with the job search, that's not much trouble either."

"I got a job," I said as we entered the building.

"Oh?" He looked a little surprised. "Good. That was quick. What are you doing?"

"Babysitting dead people overnight at a funeral home."

Reese blinked a few times as we waited for the elevator, then grinned. "That actually sounds perfect for you."

"How so?" I asked as the elevator doors parted, knowing his answer would probably irk me.

"No people skills needed."

Yep. I was right. I bit back a growl as we stepped into the elevator, and he pressed the button to take us up. I stared straight ahead, but when the doors closed, I saw his smirk in the reflection.

"I don't think someone who eats people has a lot of room to talk about someone else's people skills."

"I'm a vampire, not a cannibal," he replied. "I only consume blood, not the entire person, and I still have better people skills than you."

"So you say. The only time I've seen you around people was while you were looking for one to use as a lesson on how to find and handle prey. It's hardly a ringing endorsement for your superb people skills, and who cares who has better people skills anyway? Or people skills at all?"

“You are so bitter,” he muttered as the elevator came to a stop and we stepped out.

“No, I’m just unconcerned with winning a pointless popularity contest. Even serial killers can mesmerize people. Ted Bundy had great people skills, but you’ll have to excuse me for not wanting to aspire to be like Teddy.”

Reese paused just as we reached the studio door and looked down at me. With a hint of a grin and a partial shrug, he nodded his head. “I admit you’ve made a good point, but your people skills could still improve.”

I didn’t waste my breath debating with him as he opened the door and stepped inside ahead of me. I followed him in and as he stepped aside to close the door, I noticed the woman leaning back against the counter in the small kitchen area.

She had dark spiky hair cut in a shaggy pixie cut and wore heavy eyeliner and vibrant red lipstick. She was of average height and thin, almost what I would call wiry. Her jeans had rips at the knees and thighs, her black boots looked heavy enough to leave a dent in a rhino’s skull, and the white T-shirt I could see under her unzipped black leather jacket featured a cartoon nut sac with a knife sticking out of it. The cartoonish testes had X’s for eyes, but one was closed, and its tongue lolled out the side of the slash that had been drawn to give the thing a mouth. DANNI THE TESTE SLAYER was written in a red font that was supposed to look like blood.

“Interesting shirt,” I said as the woman appeared to give me a thorough appraisal.

“What the hell are you wearing?” Reese asked, a bemused expression on his face as he caught sight of the shirt.

“You don’t like it?” The woman smiled mischievously as she grabbed the hem of the shirt and stretched it out for better viewing. “The Teste Slayer is a close personal friend of mine.”

“I bet she is.” Reese muttered something under his breath and sighed before extending his hand out in a sweeping motion toward the woman. “Dulce Malvada, this is Ginger. Ginger, this is Dulce Malvada. Ginger will be helping with your training tonight.”

“Oh, are we going to be working on my people skills?” I asked, batting my eyelashes coyly.

“No,” Reese answered. “We’ll be working on your avoiding death skills while Ginger beats the hell out of you.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**W**hen you say it like that, it just sounds mean,” the spiky-haired brunette said, then smiled. “But fun.”

I rolled my eyes. “If the two of you are trying to intimidate me, you’re wasting your time. I know you don’t want me to die just yet and you’re not going to severely injure me when I’m sure you have more than just one night of physical training in mind and wouldn’t want to have to delay it.”

“You’re forgetting I had you up and walking out of the hospital without so much as a bruise only two weeks after you got hit by a bus and I knocked you out completely last night. Yet, here you are, again without so much as a bruise or a headache.”

“That’s because you poured your blood down my throat.” Oh, hell no. I glared at him. “You are *not* doing that again.”

“Do you want to remain broken and unconscious if you get hurt?” He asked.

“Do you want me to make this whole room smell like vomit again?”

“No, not particularly,” he muttered. “Look, Malvada, you’re going to be going after demons, shifters, and vampires, among who knows what else. Even a big human could hurt you if properly motivated or skilled. You need to get over the blood thing because if you get hurt badly enough, I’m giving you my blood.”

I moved so that I stood directly in front of him, barely enough space to slide a sheet of paper between us, and stared straight into his eyes before allowing a slow smile to curve my mouth. “Whatever you say, sensei, but if that’s how it’s going to be, you’re going to need to get over the vomit thing because it’s going to happen. It might even happen all over you. In fact, I’m almost sure it will.”

A feminine chuckle drew my gaze to the kitchen area, although I didn’t turn my head.

“You have your hands full with this one,” the woman said, and smiled. “I like her.”

“I figured you would,” Reese muttered before stepping away from me to face his friend. “She’s going to do what I do, so I need her trained well, but I do *not* want her broken. Understood?”

The woman snapped off a salute.

“And what happens here stays here.”

“You have my word, although you know he has a way of finding out just about every damn thing that happens in this city.”

“Yeah, I know.” Reese glanced my way. “His men have already seen her.”

“I assume you’re talking about this Rider Knight guy again?” I folded my arms, not all that appreciative about being talked about as if I wasn’t standing right there. “Who *is* this guy, and why are you so afraid of him?”

“Be careful invoking that name,” the woman said. “He might just pop up behind your ass like Bloody Mary.”

“And he’s far worse than Bloody Mary,” Reese muttered. “But as long as you keep your head down and your nose clean, you shouldn’t have to worry about him. Not as long as I’m watching your back.”

“My savior,” I drawled. “Are we going to just stand around or am I actually going to be taught something tonight?”

“Ooh, ready to get smacked around already?” The woman smiled. “I don’t need a warmup, so we can start whenever you want.”

I didn’t bother holding back my eye roll. “Sure. Let’s see who gets smacked around—*aagh!*”

The brunette smiled wickedly right in front of me. *Right* in front of me. Where she had not been a fraction of a second before, and I hadn’t even seen her move.

“You’re a vampire too.”

Fangs slowly descended from her upper gum, and she took her time running her tongue over one of them. “Yep. Still

feeling that overabundance of confidence? Wanna try to take me now?”

“The first thing you need to know when entering any fight,” Reese said, standing next to us with his hands clasped behind his back, “is to never underestimate your opponent based on what you see. Ginger is very thin and not all that threatening visually, but she has the power of someone ten times her bodyweight and speed that could rival a cheetah when she uses her vampiric abilities.”

“How can I tell if someone is a vampire before they flash fangs at me?” I asked, canning my cocky swagger and getting with the program. It appeared I really was going to learn something and no matter how I felt about Reese or the situation I was in, I wasn’t going to waste time throwing attitude at the person who could teach me how to protect myself from someone who could move that damn fast. No matter how badly he might get under my skin.

“See without looking,” he answered. “Just like I taught you last night. Keep your senses open to everything around you and pay attention to shifts in energy. Pay attention to your gut. Once you come into your power, it should be easier. Paranormals sense other paranormals. Until then, you may have to work harder at it. Did you sense anything different about Ginger when you walked in here tonight? Did you sense anything different when you first met me?”

That was a trick question, I thought, recalling the moment I’d discovered Reese in my bed. It wasn’t like I’d discovered a

Kevin Hart resting atop my sheets. I'd discovered a Shemar Moore. He'd definitely given off a vibe unlike the average male, but considering what it had done to my lower regions, I hadn't thought *vampire*. And I wasn't about to say what I'd thought, not even inside my own cranium in case Mr. Tall, Dark, and Fangy was eavesdropping in there.

I took two steps back and closed my eyes. Like Reese had taught me in the coffee shop the night before, I relaxed and let everything go, finding a calm place in my mind before I cast my senses out.

I sensed the presence of the other two, just like I would have any person standing so close to me, but I carefully kept my mind blank as I focused more intently on them, and I found it. There was something different about them. An undercurrent they shared, a mutual energy signature that once I really thought about it, I didn't think anyone else put out. I opened my eyes to see both vampires watching me, waiting patiently.

"Your energy is different from others. It's ... stronger," I said after searching for the right word. I raised my arm and noticed the goosebumps covering it. "It kind of tingles. Is that what I feel like to you?"

"You feel like static electricity," Reese answered.

"Or lightning before it strikes," Ginger added. "These sensations are the body's way of warning us when we are within the vicinity of a predator."

"Always be aware of your surroundings and those within them," Reese said. "Now that you know how to tell when a

vampire is near, you need to know how to fight one. I've read enough of your file to know you're a scrapper, but it takes more than that to defeat a vampire, demon, or any other paranormal entity with a hard-on for your blood."

"Yeah, yeah, you're all the big, bad wolves and I'm Little Red Riding Hood. I get it." My tone may have been a little snippy, but anxiety ran through my veins, and it was pissing me off.

Reese's eyes narrowed a little as he studied me and he almost smirked before he turned away. "Let's try this. Let's see what we're working with first."

The spiky-haired vampire grinned and shrugged out of her leather jacket before she walked over to the table and draped it over the back of a chair. By the time she turned to face me again, leaning a narrow hip against the chair, her arms folded casually in front of her, Reese had turned back toward us and leaned his shoulder against a column six feet away from where I stood.

"Attack her at half power, but hold your fangs back," Reese instructed the vampire. "Let's see what kind of instincts she has."

The woman moved in a blur of speed, but this time I expected it and had dropped into a fighting stance before Reese had finished giving his instruction. As the vampire launched herself at me from my left, I reached out, wrapping one hand around a thin bicep and the other grabbed a handful of jeans-snap. Using Ginger's own momentum against her, I

sent her flying over my head toward the other side of the room. Or, at least, that had been the plan.

The vampire grabbed hold of my arm as her lithe body sailed over my head and instead of continuing her flight, she did some sort of mid-air spin that ended with her behind me, one arm wrapped around my neck.

The woman didn't have a whole lot of meat to her bones, but I remembered Reese's comment about her strength and knew if I let her apply pressure to my throat, I wasn't going to be able to get loose, so I jerked my head back before she could get a lock on me, ramming it into her face, and once I heard the satisfying grunt of pain come from her, I dropped down and spun with one leg out, sweeping her legs out from under her.

I thought I had her right where I wanted her, but she did a spin of her own while she was on the floor and dropped me on my ass before she clamped those skinny thighs around my neck. I grabbed her thighs to pry her off of me, but she squeezed them tight, and I saw stars as my air supply went bye-bye and consciousness nearly followed.

"Enough," I heard Reese say, his voice sounding farther away than I knew him to be, not surprising given the fuzziness in my head and ringing in my ears.

The pressure eased, and I sat forward, rubbing my throat while I waited for the stars to fade away from my view.

"Not too bad," Reese said, still leaning against that column from the sound of things. "You have instincts, Malvada. Ready

for the next round? Keep in mind you can use anything in this room.”

“Sure,” I said, the word bitter as my vision cleared and I got to my feet. I took quick stock of the room as I turned to face off against the vampire again.

Ginger of the skinny yet powerfully strong thigh muscles stood a few feet away from me, her posture straight but deceptively casual. Unfortunately, I didn’t see much in the room that I could use against her other than the columns I could ram her into or the chairs I could bring down over her head. Other than those and some heavy books, there weren’t any weapons. And Reese had never given me back my switchblade.

“I’ll have weapons when we get a real target, won’t I?”

“You have weapons now,” Reese answered, but didn’t bother elaborating enough to hint at what those weapons might be.

“Let’s raise it a notch,” he said, “but no fangs. And... go!”

Ginger hit me before I could brace for impact, her shoulder colliding with my midsection before I took a hard tumble to the floor and found myself on my stomach with my arms twisted behind my back and no recollection of when she’d gotten her hands around my wrists.

“Use your weapons,” Reese said. “Let’s do it again.”

What the hell was he even talking about, I thought as Ginger’s weight disappeared and I got back up on my feet. I

walked closer to the table before turning around and noticed Reese's smirk before I leveled my gaze at Ginger. The vampire didn't have a hair out of place. Meanwhile, I was sweating through my shirt and pretty sure I'd be bruised tomorrow.

Reese stared intently at Ginger and the vampire stared back at him with such focus I wondered if the two were having some sort of telepathic conversation or something, but before I could ask, they broke the staring contest and refocused on me.

"Go," Reese commanded.

I grabbed the closest chair and swung with all my might. The metal and wood connected to the vampire's head with a loud cracking sound right before she would have tackled me, and knocked her sideways. I pounced, head-butting her in the stomach, causing her to completely lose her footing and crash down to the floor as she reflexively folded over the point where my head had made contact. I went to the floor with her and held her there with one hand wrapped around her throat as I balled the other into a fist.

Unlike the vampire, I hadn't been given any restrictions, so I let my fist fly right toward her perfectly straight nose. She turned her head just in time to avoid getting hit and my fist hit the floorboards, sending a stab of pain ricocheting straight up my arm, but I didn't have time to dwell on it before she grabbed me by my biceps and we somehow reversed positions so that I was the one with my back on the floor and she straddled me. Less than a breath later, her mouth was on my throat and my flesh was gently held between her teeth.

“Aaaaand you’re dead,” Reese said. “Let’s try this again.”

I shoved Ginger off of me the moment she opened her mouth and released my flesh, but she landed on her feet like a cat. She didn’t even appear bothered I’d shoved her, and why should she? She knew she had me.

“I’m never going to beat her without a weapon,” I snapped as I sat up.

“Then use the weapons at your disposal.” Reese’s tone almost sounded bored.

“What? My Tasmanian devil blackout thing?” I got to my feet. “I have no control over that. I can’t just summon it, and I thought you’d want me conscious and aware during this. Otherwise, what’s the point of training me? You can’t train me when I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

“I do want you conscious during this,” he replied. “I also want you to use the weapons available to you.”

“What weapons?” I held my arms out wide and turned in a circle. “Where in this room are the weapons? I used the chair. I don’t see any knives, guns, or any fucking garlic bulbs, for that matter. What the hell am I supposed to use as a weapon against her?”

“Certainly not garlic bulbs,” Ginger said. “Those would be a huge waste of time and just make everything stink. Not to mention they’re a reminder of when I was allergic to them, back before I became a vampire.”

“Back before...” I stood there for a moment, just blinking.
“You *used* to be allergic to garlic?”

“Yup. Pasta and pizza were always dangerous for me. I could request no garlic if I had it freshly made, but if even a little garlic found its way into the sauce, there went my tongue and lips, swelling up until I looked like the newest member of the Kardashian clan, until the hives popped out, of course, and you don’t want to know how things were at my other end.”

“Ginger,” Reese said, grabbing the vampire’s attention before she could go into what I was afraid was about to be a long spiel about what happened in the bathroom after she ingested garlic. He shook his head at her, but grinned. “I think we get the point.”

“Okay. So, yeah, garlic wouldn’t do you much good. I mean, you could have weakened me with it at one time, maybe even killed me, but I’ve been unbothered by it for a long time now.”

“Since you became a vampire.”

She nodded again.

“You had a garlic allergy... but vampirism cured it. It actually cured your allergy to garlic.” I continued standing there blinking at her as my brain wrapped around how absurd this new information was. “Where the hell do writers get all the crap about garlic keeping vampires away then?”

“Wherever they get the nonsense about us not being able to see our own reflection,” Reese said.

I looked back over at Ginger and shook my head. “You’re the most ridiculous vampires I’ve ever met... and I can’t believe my life has led me to a place where I would ever utter that and not be bouncing around a rubber room in a straitjacket while doing it.”

Reese almost smiled. “Let’s get back to training.”

“I’m still waiting for you to tell me where these magical weapons are that I’m supposed to have at my disposal.”

“I’m training you to survive, not win a competition that I can stand off to the side and coach you through,” Reese replied. “When you find yourself in a fight with something bigger and badder than you, you need to rely on your own instincts to know what to do. You need to be aware of your surroundings at all times, assess every entity and every location, know what you have available for your use, and you need to know when and how to get it.”

“And how the fuck am I supposed to know any of that?” I snapped, and my sharp voice bounced off the walls. “I’m not you. I haven’t been in this paranormal world as long as you have.”

“Yes, you have. You just didn’t realize it,” he snapped back. “You will come into your power eventually and that may help, or it could make things worse. There’s no way of knowing about that until the time comes, but what we do know now is that you’ve been given a job hunting demons, demons who aren’t going to give a shit how much training you’ve had. Demons who won’t take it easy on you because you’ve been

oblivious to what you are your entire life. Your father is a demon. You are half demon. You've always been half demon. You've been a part of this world from the moment you were born. Boohooing about it won't change anything."

"I'm not boohooing about anything." I glared at him, hands on hips. "I'm not whining like some crybaby, but this training isn't exactly fair. I'm never going to beat her on my own. Not yet."

Reese straightened away from the column. "So, use the weapon available to you."

"I don't know what it is," I growled through clenched teeth.

"You know what it is. You know it's available to you. You just don't want to use it. And that's what is probably going to get you killed."

The man was infuriating. I swung my gaze over to the other vampire to see her watching me, no emotion whatsoever on her face. This was bullshit. I'd just admitted I couldn't take her. What more did he want from me? I didn't know what weapon he was talking about. All I had was myself. My fists, my fingernails, my feet. I had my brain, but frankly, it wasn't doing me a whole lot of favors. The woman was faster than me, stronger than me, and I didn't know how to beat her without actually killing her, and I didn't know how to kill her with what I had at my fingertips. Not that killing her was even an option. I was pretty sure that would piss Reese off.

"You're smart, Malvada. Stubborn as hell and far more guarded than is necessary, but you're smart. You can figure

this out and you can win, but until you do, we're going to keep doing this. Go."

I didn't even bother bracing as Reese barked the command and the lanky vampire hit me like a linebacker, knocking me to the floor before she wrenched my arms behind my back and gently clamped her teeth on the side of my throat.

"Dead again," Reese said. "Let's start over."

So, we did. And we went again and again and again. I got in a few good licks, like a sucker punch that snapped the spiky-haired vampire's head back, yet still didn't mar that vibrant red lipstick.

"Nice lipstick," I said as I took advantage of her being momentarily stunned and used her disorientation to knock her legs out from under her before getting her on her chest and driving my knee into her lower back before I wrenched her arms behind her back, pretty satisfied with finally not being the one on the bottom of that move. "Love the shade."

"Thanks. It's called Flaming Labia." She then took advantage of me being momentarily stunned and somehow bucked me off her and pretended to bite my throat the moment she had me on my back and the breath out of my lungs.

"Dead," Reese said from his viewing point, sounding as disappointed as I felt disgusted. "Again."

We continued for several more rounds and I used every damn thing I could get my hands on in the room, hurling chairs and books at the too-damn-fast vampire. I even tried to

throw her out a window, get to the kitchen area to check drawers for knives, or drag her to the bathroom for a swirly, but I never made it very far in those attempts. She was too fast and just too damn good.

“Dead,” Reese announced after what felt like the hundredth time the skinny vampire got her teeth around my flesh and may have actually been. I’d quit counting several losses ago. “Again.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I snapped, beyond pissed off as I got to my feet yet again. “I know you’re doing some sort of paranormal Mr. Miyagi bullshit, but can you at least give me a damn hint what weapon I’m supposed to be using because all I’ve got left in my arsenal is playing possum and I don’t think that one’s gonna do it either.”

Reese stared at me for so long I thought he wasn’t going to answer. I couldn’t say I blamed him for being disappointed and giving up on me. The vampire had kicked my ass at every turn and despite his previous assurance that I was smart enough to figure out what I needed to use to beat her, I was starting to feel really damn stupid. And sore. I hurt everywhere and blood seeped out of my knuckles, probably other places as well, but I was too sweaty to know what was what under my clothes. I tasted it in my mouth too, but fortunately a sweep of my tongue over my teeth revealed them all to be where they belonged. Thank goodness for small favors.

“Fight fire with fire,” he finally said. “Let’s do it again.”

Fight fire with fire? It took no time at all for Ginger to simulate killing me while I pondered that, trying to figure out what to do with that hint, and I continued pondering while we rematched over and over again, my body aching and slowing more with each short battle.

She was a vampire. She had superstrength, fangs, and crazy speed. I had none of those things. I had teeth and I could bite her, but I didn't see how that would help me any. It would take a hell of a lot of pressure for my teeth to tear out a chunk of her flesh and even then, I didn't think that would be enough to kill her, and it would probably take me too much time. To fight fire with fire, I'd have to have what she had. Strength. Speed. Fangs. And I didn't, and nowhere in the room did I see... *Oh, he had to be kidding me.*

As Ginger slammed me to the floor hard enough for the back of my head to hit the wooden boards underneath and momentarily stupefy me, I realized what my great weapon was. My fuzzy knocked-around head cleared as I saw that red-lacquered mouth coming for my throat and I had just enough fight left in me to grab her throat and hold her off.

“Reese! Wanna jump in here, oh mighty weapon of mine?”

Ginger came to a complete stop and smiled as Reese grabbed her by the scruff and lifted her away from me. A moment later, he reached down and helped me to my feet.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” I rubbed my throat, which hadn't been bitten into, but even just having my flesh pinched between flat teeth often enough could cause pain and

irritation. “That’s what you’ve been wanting from me all freaking night?”

“I’ve been wanting you to win against Ginger using the weapons available to you in this room, and that’s how you finally did.”

“Yeah, you actually didn’t do too bad on your own,” Ginger chimed in. “You busted my lip and loosened some teeth more than a few times. Not too shabby.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I never saw your mouth bleed.”

“Vampire saliva,” she said. “I healed it immediately so you wouldn’t have seen anything.”

“Oh, that’s so not fair.” I glared up at Reese. “She has superheroine self-healing powers. I never had a chance of beating her.”

“You just did,” he replied. “Your first lesson in fighting is the most important one. Rely on your partner. Trust me, Malvada, and call on me when you are outmatched. You may come into some incredible strength and speed after your awak —”

“Hostile takeover.”

“Hostile takeover.” He grinned. “You may come into some incredible strength and speed then, but until then, or even after, if it’s not enough, remember you have me. I’m your partner. I am as much a weapon for your use as a gun or blade would be.”

“Then why didn’t you just step in before she got her fangs in my throat?”

“If she had really been using her fangs, I would have.” He lost all trace of amusement. “I’m going to do all I can to keep you safe out there, but I may not always know when you’re in over your head, especially after you’ve been trained and have acquired more power. That’s why this was the first lesson. I need you to be able to realize when you can’t do it alone and accept the fact that you’re going to have to call on me. You’re not alone anymore, and you need to accept that and stop fighting against it.”

“Man, that’s beautiful, but I think I should head out,” Ginger said, snagging her leather jacket from where it had fallen to the floor at some point after I’d used the chair she’d draped it over to try to bash her head in. “Sunrise isn’t too far off, and I have a few things to do before beddy-bye.”

“Thanks for helping, Ginger.”

“I owed you.” She put the jacket on and winked at me. “Hang in there, sugar. I promise you, he’s one of the good guys.”

Reese walked her to the door, and I watched, trying not to be obvious about it, but there wasn’t really a way not to be. They said their short goodbyes and away she went. No hugs or kisses exchanged.

“So, the two of you are...”

“Old friends,” Reese said, turning away from the door.
“Why?”

“Oh, no reason.” I shrugged and immediately winced as pain registered in my shoulders and back. “I just noticed you didn’t really simulate killing her when I won the fight by using you.” I crooked my fingers into air quotes.

“I didn’t need to. The point was made.” He took me by the elbow and angled his head, studying me. “You’re already starting to bruise. I can take care of that with a little blood.”

“No, thank you.”

“It’ll take away all your aches and pains too.”

“I said no.” I stepped back, removed my elbow from his grip, and changed the subject. “She’s nice for someone who could have easily killed me, I guess. And she has a good sense of humor. Unless her lipstick really is called Flaming Labia.”

Reese’s lips twitched. “I’m sure it is. The last time I heard someone ask her about her makeup, it was a shade of lipstick called Sext Me. I tried not to put too much thought into it, but it was purple. Eggplant purple.”

I barked out a laugh and grimaced as even that hurt. “Damn. I don’t even want to know what she could do to me if she actually wanted to hurt me.”

“Yeah, I don’t either. That’s why I’m going to train you to fight vampires. You had to use me to get through your first lesson, but there are ways you can still fight a vampire on your own and we’ll get to those, but we need to clean you up first.”

He walked me over to the kitchen area and turned on the faucet, adjusting the temperature until it was warm, and placed my busted knuckles underneath the water.

I held back a hiss as the water hit my broken skin, stinging before it started to soothe, and washed my hands using the nearby antiseptic soap. Once I finished, I turned off the faucets and saw fresh blood welling up. “Dammit.”

I grabbed a paper towel and pressed it against my knuckles, but the knuckles of both hands were bleeding, making using the paper towel to stem the blood flow awkward. “Do you have bandages?”

“No, but I can heal the damage to your hands in about two seconds.”

“I am not drinking your blood,” I told him, hopefully firmly enough for him to stop suggesting it.

“You don’t have to drink my blood. You just have to trust me.” He grabbed one of my hands and raised it so it hovered just before his mouth. “Trust me?”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My stomach hollowed out and my breath froze inside my lungs as I looked into dark eyes that shone with something that looked a lot like hunger, but not enough to be dangerous. Then again, I supposed that depended on what you considered to be dangerous.

I withdrew my hand and stepped away, pressing the paper towel against my knuckles. “My knuckles are fine. I just need to press the paper towel against them until the bleeding stops.”

“Yeah, that works for one hand, while the other continues to bleed and you’re going to be left with scabs. You said you’re starting a new job? How’s it going to look when you show up looking as if you’ve been fighting someone? And when those wounds scab up, they’re going to be itchy and they’re going to keep reopening while we train because I am not pausing your training while waiting for your hands to heal when I can simply heal them for you right now. You don’t have to drink my blood, Dulce.”

“No, but you’ll drink mine,” I said. “Sorry, but I’m not on the menu.”

Reese muttered something under his breath as he looked away, staring off into the distance over my shoulder as he appeared to gather his emotions. A moment later, he took a breath and looked at me again. “I don’t want to drink you, Malvada. My saliva can quickly, easily, and safely heal your knuckles. It’s not anything sexual before you get any ideas, and it’s not something I’m offering because I’m thirsty for your blood. Vampires aren’t out of control like that crap you see in the movies, except when newly turned, and I am far from that. I’m not going to taste a little bit while mending your hands and suddenly attack you. I’m offering you first aid, nothing more, but hey, if you want to stay in pain and discomfort and suffer through your next training session, who am I to stop you?”

He threw his hands up in defeat and turned away, grabbing another paper towel off the roll.

“You really won’t drink my blood? I mean, any more than you would unintentionally get when you... What are you actually going to do?”

“Well, if you allow me, I’m going to rinse off your hands again and run my tongue over your knuckles to heal them.”

He was going to what my what? Warmth unfurled in my belly as I imagined him doing what he’d just described, and I fought the sudden urge to squirm as he steadily gazed back at me.

“I could just spit on your hands, but I thought that might be grosser.”

My lip curled on its own. “Yeah, I can’t say I’m into getting spit on.”

“It’s up to you. I’m not going to force my supernatural healing ability on you.”

“Like you did previously.”

His jaw ticked. “That was completely different. When your life is on the line, I’m not going to ask permission. I’m just going to save you. If that pisses you off, I guess that’s just too damn bad for me. I’m still going to do it. In a situation like this, however, you can decide what you want. Just remember what I said. I’m not going to take it easy on you during training if you choose to be stubborn and refuse sped-up healing.”

I looked down at where the blood splotch grew on the paper towel I held over my knuckles, while even more blood welled above the cuts in the knuckles of the hand I used to hold the paper towel. Rivulets had started to run down the back of that hand. Knuckles were one of those body parts you didn’t give much thought to until you damaged them. Reese wasn’t lying. They were going to scab over, and they were going to drive me nuts itching and pulling. They weren’t the easiest place to wrap in a bandage either, and I didn’t doubt he meant it when he said he wouldn’t take things easy on me.

“Fine. You can heal my knuckles for me, but that’s it. Aleve will have to take care of the rest of my aches and pains.”

“Suit yourself. Come here.”

I joined him at the sink, where he held my wrists to guide my hands under the water. After rinsing them both, he lifted one and used a paper towel to dry the skin before quickly ducking his head. His soft pink tongue glided over the damaged flesh, his lips whispering across my skin as he moved from knuckle to knuckle, leaving glistening skin behind. Skin that no longer bled.

I ignored the way my stomach clenched and raised the hand he'd just taken care of as he turned off the water faucet and started on my other hand. My skin was slightly pink, and I could see the lines where the skin had broken as my fists connected with the floorboards, but the skin was closed.

“There.” He raised his head but didn't let go of my hand as he inspected it, running his thumb over the mended skin. “No pain and no blood. Your flesh is still healing, but at a much faster speed than normal. These thin white lines you see will be gone by morning.” He looked over his shoulder toward the windows, where the sky had already started to lighten. “Well, after you wake up, anyway. So, was that too terrible?”

“No,” I answered, heat flooding my face as I caught the breathy way I'd responded, and I pulled my hand free of his grasp and backed up, putting a few feet between us as I tucked my hands into my back pockets. “Uh, that wasn't too bad, and thank you, I guess.”

He raised an eyebrow. “No problem. You're absolutely sure that's all the help you want? You held your own pretty well for an untrained fighter going up against a trained vampire, but

you still got banged up.” He inhaled deep enough for his nostrils to flare and lowered his gaze to my knees. “You’re bleeding elsewhere.”

“Okay, the sniffing out my blood thing is kind of gross,” I said and turned away, heading for the door. “And I’m all good. Bashed knuckles would have been a pain in the ass, but I can handle whatever damage was done to my knees. Are we done training for tonight, since it’s pretty much the next morning now?”

“Yeah, we’re done. I’ll take you home.” He wadded up the paper towel still in his hand and picked up the ones I’d left on the counter and threw them in the garbage before crossing the room toward me.

I took note of the steadily lightening sky outside the windows. “Do you need to slather on some of that sunscreen I saw in your bathroom before we leave?”

“Early morning sun isn’t all that bad, and again, we don’t just go up in flames. I’ve built up some immunity. I’ll be all right to take you home and get back here.”

“How long does it take to build up immunity?” I asked as we exited the studio, and he locked the door behind us.

“Years. It’s different for everyone though. Not all vampires are the same. Some have psychic abilities and when they’re turned, those abilities alter their thirst and their immunity. Some vampires are more sensitive to the sun than others, especially the newly turned, and some struggle more with their

thirst fresh out of the gate. There are a few who never seem to get a grip on their thirst, and those are put down.”

We were on the stairs, forgoing the elevator, and I nearly stumbled. “Put down?”

“We regulate ourselves. A bloodthirsty vampire with poor impulse control is a danger to the entire race. It is the sire’s responsibility to destroy any vampire deemed a bad turn, and if the sire doesn’t, others will take care of it. And in many cases, the sire as well.”

I thought about all of this as we descended the stairs and exited the building. “So, you all just know each other and keep track of who turns who?”

“No, we’re not like an organization requiring membership or anything like that, but we recognize each other by scent or feel. And many vampires are part of what we call nests, which are like vampire families. In most cases, nests are the families created by one vampire who has turned the rest, but some vampires allow their fledglings to create their own fledglings, and they are included in the nest. You can’t just look at a vampire and know who his or her sire is, but sometimes you can sense it if familiar with the sire. Other times, you’d have to investigate. Vampires talk, just like anyone else.”

He used his key fob to unlock the car, and I waited until we were both settled in to continue our conversation. “So, is that how you know Ginger? You two are in the same nest?”

Reese had just started the car and the dashboard lights illuminated his face and the deep look of regret in his dark

eyes before he pulled out of his parking space and headed toward my apartment. “We were, a long, long time ago, but as you know, I ended up in Purgatory, so I died. Temporarily, at least. D.A.M.N.E.D. recruited me for this job and it wouldn’t go well with a vampire sire telling me what I could and couldn’t do, so I didn’t go back to the nest. My brief death severed the link I had with my sire, so he never even knew I was back. He would have felt my death, but not my return to this plane.”

“And what’s the story there?” I asked, picking up on the sad undercurrent in Reese’s tone. I continued when he simply raised an eyebrow and glanced at me in response. “I’m sensing some regret. You can’t explain this demon bounty hunter gig to your sire and get back in the nest?”

“You ask a lot of questions for someone who doesn’t like to share a lot of herself.”

I muttered under my breath and looked out the window as we continued toward my apartment. There wasn’t a lot of traffic out at the early hour. Or late hour. I wasn’t sure anymore. “What, do we have to play the question for a question game again in order for me to get an answer?”

“No, I’m just saying... someone who asks a lot of questions should be a little more forthcoming and a lot less defensive when questions are asked of her.” He cut a quick glance my way before returning his attention to the road. “With my connection to my sire cut, I wasn’t aware of changes that were made in the nest. My assignments with D.A.M.N.E.D. took me

all over the country and I had others to train, so I didn't always hear everything that was going on with the nest. Any regret you sense in me is because I didn't know my sire had gone power-mad and developed an unhealthy obsession for kids. When one of the vampires in the nest stood up against him, she was severely beaten and left for dead, and I wasn't there to help her."

"Ginger," I said, figuring it out.

Reese nodded. "We reconnected years later, and we've helped each other many times since then, but I'm not sure I'll ever get over not being there for her then. We were close and Ginger doesn't allow many people in, so being that close with her is something to be honored by. Even if I didn't want to rejoin the nest, I should have checked in with her. I should have made sure she was okay."

"Were there any signs that your sire would do that to her?"

"No, but he was our sire, and sires have full control over their fledglings, so it was always a possibility, even if he had me fooled into thinking he was a decent guy."

"You can't hold yourself responsible for what happened to her. You were working for D.A.M.N.E.D., trying to save your mother and siblings, so you did what was necessary. Judging from what I witnessed tonight, I don't think she blames you for what happened."

"Sometimes I wish she would blame me. It would make me feel a little better to take an ass-kicking from her."

“She’s certainly good at that. So, what happened to your sire?”

“Ginger refused to die. She’d heard of a powerful vampire in the area who’d developed a name for himself freeing fledglings from abusive sires, so she crawled as close as she could get to his place of business. Some good Samaritans found her, ran to get him at her request, and he sent some of his people to bring her to him. She received medical care and the following night, that vampire destroyed our sire and freed all his fledglings. Ginger went rogue like me, but she still works a lot of jobs for the vampire who saved her life.”

I remembered the exchange between the two of them in Reese’s studio and felt my eyebrows raise. “Wait. Was the vampire who saved her this Rider Knight guy?”

“It was.”

“So why do you seem so concerned with keeping me off his radar?” I asked as Reese parked along the curb close to my building. “He sounds like a vampire superhero or something.”

“Rider Knight is an honorable man, but he is also a very dangerous one. He is responsible for freeing more fledglings than I could possibly count, and many of those fledglings joined his nest without a sire-fledgling bond. They serve him voluntarily, which is an incredible testimony of their loyalty and what they would do for him. The man has an army of faithful followers willing to die for him, and if the rumors of his power are true, he doesn’t even need them to. He’s very old and very powerful, and he is not a fan of demons, so it’s best

you don't capture his attention. In fact, you may want to consider moving to another state."

I frowned, remembering what he'd said about his assignments taking him all over the country. "Am I going to have to? I mean, when demons escape from Hell, do they escape through some portal here, or am I going to be using a lot of frequent flyer miles catching these things?"

"I've trained two others to do this job, so they'll most likely be assigned the targets in other regions while you're in training, but eventually, some travel may be involved. Again, we're not assigned targets every single day, so travel isn't constant, but it happens. I have noticed that many demons who escape do so in the southern part of the states. Kind of makes sense. The energy in the South is darker, making it easier for a portal to be created."

"Huh?"

"Everything leaves energy, and sometimes that energy is dark. Think of everything the South is known for, everything that has happened or continues to happen here. Slavery, racism, black magic, raving ammossexuals, evangelicals, big trucks—"

"Big trucks? How are big trucks dark energy, and correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't demons shy away from the Bible Belt?"

"The big trucks are fine, but nine times out of ten, the bigger the truck, the bigger the asshole driving it. Add asshole points for any jackasses who add truck nuts."

“Oh, well, yeah. That’s true,” I conceded.

“I’m just saying there are a lot of jerks in the South,” he said. “And as for the religion thing, just because people call themselves Christians, doesn’t mean they’re remotely Christian. Or good, for that matter. It was Christians who tore Native children from their families and forced them into boarding schools where the concept of Christianity was forced on them while they were beaten and molested. It’s Catholic priests who have been sexually assaulting little boys for decades. It was so-called good Christian men who donned white sheets and burned crosses. There are evangelicals today who live in hypocrisy while they judge and condemn everyone else for the same sins they commit daily. That all leaves a dark energy.”

“Geez. Tell me how you really feel.”

“I’m not saying there aren’t good people out there who follow God,” he clarified. “There are. I’m just saying... I’ve been around a long time, I’ve seen a lot of things, and I can’t help noticing that those who beat their chests and shout ‘Christianity’ the loudest are usually the absolute worst, and a whole lot of them are in the Bible Belt. Demons draw a lot of dark energy from the things those people do behind closed doors and the grief they cause so many others as they sit in judgement. Get used to spending time in the South while working on assignments. Where you’re located isn’t all that bad distance-wise, but still, it may be best to give yourself some breathing room from Rider Knight, because if you slip

up, you do not want him finding out. He considers this entire city his to protect from entities like us.”

“Entities like himself?”

“Hypocrisy doesn’t stop at evangelicals.” Reese’s mouth curved up at the side and he reached for his door handle.

“You don’t have to walk me in. Um... so, I start my job tomorrow night—or tonight, I guess—at ten o’clock so I won’t be available to train then. Maybe we can switch to daytime training? Or do you usually sleep all day?”

“Day sleep is preferable, but with age, it isn’t necessary to sleep the entire day, hence why I was in your apartment during the daytime your first day out of the hospital. I’ll work out the training. Get some rest and take care of those knees.”

“I will.” I opened my door and stepped one foot out before pausing. “And, uh, thanks. For healing my hands.”

Reese’s mouth dropped open in an exaggerated gesture and he placed a hand over his heart. “Be still my heart. She actually offers gratitude.”

“Well, you don’t have to be a smartass about it,” I muttered without any bite, earning a smile. I glanced down at where he’d placed his hand. “Does your heart actually beat?”

“Of course. What do I look like, some kind of freaky-ass reanimated corpse?”

“No, but you’re—ugh, forget it.” I rolled my eyes and stepped out of the car, Reese’s deep laughter following me as I closed the door and headed to my apartment. I didn’t fail to

notice that he didn't pull away until I was safely inside my building. Safe from anyone who may have been lurking outside in the shadows, that was. Not safe from the cranky landlady who'd been waiting for me.

“Malvada!”

I stopped with one foot on the stairs and turned to see Bretta marching toward me, all wrapped up in a fuzzy hot pink bathrobe. Her fuzzy bunny slippers muted what would have probably otherwise been loud clomps. Crap. Had my rent check bounced after all?

“Any damage done to the property is your responsibility, whether it's done by you or your guests.”

I just blinked at her for a moment as I tried to figure out what she was going on about. After coming up with nothing and getting no further elaboration from her, I responded with a confused, “What?”

“Fix it before the month is up or expect the expense added to your next month's rent,” she snapped before turning on her flat, fuzzy slippared heel and storming off to her apartment.

Completely baffled, I took the stairs up to the third floor and felt my heart sink as I took in the damage to my door. It was pockmarked with what looked like the imprint of someone's meaty fists and, judging by what appeared to be a smudge of blood in one of the indentations, that was exactly what I thought had caused the destruction.

I could only think of two people who would be upset with me and even if one of those people knew which apartment was mine, she didn't have fists that matched the size of the craters left in my door. And Barry had never shown such a level of anger, but I guess getting tossed down the stairs was enough to push him to such an extreme.

There was nothing I could do about it at the moment, so I unlocked my door and locked it right back behind me, securing the deadbolt and the barrel lock. I hadn't even taken my cell phone with me when I'd left to train with Reese, thrown off by Barry's visit, but the amount of missed calls and angry texts I saw on it once I lifted it from the counter confirmed my suspicions.

Barry was one pissed-off ex, but if he thought he was going to intimidate me, he had no idea who he was messing with.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I slept fitfully and this time it wasn't solely because of the weird dreams of myself standing in flames while two shadow figures watched me from afar. I was haunted by another figure, one whose identity I knew, and I woke up angry that I had been so bothered by the jerk.

I kicked off my bed sheets and grimaced as pain registered. My knees were still banged up from my training session with Ginger, bruises and thin scrapes marring the skin. My hands, however, were so flawless one would never believe my knuckles had been busted the night before.

I'd plugged my cell phone into the charger on my nightstand before I'd gone to bed and the moment I picked it up to see if it had fully charged, I noticed all the text bubbles and missed call notifications I'd missed while the phone had been in silent mode. I'd slept until well into the afternoon, but Barry appeared to have been wide awake since six in the morning, which was when the first of many messages telling me I wasn't going to just shove him down the stairs and ignore him had started coming in on my phone.

“Oh, you’re going to hear from me,” I growled. He was going to pay for the damage done to my door and if he didn’t leave me alone, he was going to jail.

I stiffened as a knock sounded at my front door, but decided if it was Barry, it was best to face him before he could do any more damage to the property. Just because Bretta had allowed some questionable people to move into the building, it didn’t mean she was going to put up with Barry’s behavior or allow me to continue renting if he kept being a nuisance.

I entered the living room and cursed under my breath for the millionth time about how I had no peephole in my door. According to Bretta, peepholes only made it easier for renters to ignore her when they were past due on their rent, so she took the option of knowing who was on the other side of our doors away from us. Times like these, I wondered if it was possible to sue for such a thing.

I released the two locks on the door and wrenched it open, ready to tear Barry a new one, but was met with Brittany’s wide eyes instead.

“What happened to your door?” she asked, her tone full of alarm as she handed me the delicious-smelling to-go cup of coffee in her hand. “I just got off work and had a feeling you’d need this. Did you just wake up? Are you okay? What happened?”

I stepped back, allowing her to enter as I wrapped my hands around the coffee cup, reveling in the feel of its warmth

spreading through my hands. Thanks to the Starbucks logo on the side, I didn't have to worry about any spit in the coffee.

“What happened to your knees? And where did you get that bruise on your cheek?”

There was a bruise on my cheek? I hadn't even looked at myself before taking a hot shower and changing into the T-shirt and drawstring shorts I slept in and face-planting in my bed after Reese had dropped me off. I wasn't too surprised about the bruise, though. I distinctly remembered that side of my face getting slammed into the floor multiple times as Ginger repeatedly took me down.

“I tripped,” I lied.

The usually bubbly blonde stared at me through squinty, suspicious eyes, not buying my lame coverup for a minute which raised my hackles, but I reminded myself that the young woman had never done me any harm, had never really been what I'd consider a busybody, and *hello*, she'd brought me coffee. Twice. She was like a perky, caring, coffee-bearing fairy. I could look past the inquisitiveness. If she kept bringing me coffee, I could probably even learn to look past the way her blue eyes sparkled and the exorbitant amount of pink in her wardrobe.

“Is that Barbie?” I asked, nodding toward the cartoon blonde on the baby tee that exposed roughly two inches of midriff above the waistband of her light denim jeans.

“Yes. Are you sure you're all right?” she asked, refusing to let up on her probing. “Do you need to contact the police? I'll

go with you or stay here until they arrive.”

I just stared at her, stunned by her amount of concern, and that was when I noticed the small pink gift bag in her hand. “What’s that?”

“Oh.” She looked down, seeming to have forgotten she even had the bag until I pointed it out, and raised it in offering. “I brought you a gift for starting your new job at the funeral home. I got you some candy and snacks, and a crossword puzzle book in case you get bored and don’t want to run your cell phone down, although I guess you could bring a charger for it.”

I just blinked at her for a moment before blurting, “Why would you give me a gift?”

I promptly felt like the world’s biggest jerk as her face fell and moisture glistened in her eyes before she quickly averted her gaze. Pink suffused her cheeks, matching the cotton candy color of her open cardigan and lip gloss.

“I’m sorry if it’s weird. I thought we were... I mean, you were never mean to me at S&R. Girls have always been kind of snotty to me, even after high school. The new girl at work is so snippy.” She withdrew the bag. “I shouldn’t have assumed we—”

“No!” I blurted, realizing the bright-eyed, bubbly young woman wasn’t quite the social bunny I’d always pegged her to be. With her pretty features and perky personality, I’d assumed she had a whole crowd of friends outside of work. Honestly, I’d taken one look at her and figured her to be the type of girl

who shook her pom-poms at the top of the cheerleading pyramid and won prom queen without even having to try. Her being nice to me was just a fluke, something she did because we'd been stuck working alongside each other at S&R. But judging by the hurt expression on her face, that didn't seem to be the case at all. Had she just been that way with me because she thought we were friends? Had we been friends all along and I was just so socially awkward and jaded I didn't even know how to recognize friendship when I had it?

Ugh. It figured I'd finally make a friend and not realize it until I'd hurt the poor thing's feelings. I nearly recoiled, realizing what I was thinking. I didn't have friends for a very good damn reason. However, the woman in front of me looked like a kicked puppy and being the one who'd kicked her didn't feel good at all.

"No, you're misunderstanding me," I said, ignoring the voice in my head screaming, "What the hell are you doing?" My heart had clearly gone soft during the whole death and back thing because I just couldn't take another second of that sad, pouty face. "I just mean, it's not my birthday or Christmas or any other holiday that usually involves presents."

"Oh." She frowned for a moment, little lines sprouting between her eyebrows as she looked down at the pink bag in her hand then slowly looked back up, those baby blues gradually brightening until her soft pink mouth smiled wide and her normally bouncy demeanor was back. "You don't need holidays for gifts! And this is a big occasion. It's your first day

at a new job. Of course I want to wish you the best and give you a little something to celebrate.”

This time, as she raised the gift bag, I didn't hesitate to take it and peek inside to see all the things she'd already told me were in it. “This is really thoughtful. I feel kind of bad because I haven't given you anything. And you brought me coffee. Again. Really, just the coffee was more than enough.”

“Oh.” She waved her hand dismissively. “You just got out of the hospital. You were hit by a bus.”

I blinked slowly. “Why do people keep saying that like I've forgotten? Trust me, when you get hit by a big-ass bus, the memory gets stuck in your brain pretty good.”

She frowned for a moment, then laughed. “Well, I guess you wouldn't forget a thing like that, would you?”

“No.” I shook my head as I walked across the room to set the gift bag on the coffee table. “Believe me, just because I look great doesn't mean I've just gone completely back to normal.”

The moment the words left my mouth, I winced, hoping she wouldn't ask me a bunch of questions. I'd never really asked if there were rules about keeping D.A.M.N.E.D. under wraps, but I knew enough about people to know telling them you were some sort of bounty hunter for Purgatory, not to mention half demonic entity, didn't go over great with them.

“Did you really trip?” Suspicion heavily laced her voice and when I turned to face her, she was watching me with narrowed

eyes once more, not even bothering to not be obvious about her scrutiny. “You can tell me if something happened. That door looks like it’s been beaten on and so does your face.”

“That bad?” I raised my fingertips to my jaw and felt the sensitivity. “It is a little sore.”

“What happened?”

I blew out a breath and took a fortifying gulp of coffee. She might be cute as a button, but the woman was also tenacious, so I figured I might as well answer her damn question. I couldn’t tell her I was training to capture and possibly kill demons, but I could tell her I was taking self-defense lessons and that I suspected my ex of knocking a little too hard on my door.

Before I could get those explanations out, my ex did knock a little too hard on the door, then he opened it and stormed right in, still wearing the blue button-down shirt with his name tag over the right breast pocket and the black uniform pants he was required to wear at his job at the aluminum factory. His breathing was labored, and his dark eyes crazed. Even his hair looked a little wild, as if he’d been raking his fingers through it all day. I also wasn’t the only one bruised. He had one hell of a shiner, no doubt courtesy of the trip I’d given him down the stairs the day before, but my attention was on the accusing finger he pointed at me as his size twelves quickly carried him toward me.

“You’re gonna talk to me,” he snarled. “I don’t know who the hell you think—*aagh!*” He let loose a pain-filled scream

and jerked away from the misty cloud of pepper spray Brittany had just hosed him with.

I looked over at her with my mouth agape.

“I didn’t like his tone,” the no longer quite so bubbly blonde said as she tucked the canister back into the little pink purse hanging from her shoulder.

I blinked a few times as I stared at her in stunned silence, noticing a grit I’d never seen in her before, then swung my gaze back over to Barry, watching the big jerk wipe frantically at his watering eyes as he hurled profanities and made agonized noises. And then I burst out laughing.

“Holy shit, Brittany. I didn’t think you had it in you to hurt a fly.”

“That’s not a fly. That’s a big jerk,” she said matter-of-factly, folding her arms below her ample chest. “So now are you going to admit you didn’t just slip?”

“What the hell is going on in here?”

I looked away from Brittany to see a very pissed off Reese standing in the doorway. His heated glare roved over the door damage before shifting to where Barry swiped at the air, threatening to strangle me and the blonde bimbo who’d just doused him with pepper spray.

“Bimbo?” Brittany unzipped her purse. “Oh, that’s it. He’s getting another dose.”

“Not necessary,” Reese said, sizing up the situation before he crossed over the threshold and cold-cocked Barry, putting

the raving and ranting jerk out of his misery before slinging my ex over his shoulder as if the jackass weighed nothing.

“That’s it, Malvada!” Bretta’s screech reached my apartment before she did. “Whatever is going on in—*helllllo, handsome.*”

I rolled my eyes as my landlady stopped in the doorway and immediately zeroed in on the source of testosterone in the room. She’d poured herself into a low-cut, hot pink V-neck top and black and white tiger stripe leggings and as soon as she locked her hungry eyes onto Reese, she jutted out a hip and arched her back, pushing out her best assets for his viewing pleasure.

“Sorry for the disturbance,” I muttered, wondering if the woman even cared anymore. She hadn’t stopped staring at Reese and I was pretty sure drool was pooling in the corner of her pink-lacquered mouth. “I was just about to call the police on my uninvited guest, but as you can see, the situation has been handled.”

“Yes, I see,” she all but purred.

Reese glanced back at me with a look that suggested he was going to hold me accountable if the woman visually feasting on him got handsy, and shifted Barry farther onto his shoulder before stepping toward the door. “Excuse me. I’m just going to take this trash out.”

“Bretta!” I yelled loud enough to shock the woman into jerking her head my way as she reached out for Reese, stopping her just before her pointy fingernails could find

purchase over his abs as he turned sideways to squeeze past her.

“What?” she snapped.

“Oh, nothing,” I said, Reese now safely past her. It helped that he hadn’t wasted any time by bothering to protect Barry’s head from hitting the jamb as he moved past the lusty landlady. “I just wanted to explain. That was my ex. Apparently, he’s got anger issues I didn’t know about. I think he knows better than to show his face around here anymore, and I’m going to make sure he pays to fix the door.”

“Yes, well, he’d better.” Her eyes narrowed before she glanced down the hall. “So, the other man is—”

“My new boyfriend,” I said quickly, putting a damper on any ideas she might be brewing. I wasn’t really sure why. Reese could certainly handle himself against a human woman, even one as aggressive as Bretta, but the words slipped out before I could really think why I felt the need to shoot down the woman’s horny hopes and dreams.

She grunted and gave me an annoyed look before straightening back into a normal standing position. “Well, aren’t you fishing in all the right holes.”

I looked at Brittany and she shrugged, appearing as confused by the comment as I was.

“I see that big lug who damaged my door around here again, I’m calling the police.”

“Please do. That would be most helpful.” I pasted on a big smile, which only seemed to annoy her more before she *hmmphed* and turned on her heel, leaving.

“Um, so was the guy I pepper sprayed really your ex?” Brittany asked as Bretta departed.

“Unfortunately.” I took a drink of coffee, realizing I’d never let go of it, not even during all the excitement.

“And who was the really hot guy who just carried him out of here?”

Ah, how did I explain the really hot guy? “Oh, him. Uh, that’s Reese.”

“And Reese is?” She arched a perfectly sculpted pale eyebrow as I searched for the right words to explain Reese.

“Reese is a friend. He, uh, he’s been teaching me self-defense.”

Self-defense against the dark arts, I thought to myself and bit my lower lip to hold back nervous laughter. As Reese returned, I noticed the slight curve to the corners of his mouth and subtle headshake as he looked at me and knew he’d read my mind.

“He’s all taken care of,” he announced as he closed the door to my apartment. “I’m assuming he did the redecoration of this door?”

“Yes. What did you do with him?” Had Reese killed the guy after Brittany and Bretta had just seen him carried out? Would

he have to kill them too to keep them quiet, or could he do some sort of vampire mind erasure?

I could tell by the way his brows knit together in annoyance that he'd heard all that too. "I tossed him into a dumpster. Don't worry, I'm sure he'll wake up before the trash is collected. Who's your friend?"

"Oh." I blinked, remembering it was customary to introduce people. "Sorry, my manners are rusty. I'm not used to having people over, and I wasn't expecting you to come by until... I wasn't expecting you to come by."

"I said I was going to give you a cooking lesson, remember? I thought I'd do that now, since you're supposed to start your job later."

"Oh, that's right." I looked over at Brittany, who was eating Reese up with eyes full of appreciation, but fortunately her baby blues didn't contain the R-rated lust Bretta's had been filled to the brim with and I didn't notice any drool dripping from her heart-shaped mouth. "Um, this is Brittany. We used to work together at S&R."

"Oh, the place you got fired from after that old lady whooped you with a pair of panties?"

I turned a hot glare Reese's way to see him barely holding in laughter and speared him with what I hoped was a look that shriveled his balls. The twinkle in his eyes suggested my glare wasn't nearly as lethal as I'd hoped.

“Just kidding,” he said before clearing his throat, making an effort to sober. “I know she really wasn’t all that old.”

“She wasn’t old at all, and she didn’t whoop me with panties.” I somehow got the response out through tightly gritted teeth. “She didn’t whoop me at all.”

He raised his hand, the tips of his index finger and thumb close together as if saying the woman had whooped my ass a little bit. “But it’s okay now. I’ll teach you everything you need to know to take down irate middle-aged shoppers armed with granny panties.”

I’m putting a stake through you during our next training session, I thought as loudly as I could, and Reese coughed to cover up the laughter it caused.

“Brittany, this ever-growing pain in my ass is Reese...” My mouth slowly curved into a wide grin as I realized I didn’t know Reese’s last name, if he even had one, but that didn’t have to stop me from giving it anyway. “Reese Poots.”

Brittany’s cheeks flooded pink, and she did a few rapid blinks before turning her head in my direction. “I’m sorry. Poots?”

I nodded. “Like toots, but with a P. Reese Poots. Kind of an unfortunate name, if you ask me, but he wears it with such pride. It’s commendable, really.”

“It’s very unfortunate,” Reese agreed with a wide grin, “but we all have our crosses to bear. Pleased to meet you Brittany...?”

“Green,” she answered for me, and I was glad because Reese wasn’t the only one whose last name was a mystery to me.

“Ms. Green.” Reese dipped his head and covered the distance to take her hand, all gentleman-like.

Brittany blushed, and I fought an eye roll.

“Have you eaten yet?”

Realizing Reese had released Brittany’s hand and was eyeing the coffee in my grip, I shook my head. “I just woke up not that long ago. As you know, I had a late night.”

“A hearty meal it is then.” He crossed over to the small kitchen area and started taking things out of the refrigerator and cabinets as if he owned the place, but seeing as how he’d bought most of the items he was handling, I didn’t complain. “Will you be joining us, Brittany? It’s no problem at all to make three servings.”

“Oh, well...” She looked over at me, her bottom lip pulled under her perfectly straight, white teeth and so much hope in her eyes I couldn’t do anything but nod my head in encouragement and wonder what the hell happened to me for me to allow her to stay in my apartment, disrupting my fortress of solitude. Those big blue eyes brightened like I’d just told her Santa Claus was real and she was getting a mansion full of fluffy kitties for Christmas. “I’d love to.”

She moved over toward the bar, walking backward so she could wag her hand in front of her and mouth, “He is so hot,”

without the eye candy seeing her.

I didn't bother fighting the eye roll that time.

"Has this even been used before?" Reese stood by the counter, looking at a pan he'd taken out of one of the lower cabinets.

I looked at the pan in question and shook my head. "Nope. I told you I'm not much of a cook. I only have that because it came in the set I bought, and I only bought the set because I needed the pot from it to make ramen noodles and mac and cheese."

He shot me a disappointed look before shaking his head and gestured for us to come closer. "Get over here, Malvada. You're learning how to make salmon with broccoli and rice."

"I knew you were a health nut," I muttered before swigging down more mood-fortifying coffee and joining him in the kitchen space.

Reese turned out to be a pretty good cooking instructor, patiently answering the questions from both his students, giving instruction without being bossy, and amazingly enough, he kept the jokes at my expense down to a minimum. And the food, once finished, was delicious. Even better, the conversation hadn't been painful or all that awkward.

"Oh my gosh, I am *so* making this again before the week is out," Brittany said, setting her spoon in the bowl that looked as if it had been licked clean.

I did the same. Once the salmon had been grilled to perfection in olive oil and Cajun seasonings, Reese had shown us how to chop it into very small pieces and combine it with the white rice and finely chopped steamed broccoli to create a dish that resembled fried rice but tasted like manna from heaven.

“It was really good,” I admitted.

“We’ll make meatloaf tomorrow.” He collected the bowls, including the one he’d eaten out of as if he were a normal non-blood-drinking man, and carried them over to the sink.

Brittany looked over at me from where she sat at my side at the bar and wagged her eyebrows. “He even does the dishes,” she said in a tone she thought he couldn’t hear, but knowing he had better hearing than a dog, heat filled my face.

“He’s just a friend,” I said in the same low voice, knowing it didn’t matter, but it would have seemed weird to her if I spoke in a normal tone while we were supposed to be talking in secret.

“I’ll take care of those.” I jumped up and moved over to the sink just as Reese turned the faucet on.

“Is the ladies’ room through there?” Brittany asked, and I turned to see her pointing toward my bedroom.

“Yes. Just go in through my bedroom.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, gave another hint-filled look at Reese, and made her way to the bathroom.

“I like her for you,” Reese said, leaning back against the counter with his arms folded as he watched me clean the dishes and stack them in the drying rack.

“Funny. With all the hinting and commentary, I’m sure she likes the idea of me with you. Clearly, she has some issues when it comes to taste or common sense.”

“Hardy-har-har. And I didn’t mean I like her for you in a romantic way. Somehow, your reclusive, standoffish, antisocial self has made a friend.”

“Whatever. I can’t just kick her out when she shows up here. It feels like kicking a puppy.” I turned off the faucet and glanced toward the bedroom. “Or a fuzzy baby bunny.”

“It’s a good thing, Malvada. The more you open yourself to healthy, positive relationships, the more of a fighting chance you have against going dark once your awak—*er*, hostile takeover happens.”

“Speaking of the inevitable hostile takeover and all that that entails...” I released the sink stopper, allowing the dishwater to run out, and dried my hands on a paper towel as I turned to look up at the vampire. “She bought the self-defense instructor who happens to also give cooking lessons bit, but if you planned on doing any real training tonight, I’m going to have to disappoint you and get rid of her.”

“Let her stay. Like I said, this friendship is good for you. Not all of your training will involve physical fighting.” He reached up and touched my cheek with the back of his hand and I automatically jerked back as pain flared. “Yeah, that’s

what I thought. Just a few drops of blood would take care of that for you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Have you even looked at yourself?”

I frowned, realizing I hadn’t. I hadn’t even bothered to get dressed and in my drawstring shorts, my knees were on full scraped and discolored display. “No, but I’m guessing that side of my face is the same color as my kneecaps?”

He made an affirmative sound in his throat. “Hardly the look I’d want when showing up for the first night on my new job. Come on, Malvada, Aleve can help with the pain, but it can’t completely get rid of it, and it won’t do a damn thing for the bruising.”

“I am not drinking your nasty blood,” I said, the words coming out as a growl I was careful to keep very low as I heard the sound of the toilet flushing from my bathroom and knew we didn’t have much time before my bright-eyed, bubbly, new gal-pal bounced back in. “I don’t care how magical and healing it is; it’s blood and I’m not drinking blood like some disgusting...”

“Vampire,” he supplied dryly.

“Yeah. No offense.”

“Pretty sure some offense was meant and you’re being stubborn. A few drops and you’ll look a lot better. Put it in your coffee and you won’t even taste it.”

“Stay away from my coffee or face castration, you heathen.” I ignored his bark of laughter. “Besides, Brittany has already seen me, and she’s just been randomly popping up since I got out of the hospital. It’s bad enough she and the hospital staff think some miracle occurred to heal me from the accident so fast, but how would I explain healing these scrapes and bruises so quickly if she pops up tomorrow and they’re completely gone? We’re supposed to be normal humans, remember? Normal humans take time to heal.”

“Good luck impressing your new boss, then.”

“Thanks, and don’t worry about it. Makeup can be almost as magical as your miracle blood. I doubt he’ll care much about how I look anyway. I’m watching the funeral home overnight. It’ll just be me and the dead people.”

A shiver worked its way up my spine as it registered I’d be spending the entire night alone with dead bodies. I’d known it all along but hadn’t really considered how unnerving it was once I really thought about it.

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Did you just shiver?”

“No,” I said a little too defensively, spurring a chuckle out of the aggravating vampire.

“Face it, Malvada. You just realized you’re going to be spending the night with dead people and you’re shaking in your shorts. Literally.”

“Oh no. You’re not getting scared, are you?” Brittany asked as she reentered the room. “I told my uncle you’d be there tonight.”

“No, I’m not scared, and I will be just fine there tonight. I can handle dead people.” I glared at Reese and lowered my voice. “I’m getting lots of practice with the annoying ones.”

His smile dazzled. “I’ll stick around and give you a ride to work since you’re still without a reliable mode of transportation.”

“The bus is reliable.”

“Hardly, and it seems you’re having issues with your ex. I’d prefer you not put yourself in a vulnerable position until we’re sure he’s moved past his little snit.”

“I can handle Barry.”

“Without it coming back to haunt you?” he inquired, his voice low, and I knew he was referencing the Purgatory point system. “Since Brittany’s here to help, why don’t you see what you can do about those bruises and if there’s time, we’ll see if we can get in a little training. Nothing that’ll bang you up before work.”

“Oh, can I stay and watch?” Brittany asked. “Can you show us how to do that thing where you flip a man twice your size over your shoulder? Is that really possible for a small person to do, or is that just something they show on TV?”

Reese stared at the blonde with a very serious expression, and I was just about to step in and brush her off for him,

knowing he wouldn't want a normal human woman witnessing whatever training he had planned for me, when he spoke. "It's possible, and it's something every woman should know how to do, so I don't mind showing you how at all."

As Brittany jumped up and down, clapping her hands like a giddy seal, I studied Reese, wondering what his angle was. Was he really just some nice guy concerned with the welfare of some young woman he didn't really know, or was the oblivious woman just a tasty snack he realized he could have later?

"*Unfuckingbelievable,*" he muttered under his breath as he shot me a dark look, clearly having read my mind. "Go see what you can do about your face, Malvada, so I can show you a thing or two. You clearly still have a lot to learn."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I did it!”

“Yes, you did, and very well,” Reese said as he straightened from the position he’d landed in after Brittany had flipped him over her shoulder. He shook his arm, reminding her she still gripped his wrist tight, and smiled when she realized it and let him go. “If that had been for real, your assailant would have landed on his back, which would have knocked all the wind out of him, buying you time to run to safety.”

“Or time to stomp his crotch until he begs for his mother,” Brittany said, the gleam of excitement in her eyes.

“Or that,” Reese said, his eyebrows an inch closer to his hairline as he appeared to fight the urge to laugh. “But I would prefer that if you ever find yourself in a situation where you need to use this maneuver, you run away as soon as you can instead of risking getting yourself right back into a dangerous spot.”

“I know, I know.” She smiled shyly. “How do you always land on your feet like that? You’re like a cat.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” he answered, “but don’t worry. The odds of anyone else being able to do that after you put the slam on them are highly unlikely.”

Brittany’s eyes shifted to somewhere in the kitchen area, and as they widened, I realized she’d noted the time on the microwave. “Oh, look at what time it is. I should probably go now instead of taking up all your time before you have to leave for work.”

The way she snagged her lower lip between her teeth as she looked over to where I sat on the couch pulled at my soft, mushy marshmallow core. I really needed to toast that damn thing and get back to the hard-edged antisocial recluse I’d been before getting splattered by a bus hard enough to apparently reset my factory settings.

“It wasn’t a bother,” I said, “and if you weren’t here, Reese would have probably given me a much harder training session. He’s nicer around you.”

“I don’t know if I believe that,” she said, glancing at Reese’s annoyed face before swinging her gaze back my way and shaking her head as if she were chiding me. “I’ll leave you two, but play nice and accept his offer to take you to work if you don’t want me to. Bus stops aren’t safe at night, even if you were just taught how to flip a meaty guy over your shoulder. That move won’t do a lot against bullets.”

I opened my mouth to tell her I’d reconsidered and wouldn’t mind her previous offer of a ride when Reese spoke up. “I’ll make sure she gets to work safely.”

The stony expression he aimed my way warned me he wouldn't budge on the matter, so I didn't bother trying to argue.

“Okay. Well, thanks again. The food was great, and I can't wait to use my new move if I ever have to.”

“Hopefully you never will,” Reese said, walking toward the door. “I'll see you to your vehicle. It's dark out there and it's not just bus stops that are dangerous at night.”

Brittany smiled brightly and nodded her head in acceptance before waving at me. “Good luck tonight, but you won't need it. You're going to do great.”

I gave a little wave back and forced a smile. Not the easiest thing to do under the weight of Reese's glower as he stood by the open door. Once Brittany walked through it, he shook his head at me and followed her, closing the door behind them.

I had the strongest urge to run across the room and lock it, locking the deadbolt and the barrel bolt, but why bother? He'd use whatever the heck it was he had that allowed him to just unlock it and enter anyway. I had the feeling even a heavy plank nailed over the door wouldn't do anything to deter him if he really wanted in, so I stood and straightened the dark blue long-sleeved tee I'd put on after my quick shower. Paired with jeans and white and dark blue Adidas, Brittany had assured me I was dressed well enough for the job, and comfort was more important than looking nice. I wouldn't be dealing with any grieving families unless, of course, they were weirdos who tried to sneak in overnight.

We'd used my small collection of makeup to tone down the bruising on the side of my face, which, once I'd taken a good look at it, I had to admit was on the bad side. But thanks to the power of Cover Girl, Brittany's great-uncle wouldn't notice a thing. As for my knees, they were uncomfortable and itchy, but I didn't expect to be doing anything physical for the rest of the night. Despite what he'd said about not taking it easy on me, Reese hadn't been all that rough while showing me how to grab an assailant who might attack from behind and flip the bastard, using my shoulder for leverage. He'd even been thoughtful enough to land on his feet each time, knowing that allowing himself to land hard on his back would not endear me to anyone who lived on the floor below us.

I was putting up the now-dry dishes when he came back in. "I half expected you to attempt to lock me out."

"Kind of useless, so what would be the point?"

"I ensured she made it to her car safely." He walked over and leaned against the counter with his hands shoved into his pants pockets. "You can call her and make sure I didn't kill her or attack her or anything."

I slammed the cabinet door I had just put the glasses back in and spun on him. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to say it."

"No, I didn't have to say a word because you just invaded my mind and stole my private thoughts."

“It’s not like that,” he defended himself, “and I told you already that I can’t help reading your thoughts.”

“And I can’t help thinking them,” I snapped. “Yes, I had a thought that you might want Brittany to hang around so you could drink her blood. I’ve just learned vampires are real, remember? I don’t know how you get your blood or how often you need it. And FYI, your pissy-ass mood is ridiculous. You can’t get all butthurt over me having a thought like that. It’s not like I’ve known you for years or something. I’m not going to instantly trust you just because you tell me to. You’ve already said you don’t fully trust me yet either, so what’s the damn problem?”

“I am,” he muttered and blew out a breath as his puffed-out chest deflated. “I’m the problem because everything you just said is true. I guess I just don’t like it very much. I don’t like that I can make an innocent offer and all you think is *monster stalking prey*.”

“It’s not all I think,” I muttered, “but it is an initial gut reaction, and I won’t apologize for what should have been a private suspicion of someone I’ve not known that long. Someone who is a lot bigger and stronger than me. You were in the foster care system for a while too. You know what it was like. These instincts I’ve developed, this hesitancy to trust and need to protect myself, are not going to disappear anytime soon. I won’t apologize for questioning you.”

“And you shouldn’t,” he said, straightening from the counter. “You really can trust me, but I get that it’s going to

take more than my say-so for you to get that. That said, I'm going to insist on giving you a ride to this new job of yours. Your ex may just be a human man, but he's a big human man, and based on what he did to that door and the way he has stormed in here twice now, he's a big man with a lot of anger and hostility. And clearly one who never valued you enough to honor the relationship you had, yet is outraged that you broke it off and have stood up to him since. All of that is a bad combination that makes him very dangerous."

"Fine," I mumbled. "Besides, if I were taking the bus, I would have had to get on it already."

"I know. That's why I took my time with the flipping lessons." He winked at me. "I got your back, Malvada, whether you like it or not. Let's get you to work."

"Do I look all right?" I stood straighter and fidgeted with the bottom of my shirt as I raised my chin and angled my head a little to the side. "Did we do a good enough job with the makeup?"

He stared at me with a strange look long enough to be just short of uncomfortable. "You look great. Whoever you're working for won't see anything wrong with you at all."

I felt a blush and ducked my head, using the need to grab a jacket from the bedroom closet as a distraction. It wasn't all that cold out yet, so I grabbed a lightweight hooded jacket with a zipper and carried it draped over my arm as I returned to the living room and picked up the little pink gift bag Brittany had brought with her.

“First day of work gift from Brittany,” I explained, raising it a little.

Reese grinned. “I meant what I said. She’s good for you. As much as it bothered me for you to worry I might want to attack her, it also showed you can be protective of those you think of as vulnerable. I like what she brings out in you.”

I rolled my eyes as I crossed over to the door. “She wears Barbie shirts and says *fudge* when she wants to drop an F-bomb.”

He chuckled as we left the apartment, and I locked the door behind me. “Don’t let that fool you. I saw a tiger when she flipped me, not a timid little cat. There’s spirit in that one.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I started down the stairs, Reese at my side.

“So, are you going to tell me exactly what happened with the door? When did it happen?”

“While I was getting my ass kicked by your friend,” I answered. “I have no idea the exact time, but it was while I was gone. Bretta was waiting up for me so she could tell me in no uncertain terms how unhappy she was with the incident. Damn. I meant to make Barry fork over the cash to pay for the repair, but I was blindsided by Brittany drowning him in pepper spray. Then you arrived with Bretta right after you. I got distracted.”

“I take it your landlady is passing the cost of repairs on to you?”

“Of course. In case you haven’t picked up on it yet, Bretta is only about one step up from a slumlord.”

“Yeah, I don’t find that too surprising.” We were outside now, and Reese looked over at me as we continued toward his car. “Do you really think your ex is going to pay for the damage he did?”

“I’m not going to give him a choice in the matter.”

Reese used his key fob to unlock the car and opened the passenger side door. Although he didn’t say anything in response to my statement, the look on his face said enough. I didn’t call him out on it until we were both seated inside the vehicle and he started the ignition.

“You don’t think I can handle him?”

“I’m sure you can handle anyone you want to handle when you really set your mind to it. It’s the way you handle them that concerns me.”

“Meaning?”

“As stated before, you’re not much on social skills.” He glanced at his side-view mirror before pulling away from the curb and straightening out on the road. “Given the nature of your previous relationship with this Barry character, I’m sure you had other ways of getting what you wanted from him, but I don’t see you using such methods now that your relationship has ended. The man is pissed enough to try beating down your door and apparently mad enough that he keeps coming back after you’ve made it clear the two of you are no longer a thing.

I don't see him handing over money just because you ask him nicely, assuming you even know how to do that."

"Funny."

"I'm deadly serious. Your every action is being scored. Robbing the man isn't going to earn you the kind of points you want. Beating the hell out of him definitely isn't."

"So, what you're saying is that even though he damaged my property, making him accountable for his actions is a bad thing for me?"

"If it requires theft or violence, yes."

"Killing assigned targets is literally our job and we do the job to earn good points, but just squeezing Barry's balls until he hands over his wallet can earn points that will send me in the other direction?"

Reese seemed to think about my question for a moment before nodding. "Yep, that's pretty much it."

"This job makes no sense."

"Yeah, well, I learned a long time ago not to try too hard to wrap my mind around the whole Purgatory thing. I mean, it makes no sense you survived a bus crash, or that I came back from basically getting ripped apart, but here we are."

"He's going to pay for what he did," I grumbled as I stared out the window. "And he's going to stop bothering me. Surely, I'm justified in protecting myself from a hostile jerk who can't let go."

“If he physically attacks you, then by all means, beat the shit out of him. That’s justified. Beating him and taking his money because he pissed you off is a fine line you want to stay away from.” Reese glanced my way. “It’s not worth it.”

Easy for him to say. I only had the money he’d gotten back from Sal’s Garage, and I still needed to buy a new car. The bus was doable, but it was a pain. The last thing I needed was an unexpected maintenance expense.

I kept those thoughts to myself—or at least I hoped I did, but Reese probably heard them anyway—as we continued in silence. Eventually, we reached the cemetery and Reese took the winding lane up to Green Funeral Home.

The building was white and reminded me of a scaled-down plantation home with its columns in front. The double doors at the entrance looked to be made of heavy wood and long stained-glass window panels depicting doves and olive branches rested in their centers, matching the long narrow windows at each side. Reese pulled to a stop right in front, not needing to park since the circular driveway would allow him to leave right after dropping me off. “So, you’re here all night?”

“Until seven in the morning,” I told him as I looked up at the building. “I’ll catch a bus home.”

“You need to get another vehicle.”

“Hence the luxurious job.” I made sure I had everything, and by everything, I meant my keys, my phone, and the gift bag Brittany had given me, which I hadn’t realized until that

moment that I hadn't had to bring with me, but whatever. I was bound to get bored and hungry, so the snacks and crossword puzzles inside it would come in handy. "Thanks for the ride. Guess we'll train sometime tomorrow? Do me a favor and at least let me sleep until noon before you barge in, wanting to knock me around."

"I'll consider it." He grinned when I shot him my perturbed face. "Have a good first night with the ghosts."

"Oh, shut up." I got out, grinding my teeth as his laughter followed me out of the car, and didn't look back as I straightened my shoulders and marched toward the funeral home before my nerves could get the best of me and force my body to turn around and run in the opposite direction.

"Quit being a wuss," I chided myself under my breath as I continued to the front doors. I'd be assigned my first target soon enough and even if I had Reese with me, I was sure the demons we'd be assigned to catch and terminate were a lot more dangerous to me than the poor dead people inside the funeral home.

I opened the heavy door, fighting a cringe as it creaked like something that belonged to a haunted mansion, and stepped inside.

The lobby was pristine, with gold and royal blue carpet in a fancy swirly design and rich-textured ivory-painted walls with gold and blue trim that matched the carpet. An empty buffet table covered in a royal blue tablecloth sat against the back wall under a large painting of white doves that appeared to be

soaring high into the heavens. An unmanned reception desk was on my right with what looked like a sign-in book atop it, and at the end of the lobby, I had the choice of going left or right.

I was spared the opportunity to make either the right or wrong decision by an older man whose hair was blindingly white. His blue eyes were shrewd, his chin stubborn, and his nose slightly crooked. The charcoal suit he wore looked like something good money was spent on and he wore it well, despite the way his shoulders hunched.

He came to a stop and gripped the frame of his glasses as he saw me. He pushed the thick lenses up higher on the bridge of his nose and squinted as he took me in from head to toe. “Are you Darcy?”

“Dulce. Dulce Malvada.”

“That’s the one.” He gave me another top-to-bottom look. “Do you smoke?”

“No, sir.”

“Sir? Last time someone your age called me sir, I was only twice your age. I like you, Dolly. Do you drink?”

“No, sir,” I replied, not bothering to correct him again. I had the feeling it would be a waste of our time, and he didn’t look like he had a lot of time left.

“Are you into all that séance and ghost-hunting stuff?”

I was pretty sure my eyebrows popped into my hairline and the “No, sir” I responded with was much more emphatic than

the previous two.

“Good, good. Let’s give you the tour, Darla, and I’ll tell you all about the job.”

Mr. Green was spryer than his physical appearance would suggest, and he didn’t lose any breath as he rambled on about what was expected of me. My hourly pay was good even if the hours weren’t much and I had no benefits but according to Reese, I had a pretty good healthcare plan already, and the job itself was pretty simple: watch the funeral home, call the police if anyone broke in, let all calls go to voicemail, stay out of his office, and don’t bother the deceased guests, which, according to the old man, meant no poking at them, no messing with them, and no taking pictures or videos of them. And absolutely, positively, no trying to raise them from the dead like a nut job. His words, not mine.

“So, what do you think, Dory?”

“Sounds easy, Mr. Green. I shouldn’t have any problems.”

He gave me another speculative look as he hoisted up his pants. “Yeah, well, if you do, don’t call me. I promise, anything you hear will be the wind or the pipes or the heating or air conditioning. We don’t have rats, mice, or ghosts. There’s no such thing as ghosts, spooks, werewolves, vampires, demons, witches, or any other googly mooglies they keep making those awful books and movies about. On the off chance you do hear or see something that’s real, call the police because it’s one of those hoodlums that got past the cemetery’s

night guard. Just pains in the backseat, nothing dangerous. You got it?”

I fought a grin as I nodded, not wanting to be the one to tell him he was wrong on a few counts. “Yes, sir, Mr. Green. I’ll be just fine.”

“We’ll see. I’ll be back bright and early in the morning. Lock up after me,” he said as he started walking toward the front of the lobby. “It goes without saying, if I show up at seven in the morning and you’ve run scared in the middle of the night, you’re fired.”



Four hours later, I still hadn’t run scared, but the quietness mixed with the late hour was starting to get to me. The funeral home consisted of the lobby, four viewing rooms, two public restrooms, Mr. Green’s office, a small employee breakroom, and an off-limits area in the back where the deceased were dressed and done up for their viewings or else kept cool before it was time to do all that stuff. I shivered just thinking about it as I strolled down the hall.

I’d been sitting at the reception desk working on one of the crossword puzzles Brittany had gifted me when the sense I wasn’t alone got to be too much. Knowing it was all in my head, I decided to take a walk before I let fear get too tight of a grip on me. If I gave up on the job because I couldn’t take one

night alone in a funeral home, Reese would never let me hear the end of it.

The viewing rooms were blocked together in the center of the building and the hallway went all the way around them, so I was able to walk in a circle—or more of a square, I supposed—and peek inside the large arched doorway of each room as I passed to assure myself there was no one loitering in any of them.

I inspected two as I passed and came to the section of the hall that ran past the off-limits area of the building where a big DO NOT ENTER sign warned any curious visitors not to attempt opening the double doors that separated the waiting dead from the on-display dead and their friends and relatives. A shiver ran through me as I imagined what I might find beyond those doors and kept going, fighting the urge to run past them.

Just as I passed the doors, walking at a normal pace, which I was proud of, they swung open and a reanimated dead woman jumped out with a screech, and barreled straight toward me.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I let loose a screech of my own in the form of a blood-curdling scream and grabbed the charging woman by her arms. By the time my brain caught up to my racing heart and I realized who my attacker was, I'd already tossed Ginger down the hall like a rag doll and backed against the wall next to the doors where I clamped my knees together and did some Kegel exercises while recatching my breath.

The spiky-haired vampire tucked into a ball and effortlessly rolled right-side-up onto her feet, only taking two shaky steps back before she came to a stop without falling on her ass. “Hey, not bad, newbie. You totally sucked at the figuring out you weren’t alone part though, but—hey, what are you doing? Why are you standing all weird like that?”

I took my eyes off the woman dressed in all-black to look down at my tightly locked thighs and the way I was hunched over. “I thought a dead woman just jumped out at me. Why the hell do you think I’m standing like this? I’m still trying not to piss my pants!”

Ginger threw back her head and laughed before walking over, her hands held out palm-side-up before she reached me and helped straighten me back up. “Are you okay? Did you piddle?”

“No, I did not piddle, but I came pretty damn close. Where is he?” I scanned the hall. “Where’s Reese? If he’s somewhere laughing his ass off, I’m about to teach *him* a few things.”

“He was here. He was here a couple of hours, actually, before I showed up, but he took off about half an hour ago to do something. He’ll be back soon.”

“A couple of hours?” I did another scan of the area around me until my gaze landed on those double doors again. “So, the two of you have just been hanging out in the restricted area with the dead bodies, spying on me?”

“Actually, we’ve scoped out the whole building right under your nose. I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you’re not a very good night watchguard.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing Mr. Green doesn’t like technology,” I muttered. At least my lackluster job performance hadn’t been caught on film. “Did you two ever stop to think that you may have otherwise been recorded?”

“That was the first thing Reese checked for. There is no surveillance in this building. Well, except for you, which is kind of saying the same thing.” She chuckled, but the sound died as she looked over at me. “Hey, chin up, buttercup. You’re new at this, but Reese will train you and make you a threat to be reckoned with before you know it.”

Well, I supposed that was a good thing because if I couldn't detect two fully grown adult vampires creeping around me in an otherwise empty building where I should have heard every single movement, I had no clue how I was ever going to avoid getting snuck up on by the very demons I would be assigned to track down, and killed before I knew what was happening.

“Hey. You're going to be all right. Reese knows what he's doing.” Ginger slid her arm through mine and prodded me along, back toward the front of the building.

“So, you were back there with the dead guys?”

“Guys, gals. There are a variety of recently departed back there.”

I shuddered and Ginger had the decency to only smirk. “But they were all still, right? None of them are going to creep out here on us?”

She rolled her eyes. “The dead tend to stay dead, and they don't often move. When they do, it's spasms or something. And those dead people in there are either refrigerated or embalmed. They're not going to come out and mess with you. You should go check them out and see for yourself. It might make you feel better once you see they're just like really lifelike wax dummies.”

I shuddered again at that image. “No, thank you, and that's a restricted area. I hope you two didn't leave any evidence of having been back there. If you did, I'm out of a job and as fabulous as this job isn't, I still need it.”

“No worries, buttercup. We didn’t leave any evidence of being in there. Hey, there’s someone in this viewing room,” she announced as we passed viewing room A. “She’s a real sweet-looking little old lady all done up for her funeral tomorrow if you want to go lift the lid on her casket and take a quick peek.”

“I don’t want to take a quick peek!” I realized I’d nearly shouted and willed myself to calm down as I removed my arm from Ginger’s and shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket. “How is she not rotting, being left out like that?”

“She would have either been refrigerated or embalmed shortly after arriving here and that slows down the process long enough for her to be able to be put out on display for the wake and funeral,” Ginger explained. “Also, as you can tell from your need to wear your jacket, it’s kept cool in here. And believe me, once someone is embalmed, they’re definitely not coming back, so you don’t have to worry about Mamaw in there climbing out and trying to eat your brains or anything.”

“Good to know, and I’m not scared or anything. Or at least I wasn’t until you jumped out of that room where I knew the dead bodies were kept.” I narrowed my eyes at her, and she grinned mischievously, without a trace of shame.

“I couldn’t resist. I was supposed to just hang around and see how long it took you to notice you weren’t alone, *if* you noticed, and how well you did at finding the entity you picked up on, but I got bored and once you took that walk, I picked up on your nervousness and it was just all too tempting.”

“Jerk,” I muttered, earning a soft, unoffended chuckle. “And I’ll have you know, I took the walk because I did sense I wasn’t alone. I’d sensed it a few times over the course of the night, but I thought it was just my imagination acting up on me because I was alone, or thought I was alone, with dead people in an empty building right by a freaking cemetery.”

“Good, so you did know you weren’t alone. Now you just need to learn how to trust your instincts and know whether what you’re sensing is an actual threat or a figment of your imagination.”

“And how do I do that?”

“The easiest way is to not be afraid. Fear feeds your imagination, and you can simply choose not to feed it.”

“Oh, that easy, huh?”

“Actually, yes,” she replied as if she hadn’t picked up on my sarcasm at all, or just chose not to acknowledge it. “You can choose not to be afraid. Focus on your training. Reese is going to teach you how to observe, how to track, how to read your surroundings, and how to fight. Once you are trained how to take out all the bad things, there shouldn’t be anything left to be afraid of so if you’re still afraid after you’ve been trained, you’re making the choice to not trust in what he has taught you. You’re making the choice to be afraid. How good are you with choices, buttercup?”

“Judging by her taste in coffee and exes, not all that great,” a deep voice said as we reached the lobby to find Reese walking toward us, holding out a large steaming to-go cup of

coffee that smelled of chocolate and cinnamon. “I thought you might be wanting one of these nasty things right about now.”

The coffee smelled so good and was so welcome after being awake looking over my shoulder—for all the good it did me—all night, I bit my tongue instead of unleashing the barbs I’d been ready to sling at him for his antics and nodded my head as I covered the distance between us. “Thanks. I could definitely use that right now.”

I didn’t hesitate to take a draw from the thick paper cup. It wasn’t from the coffee shop on my corner, which wasn’t surprising considering the late hour and fact that the shop wasn’t a twenty-four-hour location, not to mention we weren’t near my neighborhood, but it had all the right ingredients in it to hit the spot and instantly mellow out my mood.

“So, did she actually detect your presence, or did you get bored and decide to speed things along?” Reese asked Ginger, narrowing his dark eyes at her.

“A little of both,” the spiky-haired vampire answered with a grin.

“I sensed I wasn’t alone a long time ago,” I said, before chugging down more coffee. “But you didn’t say anything about any training tonight, so I thought it was just my imagination.”

“You’re always in training,” Reese said. “And you’re always being tested.”

“You couldn’t have told me this?”

“That would defeat the purpose.” He gave me a look that practically screamed *Duh* before his gaze slid over to the desk I’d been sitting behind most of the night. “I walked through that hallway right past the back of this room earlier and you never looked up from your crossword puzzle. I’ve been in every part of this building, moving all around while you were in here, and you never suspected I was here.”

“I just told you I thought I wasn’t alone, but I thought—”

“You thought it was your imagination,” he cut me off. “Yes, I heard that. But you never suspected that it was *me* in here with you, did you?”

“No,” I answered as a ball of dread unfurled in my stomach along with the sense I’d failed some other test of his.

“And that tells us what?”

I shrugged. “No idea, Mr. Miyagi, but I’m sure you know, so why don’t you share it with me? I can’t wait to hear what I’ve done wrong now.”

“I’m going to go hang out in the breakroom for a little while,” Ginger said, seeming to sense the sudden tension in the air. “Let me know if you need me for anything. I can stay another hour or so if needed.”

Reese watched her walk away with a frown etched into his face before he returned his dark gaze to me. “Once you start hunting demons, word is going to spread. They’re going to know what you are and what you do, and I don’t think I have to tell you they’re not going to like it. Once you come into

your power, more than just Rider Knight's people are going to sense what you are. While we hunt demons, hunters and slayers hunt us. So do demons who want to end us before we end them. I didn't tell you I was going to sneak in here tonight because I needed to know how seriously you were taking training. Good thing I did, because now I know you're not paying any attention to anything I'm trying to teach you."

"I am taking it seriously," I snapped, and had to relax my hand around the coffee cup before I cracked the paper and made a mess on the fancy carpeting. "And I am paying attention."

"Really? So why didn't you realize I was in here?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you're a vampire with years of practice being all silent and sneaky, and I was busy trying to convince myself the dead people in here weren't creeping around, looking for the perfect chance to jump me."

"You just stated exactly why you should have known I was in here and you don't even know it." Reese shook his head and muttered something under his breath as he stepped away. His jaw was tight as he turned back around toward me and huffed out a breath. "What have I taught you so far?"

"Trust you." I rolled my eyes. "Ask for your help."

"Yes, but what else? What was the very first lesson?"

In my mind, I flashed back to the coffee shop and muttered, "See without looking."

He nodded his head. “And what else did I teach you? What would have let you know that what you sensed was me and Ginger, not ghosts or other figments of your imagination? What did I say you always need to be doing?”

Shit, I thought, realizing what I’d done all wrong and why the vampire was so annoyed with me. “I should have sensed vampires.”

“You didn’t even try to assess your surroundings, did you?”

I shook my head. “No, all right? Is that what you want me to confess? We haven’t been assigned anything. I’m still in whatever this training of yours is. I didn’t expect to be tested.”

“Always expect to be tested!” His voice came out thunderous enough to set me back a step. “You are half demon and there are already some entities out there who can tell, some who will want to kill you just for being what you are. Some who will want to do worse things than simply kill you. The fact nothing has happened to you yet is a miracle. You have to stay aware of your surroundings at all times, not just when we are on an active case. Am I finally making myself clear? Is any of this getting through to you?”

“Yes,” I snapped, knowing he was right, but I didn’t appreciate his tone or how stupid and small it made me feel. “I get it.”

“Where is Ginger?”

“She just told you she—” I quit talking as I noticed the way Reese folded his arms over his chest and looked down at me

with an expression of *Are you fucking kidding me?* flashing over his face like a neon sign alerting me to eminent danger if I didn't shut up and think before I spoke again.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes on the exhale, and let go of all thought and all of the anger and frustration that filled me. I released it all and opened myself to the drifting emptiness that came after. I cast out my senses, like throwing a net into the water, but instead of fishing for salmon, I sought vampires.

Reese's energy was easy to detect since he stood right in front of me. Knowing Ginger's energy would be similar, I imagined my imaginary net stretching out to cover the building, and frowned as I detected her energy. It was nowhere near the breakroom she'd claimed to be going to, and it wasn't in motion. She wasn't on her way. She was somewhere else entirely.

"She's in viewing room C." I opened my eyes to meet Reese's dark, mildly approving gaze. "She was never going to the breakroom, was she? This was another test."

"She went to the breakroom. She got a Snickers bar from the vending machine and took it into the viewing room to wait until called upon." Reese tapped the side of his nose before I could ask how he could have possibly known what Ginger had gotten from the vending machine. "In time, your senses will become sharper, and you will be able to detect these fine details, but what matters most now is that you know how to

detect what is around you and if the entities you detect are friend or foe.”

I twirled the coffee cup around in my hands. “Okay, so you’ve called me out on my sucky performance as a night watchguard and apparently my inability to be a good ... whatever the hell else I’m supposed to be. What now?”

“Now you stop sulking, finish your coffee, and we do some hand-to-hand. I understand you need a job, but we also need to train, and I’d like to train while we have some time with Ginger. Fortunately, you landed a job that shouldn’t get too badly in the way of our other work.”

“If you get blood on this carpet, I’m fired. Fresh bruises are going to be hard to explain when my boss shows up at seven to dismiss me too.”

He grinned. “Then I suggest you duck well and try not to bleed.”



“Ah, you survived the first night, and I didn’t even get a call.”

I looked up from the crossword puzzle I’d been working on while sitting on one of the comfortable couches in the lobby and smiled at the older man, who looked refreshed as he approached me in his dark blue suit and black leather shoes. A woman was at his side. Somewhere in her late thirties to early forties, she looked professional in her navy pencil skirt and

blazer over a white silk blouse. Her sandy blonde hair was pinned back into a chignon with soft wisps framing her face, which was adorned with a light touch of makeup. Her pale gray eyes were kind and crinkled around the edges as she smiled with a nod of greeting.

“I didn’t have any trouble at all,” I responded smoothly.

Yup, not a drop of blood had spilled on the carpet and no dents were left in the walls. Reese had shown me some moves and had me practice them with Ginger until the vampire had to leave for whatever other job she had to do, but she’d made sure to leave her phone number in my cell phone first, in case I ever had trouble reaching Reese or he got into trouble. She hadn’t specified what that trouble might be, and it hadn’t escaped my notice she’d given me her info while he wasn’t hovering over us, but the woman didn’t come off shady, so I accepted it and kept it to myself.

The rest of the night was spent with Reese teaching me different holds and fighting techniques, none of which left me visibly bruised or otherwise damaged. By five in the morning, I was yawning, and he’d taken his leave, assuring me I should be fine to nap until the end of my shift. Once the doors had closed behind him, however, I’d been wide awake. Brittany’s cousin may have been able to sleep on the job, but I wasn’t quite there yet. It would take many more nights of surviving the complete shift without any of the departed waking up to say howdy before I could allow my body that much vulnerability.

“Good, good.” He clapped his hands together and looked around as the woman went over to the reception desk and settled in. “So, you will be back tonight?”

“Sure will.” I slid the crossword puzzle book back into the little pink gift bag and stood. “I think this job is going to work out very well, Mr. Green. Is there anything you need from me before I go?”

He looked around again. “No, dear. Mary here will need some information from you for payment processing and such, and then you are free to go. Enjoy the rest of your day, and I’ll see you back here at ten. Mary, please take care of Donna. Thank you, dear.”

I shook my head as I watched the spry old gent head toward his office and walked over to the woman. “Hi, um, it’s Dulce, actually. Dulce Malvada.”

“And I’m Meryl.” She smiled brightly as she shook my hand. “He’ll eventually settle into a name for you and believe me, it’s best to just nod your head and go along with whatever he calls you. Correcting him just gets him all flustered. He doesn’t mean anything offensive by it. He’s just older and frankly, as long as his memory is good enough to get the deceased’s names correct, that’s all that matters. I’m the one who handles paychecks and I’ll put the right name on them, no matter what he ends up calling you. Welcome to the family, Dulce.”

I liked Meryl already.

I had my cell phone out as I exited the funeral home, ready to pull up the bus schedule I'd saved, but quickly saw I wouldn't need it. Reese's car was parked right in front of the building on the curve of the driveway, and he stood with his arms folded over his chest as he leaned back against the passenger side, dark shades covering his eyes as he waited for me.

“What are you doing here? In daylight?”

He shook his head, the side of his mouth tugging as he stepped away from the car and opened the passenger side door for me.

“I told you we don't just combust,” he said in a low voice as I got in, then he closed the door and rounded the car to get in on his side before starting the engine.

“You're wearing that lotion I saw in your bathroom too.” I inhaled. “It's not strong like the stuff I use.”

“Oh, it's way stronger than the stuff you would use,” he corrected me as he put the car in motion, “but the scent isn't. It's designed for vampires and between the fact we have a stronger sense of smell and generally don't want to be easily detected, dousing ourselves in something that reeks of chemicals or tropical fragrances isn't desirable.”

I nodded. “I could have taken the bus home. You were with me all night, and even if you don't just explode or whatever in the sunlight, aren't you tired?”

“I’ll sleep once I get you squared away and make my way back to the studio. It’s not that big of a deal and it would take two buses to get you back to your apartment. Why go through all that when I can just drive you?” He glanced in the rearview mirror. “So, you think you’ll keep this job?”

“If I can. It doesn’t really require much, but I have to be there on time and when my boss arrives in the morning. Think the demon-catching thing will prevent that?”

Reese shrugged. “Sometimes there is travel required, but like I said earlier, the others have that under control for now. Ginger and I scoped the place out and there’s no surveillance. The night guard at the cemetery isn’t much of a problem. Demons usually prefer nighttime, so as long as you check in at ten and get back by seven in the morning, you should be able to get any jobs done without your boss knowing you weren’t on the premises the whole night.”

“Unless there happens to be a break-in or vandalism while I’m away.”

“Yeah, that would suck. There’s always stripping.”

I shot him a dirty look that told him what I thought of that idea and, other than a chuckle, he remained silent for the rest of the drive.

“No need to walk me up,” I said as we pulled to a stop along the curb outside my apartment building. “Besides, you might run into Bretta and she’s probably a scarier hunter than anything you’ve been up against before.”

Reese grinned. “I don’t doubt that a bit. Just stay aware of your surroundings.”

“Believe me, that is now ingrained into every ounce of my brain.”

“Good.”

I fought an eye roll as I closed the door and headed into the building, the weight of his gaze on me the entire time. I made it into the building and up the stairs without Bretta’s notice, but came to an abrupt stop as I reached my apartment and saw what had been done to my door in my absence.

Cursing under my breath, I shoved my key into the lock and entered. The door had barely closed behind me before I had my cell phone up to my ear and it was ringing.

“Yes?”

“You fixed my door, didn’t you?”

A moment passed, and I pictured Reese driving back toward the studio, his cell phone on speaker, that stubborn jaw of his tight as he thought of how to respond. “You’re welcome. Sleep well.”

“Don’t you dare think about ending this call. I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t have to, and before you say some stupid shit about pity or charity, that’s not why I did it, so calm down and get some rest.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in deep, willing myself to remain calm enough not to start yelling loud enough to disturb everyone in my building. “What do I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

“Dammit, Reese.”

“You owe me nothing. It’s not a big deal.”

“The hell it isn’t. I wanted him to pay for it.”

“Yeah, I’m well aware of how you wanted him to *pay* for it. I already told you why that’s a bad idea, and now it’s a moot point because there is nothing left to be fixed. It’s done. You have a new door. A stronger door, FYI, one he’ll deeply regret trying to bash in if he should ever feel the need to attempt that again.”

I’d noticed the difference. Whatever the door was made of, it was heavier than the previous one. Opening the thing had required actual effort, and almost qualified as a biceps workout.

“I’ll pay you back.”

“No, you won’t, because there was never any discussion of payment. You’re my partner and my mentee. Part of my job is ensuring your safety. I could have installed a better barrier to your residence, or I could have moved you in with me. Between the two options, I think you’d be happier with the new door.”

I got a quick flash of what living with Reese would be like: constant training and testing. Constant annoyance and

frustration. Constant shifting my eyes as he walked past me, especially if he emerged from the shower with... oh, screw that. The man was eye candy for sure, but that was one temptation I didn't have to worry about. "Considering it's a toss-up which one of us would kill the other first if forced to live with each other, I'll take the new door."

"I figured as much. So, are we done now?"

"No." I tossed my keys and the gift bag onto the coffee table before I made my way into my bedroom and toed off my shoes. "Look, no one just does anything, and I don't like waiting around for the other shoe to drop, so what do you want in exchange for the door and the rides to and from work if not money?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake..." Tires squealed, followed shortly after by a car door slamming, and I knew he'd reached the studio. "I know you've been through some shit, so I'm trying to give you the time and space you need, but nothing that has been done to you was ever by my hand. So, you know what I want in return for the door, Malvada? Some trust, maybe even some respect. Just treat me like a man and not a monster waiting to pounce, and we'll call it even. Now get some sleep and try to wake up as a lesser pain in my ass."

"A lot of men are monsters," I muttered as I silenced the dial tone in my ear signaling he'd hung up on me, and fell backward onto my bed, fully clothed, too tired to bother with taking anything off.

I frowned as I noticed something different. There were bars on my window, which seemed like overkill if Reese wanted to keep Barry out of my apartment. Then it hit me that maybe the new door wasn't just about Barry. Maybe Reese was keeping out something a lot worse than an ex who didn't like being dumped.

I closed my eyes and cast out my senses, looking for anything that didn't belong, but closing my eyes after staying awake all night had been a mistake. I was fast asleep before I could sense a thing.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“**D**ulce. Dulce!”

I went from fiery hot to icy cold in the time it took to gasp awake clutched in the strong hold of a vampire’s grip.

“It’s me,” Reese said quickly as I recoiled, not sure what I was about to do, but the fingers of my left hand had dug into his forearm and my right hand struggled to break free from his hold. “It’s me. You’re safe.”

Breath escaped me in a whoosh and my head fell forward. Damp hair clung to my face, hanging over one of my eyes.

“I’m going to let you go now. Do me a favor and don’t swing on me, all right?”

I nodded, and the moment he released his grip on me, I swiped the damp hair out of my face and took in my surroundings. It was late afternoon, and I was soaking wet in the clothes I’d gone to sleep in. Reese sat next to me on the bed, watching me with what looked like genuine concern in

his dark eyes. Dressed all in black like usual, he was a dark shadow in the room, but I felt no trace of danger from him.

“Tell me about the dream you just had.”

“I didn’t—”

“Then why are you covered in sweat and shaking so hard?” He reached over and rested the back of his hand against my cheek, and I involuntarily leaned into the warmth it offered. “You’re freezing. Go take a hot shower and get dressed. We’ll discuss this while we make the meatloaf, and I mean that. We *will* discuss the dreams and you’re not going to leave anything out.”

I would have been annoyed with his bossiness, but the moment he drew his hand away from me, I yearned for the warmth. He was right. I was freezing and nothing sounded better than a hot shower at that moment. Maybe it would clear my head some as well, help me to process the images from the dreams that seemed to have only grown more vivid since my brief trip to Purgatory.

Reese didn’t waste any time leaving my bedroom, and I was just as efficient as I collected clothes—a dark gray Henley, faded jeans, comfortable socks and underclothes—and stepped into the bathroom. It took less than a minute to peel the damp, cold clothes off me and step under the shower spray that threw off enough heat to fill the small bathroom with steam.

I stayed under the spray long after I’d soaped, shampooed, conditioned, and rinsed, allowing the hot water to do its magic to melt the ice running through my veins. The bathroom was

humid after I turned off the water and stepped free of the shower stall, wrapped in my fluffiest bath towel, and I quickly wrapped my hair into another towel before dressing, not wanting to allow the steam to dissipate before I was fully clothed so I didn't risk growing cold again.

There was too much steam fogging up the mirror to check myself out, so I didn't bother, brushing my teeth blindly before I swiped on tinted lip gloss and stepped out of the bathroom, the steam billowing around me, escaping as I did.

My bed had been stripped and fresh sheets put on the mattress I assumed had been flipped over because there was no way my sweat hadn't soaked into the top layer that had been beneath me while I'd slept. Not seeing the sweaty sheets anywhere, I stepped out of my bedroom to find Reese lounging on my couch.

"I threw your sheets in the washing machine down in the laundry room," he said. "Do you feel better now? You have some color back in your cheeks."

I nodded and wrapped my arms around my waist, although I didn't feel cold anymore. Just a little exposed. "You didn't have to change my sheets or throw them in the laundry."

"There wasn't a lot else to do until you emerged from the shower, back at your normal body temperature." He stood. "You're learning how to make meatloaf tonight. We can get started on that before the sheets need to go into the dryer, and you can tell me all about your dreams."

“I’ve told you about them,” I said as I followed him into the kitchen. “They’re just dreams about me and some snakes standing in flames.”

“And you wake up covered in cold sweat from that?” He started getting out what we needed to prepare dinner, starting with a mixing bowl, a deep foil pan, and ingredients from the refrigerator, which he rinsed off at the sink before setting them on the counter. “Your heart rate was off the chart before I woke you. Worse than the previous time. That doesn’t seem a likely reaction from having the same exact dream over and over. What’s changed about your dreams recently?”

I opened my mouth to deny there had been any changes, but remembered who I was talking to and what he was capable of. “You really can smell when someone is lying, can’t you?”

“Yes. And if you haven’t noticed by now, I can be just as stubborn as you.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed.”

He unwrapped a package of raw ground beef and dumped it into the mixing bowl before throwing the packaging away and moved over to the sink to wash his hands, although they hadn’t actually touched the meat. “Then you know I’m not going to stop pressing until you tell me what I want to know. What’s going on with the dreams? Why are they so frightening you wake up soaking wet and gasping for breath as your heart tries to beat its way right out of your chest?”

“Are these supposed to be chopped?” I nodded toward the onions he’d set on top of a cutting board next to a sharp knife.

“Yes, and don’t think you can avoid answering me by cooking. You can do both.”

“I know.” I picked up the knife and started slicing, figuring if I started crying, I could blame it on the onions and save a little of my dignity.

“Like this.” Reese grabbed another knife and went to work on the green peppers he’d set out on another cutting board, showing me how to dice the vegetables.

I followed his example, and we were soon working side by side, but even though he was silent, I knew he hadn’t stopped digging. He was simply giving me a moment before he applied more pressure. What the hell, I thought. I might as well save him the trouble. The dreams were not a fun experience and maybe telling him about them could help. I certainly didn’t see how it could hurt.

“The dreams are just like I told you, but there’s a presence in them. Two of them, actually. I think I’ve always sensed the dark one lurking somewhere in the shadows, watching, waiting... like a wolf hunting prey, waiting for the right moment to pounce. I think it’s him. The demon who ... *sired* me or whatever.” I shrugged and continued chopping, dicing the onions into little chunks. I sniffed and blinked as the onions stung my eyes, thankful for the mask they provided me as my emotions rose to the surface.

“And the other presence?”

“It’s female. It’s not as dark, although it’s just as shadowy. I can’t make out features. I can’t really see them clearly. I can

only feel them. This other one is new. At least it feels new. I only noticed it after I got hit by the bus and it's been there every night since. Or day. Whatever. It's there every time I sleep."

"And what does this presence do?" Reese asked softly as he set his knife aside and picked up his cutting board to pour the diced green peppers into the bowl with the meat.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, but just... it watches me. Not like the other. I can't explain it."

"Try. It may help the dreams not have such a powerful effect on you."

I chopped in silence for a moment, much slower at the task than Reese, but that was no surprise. I'd never cooked anything that required chopping ingredients. The most complicated thing I'd ever made was macaroni and cheese or cake that came from a boxed mix.

"They're both watching me, and I feel like they're both calling for me, like when you see two people calling for a puppy to see who it goes to. They both want me to come to them. I know the male is evil, but the female is the one who really scares me, even though I don't feel any evil coming from her. I only feel the cold coming from her. Pain, suffering, and desperation. That scares me more than anything, even though I guess it doesn't make much sense. She's calling for

me, but I can't go to her. I can't move. I can't run. I just stand there in the fire, frozen in fear despite the flames all around me." I set the knife down and gripped the edge of the counter. "It's her, isn't it? It's my—it's the woman who gave birth to me."

"It could be." Reese picked up the cutting board and used the knife to rake the onions into the bowl. "If your gut is telling you she's not evil and doesn't want to hurt you, it very well could be her. So why does that frighten you? What are you thinking when you feel her there?"

I shook my head, unable to find the words to answer.

"Do you really not know, or do you just not want to say it out loud?"

"She's dead, isn't she?" I let go of the counter and straightened as I looked over to see Reese watching me with a neutral expression. "If she's in my dreams, if she's somehow found a way to reach out to me, it's because she's dead. Right?"

"I don't feel I can confidently give you an answer on that one," Reese said as he leaned back against the counter and folded his arms, never taking his gaze off me. "Dreams are complicated. There are demons who can invade them, which you've already learned from your research, and I don't doubt others may be able to do the same. You can also put people in your dreams just by thinking about them. It's hard to say what's real, what's imagined, what's a message from beyond, and what's a premonition."

“I thought you were a psychic.”

“I have psychic *abilities*,” he clarified, “but I can’t just conjure answers to anything I want to know. If I could, I would have found my brother and sister before my mother got to them.”

“Okay, I guess that makes sense, but you read my file.”

“I read some of it,” he reminded me. “I know who your mother was. I know her name. I don’t know whether she still lives. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault, and it’s not anything I need to know.” I blinked and raised my hand to wipe away the water that had spilled over my lashes, but Reese’s hand shot out and grabbed my wrist.

“Damn onions,” he murmured with the barest hint of a smile before walking me over to the sink. “I strongly recommend washing your hands after you’ve worked with onions, especially before you put them anywhere near your eyes. I guess the half of you that isn’t demon reacts the same way to them as others do.”

“Huh?”

“One of the compounds in onions that makes them burn your eyes is sulfur, which usually has no effect on demons,” he explained.

“Oh.” I sniffed and washed my hands like he’d suggested, fighting the urge to recoil as Reese wiped the errant tears away with his own thumbs.

“I can find out for you if she’s still alive.”

I shook my head and turned off the faucet before grabbing a paper towel to dry my hands with. “No, that’s not necessary.”

“Be real with me, Malvada, and more importantly, be honest with yourself. You want to know. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have mentioned it at all. However, you’re scared to get your answer. Why?”

“I hated her,” I muttered as I threw the paper towel in the wastebasket and looked into Reese’s eyes, meeting his gaze dead-on. “For years, for almost my whole life, I hated her. I hated a woman who had something terrible happen to her, something no woman should have ever gone through, and for at least some of that time, she may have already been dead and I still thought of her as some horrible, selfish woman out there living her life with no thought whatsoever as to what she’d put me through when she’d thrown me away. Oh, but wait. That’s right. She didn’t throw me away. I hated her for something she never even did.”

I didn’t realize I’d dropped my gaze until Reese slid his fingers under my chin to tip my face up. “I’ve taught you about seeing without looking, assessing your surroundings, knowing when to ask for help, demonology, and I’ve taught you some fighting techniques. Now it’s time for one of the most important lessons of all. Forgiveness.”

“I forgive her.” I sniffed, doing my best to ignore the way the backs of my eyes burned, knowing it had nothing to do with onions and everything to do with the sincerity in the

words I'd just spoken. Knowing what I knew now, knowing what had happened to the woman who'd given birth to me, how could I not forgive her?

“That’s good,” Reese said. “But there’s someone else you need to forgive; someone whose forgiveness is a lot more needed. You need to forgive yourself.”

I blinked for a moment before I stepped back, forcing his hand to drop, breaking the physical contact. “Forgive myself for what?”

“For everything hurting you,” he answered. “You need to forgive yourself for being what you are. You didn’t ask for that demon to do what it did to your mother. There was no deal made between you and it for you to be born as what you are. And you need to forgive yourself for the feelings you’ve had, even the ones toward your mother. You felt whatever you needed to feel to survive, and she would understand that.”

I shook my head. “You don’t know that. How could you know what she would understand? You read a little about her in a file, but you didn’t know her.”

“No, not personally, but I know the choices she made when an absolute evil was done to her. I know a woman who would give a half-demon child away to give it a chance in this world instead of throwing the child away like you once believed would want that child to be happy.” Reese grabbed a paper towel and wiped away another tear I hadn’t even felt glide down my cheek.

“And I know that if she really is coming to you in your dreams and calling for you, she’s doing it because she loves you and wants to help you. Because she knows there is good in you despite who sired you. I know there is too, but you have to let go of all that guilt and anger you have over emotions you had every right to have. You have to forgive yourself, Dulce, because not forgiving has a way of twisting people inside, turning them dark and tainted. There are enough factors working against you, trying to darken your soul. Don’t add to their power. Forgive yourself and become the woman your mother prayed you would be. Make her sacrifice worth it.”

I started to shake my head in an immediate refusal, a reflex I’d honed to perfection when I didn’t want to deal with something. It was easier to just let things fester under the surface until all my painful emotions turned into anger, and that built until... until I blacked out and went full Tasmanian devil on someone. Probably not the best way to deal, considering I might soon be gifted with demonic strength and who knew what else, so instead of refusing to follow Reese’s advice, I took a moment to think about why he was giving it. “You forgave your mother for what she did to your siblings.”

He nodded.

“That had to have been hard.”

“Not as hard as forgiving myself for getting to them too late or for not preventing my mother’s turning in the first place.”

“You were just a child,” I reminded him. “You couldn’t have stopped that from happening.”

“Just like you couldn’t help the perfectly natural feelings you had toward your mother, so it’s time to stop suffering from them. I know it’s hard, but once you let all that pain and guilt go, you’re going to make room for something so much better to fill up that space, something you need.”

“Something I need because I’m half demon and that makes me evil enough without all the added negativity,” I muttered, allowing myself a moment of self-pity. “I know, I know.”

“No,” Reese said, waving his index finger in front of my face. “If you’ve been paying attention to your reading and everything we’ve gone over, you know that some demons are nothing worse than mischievous and no matter what your father was, you are still you. It may be harder for you not to give in to certain temptations, but you have free will. You can choose light or darkness.”

“You’re not going to give me the *there are two wolves inside you* spiel, are you? If you are, I’d just like to point out that mine are probably hellhounds, so my sitch is probably not as easily resolved by proverb.”

“Smartass,” he muttered, but the corners of his mouth twitched as he grabbed two eggs from the refrigerator and handed me one. “Let’s see how good you are at cracking an egg without getting any shells in the bowl.”

Using just one hand, he cracked his on the edge of the mixing bowl and dumped the yolk in. While I wasn’t a master chopper, I’d cracked my fair share of eggs for cakes and brownies, so I performed the same one-handed feat without a

problem, although I was confused and a little grossed out as I watched the yolk plop down on the pile of beef, onions, and green peppers.

“Why are we putting egg yolk in a bowl of meat?”

“Because that’s how you make meatloaf.” He chuckled as he threw the eggshells away.

“And why, exactly, are we making meatloaf anyway? You’re supposed to be training me to track and kill demons, not cook.”

“Everyone should have someone in their life to teach them the basics they don’t know, like cooking, maintenance, and finances,” he said, probably having no clue how much his simple, kind answer affected me. “Besides, this can be training too.”

He measured oats into a measuring cup and dumped them on top of the mess before grabbing a small bottle. He held it up and did a hand gesture like he was one of those women on the daytime game shows displaying the prizes. “Lawry’s Seasoned Salt. Seasoning is very important. Everything needs to be seasoned. If you’re unsure what to season with, you can almost never go wrong with seasoned salt, especially if it’s Lawry’s. You should always have Lawry’s in your kitchen.”

“You said this about the Cajun seasoning yesterday when we made the salmon.”

“I know.”

“And you made a big production of seasoning then too.”

“Of course I did. It didn’t escape my notice that before I went shopping for you, there was no seasoning at all in this apartment.”

I moved over to the corner of the small kitchen space and grabbed my Baby Groot and Rocket salt and pepper shakers off the counter. “What do you call this?”

“White people’s version of seasoning.” He peered closer at me. “I thought you were Latina, or at least mostly Latina, but your kitchen is suggesting a higher ratio of Caucasian than I’d first assumed.”

I rolled my eyes as I returned the salt and pepper shakers to the counter and rejoined him by the bowl of utter grossness. “I have nothing against seasoning. I just don’t cook much so I’ve never needed any of this.”

“That’s the Caucasian in you talking,” he said. “There is never an excuse to not have a good seasoned salt and a good Cajun seasoning blend in your home. Now get in there with it.”

I bit back a laugh as I took the seasoned salt from his hand and started shaking it into the bowl. Whenever I attempted to stop, he coached me to add more, until eventually, he seemed satisfied enough for me to stop. Or so I thought.

“I’ll add more as you work it through.”

“Work it through?” I looked at him, then down into the bowl. “Work what through?”

“You gotta get in there, Malvada.” He made claw hands and gestured like he was squeezing something. “Get your hands in there and incorporate all the ingredients together.”

“You want me to put my hands in that?”

“How else is it all going to get mixed together?”

“A mixer or a blender?”

“For meat—” He stopped himself, biting his lip as his shoulders shook with the laughter he was trying not to release. “You clearly needed my guidance in the kitchen way more than you will ever need me to help you with your demon problem, because you might know even less about cooking than you know about cars. Just put your hands in the meat and start working it all together.”

I looked at the mountain of meat covered in the other ingredients we had dumped on top of it and took a breath. It kind of looked like roadkill, especially with the egg yolks oozing all around it, and I cringed at the thought of touching it with my bare hands.

“If you can’t touch raw meat, you’re never going to handle taking down a demon. Get in there, Malvada. Quit being a baby and what was that you told me to do the other day? Oh yeah. Grow a pair. Chickenshit.”

I shot him a look I sincerely hoped caused him some testicular shrinkage and rolled my sleeves up. Then, with only my annoyance at him making the act possible, I shoved my hands into the meat mixture and promptly let out a high-

pitched squeak that put tears in Reese's eyes as he laughed heartily.

"Why does it feel like this?"

"It's raw meat and egg," he said, as if I wasn't fully aware of the grossness I'd just shoved my hands into. "It's supposed to feel like that. Now, mush. Everything needs to be combined or it won't come out good."

I made some more squeaky noises, unable to help myself, and worked my fingers through the mixture, fighting my gag reflex as the cold, sloppy meat and egg mixture oozed between my fingers. "You did this on purpose. You only wanted meatloaf because you knew it was disgusting."

"No, meatloaf, when made correctly, is delicious, and I had no idea you were this big of a wuss."

"Oh, shut up. This is gross."

He only laughed as he shook in more seasoned salt while I continued to knead it all together with my fingers. "Hey, this is training too. If you ever need to dig through a demon's stomach and tear its intestines out with your bare hands, you already know what it will feel like."

I gagged hard over the bowl, and it was quickly snatched away from me.

"Don't even think about throwing up in my meatloaf, Malvada."

I looked at the raw meat and egg mixture with oats and green peppers poking out that still coated my hands and

gagged again.

“You’re stronger than this, Malvada. You’re going to see and feel a lot worse than raw meatloaf when you’re out there doing the job. You have to get over this weak-stomach stuff. Think of something else.”

My vision swam as I fought down bile, the feel of the cold meat and egg on my hands doing nothing to help me keep the contents of my stomach where they belonged. I had to get it off of me. I went to the sink, not caring at all about what mess I made as I reached for the faucet, but Reese grabbed my forearm, far enough back that he didn’t get anything on his own hands.

“No, no. You still have to handle the meat. You have to put it in the pan and shape it into a loaf.”

I looked at his clean, meat and egg-free hand, then let my gaze travel up his arm to his shoulder, right up to his face where he fought a grin, and then I grinned too.

His eyes immediately grew wary. “What are you—Malvada, don’t you even think about it.”

“Too late,” I said, smiling devilishly before I lunged, and the fight was on.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

“**Y**ou were right. This is delicious.”

Reese glared from where he sat next to me at the counter, one of my Avengers T-shirts stretched over his broad shoulders, but the heat in his eyes cooled as his mouth curved into a grin. “Yeah, I’m glad there was enough meat left to make dinner with after you were done scraping it off of me.”

“Ew, like I would have used any of what I covered you with. That’s unsanitary,” I advised before taking the last bite of meatloaf he’d taught me how to cook along with garlic mashed potatoes and green beans, which I now knew required more than just dumping from a can into a pot to properly cook.

“Hmm, well, at least I know you’ve been paying attention during the physical part of our training. You’re dangerous when armed with food.”

“And don’t you forget it.” I swallowed the last of my dinner and stood, taking both of our plates with me.

“I won’t, and I guess I should thank you for at least sparing my pants. Speaking of clothes...” He stood. “The dryer cycle

should be finished. I'll go get everything."

"I can do that." I set the dishes in the sink.

"No, you do dishes. I'll go get the laundry."

"So, you'll let me fight demons, but you're afraid of letting me go against a mere human man?" I said, knowing exactly why he insisted on being the one to get the laundry.

"As stated before, I know you can handle a human man. I'm just not too crazy about how you might handle him." He slipped out my front door before I could continue the discussion or point out that I hadn't heard from Barry at all since Reese had knocked him out and thrown him in the dumpster where he belonged. For all I knew, he'd been collected and compacted like the sack of trash he was. Not that I believed I had that much good luck. Still, I didn't think the jerk was skulking around my building, waiting to get me alone.

There were no leftovers to deal with, thanks largely in part to Reese's ability to consume enough food to feed three people, so I rinsed off the dishes and put everything in the dishwasher along with what we'd used to prepare the surprisingly good dinner. Once I had the dishwasher going, I wiped down the counter again, cleaned the sink, and with nothing left to do, settled onto the couch.

Reese returned soon after, and promptly tossed my sheets over me, burying me under their warm softness. "Fold your own sheets," he said in a mock bossy tone.

I kept my laughter on the inside, the easy way he brought humor out in me cluing me in to the fact I was softening toward him, despite my best efforts to keep him at a safe distance. I pawed at the sheets until I was able to dig myself out from under them... just in time to see my Avengers shirt get peeled away from Reese's chest and removed from his body.

I may have gawked a little during the all too brief moment Reese's face was obscured by the fabric, his upper body on clear display. The man was built like an action figure, except, to my detriment, I was pretty sure he was anatomically correct. But as soon as that shirt was over his head, my gaze focused on the sheets I clumsily folded.

"You could have just borrowed my shirt for the rest of the night," I told him. "Or are you afraid no one will recognize you if you're not in one hundred percent black from head to toe?"

"I *am* one hundred percent black from head to toe," he replied with laughter in his voice as he pulled his freshly washed and dried T-shirt over his head. "Also, there are times in this line of work that you don't want to be recognized. Anyway, while I appreciate the shirt loan, it's not my style."

"I noticed." I stood with the sloppily folded sheets in my hands, noting how neatly he folded the other shirt of his that had made it into my laundry, the one I'd borrowed after getting mine bloody, and picked up the Avengers shirt he'd dropped on the coffee table to hang back up in the closet since

he hadn't worn it long, just long enough to stretch it out a little.

"I see folding sheets might need to be next on our lesson list."

"I thought you were supposed to be training me to kill demons," I called over my shoulder as I took my things to my room and stuffed them in the closet. Well, except for the T-shirt. That got hung on a hanger. I wasn't a total slob. "Why haven't I been given any weapons instruction yet?"

"You have."

"What, you?" I asked, rejoining him in the living room.

He spread his arms out wide as he faced me. "I am your greatest weapon."

I didn't bother fighting the eye roll that statement prompted. "If that were true, I wouldn't need training at all. There'd be no need for me tagging along. You could handle all the demons yourself."

"Yes, but I need someone to cheer for me, which reminds me, I need to order your pom-poms." He just grinned while I gave him my best *you're stupid* face, then he unzipped one of those many pockets in his cargo pants and reached inside. "All right, all right. You can't blame me for not immediately putting a weapon in your hands, though."

"Why not?" I looked at the switchblade he pulled free from his pocket. It wasn't the one he'd taken from me and never returned. "If we could be assigned a target, it makes sense for

me to know my way around weaponry. Not that I'd call that thing weaponry. Not for going against a demon."

"Because with all the attitude you gave off during our initial get to know each other period, you may have used anything I gave you on me. You've already tried to use a switchblade on me once."

"Which you easily disarmed me of. You're a vampire. Could I really kill you with one of those?"

"Even if you couldn't, I don't enjoy being stabbed. Vampires still feel pain, and we bleed out worse than mere mortals, so yeah, you could do some damage with this thing, which, by the way, is more effective than you think." He flipped it open to reveal the blade. "Salt-fired. Salt-fired blades are the best weapons to use against demons, and a blade of this size can be easily concealed so you can take it almost anywhere, unlike a larger dagger, sword, or gun. Keep it on you at all times."

"You're giving me *your* switchblade?"

"It's your switchblade, because having a weapon at hand at all times is a requirement from this moment on. And you will be checked randomly to make sure you're keeping it on you as instructed."

"Of course." I took the blade he handed to me handle-first and tested its weight. It was heavier than it looked, but light enough to not be cumbersome. I gave it a few test swings and looked up to see him watching me with amusement. "What, do I look like an amateur?"

“You look like a kid playing with a toy, but that’s okay. I’m going to train you to handle weapons like Black Widow.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” I took another swipe at absolutely nothing.

“The first thing you need to know about blades,” he said as he grasped my wrist, stopping my make-believe attack, “is where to stick them into targets.”

“Let me guess, the head or the heart?”

“You stick it where it best serves the purpose you want from it,” he continued. “Sometimes we are assigned to kill a demon. Sometimes, we are sent to apprehend other entities and take them to an aboveground containment facility.”

“A whomchamawhatta?”

His lips twitched. “I’ve been doing this for quite some time and even I don’t understand everything I’m tasked with doing, but we are essentially bounty hunters. Sometimes, we get demons. The only way to send them back to Hell is to either kill them or exorcise them. Sometimes, Purgatory wants us to detain others who may not need a one-way ticket to Hell but to be brought to management.”

“That gray office I woke up in after getting hit by the bus?” I asked. “Killing them doesn’t send them to Purgatory like it did me?”

He shook his head. “That was the office of The Accountant. Sometimes we may be assigned to simply bring someone to management, someone who can be dealt with up here, but they

need to be captured and, uh, *escorted* to management. You'll catch on soon enough."

I looked at the blade in my hand and gave it a little spin. A slow, no-frills spin because hey, I wasn't Black Widow yet. "I'm guessing we don't stab those ones in the heart?"

"No, those we only stab to wound, and only if stabbing is necessary. Depending on who we're after, we may not need to use weapons at all. For demons, you want to stab them in the heart with a salt-fired blade, unless you can trap or pin them long enough for an exorcism. For others who merely need a face-to-face with the management, we only want to wound and only if necessary. Whatever you do, you don't want to get your weapon taken from you, so let's go over some different scenarios."

Four hours later, I still wasn't Black Widow, but I knew how to work with a switchblade decently enough I might actually survive my first run-in with a demon, and I knew some new fighting moves and a lot more about demons and other targets Reese and I might luck into. Or unluck into, I suppose, was more like it. I was also a little sore and a little sweaty.

"That's enough for now," Reese said, glancing at the clock on my microwave after I successfully got out of his latest hold without losing or having to use my blade.

He stepped back, raising the hem of his shirt to wipe at the sheen of sweat shining over his upper lip, revealing six-pack abs I studiously ignored because his woodsy, rainy night scent was all around me and smelled way too good. I also

immediately started thinking of Chris Hemsworth in some of his sexier Marvel scenes just in case Reese picked up on any of my mind's traitorous wanderings or the sudden rush of lust followed by anger at myself. Of all the men in the world not to entertain lusty thoughts about, I was pretty sure the man tasked with killing me if I turned out to be a bad demon egg was at the top of the list. Especially given that if I turned out to not be super-evil, we were still going to be partnered for who knew how long and I never slept with someone I couldn't walk away from and pretend they'd never existed once I decided our time together was done.

"I guess you'll need to clean up again. I'll just catch something on TV until you're done, then run you over to the funeral home."

"You don't have to drive me." I glanced down at myself, wondering if I smelled, but knew if Reese was sweating, he'd know I was too, so the suggestion to clean up wasn't anything to worry about. Then I realized I cared if the man thought I smelled, which I shouldn't because there was no way in hell I was attracted to a man I was going to be stuck with, especially not one who knew too damn much about me. "I'm a grown woman and perfectly capable of taking the bus."

His eyebrows started to rise, but he quickly schooled his face into a blank mask before folding his muscular arms over his irritatingly hard chest. "Sure, you could do that. If you want to be late on only your second night of your new job. Go. Shower and get ready. It's no problem taking you. Besides, we can work on your Latin during the drive."

I opened my mouth to tell him where he could stick his helpful ride, but fortunately my brain caught up to my unfounded temper tantrum, and I realized what an ass I'd be for bitching about the man being helpful, and honestly, doing nothing wrong. Damn him.

"Fine," I muttered before turning toward my bedroom. "Feel free to raid the kitchen. You bought almost everything in it anyway."

I quickly showered, scrubbing harder than necessary as I growled curses under my breath, then dressed in another pair of jeans and a Captain Marvel T-shirt, dried my hair before doing a quick finger-comb, and put on a dark wine lip gloss.

"Quit being a moron," I told my reflection in the bathroom mirror before stepping out into my bedroom to put on my shoes.

The man was attractive. Very attractive. And my life was crazy. He was the only person I could really talk to about what I was going through if I were the type of person to actually talk about my feelings. Of course my stupid hormones were all wonky from the stress of my situation and he made a very desirable outlet to release some of that. But I still had a functioning brain and willpower. I knew what not to do, and I could add giving him attitude he didn't deserve to that list.

"I'm ready," I said as I stepped into the living area, purposely not looking in Reese's direction as I crossed the room to retrieve my zippered hoodie off the peg by the door

and checked the pockets after I pulled it on to make sure I had everything I needed.

“You got everything?” he asked as he stood from the couch and turned my TV off before setting the remote back on the coffee table. All of which I knew from listening because I was still avoiding direct eye contact.

“Cell phone. Charger. Keys. I’m all set. Honestly, I might just stretch out on one of those sofas in the lobby and sleep most of the night this time. If I can’t, there’s a TV in the breakroom.”

Reese strode across the room, and I could tell his intent to open the door for me by the way he moved. Fully aware of where our recent physical training had sent my libido, I knew better than to allow him to reach across me, surrounding me with that delicious scent of his, and opened the door myself before ducking out ahead of him. I jogged down the stairs, not even waiting for him to lock my door behind us.

Down the stairs. Out of the building. Into the car. Then I just had to keep my mind occupied while he drove me to work so he couldn’t get a peek at my thoughts because ever since he’d trained me how to use the switchblade, often getting very up close and personal while doing so, my hormones had gone haywire. And that was not something I wanted a cocky man like Reese to know. Especially if there was any chance he might consider me an acceptable bedmate as well. There was a big flashing warning sign all over that idea.

I ducked into the car the moment I heard the locks disengage and Reese joined me soon after. He started the ignition and looked over. “Switchblade?”

I pulled the weapon free of my jeans pocket and held it up for him to see.

“Good girl.”

Pshh. Not if he could see the thoughts I was fighting like hell to keep out of my mind.



I practically jumped out of Reese’s car before it fully came to a stop in front of the funeral home, but if he’d noticed, he hadn’t said anything. Then again, I’d been out of the car and inside the funeral home faster than possibly even he could have moved so I wouldn’t have known if he had.

But I’d settled in nicely and after an hour spent reading one of the many novels by Jack Wallen I had on my Kindle app, all my best-ignored thoughts about Reese had dissipated and I was fully engrossed in tales of reapers. I stretched out on one of the sofas in the lobby, resting my head along the arm as I continued to read, and eventually, all the good sleep I hadn’t had that week caught up with me and before I knew it, I was out. I wasn’t sure what time it was when I woke back up. All I knew was a big man loomed over me and he almost looked rabid.

“Shit!” I scrambled off the sofa, quickly getting to my feet in moves best described as not smooth whatsoever, and braced myself for whatever was about to happen. “Barry? What are you doing here? How did you even know I’d be here?”

“I followed you and your new boyfriend last night after you and that asshole jumped me.”

“That’s hardly how I remember things happening,” I said dryly. “You tried to beat down my door—you owe me money for that, by the way—then you just stormed into my apartment like a pissed-off bull.”

“I only wanted to talk.”

“If that was true, you wouldn’t have been maced or punched. And you could have called me.”

“I called you!” he snapped, the force of his voice causing me to jump. “You never answered the damn phone.”

“Because we broke up,” I reminded him. “Because you were sleeping with other women. It’s over, Barry, and honestly, I don’t understand why you even care. You couldn’t keep your dick out of other women when we were together, so I obviously didn’t hold that special of a place in your heart. Or even your pants.”

“Like I did in yours?” His eyes darkened. “I wouldn’t have needed to look elsewhere if you made me feel like a man, but I tried, Dulce. I tried as hard as anyone could with a woman as cold as you, but it’s not like I couldn’t feel that I was just a way for you to spend time. Tell me, when did you begin with

Mr. Cheap Shot? I think we're even on the skirting-around shit."

I knew better than to allow a man to make me think his infidelity was my fault and not his own lack of moral compass, even if a few of the things he said may have had some root in truth, so I didn't rise to the bait.

"If you weren't happy with how things were between us, you should have ended the relationship instead of sleeping with other women behind my back. That's called respect. I may not have been in love with you, but I never lied to you, and I didn't even meet Reese until after I got out of the hospital. He's not my boyfriend, not that my relationship status is any of your business," I explained calmly. "Our relationship has reached its end and from the sound of things, you weren't all that happy while in it, so let it go, Barry. It's time to move on."

"You know, I might have," he said, his tone lowering into something menacing that promised pain. "You should have answered your damn phone instead of ignoring me while running around with that man. And as for what the two of you did to me? I hope you got a good laugh while you could because he's not here to save you now, is he? I'm not a bad guy, Dulce, but I'm not a damn fool either, and I won't let anyone try to make one out of me."

The room seemed to drop several degrees, but I knew that was probably just the chill running through my blood as Barry's face went stone-like, set in a mask of rage I'd never

seen on him before. I glanced toward the sofa, searching for the cell phone I'd had in my hands while I'd fallen asleep reading on it, but it wasn't there or on the floor. Neither was the switchblade I'd taken out of my pocket because I couldn't get comfortable with it on me.

“Looking for these?” Barry held up my cell phone and my switchblade before tossing them aside.

I lunged for them, but he caught me by my throat, his big hand squeezing tight before he threw me across the room where I slid over the carpet before doing an ass-over-head tumble that left me sprawled out on my back on the floor. It was official. I was the worst night watchguard in existence and probably would have made an equally bad bounty hunter, but as Barry approached me with murder in his eyes, I was pretty sure I wasn't going to live long enough to know how I would have done with my first demon target.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Oh, fuck this. Pity party over, I prepared myself to fight. This was not the way I was going out. I'd survived getting run over by a bus, dammit. Okay, so I'd died a little and my boobs had probably pointed in different directions for a while, but I'd come back from it. Geometrically correct, I might add. If I could come back from that, I could take this jackass down. I was half demon. I had Hell on my side.

“Big fucking mistake,” I growled, getting to my feet before Barry could overtake me. “Huge.”

“Yeah? Who are you supposed to be, *Pretty Woman*?”

“That was the name of the movie, dumb-fuck, not the character or the actress, and no, I'm just a pissed-off woman with a surprise up her sleeve.”

Barry only sneered as he closed the distance between us and reached for me. Using my training, I grabbed hold of his forearm, turned into him with my shoulder and did the move Reese had shown Brittany and me just the night before. Unlike Reese, Barry hadn't been prepared, so he didn't land on his

feet. He crashed hard on his back and looked up at me with a shocked and dazed expression.

Unfortunately, he hadn't let go of the grip he'd gotten on my arm while I'd been flipping him so once the stunned shock left him, that face turned into a mottled red mask of anger, and I went airborne for the second time that night. This time, I didn't stop until my body slammed into a wall and slid down into what I hoped wasn't a broken pile of bones. It sure hurt like it and there were too many stars blinking in front of my face to count.

"Fucking bitch," he snarled as he made his way toward me, not satisfied with what he'd done so far.

Shit. All the bravado I'd had a minute earlier fled as common sense told me I might be half demon, but that demon side hadn't come out of me yet, and Barry, while just a human, was a *big* human. A big, pissed-off human man fueled by rage. And Reese had been right. He was my greatest weapon. I couldn't do this without help, but Barry was between me and my phone, so I couldn't call him.

So, I ran.

I scrambled to my feet and took off as fast as my bruised and battered limbs would allow, running deeper into the building because that seemed the safest direction based on Barry's position between me and the front doors that would have led to freedom.

Barry followed quickly on my heels and slammed into the breakroom door just as I closed it in his face and used all my

strength to keep it closed while I attempted to lock it. That was my mistake, not that I could have kept the door closed forever by sheer force alone, but the moment I reached for the lock, I took away the pressure needed against the door to keep him out.

He came through the door with enough force to knock me on my back and sent me sliding across the slick floor, knocking chairs out of the way as I ended up under the small table. Before I could regroup, his hand latched around my ankle and I was sliding again, right toward him.

“I told you I wasn’t going to let you make a fool out of me,” he growled as he unfastened his jeans and dropped to his knees between my legs.

Who the hell was screaming?

I blinked and gave my head a shake until my surroundings came into focus. *Holy hell*. Or unholy, I supposed, as I took in the scene. It had happened again. I’d lost consciousness, succumbing to the blackness that overtook me when the threat of danger got too real. But this time, no one had been around to pull me off my attacker.

“Shit.” I crawled over the shattered glass, pushing a toppled chair out of the way as I made my way toward the fallen body.

Barry stared up at the ceiling, but he saw nothing. There was no breath left in him, his soul having flown the coop. Blood pooled underneath him from wounds I couldn’t see and sprayed out of his neck from the slice I could see.

I realized the screaming had stopped.

“I didn’t mean to kill him.”

I looked over to see a bubbly blonde sitting between the door and the counter that held the microwave and sink. My switchblade was in her trembling hands and blood splattered her soft pink sweater and jeans. I had to be hallucinating. “Brittany?”

Her wide, horrified eyes spilled over with tears. “I couldn’t sleep, and I thought I’d just drop in and see how you were doing, work on getting a little braver around this place. I heard the noise. Glass breaking, you screaming, and him saying such awful things. I saw the knife.”

She looked down at the switchblade in her hands and tossed it away from her as if just realizing she still held on to it. “I should have called the police, but I didn’t think. I heard you scream and I just... I just...”

“I didn’t do this?”

She shook her head. “You were fighting. You were doing good, but he was so big and so mean. He caught you and he choked you. Your eyes rolled back and... I thought he was going to kill you. I had to help you.”

I nodded, starting to understand, but still, there was so much blood. “You didn’t do all of this. This isn’t your fault. I lost control. I lost control, and I killed him.”

“No, I killed him.” She broke down into deep sobs. “I stabbed him. I stabbed him to get him to let go of you and

when he dropped you and came after me, I just panicked, and I swiped out. I didn't mean to—I didn't even aim! The blood just started spraying, and he started choking on it and—" The sobs overtook her.

Shit. The friendliest, perkiest woman I'd ever met had just slit my ex's throat. I did another scan of the breakroom. The table and chairs were scattered, but not broken. Blood was all over the floor and the vending machines, but that could be cleaned since I'd fortunately run into the breakroom before I'd lost control. Had blood gone everywhere in the lobby, I wouldn't have had a prayer of getting it out of the carpet before Mr. Green arrived in the morning.

I could clean the blood up and straighten the table and chairs. I could clean up in the bathroom and get a change of clothes from Brittany. What I couldn't do before Mr. Green arrived was repair the broken glass from the snack machine or buff out the huge dent in the one that dispensed soft drinks.

"I am so fired," I muttered, falling onto my ass.

"Fired? I'm going to prison!" Brittany wailed.

"No, you're not," I assured her. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I was not letting that bubbly girl go to prison because she'd saved my life from dying at the hands of some asshole I'd been stupid enough to get involved with. How the hell had I not seen the signs that Barry was clearly a psycho? "This is my mess and I'll take the rap for it, whatever happens."

"You didn't kill him, Dulce."

“And you didn’t murder him. You saved my life and I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you because you chose to protect me.” I felt an odd pain in my chest as I got to my feet and looked down, expecting to find a shard of glass protruding from it, but there was nothing there, just the realization that no one had ever done anything so extreme to protect me before. Not even the system that was supposed to protect me as a child. I had never had a real friend before, wasn’t really sure what it was even like to have one, but in that moment, I knew I would do whatever it took to keep Brittany safe. “Go home. I’ll handle this.”

“What?” Brittany got to her feet and managed to stay upright despite the way her legs shook and the fact she had to hold on to the counter to keep from falling back down. “You didn’t do this.”

“I was stupid enough to date the idiot. He came here because of me. This is all my fault.”

“Dulce Malvada, you will not blame yourself for the abuse you received from this man!”

I blinked and felt my jaw drop, stunned by the vehemence coming from the young woman who, just a moment ago, had been quaking in fear. She now stood rod-straight, hands on hips, eyes narrowed at me.

“It was self-defense,” she said. “All we have to do is explain to the police that he was about to kill you and I was here at one-thirty in the morning for a very good reason and I didn’t

mean to slit his throat open. I just—they're going to put me in prison! I can't go to prison. They watch you pee there!"

"That would be the least of your worries in prison," I assured her and instantly regretted it as she started wailing. "Brittany! Don't worry about it. Just go home, make sure no one sees you, and... burn your clothes or something. I'll take care of this."

"How?"

"No idea, but you just saved my life. I'm not letting you spend the rest of yours in prison for it. Just go."

"I can't do that." She shook her head vehemently and straightened her shoulders, sniffing back tears. "We're in this together. We just have to get rid of him and clean up the blood. I'll tell Uncle Harold I broke the vending machines, but I think we can clean up the rest. We can do this."

What the hell had I dragged this poor girl into? I blew out a breath as I looked at the carnage. She wasn't wrong, though. We could clean up the blood and maybe, if we could both calm the hell down and think rationally, we could come up with a plausible excuse for what had happened to the vending machines. I might still get fired, but that was *so* not the biggest problem at the moment. The body was our biggest problem. "Brittany, how do we hide the big dead guy?"

She bit her plump bottom lip as she thought about it. "We can hide him in a cooler. My uncle keeps bodies in coolers all the time."

I gritted my teeth and fought back the knee-jerk urge to point out how flawed that idea was. Instead, I explained as nicely as I could why her idea wasn't that great. "Um, Brittany, that's because this is a funeral home. Those bodies are supposed to be here. If he opens a cooler and finds my ex-boyfriend with his throat cut, that's not going to work out too well for me."

"Oh. Yeah, I was thinking we could just tell him his mind was going, and he'd forgotten where that one came from, but I guess there'd be paperwork and police involvement for a body that showed up with a slit throat and a stab wound in the back."

Ya think? I shook my head. This was a mess.

"So, what are we going to do? Think one of us could bury him in the cemetery while the other distracts the guard?"

That actually wasn't the worst idea, but I was sure the groundskeeper would notice a burial plot that just appeared overnight with no explanation, not to mention a lack of headstone. And I might be half demon, but until my hostile takeover happened, I was pretty sure I didn't have the strength to carry Barry out of the funeral home or dig a hole that quickly. And despite how many times Brittany had surprised me already, I was pretty sure she wasn't hiding superhuman strength either. Her idea also got me thinking about witnesses. The cemetery by the funeral home had a night watchguard. What if the guard had seen Barry or Brittany? Or heard the commotion?

“Just give me a moment to think,” I said before remembering my training. I cast my senses out, hoping I could cast out a net far enough to determine where the cemetery guard was at and if anyone else had shown up. Say, the police after having been called in because the cemetery’s night guard had heard screaming? It didn’t take very long to detect another big-ass fly in the ointment of my absolute shitfest of a night. I muttered a curse before calling out, “How long have you been here?”

Reese stepped into view, filling the doorway but not stepping inside of it. He did a scan of the room as Brittany sucked in a panicked breath and ran over to me to grab my arm. I stepped forward, shielding her by standing so that half her body was hidden behind mine. I would have stepped fully in front of her, but that frightened grip of hers was not letting me loose.

“Unfortunately, not long enough to have prevented this, but long enough to overhear some terrible suggestions for making this clusterfuck disappear. I clearly have a lot more to teach you.” He looked up from Barry’s dead body to meet my gaze. “Are you all right?”

“I’m standing in a room with my dead ex-boyfriend,” I replied. “I think it’s safe to assume I am not having a good night.”

“Are you hurt?”

I looked down at myself, realizing I hadn’t even really checked myself for injuries and I’d been so amped up on the

adrenaline of knowing I was screwed and trying to figure out how to save my ass and Brittany's too, I hadn't even picked up on the aches and pains I now felt. The good news was, I didn't think I'd suffered any major damage. "I'm not sure if any of this blood on me is mine, but I think I'm all right."

"Good." He raised his finger as if telling me to wait and took a cell phone out from one of his cargo pockets. A moment later, he held it to his ear and stared at me while shaking his head.

"Tell me you're not working tonight," he said into the phone after what could have only been two rings. "You are now. I need a cleanup and I need it kept quiet... the funeral home, in the breakroom. You'll find it all pretty self-explanatory. It must be done before her boss arrives at seven in the morning... No, it wasn't her... If there are any problems, he knows where to find me... I just need to know if you can do this. I have places to be... You got it. Thanks, Ginger."

Reese returned the cell phone to his pocket and let out a low whistle. "Man, you really know how to keep things interesting. We gotta go, Malvada. Brittany, you're coming with us."

"You're going to have to get through me if you think you're going to do anything to her. This was all me. She just happened to walk into this mess." I shot Brittany a dark look that warned her to keep her mouth closed when I sensed her about to confess what had happened.

Reese's head tilted to the side as he studied me, his eyes narrowed and the slightest curve to his mouth before he shook

his head again. “You’re going to stick to that story?”

“Yes.”

“Even when asked by Petie himself?”

I swallowed past the lump that had suddenly formed in my throat, realizing the amount of negative points I’d probably just earned with all that had happened in the breakroom. Screw it. I couldn’t save myself from going to Hell, but I could save Brittany from going to prison or worse, being taken out by Reese.

“Is that what you think I’m going to do?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, realizing he’d read my mind. “I don’t know the procedure here.”

“Clearly. Cleanup is on the way. We have a job to get to, and we need to get your friend away from here and get her all tucked in safe and sound in her home so she can go about her life without any aftermath from this night other than nightmares. I can’t help her with that, but I can get her safely away from here.”

“You’re not going to report me to the police?” Brittany asked, voice trembling.

“And risk them not understanding what happened here and putting you in a cell where others can see you pee?” The corners of his mouth twitched. “You proved yourself a good friend tonight, and so did Dulce. That counts for something. Now, let me get you both out of here so we can make this thing go away.”



Brittany lived in a small, yet nice, ground-floor apartment in a much nicer part of town than I lived in. It took her a while to unlock her door due to how badly her hands shook, but once she was safely inside, her bloody-soled shoes in her hands and tears still in her eyes, I knew she would be okay. She might not sleep, but she'd be okay.

“You're safe, Brittany. Reese assured us everything's going to get cleaned up like nothing happened and your car is going to be back here in your parking space by morning. I'm not sure how he's going to do that, but I trust him to do as he promises. No one is ever going to know what happened as long as we don't tell anyone, and we're not going to tell anyone. Right?”

She'd thrown her shoes in the garbage and walked me back outside after ensuring all the lights in her apartment were on, and looked over my shoulder to where Reese waited for me in his idling car before raising her hand with the pinky finger out. It took me a moment to realize what she was doing, and once I did, I was too touched to feel foolish as I raised mine and shared a silent pinky swear with her.

“So, you were really willing to take the fall for her,” Reese murmured as I lowered myself into the passenger seat and watched Brittany close her apartment door, knowing she would be locking it up tight and staying awake, replaying what

had happened. “You were going to claim you were the one to kill that man?”

“I’m the reason it all happened,” I said. “She saved my life. I wasn’t going to let her life be destroyed because I didn’t recognize what type of man he was, and if she hadn’t been there, I probably would have killed him. I blacked out again.”

“According to her, that’s not how things would have played out at all. He was choking you out. He would have killed you.”

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s what I get for picking—”

Reese’s hand gripped my chin and turned my face toward him. “Don’t. Don’t ever blame yourself for the actions of someone like that.” He released me and turned to stare out of the windshield. “I fucked up too. I knew that man was a problem.” He hit the steering wheel with his fist. “I should have been there. He had to have followed us. I knew he was a threat, and I missed it. I missed the follow.”

“At least you didn’t totally underestimate him. I really thought he wasn’t a big deal. I guess I’m not much of a demon hunter, huh? I couldn’t even stop a mere human man from getting the better of me. Arrogance, one; actual ability, zero.”

“You haven’t come into your power yet, and we all miss things,” Reese said softly, returning his gaze to me. “None of us are infallible or invincible.”

“Not even you?”

“I’ve already died once, remember? And on that note, put your game face on, Malvada.” He released a sigh as he backed

out of the parking space in front of Brittany's apartment and angled the car toward the road. "The reason I dropped in on you at your job was because we got our first assignment. It's time to go catch your first official target."



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“**S**orry,” I muttered again as I balled up the wet wipes I’d used to wipe blood off the soles of my shoes before putting them back on and stepped out of the vehicle now parked in the lot next to the building Reese had been staying in. I transferred them to the plastic bag he held out for me and waited for him to grab the towels he’d used to keep his floor mats and seat clean.

“This is very little mess compared to the way I’ve looked after some of my assignments,” he said, closing the door and turning toward the building. “If blood in my cars wasn’t a normal occurrence, I wouldn’t have a supply of towels in the trunk. It’s fine.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t have called the police? They’re going to investigate once he’s reported missing and if anyone knew he and I were dating, they might suspect me anyway. Maybe we should have just told them he attacked me.”

“And if they didn’t believe you?” He glanced at me as we entered the building. “Even if they did and everything worked out in your favor, there would have been an investigation and

you would have been watched. Staying under the radar is imperative in our line of work and you have to be available for assignments. You getting arrested is not a risk we could take.”

“Can Ginger really clean everything up at the funeral home? What will she do with the body?”

Reese shot me another look as we stepped into the elevator, and he pressed the button to take us to his floor. “If vampires weren’t capable of cleaning up big, bloody messes and taking care of bodies, we wouldn’t be as unknown as we are.”

“There are gazillions of books and movies about you,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but try telling someone we’re real and you know a few,” he replied. “Enjoy your stay in the looney bin.”

“Touché.”

“You don’t need to know what she does with the body. You are right to be concerned the police may question you if his disappearance is reported. The less you know, the less you can accidentally slip up and give away. Dealing with law enforcement is honestly more of a pain than tracking and taking out demons.”

I hope so, I thought as we stepped out of the elevator and Reese unlocked the door to the studio. Butterflies had been throwing a rager in my stomach since Reese had revealed we’d been assigned a target. After getting bested by Barry, it went without saying my confidence in my ability to do a damn thing where demons were concerned was seriously lacking.

Reese opened the door, and I was pretty sure my jaw hit the floor. “What the hell is that?”

A big, dark, swirling vortex stood in the center of the room between two columns. It was about ten feet in diameter and looked like some sort of portal, but I could see nothing inside it. Just swirling shades of darkness.

“That is how we get to Purgatory’s administrative offices to retrieve our assignment,” Reese explained as he prodded me forward so he could close the door. Apparently, I’d been frozen in surprise. “And we’re already late. I know you seem to think Petie is some cute little guy, but I assure you he’s really not, and you don’t want him grumpy, so let’s not make him wait any longer.”

“Wait.” I looked down at myself. My Captain Marvel T-shirt was black so most of the blood on it didn’t show, but what had stained my jeans while I’d crawled over to check out Barry’s lifeless form did. Wet wipes couldn’t help me with my clothes. “I can’t go there looking like this.”

“You looked even worse the last time you were there,” Reese reminded me as he tossed the soiled towels and wet wipes from his car onto the floor. “If they’re bothered by your appearance, they’ll do their magic wand shit and fix you up. And they’re going to know what happened tonight the moment you set foot in Purgatory anyway because it’s going to show up in your file. There’s no hiding anything from them.”

“Well, not there,” I said, latching on to what he’d said. “But if I don’t go through that portal, they won’t know, right? We

can just delay all this stuff until I die again. I'll wait here while you find out who our target is.”

“Sorry, but it doesn't work that way. They want to see you too.” His arm snaked out as I turned to run, and his hand wrapped around my wrist before he tugged me along toward the portal. “Nut up, Malvada.”

“I don't have nuts.”

“Use your metaphorical ones.”

We walked into the portal and immediately stepped out into a gray waiting room. Gray walls. Gray carpet. Gray plastic chairs. Gray-haired lady in a gray dress sitting behind a gray desk. She merely gestured toward the chairs with a look at Reese that said he knew the drill.

We didn't have time to sit, however, before the only door in the room—gray, of course—swung open and a voice I would have bet money belonged to Leslie Jordan barked out, “What the hell are you standing around out there for? Get your asses in here.”

I took a quick look down as Reese dragged me forward and saw that I had not been magically cleaned up upon entering Purgatory's administrative offices, but I was in Petie's office before I could have a panic attack over it.

“Well, shit. What happened to you?” Petie said, looking up at me from under his eyebrows, making no effort to get up from behind his gray desk. “You weren't supposed to kill anybody yet, girl. Reese, aren't you training her?”

He raised a short, thick finger up, silencing Reese before he could respond, and a gray door appeared in the gray wall behind and to the left of the little man-in-charge. It opened, and The Accountant stepped inside, carrying a gray folder. The door disappeared behind her as if it had never been, which was when I noticed the one Reese and I had entered through was also nowhere to be found.

The Accountant barely glanced my way before moving over to Petie's desk and setting the folder in front of him. She opened it and showed him the pages inside. The file was far thicker than the one I'd seen during my previous visit, so I sincerely hoped it wasn't mine.

"As you can see," she said, "the infractions are minor, but plentiful. However, what occurred just before his death is major."

Whew, if they were talking about a man, that was definitely not my file. Unless... that *was* my file, and the man whose death she referred to was Barry. *Crap.*

Petie flicked a glance my way before looking over at The Accountant. "I've got the gist from the file, but with two paths crossing like this, show me the footage."

The Accountant waved her hand and another of those portals opened in the air to her right. This one was rectangular, and it wasn't completely dark. It was basically a floating television screen and what I saw playing on it chilled me.

As if I were watching myself on a security camera feed, I saw myself wake up to find Barry looming over me. I felt

Reese's fingers slip through mine as he held my hand while we watched the attack. I heard a low growl he barely suppressed as on screen, my body went flying, crashing into the lobby wall. I continued to watch with my heart in my throat as I'd tried to outrun Barry, only to get cornered in the breakroom. The moment he unfastened his pants, I looked away, burying my face into Reese's shoulder.

"He didn't even have time to go for your zipper," Reese whispered softly, sensing what I was afraid to see. "You shifted the moment he went for his."

Shifted? I lifted my head and looked at the screen to see myself fighting Barry. My eyes were wild, my lips pulled back in a snarl, and I swung and scratched at him like an animal possessed. Which I probably was.

"Has my demon side actually awakened?" I asked no one in the room in particular. "Is it just a temporary thing I lose consciousness during?"

"No," Petie answered, never taking his gaze off the screen where Barry and I continued to fight like hell.

Fortunately, I landed more blows than Barry did, and his missed my face so I wasn't walking around looking like Bozo the Ass-Whooped Clown but his days on the high school wrestling team had helped him grapple well enough to hold his own against me during my lights-out fit of rage. The screen split to show Brittany arriving at the funeral home, entering to hear the struggle. She saw my cell phone and switchblade, and her instincts must have kicked in because she grabbed the

knife and crept quickly toward the back of the building, arriving at the breakroom just in time to see Barry cutting off my air supply.

She stabbed him in the back, and just as she'd said, he dropped me and went for her. She swung out, landing a perfect cut across his throat and I already knew everything that had happened after that because it wasn't long after that I regained consciousness.

The Accountant and Petie watched until Reese arrived on scene and then she made the screen disappear with a wave of her hand before turning her attention toward the man. "Well?"

Petie's lips puckered as he tapped his stubby fingers over the open file in front of him. He narrowed his eyes at me for a moment, then grabbed one of the two big stamps on his desk and brought it down hard on the paper before him. He returned the stamp to its spot on his desk, closed the folder, and handed the file to The Accountant. "Send him on his way."

The Accountant nodded her head sharply, turned, and disappeared through the door that suddenly appeared before her and blinked out of existence just as quickly. And then I realized what had just been said. "Wait. Was that Barry's file? Is he here? Is he being audited? Where was he sent?"

"I can't answer those questions, girl." Petie looked at me as if what I was asking was blasphemy. "We have HIPAA."

I blinked. "The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996?"

“No, dummy. Happenings In Purgatory Are Anonymous, or the original acronym I actually preferred but HR overruled: Happenings In Purgatory Aren’t your business, Asshat.”

I decided not to ask if HR stood for Human Resources. I was almost afraid that if it didn’t, whatever it did stand for would insult me.

“Told you about the acronyms,” Reese muttered.

“What was that?” Petie seemed to swell a little in size, but I blinked, and he was his usual cute self again.

“Nothing.” Reese released my hand and stood straighter. “You have a target for us?”

“Yes, and now that you’ve *finally* graced us with your presence, I can give it to you. Damn demon’s probably gained at least three souls by now while you were dilly-dallying.”

“He was helping me with—”

“I know what he was helping you with, girl.” Petie glared at me for a moment before his features softened. “That loss of consciousness you experience from time to time isn’t your demon awakening. It’s the bit of demon DNA that’s been in your blood since you came screaming into the world. It’s what you suppress so hard without even knowing it that when you need it to defend yourself, your mind takes a vacation and lets your body do the work. When you go through your actual awakening, you will fully access the demon DNA inside you. You’ll change. How you’ll change is yet unknown, but you shouldn’t be able to just block it out of your mind, so you

better brace yourself because I can see it stirring. It's closer to the surface than it was your last trip here."

His gaze shifted down, and I followed it to see my hands trembling almost as badly as my heart raced. I shoved them into my pants pockets and took a deep breath. Petie seemed to wait until I'd calmed myself before he continued. "What happened tonight was a damn shit-show, but as far as shit-shows go, it wasn't the worst I've seen, and what matters is how you handled it. I won't say you handled it spectacularly, but you put the protection of another ahead of yourself. You earned some positive points tonight, Malvada. Now you have the opportunity to earn even more."

He waved his hand, and another screen appeared. A beautiful, curvy blonde's image appeared on it. "This is a very simple grab and return. You don't even have to work hard to track this one. She's very low-level and apparently doesn't know better than to put some distance between herself and the hellhole she escaped through before she started making deals."

"Hellhole?"

Petie flashed me an annoyed look, apparently not a fan of being interrupted. "Something you need explained?"

"Uh, the hellhole part." I glanced over at Reese to see him fighting a smile while he stared at the floor.

"What about it?"

"Nothing. I'm just wondering how demons actually escape Hell."

“Through a hellhole,” Petie said, looking at me like I’d just asked a dumb question.

“Right. Just, um, so they all escape through these hellholes?”

He nodded.

“And how do they get out of Hell to get into these places that are considered hellholes?”

The little man’s cheeks reddened as he stared at me, blinking occasionally before he erupted. “They’re hellholes, Malvada! Hell has holes and demons escape through them. Holes. In. Hell. *Hellholes.*”

“Ohhh.” A strangled chuckle came from my right side, and I looked over to see Reese struggling. “Jerk. You knew what I thought he meant and why I was asking.”

“Sorry. It was too amusing watching that whole thing play out.”

“Dumbasses,” Petie muttered before returning his attention to the image on the screen. “Santana Allen. Started out human, turned demon after going down below. Now she’s back up top making deals and claiming souls in Louisville. You know the usual places for those transactions. Like I said, not a hard one to find. Shouldn’t be any harder to send her back.”

Yeah, then why don’t you go fetch her? I thought, but good sense told me not to let those words leak past my lips.

“Any questions? No?” Petie answered his own question before either of us had a chance to and made a dismissive

gesture with his hand as he told us, “Get outta here, then.”

I lurched backward and only Reese’s hands around my waist kept me from falling on my ass in his studio. I couldn’t even see the portal we must have been blown back through by whatever force had come out of Petie’s simple hand gesture.

“You’ll get used to that,” Reese assured me as he straightened me before releasing his hold. “Takes some practice, but you’ll figure out how to brace for the return.”

“I’m sure I would have had a smoother go at it had I been warned,” I muttered, not sparing any accusation in my tone.

Reese only grinned. “This is a tough job. I have to get my kicks where I can. Besides, you seem tense. A little joviality couldn’t hurt.”

“Of course I seem tense! I’m about to go after my first demon and I just nearly got killed by a regular guy.” My voice cracked and the backs of my eyes burned as my throat clogged. I turned away to wipe away the tears I knew were coming, but Reese’s hand wrapped around my biceps and pulled me back.

“Hey.” He shoved away the hand I pressed against his chest in my attempt to break free and wrapped his free hand around the back of my neck, locking me in place before him so I had no choice but to meet his gaze as water filled my eyes. “Hey. You got this. You’re going to be fine.”

I just shook my head, any bravado I’d had in the beginning of our training long gone. I forced myself to hold his

sympathetic gaze as I breathed in deeply through my nose, using all my willpower not to blink because once I did, there'd be no holding back the tears threatening to fall.

“You're going to be okay.”

“How do you know that? I couldn't even handle one guy.”

“One human guy,” he pointed out. “One who caught you unaware and whether you want to admit it or not, may have still held some trace of affection for that would have prohibited you from defending yourself the same way you would defend yourself against a demon. You're the one doing the hunting now, which gives you the advantage, and you hold no attachment toward your target. And you have me. If I see you in a jam with this demon, I'm not going to stand there and let it kill you. I'm going to jump in and kill it.” His lips twitched. “Then I'm going to kick your ass and make you give me fifty pushups for not handling it yourself, but either way, you're going to be all right. You might not survive the training session I put you through after this, but you'll survive whatever happens with the demon tonight.”

“Jackass,” I muttered, but grinned, and found I could breathe easier.

“Yep, I am, but we all have our flaws.” He let me go and turned for the door, giving me the time I needed to wipe my eyes and sniff back the last remaining threat of tears. “Come on, Malvada. No sense changing into a clean shirt before we find this demon. Things are going to get messy.”



“Do you have your switchblade?” Reese asked as we walked to the back of his Charger.

The building he stayed in wasn't too far from the hub of downtown, so I hadn't been given a lot of time during the ride to calm myself before he'd found a lot to park in. On the upside, I hadn't been given a lot of time to work myself into even more of a panic, but I'd sure given it my best shot, judging from the way my heart thumped away in my chest. I extracted the switchblade from the pocket I'd been carrying it in since picking it up from the breakroom floor and tried not to think of it as “the murder weapon.”

“Good girl. I'm just making sure you're listening during your training and following instruction, but since we are actively in pursuit of a target we have been assigned to send back, you're getting an upgrade.” He popped the trunk open using his key fob and lifted what I thought had been the bottom of the trunk to reveal a hidden compartment I quickly saw was full of weapons.

“Very Winchester.”

“What?”

“Very Winchester,” I repeated. “The Winchesters have a stash like this in a hidden compartment in their trunk, but their car is way cooler.”

“You’re talking about that show with the brothers who hunt monsters.”

“Yep. You ever watch it?”

“I’ve caught a few episodes. They lost me when they decided to give the vampires retractable shark teeth.”

“Your fangs retract.”

“Yeah, but they look a hell of a lot better than what those freaks had, and enough stalling.” He lifted a dagger with a thick handle and an eight-inch blade with a tip that looked sharp enough to pierce steel. “Daggers are more for stabbing than slicing, but that’s exactly what you want to do. Our assignment is to send this demon back to Hell, and that takes a direct stab to the heart with a salt-fired blade.”

“We can’t just do the exorcism thing? Petie said this demon was low-level, so wouldn’t it be a good one for me to get some exorcism practice on?”

“We’re still working on your pronunciation, and once you can clearly pronounce the necessary words, we’ll have to try the incantation in a safe location, not out in the field. We don’t know if the incantation can even be used around you yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re half demon. I’m hoping your human DNA is enough to anchor you here if an exorcism is performed around you, but if it isn’t, you could possibly poof your own ass to Hell trying to send some other demon back.”

I stared at him for a long stretch, blinking now and then as I processed this rather disturbing possibility and remembered practicing the Latin words he'd taught me while dropping me off at work earlier that night. Then I slugged him on his left pectoral. "You had me saying Latin!"

He grunted and rubbed his chest before shooting me an annoyed look. "I didn't give you the whole incantation. Random words weren't going to do anything to you, but this dagger will so keep your hands to yourself unless you're using them against a demon."

With no witty comebacks popping into my brain, I folded my arms over my chest and glared at him, jutting out my hip for a little extra attitude.

Reese shook his head and handed me the dagger, handle-first. "Take this. You're going to keep your switchblade on you for backup, but this will be far more effective."

I took the dagger and turned it in my hand, getting a feel for its weight as Reese retrieved something else from the trunk. A moment later, he was attaching some sort of sheath to my thigh while I held my breath.

"Relax," he said, falsely assuming my sudden statue impersonation was because of nerves and not the fact that his palm had just been on the inside of my thigh. "You're going to be okay."

Yep, just as long as I stayed still as a statue, fighting the urge to reach down for him because I didn't even want to think about what might happen if I touched him then. And since I

didn't want him knowing about what I was thinking, I started singing in my head.

“Let's slide it in and see how it feels,” he said, straightening up.

“What?” My voice cracked, and I nearly choked on my own tongue.

“Put the dagger in the sheath and see if everything fits right.” He angled his head to the side as he studied me, the low dip to his eyebrows hinting he was worried about my mental faculties. “What else would I mean?”

“Oh, nothing. I just didn't know what you were talking about. The sheath, of course. I was just... my mind was elsewhere.” I slid the dagger into the sheath and held my breath again as Reese fiddled with it, testing the placement and security. Meanwhile, a concert blasted away in my head.

“Pull it out and see if you struggle.”

The dagger glided out of the sheath effortlessly and slid back in easily when returned. “It's all good.”

Reese stood before me, hands on hips, staring at the weapon. He nodded once he must have approved of everything and clapped his hands together. “All right, so—what is that racket in your head?”

I hit him with a fiery glare. “Something you wouldn't know was there if you weren't purposely trying to intrude upon my private mental thoughts right now.”

His frown deepened. “Ginger taught you how to mask your thoughts.”

“Did it ever occur to you I might be smart enough to have figured the song thing out on my own?”

“It occurred to me, but then I got an earful of Chumbawamba.” He rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I wasn’t dipping. I can hear it because whatever you’re trying so hard to not let me hear right now, you’re so freaked about it, you’re blasting the damn song. You don’t have to be afraid to admit you’re terrified right now. I’m not going to judge you for having enough sense to know this shit isn’t a cakewalk, but I need you to calm down so you can clear your mind. We need to open our senses to find our demon.”

“Can’t you do that?” I asked, hesitant to let go of my masking song even if he mistakenly thought I was only hiding my fear of what we were about to find and send back to Hell, not my fear of him knowing the effect his hands on my thigh had had on me.

“Yes, but it’s something you need to get better at and need to consistently do while we’re in the field.”

In the field. This shit was seriously getting real. “Fine. What do I do again?”

“Just let everything go, especially that damn song. Not sure why you went with ‘Tubthumping’ other than the fact it is effective in being very annoying on repeat.”

“It’s easy to remember, and it’s catchy.”

“Yeah, you’ll think so when it’s still in your head while you’re trying to sleep later. I know I will,” he added with a slight growl, hinting at how not appreciative he was of my song choice, which only made me happier I’d chosen it. “Let it all go and cast out your senses like we’ve practiced. Before that, though, what can you tell me about our prey tonight?”

“Santana Allen,” I said, repeating the name Petie had given us. “Former human. Turned demon in Hell and now back up here making deals. So, she’s a dealer demon.”

“Which are?” he prompted, basically giving me an on-the-spot quiz to know what I’d retained from my reading.

“Dealer demons have the ability to collect souls in exchange for giving the mortal what he or she desires most. They can be summoned from Hell through a dark spell, or they can intrude upon a séance, although it is usually more powerful demons who do that. Once aboveground, they don’t have to be summoned by a spell. They can sense when mortals desire something with enough level of desperation to make themselves susceptible to making a deal and are free to approach.”

“Very good. Where do they lurk?”

“Bars. Clubs. Dark alleys. They hunt at night. Night is when people feel the most alone, buried under the weight of their own sorrow. Night is when they are more susceptible to trading their souls for what they want.”

“How will we know her?”

“Other than the picture Petie showed us of her, we will sense the shift in the air around her. A dealer demon affects emotions, makes people want to bargain.”

“Yes, and that isn’t just something she can solely do to the regular humans she preys on. A dealer demon affects anyone with a soul. That includes you and me.”

“Good to know I still have a soul. You too.”

“There are very few soulless entities. Those bypass Purgatory altogether and Heaven isn’t even in the realm of possibility. We have souls, and the dealer demon will prey on us just like she would anyone else if she wants to and we’re susceptible. She’ll be able to see what we desire most and make a damn good offer based on what she sees.”

“I’m not an idiot. I know whatever deal she offers will not end well for me,” I assured him.

“Good. Also, remember that demons are tricky. Don’t answer anything in the affirmative around her. You might agree to a deal without even knowing it.”

“Got it.”

“I find it most helpful to just kill the bitches before they get the chance to open their mouths.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.”

“Glad you agree. Now that you’ve got that damn song out of your head, let’s cast out our senses and find this bitch.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Casting for the demon had been a little odd. We hadn't sensed the physical presence of any particular entity, or at least I hadn't. What we'd sensed had been a sort of black hole where nothing inside could be sensed.

“It's like a force field,” Reese explained as we traveled up the street on foot, leaving Reese's car in the lot at a safe distance. He'd given me a long leather duster to wear to cover the blade attached to my thigh, as well as the parts of my clothes covered in dried blood, and he wore a shorter leather jacket to cover his weapons. He didn't have a dagger as long as mine, his explanation being that he moved faster and had more training so he could get closer to attack than I could, so he didn't have anything strapped to his leg that needed covering. “She can affect anyone within that circle with her mood-altering ability and it conceals her at the same time. Although trained bounty hunters for Purgatory like myself or those with demon blood like you can use the same thing shielding her to actually locate her.”

“What about those Rider Knight guys?” I asked. “That big one sensed me. Could he sense this demon?”

“If he was inside the perimeter of that dead zone, he could. However, despite being trained to hunt and fight and having his own special abilities due to what he is, I don’t think Hank would sense that dead zone at all outside of it. You can because the demon blood in you recognizes the blood in that demon and what she’s doing. I can because it’s one of the perks of being employed to hunt by Purgatory. I guess you could say we get an upgrade to our senses so we can track demons better.”

“And Ginger doesn’t have this upgrade?”

“No. She’s just a regular vampire, working for Knight and taking whatever other jobs entice her. She’s mostly been working for Knight lately, though. Not sure why. I guess her loyalty to him has grown.”

“And that doesn’t worry you?” I asked as we neared the location we’d sensed.

“No, and there’s no reason it should. Ginger and I go way back. I trust her and she knows she can trust me. She’s the only person outside of anyone I’ve trained who knows about my deal with Purgatory and she’s never told anyone about it, not even Knight.”

“You’re sure of that?”

He cut me a look. “Believe me, if Rider Knight knew I had access to Purgatory, he would be far more aggressive in his

attempts to recruit me to work for him. Working for him would no longer be an option. It would be an ultimatum.”

“He sounds so pleasant.”

“Yeah, that’s a word for him.” Reese chuckled before a strange shift in the air rolled over us. Then he grew serious. “Entering the dead zone. She’s going to be in one of these bars and we can’t just stab her in front of humans, so we’re going to have to go in and discreetly keep an eye on her until she leaves. Then we’ll follow her out and gank her in an alley where there hopefully won’t be any witnesses.”

“And if there are?”

“Worry about that then. But no, we generally don’t kill the witnesses, if that’s what you’re wondering. Kind of defeats the whole purpose of us trying to keep our souls out of Hell.”

I nodded my understanding and came to a stop when he did. “What?”

“We’re within the dead zone now. Let’s find her. You know what to do.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, casting my senses out as I did. We’d walked toward the West End, but were still in an area considered downtown. There were bars all around us, as well as a couple of clubs and a few other businesses, like a small convenience store and a little barbershop. Given the late hour, the bars and clubs were the only places inhabited and they were filled with enough people to make sorting

through all the different energies quite an effort, but I eventually found what I believed we were looking for.

“She’s in there,” I said, pointing toward a bar called Ring O’ Fire. Kind of fitting for someone who recently escaped from Hell, I supposed. “I can tell because everyone in there seems kind of off, like their emotions are being played with.”

“Yup,” he said, staring at the sign over the door that identified the small bar. “Looks like we got a demon with a sense of humor. I just love demons with a sense of humor.”

“The tone of your voice says you don’t.”

“Exactly.”

“I like to think I’m funny, so I guess I should be kind of offended right now.”

“Nah. You’re not fully a demon and you’re not my target. You’re annoying, yes, but sometimes you’re entertaining.”

I placed my hand over my heart and fluttered my lashes. “Be still my heart. You know just how to sweet-talk a woman.”

“Your heart can be as still as it wants, but I need your ass to move now. Don’t think I don’t know you’re stalling again.”

“Maybe I’m waiting for you to take the lead and teach me something. I’ve still got training wheels on, remember?”

“Wiseass,” he muttered before tugging me into his side and looping an arm over my shoulders before leading me toward the entrance. “We’re doing the dating act. She may pick up

that I'm a vampire and you've got some demon in your blood, but there's no reason she'd know we're hunting her as long as we're discreet. Hell, she might even try to hang out with us."

"And if she does? Do we just stab her under the table or something?"

"Uh, no," Reese answered in a tone that implied he questioned my intelligence. "That's not where her heart is, Malvada."

Getting into the bar was a breeze, the fake ID Reese had acquired for me barely garnering a glance from the security guard at the entrance. The place was clean enough, but not all that impressive. The walls were paneled in the same wood used for the floor. The overall effect was that it felt like walking inside a giant crate. The big-ass bar taking up the center of the room was the focal point, with booths along the right wall and tables scattered around the front and left. A pair of dartboards hung on the left side of the rear wall, a jukebox rested dead center, and a sign indicated the bathrooms were down the hall on the right. This wasn't a place to come to be entertained. It was a place to drink and look for a hook-up if you wandered in alone. It took all my willpower not to stare straight at the demon I sensed staring a hole through me.

"Pretty sure we've been spotted."

"Of course we have. She'll be watching everyone who enters," Reese explained as he guided me over to a table that would put us at a comfortable distance from the booth the demon sat in, but still gave a decent view of her so we'd know

when it was time to get up and go after her. “She’s hunting. But again, as long as we look and behave like a couple on a date, she has no reason to suspect a thing.”

Reese pulled out a chair for me, which would appear gentlemanly to anyone else, but I knew he was just making sure I sat where he thought I would be positioned best for the job we had to do. Once I was seated, he leaned forward, resting one hand on the table, and used the other to rub his knuckles down my jaw. “Watch her without being obvious while I get drinks. Seeing as how you’re not actually twenty-one yet, I’m assuming you’d want—”

“Bourbon in any shape or form.”

He grinned and shook his head before stepping away to go to the bar. It took me a moment to realize I was watching him instead of covertly watching the demon, so I tore my gaze away from Reese to do what I hoped was a nonchalant scan of the bar, starting over my shoulder and slowly moving over the room in an arc to casually glance at the curvy blonde demon... who was totally scoping Reese out.

I should have continued scanning, letting my gaze slide by before I drew attention, but the way the demon watched Reese pricked something under my skin, especially as her dark gaze did a slow up-and-down and her mouth curved. Her gaze shifted to mine, and that curve went from seductive to amused as I met that gaze full-on and didn’t even think about dropping it. I studied her fully, taking in her bright blue eyes, glossy blonde hair that fell over her shoulders, and the black leather

low-cut dress hugging her curvy frame under the short leather jacket she wore over it.

“Do you even know what discreet means?” Reese asked in a mildly annoyed tone as he returned with our drinks.

“Do you know how a woman reacts to a skank sniffing around her man? Because if I’m supposed to be on a date with you, it would be suspicious of me *not* to glare at that bitch after the way she was undressing you with her beady little eyes.”

Reese choked back a laugh as he set the drinks on the table and moved behind me before taking his seat close to my side. “And here I thought I might have trouble convincing you to sell the cover story. Are you always so territorial on dates?”

“Honestly, no. I figure if a man is tempted by another woman while he’s with me, she can have him,” I said as I leaned into him—solely to sell our cover, of course—and wrapped my hands around my bourbon on the rocks. “But I figured if I could sell the clingy, jealous girlfriend bit, it would allow me to watch her with less worry of her knowing we were actually hunting her.”

“Look at you being all smart and sneaky. Already thinking like a bounty hunter.”

“Yep, that’s me. Joe Pro.” I realized I was a little tense and forced myself to relax. “So, is this the way you usually are on dates? All close and clingy?”

“Pretty much.” He grinned and somehow seemed to get even closer to me as he angled his head so his lips hovered over my neck, just below my ear. “Makes it easier to get close for the little nips the women I’m usually with like for me to take. Relax, Malvada, I’m not going to nip off of you, but if it looks like I am, it only helps our cover. Especially if she smells the blood on you.”

I forced myself to relax yet again. “So, you drink from your dates.”

“The women I find myself in bars with socially are usually the type who want that,” he said, moving his mouth away from my neck. “This job doesn’t allow much leeway for real relationships, so I don’t really date so much as...”

“Hook up,” I supplied when he trailed off, as if searching for an explanation that wouldn’t offend me.

“Yeah, that.” He lifted his drink and sipped, and I noted the bloody color.

“That looks like cranberry juice.”

“That’s because it is,” he said, returning the glass to the table. “Alcohol thins blood, not a good thing for vampires who already have thin blood.”

“So, you can’t even enjoy a drink in a bar?”

“Not a bar like this,” he said, glancing around. “There are vampire-friendly bars where you can order a very bloody mary, which is what it sounds like, but the only vampire-

friendly bars in Kentucky are owned by Rider Knight. That demon won't go near one of his bars."

I glanced over at the demon in question to see her texting on a cell phone. I shook my head. It was crazy enough that seven-year-olds had cell phones, but even demons freshly escaped from Hell had them? The damn things really were an obsession. "Um, does that fact make our real reason for being here kind of obvious?"

"Hmm?"

"Why would we be here if there are vampire-friendly bars you could actually drink at? Aren't you afraid it's kind of obvious we'd be here just to hunt her? What if she thinks you're one of Knight's guys?"

"Think it through, Malvada. Keep in mind the part where *we* are here together." He lifted his glass again and sipped while I thought things through.

It took me a moment, but when I caught on, I kind of wanted to give myself a head-slap. "She won't go near one of his bars because demons aren't welcome. I wouldn't go near his bar for the same reason, and if you were one of his guys, you wouldn't be all cozied up to me."

"Bingo. Now, quit letting that bourbon go to waste. You have no idea how much I miss the stuff."

"Was that what the little smile was about when I requested it?"

“Yeah, a little amusement that you’d request my drink of choice despite that abomination you call coffee. Have you actually drunk bourbon before?”

“Yes, but I’d still choose my coffee over this if given a choice between the two,” I murmured before taking a drink, smiling around the edge of my glass as he chuckled. Although I’d been a little afraid of the quality, given the bar not looking like much, the bourbon went down just right, and I took another drink before setting my glass back on the table. “You know, this is kind of nice. Actually, kind of enjoyable.”

“Shit,” he muttered.

I turned fully toward him to see him watching me warily. “What?”

“You’ve been bickering with me from the moment we officially met. If you’re suddenly enjoying my company, she’s probably working her demon crap on you, bringing out desires you don’t even know you want.”

I immediately went on defense. “Oh, get over yourself. Not every expression of enjoying a man’s company means a woman wants in his pants. I was just—”

“Not where I was going, Malvada,” he cut me off. “You’ve spent a long damn time alone. You’ve had plenty of boyfriends, been on a lot of dates, but I’m guessing you’ve never been to a slumber party. You desire friendship, and that demon could use your desire to bait you into making a deal if you’re not careful.”

“You don’t know what I desire, vampire.” As I spoke the words, I found myself very thankful for the truth behind them. I wasn’t even one hundred percent sure what I desired so best of luck to him if he tried going in my head to find out, but I definitely harbored some feelings that could make our working relationship very awkward, feelings that made no sense because I normally pushed people away unless I wanted to take care of physical needs, and Reese wasn’t the type of man I’d ever choose for taking care of that particular itch. Even stranger, despite the man’s indisputable attractiveness, that wasn’t what I found so appealing about him. I liked the deep throaty sound he made when he chuckled, the way soft light seemed to enter his eyes when he was amused, and I couldn’t stop thinking about the stupid cooking lessons and why for some reason, they meant more to me than I could explain.

“Maybe you’re just less of an insufferable ass-wad than I originally thought,” I said, realizing the silence between us had gone long enough to become awkward and that certainly didn’t help us sell the whole being there on a date thing. “I know that can be very hard to believe, but there it is.”

He grinned as he reached for his juice and lifted the glass to his mouth. “You sure know how to stroke a guy’s ego.”

“Well, if we’re selling this as a date, I suppose I should be stroking something.”

He choked, nearly spewing cranberry juice before he could clamp his mouth closed and finish swallowing the liquid. He coughed through the fit, but not before water streamed out of

his eyes. I gave his back a couple of good smacks until he was done choking and could laugh. “Warn a guy the next time you plan to kill him.”

“Pretty sure warning my intended prey wouldn’t be a smart move.”

“You’re probably right.” He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes before giving a nearby table of men eying us a dark glare that quickly had them minding their own business. “And just so you know, you have a friend now. Man, that Brittany went above and beyond tonight. She’s a keeper.”

“You barely know her.”

“I know she killed a man to protect you and she’s not some deranged psycho who gets off on that sort of thing, and I know despite you being about as cuddly as a porcupine, she’s been slowly breaking down the bricks in that damn wall you have all around you. She got you a job when you needed one. She’s been a support system for you, even though you’ve never requested anything from her.”

“I know,” I said, still surprised and confused by how the woman had embedded herself so deeply into my life. “Do you think I should be suspicious? Maybe she’s like a spy for the other side or something.”

“The demons who escape Hell aren’t that organized,” Reese assured me. “Or that smart. You have a friend, Malvada. Be thankful and try to enjoy it. Maybe schedule a girls’ night. It’s the least you could do for the poor girl after she traumatized herself, slashing your ex’s throat open.”

“What’s a girls’ night?”

Reese did a slow blink before grinning wide and shaking his head. “I can teach you how to hunt and slay, but you’re going to have to figure out the girls’ night thing on your own.”

“I’ll ask Ginger.”

“Pretty sure you want to stay away from whatever Ginger would consider a girls’ night,” he said, taking a drink. This time, the juice went down without any problems. “Her idea of fun usually involves bloodshed and, depending on how you phrase the question, she might think you’re asking her out. She gets around with the ladies more than I do.”

“Oh.” I took a drink. “Well, I don’t think I’m her type. I can usually tell when someone’s attracted to me, and she has been a perfect gentle... lady?”

“Oh, then she’s definitely not into you,” he replied with an even bigger smile. “I figured as much because she usually hits on a woman immediately when she’s interested. Of course, there’s the demon thing too,” he said, sobering. “You’re going to face a lot of prejudice, especially after your awake—uh, hostile takeover, I mean, happens. Unfortunately, demons aren’t very well-liked, especially in this city. There are rogues like me and a few other nests, but most of the vampires in this city are under Rider Knight. That vampire really hates demons.”

“Why?”

Reese shrugged. "I'm not close enough to the guy to ask him for personal details like that. I just know it didn't take very long for enough demons to die going near his bar that they figured out it was better to stay the hell away."

"Noted," I said, lifting my bourbon. As I did, I noticed Santana Allen get up from the booth she'd been sitting in and cross the floor, adding a sway to her hips meant to entice anyone looking her way. Judging by the way she stared at Reese, she hoped to entice him. Judging by the way she winked at him, she also wanted to get her throat torn out.

"Easy, tiger," Reese said, not laughing openly, but the amusement was clear in his voice as he stared right back at her as she exited the bar. "That was a clear challenge and right in your face, so finish your drink. We'll catch up to her and you can go all pissed off, jealous girlfriend until we get her where we want her, preferably an empty alley. Then, we ship her back to Hell faster than Amazon Prime."

I threw the drink back, downing what was left in one swallow, and slammed the glass down on the table before I stood. "Come on."

"Uh, you seem a little personally affronted."

I looked down at where he still sat, which annoyed me because I was ready to fight. "You and I may know we aren't really together, but she thinks I'm your date, and she winked at you. Like you said, right in my face. I don't really give a shit when a man decides to drop me for another woman, but when

a woman thinks she can just take a man from me, she needs to get throat-punched.”

“Ah, so that’s how that works.” Reese stood and ushered me toward the door. “Feel free to throat-punch all you want. Just don’t forget we need to stab her in the heart with a salt-fired blade. You can have your fun, but the actual job is to send her back to Hell.”

“That won’t be a problem,” I said, realizing I was a little overly perturbed by the incident. It wasn’t the first time a woman had flirted with a man with me, but it was the first time I’d wanted to rip one’s face off.

We stepped out of the bar and scanned left to right, quickly spotting the demon a block down on our left. Her black leather knee-high boots carried her away at a casual pace, as if the cool night air didn’t affect the exposed skin between her boots and hemline at all. I must have started after her too quickly because Reese snagged the back of the duster he’d given me and pulled me back so I was at his side before he threaded his fingers through mine. “Don’t give up the illusion until it’s time,” he said. “She could look back at any moment and if she does, you want her to see a pair of lovers, not two threats stalking her.”

I took a deep breath and nodded, willing my racing nerves to calm down. I recognized the fear under my desire to fight and reminded myself that I was with Reese, and he had been doing this for a while, certainly long enough to handle Santana

Allen. "You've gone after much worse demons than a dealer demon, right?"

"Much worse. Humans who become demons after going to Hell are never as powerful as demons that are born what they are and if this one is young enough to still be known by her human name, she's nothing much to worry about. Just don't get so caught up in the desire to throat-punch her that you let her sneak in some pain of her own. She won't just stand there and let you beat the crap out of her, especially if she suspects our intention is to send her back to where she just escaped."

"Yeah, I get the danger, and no worries. Stabbing her back to Hell will be just as satisfying as ripping her face off."

"I thought you wanted to throat-punch her."

"I can want to do both." I ignored his grin as the demon ducked down an alley and we quickened our pace just a little. "So, was she that pretty before going to Hell, or is she possessing someone's body?"

"Dealer demons always have to possess bodies, but as low-level as they are, they mostly possess dead bodies because they can't fight the will of the living long enough for a full possession to last."

"Right. I remember that from what I read," I advised with just a hint of irritation as we ducked down the same alley to see Santana ahead of us. "I'm asking if you think she went back into her own body. They can do that, right? Because, although they aren't powerful enough to possess a living body

for long, they can regenerate a dead one. Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked innocently.

“Like you want to put a gold star sticker on my paper and hang it on the refrigerator.”

He chuckled. “You’re making me proud, Malvada. Let me bask in it a moment, my irritable little protégé. To answer your question, I don’t know if she reclaimed her own body or someone else’s. And I really don’t find her all that attractive. I’ve always been into women with darker hair and skin tones, so the pale blonde bombshell thing isn’t doing much for me. Why does it matter what she looked like before going to Hell?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged as best I could with him still holding my hand. “I guess I’m just thinking out loud, wondering what little tricks and perks there might be for demons. Who knows which abilities I may get after I go through my big demon makeover.”

Reese gave me a sideways glance but didn’t comment on what he thought about my out-loud thinking. We went around another corner we’d seen our target duck down and I was hit by a feeling of foreboding so strong it stopped me in my tracks before Reese could mutter, “Shit.”

Santana Allen stood facing us, her feet firmly planted, and her arms folded under her ample bust. The shit-eating grin she wore while staring us down told me all I needed to know.

“So, when do you think she made us?” I muttered, but Reese didn’t answer, busy scanning the secluded alley we’d been led to, and I soon realized there actually *was* more that I needed to know, like just how fucked we were.

Men and women stepped into the alley, some moving slowly, like wild animals stalking prey, and others moved in a blur of speed before stopping along what had become a perimeter around Reese and me. There were four behind us and three who’d entered from the mouth of the alley beyond Santana and now stood in line with her. None of them were human.

“Five rogue vampires, a wolf-shifter, and another low-level demon,” Reese said, and I was thankful because my heart pounded far too furiously for me to focus long enough to detect what they were myself.

“So much for vampires not liking demons.”

“These aren’t Knight’s vampires.”

“Reese Carter,” a thin brunette in a black pantsuit standing near Santana said as she stepped closer, her eyes briefly flooding black, cluing me in that she was the other demon. “Yes, that’s right. We know who you are. Do you really think you could send so many of us back down without us ever catching on? You should have stayed out of this area, but I see you’ve picked up company. A new recruit to train to do what you do? Or maybe a toy to play with before you send her down too.”

As the demon's gaze shifted over to me, I didn't feel the fear I thought I should have under her intense glare. I was too busy staring at Santana Allen and wanting to kick myself in the ass for not seeing it. The whole thirsty for my man bit was a ploy. Somehow, the demons aboveground had caught on to Reese and warned others. She'd recognized him the moment we entered the bar and played us.

"That's right," Santana said, either reading my mind or my face. I wasn't sure what she was capable of, which was obvious by this point. "I recognized you right away, Reese. I had your image right on my phone, just like so many others who've had companions sent back or killed by you. I'm not sure where the chick comes in, but I knew you were there for me, even if you were slumming it up with a half-breed."

"We've been looking for you for a while now," the other demon said. "And we've been warning others. I'd tell you your job just got a lot harder, but why waste the words when you're going to die before you can process them?"

Reese gave my hand a squeeze before letting go of it and gave me a firm order before outing the gun he'd had tucked against the small of his back. "Don't die."

Then all hell broke loose.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Reese had a suppressor on the gun, but each pull of the trigger made a click that went right through me, although I shouldn't have been able to hear such a small sound over the chaos happening around me.

The moment he'd raised the gun, our enemies closed in. At first, they hadn't seemed to give a damn about me, their focus on getting to Reese and tearing him apart, but once I used my dagger to slice through the stomach of a vampire, they caught on pretty quickly that we were a package deal. They may not have understood why a half-demon was protecting a man who'd been sending them to Hell, but they knew I'd kill them before I let them hurt my partner.

I wasn't sure what type of bullets Reese's gun had been loaded with, but he shot the demons first and the screams they let out as the bloody holes the bullets made smoked and sizzled rattled my bones. Then the vampires were on him, and he had to go hand-to-hand. That was when I went Gamora with my blade, gutting a vampire who released a rage-filled

shriek before backhanding the taste out of my mouth and sending me flying into a brick wall.

I'd barely slid down the bricks to land in a heap before that vampire, another man, and a woman stalked toward me. I was a little too mesmerized by the fact the vampire I'd sliced open was holding his guts in while his exposed flesh healed right before my eyes to move, so I didn't even try to sense what my other attackers were. Someone in the group had to be a shifter, but I couldn't tell who, and it wasn't like they were going to show me their fangs if I asked nicely. And it really didn't matter, I realized as they came closer, because I hadn't studied shifters yet.

"I'm still on demonology, you assholes!" I shouted as anger flooded me, and I used the strength of my rage—and their confusion as they froze, wondering what the hell I was going on about—to get up before they could pounce on me. I could crouch before I could stand, so that was what I did, and swung a leg out, knocking all three off their feet before I rolled over and slammed my blade home in one of the men's chests. He let out a wail of pain, opening his mouth to reveal fangs, so I whipped out my switchblade with my free hand and sliced his throat.

"Try to heal that before you die, Count Gurgle," I said as he started choking on his own blood while reaching desperately toward his throat in a sad attempt to stop the blood flow.

I couldn't revel in my victory long before pain seared through my shoulder, and I was torn away from the vampire. I

kept my grip on my blades, freeing the dagger from the hole it had made in the man's chest but what hurt me worse than the pain burning through my shoulder was the sight of the vampire I'd gutted licking the other vampire's slashed throat, healing him so he could fight again. How the hell were we going to win against vampires who could heal what we did to them quicker than we could kill them?

My back hit the pavement hard enough to jar my entire body, and I looked up into a giant saliva-dripping maw attached to the biggest wolf I'd ever seen. Its claws sank into my shoulders, weighing me down and the snarl it made as it prepared to bite what I imagined would be my entire head off was the ugliest, most frightening thing I'd ever seen.

Then blood exploded from its head to spray over me, and it toppled over, allowing me to lift my upper body long enough to see Reese pointing his gun in my direction before the two demons each grabbed one of his arms and yanked, allowing a wide open target for a spiky-haired vampire to shove a blade into Reese's stomach and slash upward before reaching in to pull the two halves of his ribcage apart.

I screamed as Reese's eyes grew wide and his face twisted into a mask of complete terror and pain as he screamed, and that was the only sound I heard as every other noise around me disappeared. The sound was angry, anguished, and terrified all at once, and as his gaze drifted down to me, I knew in my heart he wasn't even thinking of himself because as the wound in his chest split open too fast for him to heal the damage, he screamed for me to run.

Fire filled my veins as I rose to my feet, charring everything in its path, but I did not burn. The fire overtook me, consumed me whole as I stared at the man dying before me, the man who had taught me how to fight. He'd told me he was my greatest weapon, that I could call on him when I needed help, and as I watched the blood pour from his chest, my blood boiled from the heat of my rage. How dare these monsters take away my weapon. My teacher. My partner.

My friend.

I screamed, and continued to scream as everything slowed down, time almost coming to a complete standstill as the fire ate away at my flesh, burning it away so I could be reborn.

I saw the frightened and stunned expressions on my enemies' faces before the flames grew too tall, spreading out from me, and I was there, in the place I only visited in my dreams. The flames engulfed me this time, destroying who I had been, but I felt no pain, only a sudden clarity that this was what I'd been waiting for my entire life. This was what I had been born for.

“Take my hand!”

A waft of cold air breezed over me as I turned my head toward the voice to see the female shadow rushing toward me.

“No,” a deeper, more masculine voice bellowed from behind me. “This is who you are. This is what you were meant for. You will reign over these lowly creatures.”

“Dulce, please!” The shadows fell away from the woman as she pushed through the wall of fire surrounding me, revealing her little by little until she stood before me, a woman who was almost a mirror image of myself.

She seemed to hit an invisible wall as laughter bellowed from behind me, laughter that made my flesh crawl and the snakes coiling around my limbs shrink back. She couldn't come any closer, but she reached for me, straining to get as close to me as she could.

“I have always loved you,” she said, “and I never wanted to give you away, but you weren't safe with me. I did what I had to do to give you a chance. Please, sweetheart, please take my hand and hold on to me. Hold on to me, my sweet little girl, so you never lose who you are!”

“No!” the anger-filled voice from behind me bellowed and a blast of heat washed over me to blow the woman back, but she dug her heels in and continued to strain, even as her skin reddened and started to burn.

“Take my hand, Dulce! Whatever you felt or thought before doesn't matter. Please, sweetheart, take my hand and let me give you what's left of me!”

The heat intensified, and I felt the darkness of the other presence rushing toward me, tired of the woman's intrusion. The woman I now knew for sure was my mother. Tears slid down my cheeks, sizzling against my heated flesh as I watched her skin burn and peel away from eyes that looked at me with

a desperation I had only seen once before, as I'd watched Reese scream for me to run.

"I'm sorry," I said as I reached through the only spot of cold around me and took what was left of her hand a mere second before the other entity with me, the one I knew had planted his seed inside her solely to create a monster out of me, a terrible creature born to do his bidding, released a roar that obliterated everything, destroying existence itself before everything went pitch black and dead silent, then I was back in the alley, but I was not the same woman I had been.

Time started again, my enemies dropping Reese's body to the ground as they braced to fight despite their fear-filled eyes and shaking limbs. I sensed the others behind me, having healed enough to pick themselves up, but I didn't fear them because I wasn't alone.

"Hold them," I told the snakes slithering around me and cast them out.

There were four of them, each one growing until they were as long and nearly as thick as one of Reese's legs, and they didn't hesitate to attack my enemies, taking care of four to leave two to me. Apparently getting shot in the head with whatever type of bullet Reese had in his gun was enough to kill the wolf-shifter who had shifted back to the woman she'd been before she'd attacked me in her wolf form, and another vampire had been beheaded by Reese before he'd been distracted by the wolf about to take my head off.

Acting purely on instinct, I swiped out with a clawed hand as I sensed an attack from the two vampires at my back and the thick, sharp, black nails dug effortlessly through one vampire's chest to wrap around his beating heart while my other clawed hand gripped the other vampire's throat, holding him back while I yanked his friend's organ free.

"You should have just allowed yourself to bleed out from the slit throat," I told him as his now lifeless body fell to the ground and I turned to look into the horrified eyes of the vampire I now held off the ground one-handed. He tried to scream but didn't get far between my hand clamped around his throat and the heart I shoved into his mouth.

"I liked you better this way," I said before I swiped my manicure from Hell down his chest, splitting him open before I dug in and this time pulled his intestines all the way out before casting him aside, seeing how he liked being the one thrown into a brick wall. He didn't slide down the wall quite as easily as I had, however. Unaware of my newfound strength, I'd embedded the fucker into the brick. Oops.

Four down, four to go, and my snakes were so kind to hold them for me, wrapped around their throats and limbs so tightly, they couldn't move to defend themselves no matter how hard they struggled. My snakes had them stretched out like starfish as they struggled on the ground, unable to do a damn thing with their limbs stretched out at such wide, awkward angles. My snakes had elongated, becoming living ropes the evil bastards couldn't get loose from.

I glanced at Reese to see him on his back, holding his chest together the best he could as he stared at me. He wasn't breathing, but he was alive. I knew because his stare wasn't vacant. I could see fear in it, a little doubt, but a lot more hope, and something that reached through the shell of whatever the hell I'd just become to warm my heart. Joy.

These bastards had tried to take away the only person who'd ever looked at me like that and they were going to pay for it. The demon bitches were mine, and definitely the spiky-haired vampire who'd sliced Reese open, but I didn't have anything personal planned for the other vampire, a Hispanic man with a goatee in what looked like a Nike tracksuit, so I waved my hand toward him as I approached the others. "Kill him."

Three of my snakes uncoiled from their hostages to work with the one that had already been holding the Hispanic vampire for me. They each wrapped around one of the vampire's limbs before they snapped taut, literally tearing him limb from limb before returning to me, shrinking in size to fit better around my body.

The remaining vampire was the first to rush me, but without even having to give the verbal command, one of my snakes soared over the distance between us to wrap around his throat and hiss a warning in his face as another coiled around his wrists, binding his hands together.

I swiped my arm out toward the demon in the pantsuit as she tried to lunge for me, grabbing her by the nape and yanking her head back before flinging my other arm out

toward the direction Santana Allen ran away in, wordlessly sending my remaining two snakes after her.

“Never fuck with what is mine,” I growled at the demon in my hands before twisting her neck, using my newfound strength and sharp claws to detach her head from her body before letting both drop to the ground.

The vampire’s eyes bulged out of his head as I turned toward him, my snake moving out of the way so the vamp had a clear view of his approaching executioner. “He sends your kind to Hell. How can you be on his side?”

“Because, dumbass,” I said, bending to pick up the blade he’d used on Reese and, at some point, dropped just as I had dropped both of mine. “I’m not your average demon.”

I slammed the vampire’s blade into his groin and listened to the sweet sound of his agony as he screamed for a moment before I slowly dragged the blade up, making sure he suffered from the pain of what he had done to Reese. Eventually, I reached his throat and, with a deeper shove, took out his ability to scream at all before summoning my snakes back to me. All of them, including the two that had dragged Santana Allen’s writhing body back to me, her skin scraping off as it had been dragged over the ground so roughly.

I retrieved the blades that had fallen from my grasp while I’d undergone my hostile takeover and quickly returned, dropping to my knees beside Santana Allen, where the bitch lie flat on her back, knowing any attempt to escape was a waste of the few seconds she had left aboveground.

“Stay down there where you belong this time,” I warned her, “because you’re clearly not powerful enough to smoke out of this body before I stab you back down below and if you find another hellhole to crawl back out of, I will find you, and the next time I have to send you back, I’m going to do it slowly.”

I punctuated the end of my warning with a stab to her heart and watched her convulse before her eyes flooded black, turned bright red, then her body instantly rotted.

“So, this wasn’t your original body,” I muttered before turning to pierce the other demon’s heart as her body attempted to crawl toward its detached head, and sent her back to Hell in the same fashion before I rushed over to Reese.

“Don’t you dare fucking die,” I snapped at him as he recoiled as much as he could from the snakes slithering around me. I knew they followed my commands and desires, therefore wouldn’t harm him, but could understand his unease with them, so I ordered them away and, like the obedient pets they were, they slithered out of his view.

“You’re not naked,” he croaked out before coughing, and I thought I heard an unsettling gurgle deep in his throat.

“Really? Your chest is torn open, you’re gurgling on your own blood, and that’s what you’re thinking?”

“It was what you—” He coughed up blood.

“*Fuck!* Yeah, it was one of the first things I said to you,” I said as I leaned over him, assessing the damage as if I knew what the hell I was looking for. His shirt was torn open, as was

the flesh under it. I could see it attempting to heal, but it was slow-going, and he hadn't been lying about how thin vampire blood was. It had poured right out of him. I thought about applying pressure. They were always going on about applying pressure in the movies, but he wasn't losing as much blood now—which wasn't as comforting of a thought as I thought it would have been—and I was afraid applying pressure might actually cause the blood to flow fast again. Not to mention, I might stab him and injure him worse with my new murder fingers. “Why aren't you healing faster? Why isn't this sealed yet?”

“Too much... blood,” he said, and it clicked. Too much blood loss had diminished his ability to heal, and he hadn't had a vampire on his side willing to lick his wounded flesh back together. And I'd killed the only assholes I could have ordered to do it for him.

“Shit,” I shouted as I reached into my back pocket for my cell phone, struggling to grab it with my newly clawed hands.

“No,” Reese said as his eyes widened, and he seemed to comprehend what I intended to do.

“Shut up. You're not dying on me!” I couldn't hold the phone and dial for shit with my elongated fingernails so once I got it unlocked, I set it on the ground and fought off Reese's attempts to grab it as I used the tip of one of my long-ass claws to dial Ginger.

“Reese is bleeding out!” I yelled as soon as she picked up, before she even spoke. “They tore his chest open, and it's not

healing fast enough. If I move him, he's going to lose what blood he has left. He's gurgling on it!"

"Leave the phone on, I'm coming," she said, and I heard squealing tires through the phone.

"She's coming," I told Reese as I wiped the bloody spittle from the corner of his mouth, careful not to cut him. "Just hold on."

"Go."

"No, I'm not leaving you."

"Go!" he said more forcefully and gurgled more. "They'll kill you—" he coughed up blood— "like this."

They'd kill me like this. Like *this*. I looked down at the clawed hand gently cupping Reese's cheek. I had no idea what I looked like. I wasn't naked as I'd been in my dreams, but I had the clawed hands. I reached up to my face and felt around. My brow protruded a little, but I couldn't feel any other distortions. Still, I could look like a total monster.

"Still... beautiful," Reese said, struggling to get the words out as he continued to gurgle blood.

"Thanks, but that's not my concern right now," I murmured. I wasn't leaving him, and if I couldn't pass myself off as a normal human woman, I would die soon enough anyway because there was no way I wouldn't be hunted. If not by Rider Knight's people, then someone else who didn't care for demons. Hell, the damn military might take me out.

As if sensing my emotional turmoil, my snakes slithered over, wrapping themselves around me in what I realized was their form of a hug, and I felt myself calm down as I drew upon the comforting support they gave me.

Of course, I thought, and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and drew my snakes into me, willing them to hide along with the part of me that was not of this realm, and waited until I sensed them burrow deep within me to release my breath and open my eyes to see Reese staring up at me in stunned awe. My hands were back to normal, but Reese's color was not.

“He doesn't have long, Ginger!”

“I'm almost there,” she yelled, giving me the sense she was also on speakerphone as she raced toward us in that yellow Mustang I remembered from outside Reese's building. “Staunch whatever blood flow you safely can and get some of his saliva into the wound if possible.”

“Fuck. Why didn't I think of that?” I yelled at myself and turned his head to the side. Too afraid any attempt to staunch the blood loss would cause more of it, I focused on healing what I could. “Spit!”

“What?”

“Spit,” I instructed him as I cupped my hand under his mouth. “Just do it, motherfucker!”

He shot me a perturbed look while laughter came from the phone, but his jaws went to work as he mustered up enough saliva to productively spit into my waiting hand. I couldn't

fight the way my lip curled, but otherwise fought through the gross factor to rub the blood-tinged saliva over the edges of the wound in his chest that had stopped healing on its own.

“Give him your blood,” Ginger ordered. “I’m assuming there aren’t many other options around, so it’s going to have to be yours.”

I looked into his eyes and saw the acceptance in them. I’d been very clear that I didn’t want him to drink from me, so I couldn’t blame him for thinking I would let him die before I’d allow him to take my blood, but it hurt all the same. Especially since I was afraid I might have to refuse him, despite wanting to save him.

“Can he drink demon blood?” I asked. “I’m a demon now. I went through my hostile takeover.”

“Your hostile what? Whatever, you’ve always been half demon, Dulce. Your awakening wouldn’t change that, and your blood won’t kill him. It might just save him.”

“And you didn’t even ask,” I scolded him as I shoved my wrist into his mouth. “Drink, dammit!”

Genuine surprise flooded his eyes, but soon hunger and survival took over. He bit down and after a brief flare of pain, his throat and jaws started working. By the time Ginger’s Mustang screeched into the alley, his color was coming back, and I was a little lightheaded. The long, deep slit that had been slashed through his chest and the split-apart ribcage had started to knit back together again, but slowly.

Ginger killed the engine along with the headlights that had been shining right into my eyes and jumped out of the vehicle to run over to us. She dropped to her knees and bent forward. “Do not attack me,” she said in a rough warning tone. “I am not even remotely attracted to men.”

I just stared at her in utter confusion, not sure why she thought I would attack her. Then she held the edges of Reese’s torn flesh together and her tongue glided over Reese’s wound, licking over his abs and other enticing areas, and I felt a fiery hot rage rise inside me.

I quickly turned my head away, refocusing on my wrist in Reese’s mouth, and blamed the odd reaction on my lightheadedness, because nothing else made sense. “Is he going to survive?”

“He’s going to be fine,” Ginger said, finally raising her head from the chest wound. The skin was raw and puckered, but blessedly closed. “But he’s going to kill me if I allow him to drink you dry, something he may do because of how close to death he just got.”

She grabbed his jaws and squeezed until the seal his mouth had formed over my wrist relaxed some. “Draw those fangs back in before you kill her, dumbass.”

Reese’s heavy-lidded eyes went wide with fear before he drew his fangs back into his gums and immediately looked at me.

“I’m fine,” I assured him, tucking my still-bleeding wrist against my chest.

“I can take care of that for you.” Ginger nodded toward my wrist after I looked at her, my brows raised in confusion.

“Oh. Oh, yeah, sure.” I held my arm out, and she made quick, not too awkward work of sealing the wound a lot faster than it would have sealed on its own with what little saliva Reese had left behind.

“Shit,” she said, straightening after she finished. “That packs a punch.”

“Oh, sure. Trust her right away, but make me damn near jump through hoops before I can heal you,” Reese muttered, the gurgle thankfully gone from his throat. “And we need to talk about your language and general bedside manner. Just because you’re half demon doesn’t mean you can’t still be a lady.”

“Yeah, heal yourself completely and then we can discuss how sexist what you just said was,” I told him as I picked my cell phone up off the ground and shoved it into my back pocket. “And I’ll use whatever language I want when I’m freaked the hell out, thank you.”

“So,” Ginger said, looking around at the carnage. “This looked fun. How the hell have the police not shown up yet?”

“Silencer on my gun, and I suspect the demons worked their mojo to keep everything in a bubble of quiet. Until Dulce stabbed them back to Hell, that is.”

“Not bad for your first time out, newbie. I think the crisis here has been averted. Let’s get you back to the funeral home

so you can be there when your boss shows up. I'll call in a cleanup crew to take care of this, and don't worry about Reese. Your blood is strong, and his wounds have been sealed. All he needs is some good day sleep and he'll be good as new. I'll get him home safely."

"Oh, damn. My job." In all the excitement, I'd completely forgotten what had happened at the funeral home, or that I was technically still on the clock.

"All cleaned up," Ginger assured me as she lifted one of Reese's arms. "I had already left when you called. Help me get him up."

"Is that safe?" I asked, grabbing his other arm. "Are you able to get up so soon?"

"Hey, you know me. I get knocked down, but I get up again." He winked at me. "You're never gonna keep me down."

"Oh, shut up," I said and rolled my eyes as "Tubthumping" started up inside my head.

"Why does that remind me of something?" Ginger asked as we helped Reese to his feet and the genuine confusion in her expression got both of us laughing. Until Reese groaned and grabbed his abdomen.

"Shit. Don't make me laugh while my guts are still healing," he said.

"I don't even know *why* you two were just laughing," Ginger said before her gaze cut up the alley to an approaching

vehicle. “Oh, shit. I swear I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Yeah, I know you didn’t,” Reese said as another vehicle, a black SUV matching the first vehicle, rolled up the other end of the alley to park behind Ginger’s Mustang. “But the man knows every damn thing.”

My stomach dipped as I realized who they were speaking of and remembered all the warnings I’d been given. “Is this who I think it is?”

“You don’t say a word,” Reese warned me as he stood taller, straightening his shoulders and puffing out his chest as if it hadn’t been torn open within the past hour and death hadn’t nearly claimed him. He zipped up his coat, covering his torn shirt. “If ever there was a time to do as I say, it’s now.”

Ginger cut a warning look my way and subtly nodded her head as if saying Reese was correct and moved toward the first vehicle that had approached us as a third pulled to a stop behind it.

“Hey, Rider,” she said, as a group of mostly men and one curvy blonde stepped out of the first vehicle. “There was a demon situation, but they’ve been taken out of the picture. I would have called this in if backup was needed, but everything was handled before I got here.”

I recognized Hank as the driver of the SUV and there was an almost equally muscular black man who’d been riding shotgun. A tall, lankier Hispanic man and the woman had exited from the rear door behind his, but despite those men’s sizes and the sense I had that the blonde could eat a person

alive if she wanted to, the real power came from the man who had exited the rear behind the driver.

He was tall and lean, yet muscular. Caucasian with long black hair pulled back into a low ponytail. He wore black pants and expensive-looking black leather shoes, and I saw a steel gray shirt that looked like it was made of real silk under his black leather jacket. The eyes that glared at us were blue enough to make sapphires envious, and I could say in all honesty that he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. It was a damn shame the threatening power I sensed coming from him made me want to piss my pants.

He walked forward until he stood in front of the SUV, but the others with him were poised to jump into action if anyone threatened him, and although no one had exited the other two vehicles yet, I could sense them all braced for combat at the drop of a command too. Everything about the man's body language suggested this was not a social call. "There was a disturbance felt in the force."

"Funny," Reese said, stepping to the side so he shielded my body, and I had to tilt my head to see around his shoulder. "Nothing occurred here tonight that needs your attention."

The vampire nodded his head toward me. "That needs my attention."

"She's my partner. I vouch for her."

"You've never had a demon partner before." A sly grin tugged at the corners of the vampire's mouth. "I thought it was your usual custom to kill demons, not sleep with them."

“She’s only half demon,” Reese bit out. “And one who just killed two others in order to save my life. And I don’t give a fuck what you think you know about what we’re doing together.”

“Sweet,” the vampire said, his tone almost mocking as his gaze narrowed. “Are you really willing to fight while injured to protect her?”

“If I have to,” Reese said without a trace of hesitancy. “You and I have never had a problem, but with all due respect, lay one finger on her, and we will.”

The vampire’s eyes widened a little before he quickly regained control and cleared his expression of all reaction. “You’re compromised, Reese.”

“I don’t get compromised,” Reese responded. “I kill what needs to be killed and I protect who doesn’t deserve to die. It’s that simple. Hell, isn’t that your own creed?”

The air suddenly grew thick and hot as prickling energy rolled over us. The vampire’s eyes glowed with golden light, revealing him to be the source of whatever the hell was happening. As the pressure of what he threw at us forced me back a step, Reese grabbed my wrist and stepped forward, somehow not only holding his footing in that strange energy but stepping into it. It was even better than shouting into the vampire’s face that he wasn’t afraid of him.

The vampire must have been impressed because after another subtle eye-widening, he barked out one sharp laugh and the energy snapped, seeming to retract into him. “You’re a

mere child compared to me, and right now, you're at half-strength at best."

"And?"

"And I can't decide if you're being really brave or really stupid right now, but I have to admire the balls on you either way."

"Yeah, not surprised. I get a lot of compliments on my balls."

The corners of the vampire's mouth twitched before his blue eyes darkened to a nearly black color and his gaze shifted over to meet mine directly. "Keep her away from my bar and keep the leash on her good and tight because if she breaks loose, and an innocent gets hurt, we'll take care of her. If one of mine gets hurt, I'm going to see to her personally, and I'm going to take my sweet time doing so. Understood?"

Reese's entire body stiffened, and I sensed him about to snap, which I also sensed would be a very bad thing, so I placed my hand on his shoulder blade and hoped I could infuse some calming energy into him. At the very least, the knowledge that the man had only threatened me so far. Words we could both shake off.

It must have worked, because he simmered down, his muscles relaxing under my hand. "I don't want trouble with you, Knight. I'll respect you and your people as long as you respect me and mine. We're all out here doing the same job. No sense taking out those on your own side over assumptions and prejudices."

The vampire's eyes narrowed as his nostrils flared and I saw his jaw clench. But if he had anything further to say to Reese, he kept it to himself. Instead, he addressed Ginger. "Get your friend out of here. He looks like he needs help with that. This will all be cleaned by then, but the next time we have a cleanup like this, you're getting called in for it. Maybe the next two or three cleanup jobs."

"You know, I *am* more of a freelance, work-for-hire sort of —" Rider Knight stepped directly into Ginger's personal space — "It would be an honor to scrape up viscera for you, sir."

"I thought so." With that, the vampire turned away and got back into the SUV with one last warning look Reese's way, and an even colder one sent my way before he disappeared inside the vehicle and one by one, they backed out of the alley and left us alone.

"Be honest," Ginger said, joining us as Reese sagged enough we both grabbed an arm to support him. "Did you tinkle a little?"

"No, I didn't piss at all," Reese muttered.

"Damn. I guess it was just me then. Come on, buttercup," she said, helping me get Reese to her waiting Mustang. "Let's get you to work before you get canned, and then I can get this one tucked in so the day sleep can cure all his ouchies."

"I'm a grown man," Reese bit out as we opened the back door for him. "I don't have ouchies."

Ginger poked his abdomen once we settled him into the backseat.

“Ouch!” Reese growled, and moved like he was going to throttle her, but Ginger closed the door in his face and turned toward me.

“See? Ouchies.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Holy crap!” Brittany exclaimed as she opened her door and the next thing I knew, I was in the tightest bearhug of my life. Also, the only bearhug of my life.

“You’re going to crush your present!”

“My what?” She released me and looked down to see the little pink gift bag in my hand. “You got me a gift?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged, feeling a little stupid. “It’s a, uh, sorry-you-had-to-kill-my-stupid-ex-to-save-me present.”

“Oh, that’s just the sweetest thing!” She tugged me inside her apartment and closed the door before going over to her white leather sofa to open the gift.

I’d felt a little silly buying up every pink and fuzzy thing I saw at Target that morning, wondering if sparkly hand lotions and pink-inked pens with pink doughnut and fuzzy pink teddy bear toppers were decent gifts for a woman of her age, but judging by the long, pink, Bambi sleep shirt she currently had on and the fuzzy pink slippers, I felt more secure in my

purchases. Also, I'd thrown in a big box of chocolates because who didn't love chocolates?

"How are you doing?" I asked, settling next to her on the sofa. I noted that despite the big smile on her face as she continued to pull out all the little gifts I'd thrown into the bag, she had heavy bags under her eyes and her bottom lip looked like it had been nibbled through.

She stopped digging through the bag to look at me. "I'll be all right. I know I had to do what I did, and I didn't mean to kill him, but I still worry that someone's going to find out and I'm going to go to prison. What happened after we left? I called my uncle to ask how things were going with you, just to kind of see what he might say, and he ended up going on some rant about my cousin Bobby quitting and how bad off he'd be if he didn't have you."

"Yep," I said with a laugh. "I have no idea how she did it, but that place was spotless when I got back to it a couple of hours before he arrived." Even I had been clean, thanks to the clothes Ginger had just finished buying for me at the twenty-four-hour Walmart when I'd called her to help Reese. "Nothing was out of place, the vending machines had been replaced, and your uncle never suspected a thing. Of course, he was already upset because your cousin decided he didn't want the job anymore, but I accepted the extra nights. At least, until he can get someone else to work a few just in case I need nights off for anything in the future."

Like demon-hunting. Not that I was going to tell Brittany that.

“So, we were worried you might get fired, but you actually ended up with more hours.”

“Yep.”

“And there’s no evidence I killed anybody.”

“None. I have no idea what happened to Barry’s body, but I have the feeling Reese’s friends covered everything up for us really well.”

Brittany’s brow furrowed, and she leaned in to whisper as if we needed more privacy despite being completely alone. “He isn’t in the mafia, is he?”

“This is Louisville, Brittany. We have a few gangs, but I don’t think we have a mafia.” At least not a human one. I was still a little suspicious of Rider Knight, but it was clear Reese didn’t work for him, so no, I didn’t think he was part of any mafia, vampire or otherwise. “I guess he just knew what to do because he’s a personal trainer. He teaches people to protect themselves, you know? He’s worked as a bodyguard and stuff before, so maybe he’s run into situations like this before?”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense,” she said, opening the box of chocolates and offering me a piece. “He’s such a nice man, and he’s totally into you.”

I choked and nearly hacked my chocolate back out of my mouth. “What?”

“Reese. He’s totally into you.”

“Yeah, no. He’s not.” I had to laugh, remembering the way I’d been all but shoved back to my job with a stern warning not to bother him during the day so he could heal completely. Then there was what he’d said at the bar when he’d made it clear he didn’t do relationships despite the grief he’d given me over the fact I didn’t do them either. At least, not long-term and not anything meaningful. And he was my partner. A business partner. Someone I needed to trust to have my back, and I had to be the same for him, which last night proved. “Reese is a good guy, but he’s not anyone I could ever be with in that way, and I don’t know what you think you picked up on because he doesn’t feel that way for me. I’m just his... someone he’s training. I’m a job.”

“That’s too bad,” Brittany murmured as she selected another chocolate. “Because his eyes sure do sparkle when he looks at you.”

I choked back a laugh, imagining Reese’s expression if anyone ever told him his eyes were capable of sparkling, then got serious as I looked at the time. There were still a few hours before nightfall, and I hadn’t heard from Reese at all. Not wanting to bother him while he was healing, I’d texted Ginger to ask how he was doing, but she hadn’t responded, and my stomach felt like it was trying to eat itself. What if he hadn’t healed? That knife had sliced through more than just his flesh. I wasn’t entirely sure how the blood and saliva thing worked to repair damage done to a vampire’s body, but anything could have happened. He could have died during the day while I’d been waiting to hear from him.

“Brittany, I have to go. I need to get to the bus stop before I miss the next one.”

“Do you need a ride?” she asked. “I can be ready in ten minutes.”



I thanked Brittany and got out of the car, firmly committed to a girls' night that weekend, not entirely sure what it was, but we were going to watch the new *Black Panther* movie on her laptop during my shift while Brittany worked on getting over her fear of the funeral home at night.

I noticed Reese's car parked in his usual space and Ginger's Mustang nowhere to be found, and frowned, wondering how long she'd been gone. Then a spike of fear shot through me. What if she was gone because there wasn't anyone there to help?

I ran into the building and up the stairs, my need to see Reese and ensure he was alive and well too great to allow me to stand still long enough to take the elevator up. I banged on the door, knowing he needed his day sleep and could still be under it, but I couldn't wait.

I heard a click, but the door didn't open so I opened it myself and barely closed it behind me before I was running across the room and pushing through the bedroom door... to find Reese lying on his back on the mattress, a thin sheet covering him up to his waist. His chest was bare and,

amazingly, completely healed. But his eyes were closed, and his body was as still as stone. There didn't appear to be any breath in his body.

I dropped to my knees next to him on the mattress and rested my palm over his heart, feeling nothing, but he was still warm.

“I believe this is considered sexual harassment,” Reese said, causing me to yelp and fall back on my ass. “I’d report you to Human Resources, but I suspect human resources means something totally different in Purgatory than what it means here.”

“You scared the crap out of me. Don’t do that!” I snapped at him as I got back to my knees and smacked his shoulder, then instantly regretted it. “Oh, crap. I’m sorry. Are you still hurt?”

“I’m all good. I told you it takes a lot to take down a vampire.”

“But it almost happened.” I looked down at his chest, and despite the man’s impressive physique, all I felt was fear. “I thought that was it. I thought you were going to die, and I couldn’t do anything to save you.”

“But you did save me, and what happened was all on me. I fucked up, didn’t see the trap before it was sprung. I’m sorry, Dulce. That was not the first night in the field I wanted for you. I could have gotten you killed.”

I sat next to him so I wasn’t looming over him so much. “Are you really worried about that when you were the one

who nearly bit the dust?”

“Yes, because if I had died, I would have left you alone with them. Like I said, I fucked up.” He stared at me for a moment, frowning a little, then I thought I saw a little of that sparkle in his eyes Brittany had told me about, and he slowly grinned. “Who would have thought concern for my safety was what would bring out your demon power.”

I suddenly felt very exposed and very, *very* vulnerable. “Yeah, I guess nothing pisses me off more than the thought of having to go through all this training crap with some other jerk,” I said, brushing away the notion that I might have been emotionally affected by his near-death experience. “I can only imagine who Petie would stick me with next and as frustrating as you are, I’m at least used to you. And you know good movies. I wasn’t about to risk getting stuck with some DC Comics-loving dumbass or a Trekkie. Come on.”

He just stared at me knowingly, that mouth of his curved.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He grinned at me a while longer, but then the twinkle left his eyes, and he grew serious. As if he too realized we were essentially business partners and feelings on either’s part were bad news. “*Shazam!* is DC. Still want to be my partner if I admit I liked *Shazam!*?”

“I liked *Shazam!* too,” I mumbled, the words leaving a bad taste in my mouth. “The other DC movies suck though.”

“Agreed.”

“See? This is why I will kill any bastards who try to kill you. I need a partner with good taste. Now, what the hell kind of demon am I? I haven’t been able to sleep so I’ve been reading that big-ass book and I’m still not sure. I haven’t had the desire to hump any men’s legs, though, so I’m pretty sure I’m not a sex demon.”

“Do you generally hump men’s legs? I don’t know how to tell you this, but I think you’ve been doing sex wrong.”

“Shut up, jackass. You know what I mean.”

He laughed, and I was relieved to see it didn’t seem to cause him any pain. “Minor archdemon, as I suspected. You have minions you can summon and send away at will.”

“What do you mean, I have minions?”

“The snakes. Kind of freaky, by the way, but they were effective. You’re definitely a minor archdemon, which means your demon father is one of the big baddies.”

“Yay for me,” I muttered. “She was there too, you know. It was her in my dream. My mother.”

“When you say she was there...”

“During the hostile takeover. I went somewhere. Like another plane of existence or something. I don’t think I ever left this one, but I was in the flames. I was in whatever place that was I always saw in my dream. She begged me to take her hand so she could help me. She said to take her hand so I wouldn’t lose myself.”

“And you took it.”

I nodded. “I still felt that coldness, that fear, but he was there too. I didn’t see him, but I felt him, and he did *not* want me to take her hand. I figured if he didn’t want me to, then that was even more reason I should. And I kind of trusted her, I think. The moment I took her hand, it happened. I became whatever the hell that was I became, but I was still me. Just enhanced, I guess.”

“She made sure you held on to your humanity, to the part of yourself she gave you.” He smiled to himself, then rose to a sitting position. “Have you shifted into that form since then?”

I shook my head.

“Have you tried?”

“Uh, no, because I don’t know how. It just happened.”

“That was it. That was the moment you came into your power, so you should be able to shift into your other form whenever you want. You have it all now. Hell, your blood proved that.” He lowered his gaze. “That’s why I asked you to stay away while I was healing. You have to be careful with your blood now. It’s powerful and a weak vampire will have a hard time letting go once they’ve had a taste. I wasn’t in condition to have complete control over my thirst after being injured so badly, and if Ginger hadn’t pointed out the obvious, I might have just kept drinking from you. Weren’t you getting lightheaded?”

“Yes,” I admitted, “but you needed the blood and I trusted you.”

“Don’t.” He stared straight into my eyes. “Never fully trust a vampire who has been injured to that degree. Not even me.”

“You stopped when Ginger told you you’d taken too much.”

“Yes, but what if she hadn’t been there to tell me? I should have known to stop on my own. And you should have been ready to cut my damn throat to stop me if that was necessary.” He flung off the sheet and stood.

I was relieved to see he had pants on as he strolled over to the closet to fully dress, but I still averted my gaze. “So, do we need to do something? I mean, we tracked the target and sent her back. Are we supposed to fill out paperwork or something?”

“Nah, if we had to do paperwork, we’d probably be working for Hell, not Purgatory,” he said so casually I had no idea whether he was joking or serious. “We send them back, Purgatory gets the notification however they get it, and we wait for the next target to be assigned.”

“Oh, so what do you usually do after you’ve taken out a target? Do we celebrate or, I don’t know, go to therapy or something?”

“Do you feel like you need therapy?” he asked, settling next to me on the mattress so he could pull his socks on.

“No, I’m pretty sure I’ve been screwed up beyond repair since birth,” I said, earning a chuckle. “I’m just wondering what you normally do after an assignment, especially a rough one like last night’s?”

“Honestly? I usually hit a bar known for vampire groupies, get some fresh blood, and get laid.”

I didn't need further explanation on what a vampire groupie was—the title was pretty self-explanatory—or further hints that it was time for me to go. “Oh, well, I'll let you get to it then.”

His hand snaked out and grabbed my wrist the moment I stood to leave. “That's not what I'm in the mood for right now.”

“Oh?” I looked down at the mattress he still sat on while he put on his boots and tied them, and felt my breath hitch. “What are you in the mood for right now?”

“Pot roast.”

“Pot roast?”

He finished tying his shoes and stood. “Yup. I'm thinking I'll show you how to make pot roast tonight and a big pot of chili tomorrow. You still need to train, too, so let's get that out of the way before we head over to your apartment to take care of dinner.”

“Train?” I looked out into the training area. “You said I'd only have to train if I didn't handle the demon myself, which I think I did.”

“I said I'd make you give me fifty pushups if you didn't handle the demon,” he corrected me, “but you were always going to train either way. That's the job.”

“But I kicked ass last night,” I argued as I followed him out into the main room where all the physical training took place. “And I have snakes now. How much training and exercise do I need when I have snakes I can just whip out at my enemies, and did you see how I put that one vampire through a brick wall? I have superstrength.”

“I did see that, and I saw you were in your demon form, a form you have not taken since you drew it back in last night,” he said as he stood hands on hips, watching me. “Clearly, part of our training will be how to take on that form again, because it’s definitely there. You just have to know how to summon it into being. And just because you have added strength and cool new minions now doesn’t mean you don’t need to know how to fight. There is always, *always*, something more powerful than you out there, and sometimes your enemies don’t even have to be more powerful to take you down. They just have to get lucky.”

Like those monsters had gotten lucky the night before, attacking Reese while he was distracted, focused on me.

“Don’t blame yourself for what happened last night,” he said, clearly reading my mind. “We both learned a few things. I learned we’ve got to be more careful working in this area because the demons are talking about me, and now probably you too, in Hell, and the ones escaping are talking to whoever else is aboveground and on their side. Another reason why it’s important to know how to fight so yes, you are training right now. Get in your fighting stance, lazy-ass.”

“Lazy-ass? You’re the one who just got out of bed,” I reminded him.

“It’s still daylight and I’m a vampire,” he said and rolled his eyes. “And I was injured, for crying out loud. Plus, Ginger stayed to ensure I was all right, which would have been fine except she snores like you wouldn’t believe. Not even the power of day sleep and my need to heal could drown that noise out, so I didn’t rest properly until Knight thankfully called her away for a job.”

I laughed at the thought of a snoring vampire disrupting another’s sleep and whipped off my hoodie. Dressed in black leggings and a gray T-shirt, I was dressed for training anyway, and he was right. I couldn’t get cocky just because my demon side had woken up when I’d needed it. I still didn’t know how to call upon it without being pissed off anyway, so I might as well always be prepared to fight using just my human strength in case my demon form had a failure to perform. And if I ever crossed paths with Rider Knight again while he was in a bad mood. I seriously doubted that vampire would wait for me to power up before he went in for the kill.

“Fine, I’ll train, but this is ridiculous, not even giving me one night off? We just finished an assignment. It’s not like they’re going to instantly give us another one.”

A big, swirling portal opened between two columns in the center of the room and Reese dropped his head back to look up at the ceiling as if he were searching for the heavens.

“Dammit, Malvada. Don’t you know better than to give the universe the opportunity to screw with you?”

“Uh, oops? In all fairness, you never taught me that.”

“Yeah, well, the universe just did.” He held out his hand and sighed, fighting a grin as I placed my hand in his. “You are a great big pain in my ass.”

“Yeah, but I think you actually like having me as a partner.”

He grunted, but that smile grew as we stepped toward the portal. “You definitely keep things interesting. Now, be quiet and let me do the talking while we see how the universe wants to screw us now. We don’t need you giving it any ideas.”

“Would I do that?”

“Yes, you probably would,” he said as we stepped into the portal, “but at least you’d do whatever it took to get us out of any trouble your big mouth got us into.”

I smiled as we stepped out into Purgatory’s gray waiting room, because I knew he meant what he said.

“What the hell are you two doing out there, making googly eyes at each other or something?” Petie yelled from his office. “Get your asses in here!”

“After you.” Reese gestured for me to precede him.

I rolled my eyes and stepped into Petie’s all-gray office to find him behind his desk dressed all in gray. Surprise, surprise. “Give me another demon bitch to send crying back to her devil-daddy and make it snappy. We have a pot roast to make.”

Petie's eyebrows shot up into his receding hairline and he blinked a few times before turning his blue-gray eyes toward Reese. "Oh, I like her. She's sassy."

"Yeah, that's one word for it," Reese said, laughing under his breath as he stood at my side and looked over at me, smiling. "She's a pain, but I think I like her too. She's working out just fine, demon half and all."



Dulce returns in *HELLIFIED*, coming soon!

About the Author

Crystal-Rain Love is a romance author specializing in paranormal, suspense, and contemporary subgenres. She also writes contemporary romance as Shylyn Ray. Her author career began by winning a contest to be one of Sapphire Blue Publishing's debut authors in 2008. She snagged a multi-book contract with Imajinn Books that same year, going on to be published by The Wild Rose Press and eventually venturing out into indie publishing. She resides in the South with her family, and when she's not writing, she can usually be found creating unique 3D cakes, hiking, reading, or spending way too much time on Facebook. Find out more about her at www.crystalrainlove.com

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