



Malakai

Autumn Bridges
Sins of the Father
Book One

Malakai

Sins of the Fathers Book 1

Autumn Bridges

Copyright © 2023 Autumn Bridges

Cover Copyright © 2023 Autumn Bridges

All rights reserved This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The purchase of this ebook allows you to only one legal copy for your own personal reading on your own personal device or computer.

You do NOT have resell or distribution rights without the permission of the publisher and copyright owner of this book. Do not copy in any way.

Warning: This book contains scenes of sexual situations between two or more consenting men.

Contents

[1. Chapter One](#)

[2. Chapter Two](#)

[3. Chapter Three](#)

[4. Chapter Four](#)

[5. Chapter Five](#)

[6. Chapter Six](#)

[7. Chapter Seven](#)

[8. Chapter Eight](#)

[9. Chapter Nine](#)

[10. Chapter Ten](#)

[11. Chapter Eleven](#)

[12. Chapter Twelve](#)

[13. Chapter Thirteen](#)

[14. Chapter Fourteen](#)

[15. Chapter Fifteen](#)

[16. Chapter Sixteen](#)

[17. Chapter Seventeen](#)

[18. Chapter Eighteen](#)

[19. Chapter Nineteen](#)

[20. Chapter Twenty](#)

[21. Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[22. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[23. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[24. Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[25. Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[26. Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[27. Epilogue](#)

[About Autumn Bridges](#)

Chapter One



image-placeholder

THE SWEET, COOL AIR of autumn blew through Malakai Brent's greasy hair. It was always greasy, even five minutes after washing it, and working at the local greasy spoon didn't help. The smell of bacon grease and onions always clung to him like a spoiled child.

He drove his old Dodge Ram pickup down the bumpy dirt road toward the house that he shared with Dutch. Dutch Connors was a pitiful brute, fists before words, snarls before smiles. Mal had begun to hate the guy about three minutes after they got together, but it wasn't like he had an option. Who'd want an overly tall, overly skinny, pimple faced freak like him?

That was how Mal saw it and he'd had very little feedback to the opposite. His friends at work, sure, they told him he was better than he thought, but they were his friends. They were supposed to say things like that.

The house where he stopped needed a paint job badly. Malakai could barely tell it was supposed to be blue. Right behind him, the mailman, Carl Rodriguez stopped and instead

of placing the mail in the box at the end of the drive, he got out of his mail truck and started toward Mal.

He was a jolly man with the belly to match, and as he made his way up the little slope of the driveway, he waved the mail at Mal.

“Hi, Mr. Rodriguez.”

“Hey, Mal, my boy. How is the diner?”

He moaned playfully. “It’s a diner. Meatloaf special today, so we had a lot of people. I’ll never get why they like that stuff so much.”

“Now, listen here, kiddo,” he began as his bushy salt-and-pepper brows creased hard. “I used to love the stuff. Miss it! The missus won’t let me have red meat anymore. Cholesterol and all, you know. My mother made a meatloaf that just made ya feel all warm and loved. Memories, Mal, that’s why people eat a lot of the food they do.”

“Comfort food, they call it. Right?”

“Yessiree, fella.”

After grabbing Mal’s hand, he slapped the stack of envelopes there and started back to his truck with a wave.

“Thanks, Mr. Rodriguez!”

The stack included the usual; bills, second and final notices, of course. The problem with Dutch, well, one of the problems with Dutch, was that he worked sporadically and he drank what he made.

In fact, he drank what Mal made too, so Mal would have to take extra shifts to make up for it.

It looked like he'd be working plenty of doubles for the next couple weeks.

He came across a letter that wasn't one of the former, not a final notice, and in fact, wasn't from a creditor at all.

"Shuster and McMillan," he read from the return address. "Weird."

After getting into the backdoor, the hinges squealing in protest as he opened it, Mal slid his bony finger under the glued flap and quickly got a paper cut. "Damn!" he spat offhandedly, and without looking, opened the screen door and stepped into his self-made prison.

Setting the rest of the mail on the wobbly table, trying not to see the pile of empty beer cans littering the kitchen counter in the corner of his eye, Mal finished opening the envelope and accidentally dropped the keys to the linoleum.

"That you?" he heard from the next room over the sound of WWF grunts and groans on the television.

"Yeah," he said aloud, and then under his breath, he whispered sarcastically, "Like who the hell else would come here?"

Mal pulled out a legal document from the envelope, and suddenly it became clear what this was about. Just then Dutch came into the kitchen, holding another empty. "What's that shit?"

Being too late to hide it, Mal handed over the letter and started collecting the empties into the trash can. “Just a letter from a lawyer.”

“I can see that, idiot. Who’s this Constantina Leopold?”

Mal had heard of her, sure. That was his mother’s bitch of a mother. Or so his dad had said enough times. Mal may have met her but he didn’t remember it. He’d lost his mother at his birth and his father had hated him since. Mal took the letter back timidly.

Mal had killed his father’s beautiful love.

“My grandmother.”

Dutch snatched the letter from him and mocked, “*Fancy-smancy lawyers*. Maybe she left you a shitload of money. I sure could use that.”

Barely keeping his mouth closed, biting back the words he wanted to spit at Dutch, Mal gently took back the letter from him and read the time and place. Four-thirty on Thursday, their offices in Denver.

“I sure hope Dennis lets me off work.”

“He will for his little *snuggums*,” Dutch croaked. Dutch wasn’t liked at the diner for how he treated Mal, so he had decided to hate them all right back and doubled down on it.

He ignored Dutch as the man went into the fridge and grabbed another beer. Milwaukee’s Best, the foulest beer on the planet, as far as Mal was concerned.

As he made his way back to watch more wrestling, Dutch belched and called behind him, “Make sure you go to that and get what you got coming to you.”

He thought about it briefly and didn't know what Dutch could think he deserved. He'd never met the woman that he could remember. He'd never met his own mother so anything he had coming was in Dutch's mind. He'd killed his own mother just by being born. He wouldn't be surprised if his grandmother handed him a bill.

After making dinner, two burgers, Dutch's with three patties like he insisted, they ate in different rooms. Dutch took his in front of the television so he wouldn't miss a second of the action, and Mal in the kitchen, mulling over the letter.

He wouldn't begin to hope. He knew way back in his mind that he could get away if he had some money. Ditching Dutch, getting a better car, packing it with the few things he cared to take and running far and fast.

Randy and Lila at the diner, he'd miss them terribly. He'd miss Dennis, too. He was a grumpy old guy, but he was fair and had kept Mal on all those years, giving him a raise or two when he could, letting him have days off when Mal was too beat up to go to work.

To get away from Dutch, though, he'd have to leave them all. The friends that had become his only real family, that would hurt. It was just a good thing he didn't have to worry about it. He was certain there was no windfall headed his way. No, no windfall. Windstorm, maybe.

With the dinner dishes drying in the rack, he could finally sit on the sofa and take his weight from his tired feet. Dutch was dozing in his chair, his square chin resting on his chest above his ample beer gut, the reflection of the lamp casting a yellow glow atop his balding head. Mal wondered why he stayed, why he didn't leave the worthless lump of man. But at least he was a man.

It's not like he had ever had a lot of options where love was concerned. Mal had lost his virginity at fifteen to an older boy from down the street one night after a keg party. He never asked Mal out again. A guy at the diner asked him out once and got pissed when he protested being driven to the motel on the highway, so he hit Mal and made him walk home. A few others that were mostly sweaty romps in the back of cars or in beds with dirty sheets. The first hint of romance had been Dutch. The only guy who had ever brought Malakai dinner first.

Realizing how pathetic that was, Mal took his lumps, took where he was in life, and tried to make the best of things. If he bought Dutch beer, sure he'd get shitty for a while, but it also made him pass out early, giving Mal the night to himself. It worked out, in a strange way.

As he watched an old movie, casually eating a half pint of his favorite food, dulce de leche ice cream, he thought once again about the letter and what it could hold for him. For those couple hours, he dared to dream that it would somehow change his life.

The mornings always came too quickly. Of all the inanimate objects in the world, there was none so evil as the alarm clock. It woke him out of a dream that morning of walking hand in hand with a tall handsome man on a long stretch of white beach. In his dream, the sights and sounds had been so real that as his eyes opened he thought he caught a scent of sea air.

He showered and dressed in his best blue jeans and flannel shirt, then made coffee. As he sipped his sugary black coffee, he watched Dutch stumble in to grab his stained white cup and fill it halfway with hazelnut creamer and add three spoons of sugar before he bitched about the coffee being too weak.

“Told you, this shit tastes like water.”

“No, it tastes like creamer. You use too much.”

“Don’t smart mouth me unless you want to go to that fucking diner with another shiner,” he said, sitting at the wobbly table. Mal cursed himself for not fixing the loose leg, but he hadn’t had the time. “Oh, shit. I made a rhyme.”

Mal almost laughed but didn’t have it in him that morning.

“You gonna ask that prick for the day off?” He took a slurp, then before Mal could answer, he added, “Actually, half a day. You can get to Denver and back with half a day to spare. No use your paycheck suffering.”

There was a distinct urge to roll his eyes and snap back with a query about Dutch possibly getting a job, but he liked his teeth too much. “I’m gonna ask this morning.”

“Good. Might get something out of you besides bad food and worse blow jobs yet.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Again, Malakai let himself dream. One day shaking off the dust of the town, as they always said. For him, it was true, though. The dust was everywhere, the prairie winds blowing it into the stores and homes, across the hoods of the vehicles as they drove to work, like he did that day.

His mind spun at the possibilities, getting money, getting away from Dutch and his ugliness, his fists, his words...

Then, he thought beyond that. Getting a dog, maybe. He'd been so afraid of doing that, fearing Dutch would hurt any pet Mal would have. He'd have a car, a home, someplace nice, maybe in the Pacific Northwest. All that rain, all that life and greenery.

He did not like living in eastern Colorado, the first line of the plains, nearly as flat as Kansas and just as backward.

He stopped for gas and another pint of oil, then made it to work three minutes early. Dennis was there, cleaning the men's room.

The diner looked like it had since it opened in the nineteen fifties. Metal lipped counters and tables, red vinyl on the booths and seats of the chairs, and black and white floor tiles as far as the eye could see.

Stopping in the doorway of the equally out of date men's bathroom, he hollered, “Dennis? Can I talk to you a second?”

“Mal? Is it seven already?”

Mal laughed at that. Dennis was forever asking the time. Lila had given him a watch a few Christmases’ back, but he’d promptly lost it. “Yes, sir, it sure is.”

“Damn it all to hell,” he grumbled as he came around the partition and smiled at Mal. “You keep me straight, kid.”

“I know. Listen, I...I need Thursday off. Well, maybe not the whole day, but...well, yeah, the whole day. That old beater might break down and I’ll be stuck, so best just figure it will be all day.”

“Slow down, Mal. Sure, take the day, but what’s going on?”

He was balding more than Dutch and had a bigger gut, but where Dutch slung his appearance and strength around to intimidate people, Dennis didn’t notice his, let alone use it.

“My grandmother died.”

Dennis patted his shoulder, the gesture bringing Malakai close to tears. It was the first outpouring of sympathy he’d gotten and he realized he’d needed it. “That’s too bad, Mal. I know you don’t have much family.”

“Just Dad left, and he...well, you know.”

“I know. That no-good bastard,” he growled and slung a heavy arm over Mal’s shoulder, which wasn’t easy because Mal was taller than him. Mal’s six foot seven inches was bigger than most people he knew.

“Well, she left me something. I don’t know what, but I need to go to Denver to talk to her lawyers. It shouldn’t take long. I don’t even remember her, so I doubt she left me anything big.”

“If she did,” Dennis said, moving in front of Mal and staring him hard in the eyes. “Don’t you dare give a dime of it to him.”

“Dutch?”

“That’s the one. Honey, he’ll take that and you’ll never see him again, and while that might be a nice relief, it’s you that needs it. You need a break in this life, Malakai. You’ve had piss-poor few!”

“Thanks, Dennis. I’ll keep him from it. He knows about it, though. The letter, I mean. It’ll be hard to keep him from whatever it is she left me.”

“If you have to, make something up. Lie, Mal, even though I know you hate to do that and you’re not exactly good at it.”

He smiled involuntarily, as he’d been told that again and again. “Yeah. I’m not gonna work on it, either. I don’t like lying, Dennis. Not to people I care about, and him, well, he never believes me either way.”

“Liars tend to think everyone is like them. That’s a good thing. They never know the truth from lies. Use that.”

He nodded a little shyly, knowing how hard that would be to do if indeed he decided to try. Then again, his luck was as dark as the sky before a storm, so he’d likely not have to lie that he didn’t get a check for a million dollars.

In the mirror of the bathroom that he finished cleaning for Dennis, he got out his hair net to get onto his head. He'd showered before he left the house that morning, not forty minutes earlier, and it was already greasy. His face was pimples and as shiny as his hair. It never failed. He could never have nice hair and his skin hated him.

Huffing in resignation, he went to the kitchen to start prepping for the day. The place opened at seven-thirty, and he was already behind after cleaning the bathroom.

As Mal chopped onions, Lila came up behind him and slapped his back gingerly. "Hey, Mallie, how're things?"

Mal didn't want to keep telling the tale of the letter, but he didn't know when Randy would be in for work. "I...got a letter. My grandma died," he said, then saw the dawning on Lila's pretty face and added, "I'm not sad, so don't worry about giving me sympathy. I didn't know her, like at all."

"Still, Mal, that's got to be a blow. You don't have any family."

Lila had short blonde hair that always looked windswept, which was apt, being she rode a motorcycle. With her tiny nose wrinkled up, she said, "You...get anything?"

"Lila!"

"Well! You said you got a letter, and if she's gone, then it's pretty obvious she didn't write it. So concluding it was from a lawyer, that means an estate, one that you may benefit from. Don't tell Dutch," she warned.

He laughed at the warning, whispering, “That’s the consensus.”

“Well, anyone would know, knowing that fat lump of turd, that it wouldn’t last a week no matter how much. He’d take it and spend it on booze and drugs and who knows what else. Besides, you’re due for a break.”

“Also, the consensus.”

Lila leaned on the counter, staring at him. “What’s going on?”

She could see right through him. “Nothing, nothing, just... what if it is something...big?”

She grew terribly serious as she looked away from him. “Then go. Go and do something with your life. Enjoy it. Live every second of it.”

After setting the knife on the counter, he turned toward her, uncomfortable with delving into people’s business, but he pushed himself anyway. “Randy again?”

She’s been in an on-again, off-again relationship with Randy, the other cook, for as long as she’d worked at the diner. They’d never gone past the dating level of the relationship, keeping their own places and lives. Lila claimed it was what she’d wanted, the freedom of that kind of relationship, but there were times Mal thought it was bullshit.

“He was out with the boys last night. We were supposed to go to the movies. He called, last minute, telling me this old friend was in town.”

“Was it true?”

After shrugging one thin shoulder, she whispered, “I have no clue.”

Mal liked Randy, but he liked him as a friend for himself. The way he was with Lila, who was even a better friend, he didn't like at all. It reminded him of a watered-down Dutch.

“Maybe, if there's anything, we can go ahead and take off together?”

Barking a laugh, Lila nodded and said, “Sure. Why not? What keeps me here, I'll never know.”

“Me,” he teased, then felt his face heat.

“Aw, he blushes. Sorry, Mal, I don't do gay dudes. I'm afraid they'll fall in love with my chest hair.”

Mal retched, thinking of hair between her ample breasts, then laughed with her. After grabbing her apron and receipt pad, she gave him a wink as the doors opened for the first customers of the day.

They were a string of older men, mostly, coming into the diner to gossip over coffee and pancakes. It was the same landscape of faces as any other morning, but Mal looked out of the cook's window as he started to whisk the pancake batter and smiled, as they looked different to him that day.

He realized he'd miss them, though he rarely spoke to them. It was somehow a comfort to see the same people day after day, however. It was like a home without walls, family without blood.

All those weathered old men, spending their lives on the seat of a tractor, growing crops for the rest of them to consume, raising families, passing their wisdom down to their kids. He'd had one of those dads so very long ago, out each day, working until the sun lowered to light another place, far away from Colorado.

Yes, he loved it, and would miss it, but he needed to miss something. He was happy to think he'd miss something.

That hope carried him through that day, even when Randy came in an hour late, kissing up to Lila more than doing any of the cooking. Mal watched, laughing at them as they snuck out the back door into the alley to make up the way they always did.

Randy was younger than her, handsome, funny, long sandy hair held back in a messy ponytail, a blue bandana around his head while he cooked. Mal had been crushing on him for years but knew it would only be that. Not only was Randy straight, but he was also desperately in love with Lila, no matter how immature and stupid he acted most of the time.

No, Malakai knew he'd always be searching for the right guy, probably long enough for his man parts to give up working. He smiled at that and handled the last of his orders before heading home, dreading getting there to watch Dutch be a jerk all over again.

When they cleared the alley, Mal gathered some of the bacon and eggs left from the bussing tubs and scraped them

onto a paper plate. He sneaked out with them, and sure enough, his buddy was there.

He was a scraggly looking dog, mutt, black and white, wiry fur, and big brown eyes set high, just below his small ears.

He wasn't a big dog or a small one, but he was skinny. There wasn't a day when Mal didn't get his tail wagging. "You hungry?"

A yip of a bark came in response and Mal set down the plate. The dog moved in to eat his fill, licking the paper until Mal took it and tossed it into the dumpster.

He sat on the ground there to pet him. In his mind, Mal called him Teddy. "How have you been?"

Teddy layed next to him and let Mal pet him. It had taken a month to get to do that.

"I wish I could take you home. Or find you a good home."

Teddy blinked at him, then got up and took off, heading off into the lot behind the diner.

"Well, bye!"

He smiled as he went back in the diner, and there was Randy, shaking his head at Mal. "I heard you're gone for the day Thursday. I know you come on your days off to feed him."

"Yeah," Mal said while ducking his head.

"I'll feed him Thursday."

"Thanks, Randy."

Chapter Two



image-placeholder

THE DAY OF THE meeting with the lawyers, Malakai fussed obsessively over what to wear. He didn't have nice clothes and even his everyday clothes were stained from flipping pancakes and burgers.

Huffing, he finished with his pants, leaving on the last pair he tried, and started on his shirts.

“You're too fucking skinny to look good. Just wear a goddamn shirt and get out of here before you're late.”

He settled for the only polo he had, a red and gray striped one that hid the mustard stain near the collar well enough. “I'll be there on time. Traffic shouldn't be bad, it's after rush hour.”

“Still. Get going. Maybe I should drive you.”

Mal knew he didn't offer to be nice. He just wanted to be there if there was a check to sign. “You've been drinking. I saw the empty on the floor by your chair.”

Dutch stormed into the room and raised his fist, but Mal didn't back down from it. He knew Dutch better than that. Mal would get hit later when no one important could see the bruise.

“Watch that mouth. When you get home, I’m gonna teach you a lesson, running off like that.”

Mal, lifted by the fact he may be able to leave Dutch soon, didn’t shake in his sneakers for once. “Fine. We’ll have a go of it when I get back. For now, please lay off. I’m nervous enough.”

“You should be. Fancy fucking lawyers are gonna see you coming and hide their gold watches. You look like a crackhead thief.”

And you look like a turd dressed in ragged clothes, Mal thought, but didn’t voice it.

In the truck, he pleaded, “Work for me, old timer. Just a drive to Denver and back. That’s it. You can make it; I have faith in you.”

The truck came to life as soon as the key turned, and Mal stopped to get a couple extra pints of oil for the trip on his way out of town.

The drive was great. Anytime he left his hometown, that was a great drive. Oh, he didn’t completely hate it there, but he felt stunted and stifled, like a butterfly trying to break out of a cocoon that was built of reinforced steel.

The prairie wasn’t most people’s cup of tea, but Malakai found beauty there. Along the rivers grew huge trees that he could imagine lying on the grass under those long branches to block out the sun and dream away for hours. There were arroyos that were deeply cut by streams long dried, but in a

heavy rain, returned to life, sweeping everything away in its path.

Those arroyos were where he played as a kid. His dad would be drunk, pining for his long-lost love, Mal's mother. The ditches had branches off it where he'd hide for hours, pretending he was escaping terrible monsters that had come to earth and wanted his soul.

Laughing at the memories, he pushed the gas a little, ready to see the city.

As nervous as he was to go into the office, he liked being away from his hometown for a while. He felt free, driving those miles, passing the occasional semi-truck, a motorcycle or two passing him. The wind swept over the land, pushing on the truck a little, reminding him of the power of that wind. He'd been in two tornados in his life, the funnel clouds destroying swaths of the prairie, houses, barns and fields of wheat and hay. The trailer parks he lived in then had community storm cellars where they'd hunkered down to keep from being sucked into the twisting funnel of dust and debris.

That was the most excitement he'd ever had, and those had been at least a decade earlier. Since then, excitement had been extinct. A trip to the city, however, wasn't a tornado, sure, but it was something exciting.

Walking away with nothing, that would suck, but he didn't mind too much. He'd never had anything, so it's not like he'd miss something he'd never had. The trip alone, that was enough.

He navigated the way to the office once he was in the city, cruising in on I-70 with more semis and a parade of fast-moving cars.

His phone was an old model, but it worked well enough to get him there, near downtown where there were more one-way streets than he'd imagined. Keeping himself on the right roads, he got to the building, but there were no free spaces around it. He looked up to see a parking garage and pulled into it, confronted with the parking attendant immediately.

After rolling down the manual hand-crank window, he smiled at the guy, who winced a little at the grin. "Do you have an appointment or business with someone in the building?"

He was handsome, but obviously didn't reciprocate that feeling. Suddenly gone blank, Mal hurried to find the letter, passing it to the guy, who pushed it back to Mal. "Just tell me your name."

"Mal-Malakai Brent. Here to see," he looked at the paper himself. "Shuster and McMillan."

"You're on the list. Go ahead and park wherever you like. Elevator is on the east side and the one to the left takes you up to ninety-three."

His throat tightened so he could only squeak, "Ninety-three? As in the floor?"

Smirking, the attendant said, "Yeah. The floor."

He swallowed his fear for the moment so he didn't look like a complete coward and drove ahead, feeling his hand begin to shake as he rolled the window back up into place.

He'd never been above the third story of any building in his life. It terrified him, being up high. Once he'd stood at the top of one of the arroyos he'd liked to explore, and it was maybe twenty feet deep. He'd backed away so fast he fell on his ass and continued to crawl backward until he was far from the opening.

That was nothing compared to being that far up, in a man-made building that could topple over and crush him in a tangle of twisted metal and concrete.

Parking on the second tier of the garage, he sat for a few moments, his vision blurring and entire body shaking with fear. He was going to have a full-blown panic attack and that wouldn't look well. Would they give him his inheritance if he was visibly crazy?

He remembered watching a movie, someone in the story having a panic attack. They slowed their breathing and started to count. Or was that for anger?

That question made him more nervous, ramping up his hyperventilation, his shaking getting worse. He knew there was no way he could go in there. Maybe if he left and called them, they could meet him at some coffee shop, one on a ground floor.

There was a knock on his window, and he jumped so badly, he hit the steering wheel with his thighs and that pain brought

him out of the panic enough to turn his head while rubbing over his lap.

A handsome man in an expensive looking suit was standing next to his window. Not that he'd know the difference, but it was tan and silky looking, a dark lavender tie perfectly blending with the beige material of the suit. Maybe he was staring there so he wouldn't have to look into the man's face. He'd surely see the terror on Mal's.

“Excuse me? Are you Malakai Brent?”

The surprise took him out of his fearful mind for the moment as he blinked a few times, his eyes moving onto the man's beautiful, blue orbs.

He laughed a little and shrugged at Mal, who remembered he'd been asked a question. He rolled down the window again and stammered, “I-I-I am. How did you know my name?”

“Well, Malakai, I saw you here and figured you were Malakai. I know most of my other clients and didn't recognize you, but you were parked in the spot for our law firm, so I thought I'd ask.”

Mal turned to the front again and saw it there like it had just appeared. There was a yellow sign that read, *Parking for Shuster and McMillan clients only.*

“Oh. I didn't see it.”

“You looked a little troubled. Can I help?”

Malakai looked back at him, his beautiful dark hair framing his pale face, those bright blue eyes that seemed to glow, and

he was captured by the man so much, he'd forgotten momentarily why he was so afraid.

“Heights. I’m...I don’t like them.”

“Oh, I see. Our firm, way up there. Of course. Excuse me for a second.”

Before Mal could so much as nod, he took his phone from the inner pocket of his suit coat and was on it, walking a few feet away while Mal tried to compose himself. Admitting his fear was humiliating, but the man didn’t seem to judge him for it.

Dutch would have never let him hear the end of it.

When he was off the phone, the stranger came right back to the truck and said, “How would you like to have our little meeting on the first floor? There’s a common conference room that happens to be free and I had an intern bring down the pertinent documents.”

Relief flooded him so quickly, he felt tears welling in his eyes, threatening to rain down his face like a waterfall in the Amazon.

“Come, I’ll escort you. I’m Oliver Shuster.”

Mal felt so underdressed, and not anyone good enough to be walking with such a man. Still, he couldn’t make the man wait, so he stepped out of his vehicle.

The first thing he noticed was that he didn’t tower over Oliver like he did most people. They were similar in size, though the comparison ended there.

Oliver was movie star handsome, square jaw, but not overly squared, and a little dimple in his chin. His face was clean shaved, but Mal could imagine him with a beautifully trimmed beard, how it would line his perfect jaw and chin as well as his chiseled cheeks, the bones high and rounded.

“I’m sorry about scaring you back at the truck,” Oliver mentioned as they took a set of stairs to the sidewalk just outside the building. “I am too forward at times.”

“No, it’s fine. I was...never mind.”

“I like you, Malakai. You don’t want to talk a mile a minute making up excuses about things. That’s commendable and something, as an attorney, I don’t see much of.”

Mal smiled shyly, ducking his head as they entered the building. “Thanks,” he said quickly before he raised his head, then his eyes to take in the grand lobby.

There was an immense ball in the center, hanging down on silver chains. It was a light fixture, but it was art as well. It reminded him of the moon when it was full over the eastern horizon in months when it was reddish yellow.

There were two fountains on either side of the lobby floor, both gurgling quietly; simple, long, twisting posts where the water flowed down the spirals of dark granite to collect in a white granite pool. It was beautiful and hypnotic.

“It’s past the guards and to the left, here,” Oliver said, leading him with a hand on Mal’s elbow.

There were sleek metal detectors that big men dressed in guard uniforms manned. Unlike the thick white ones he'd seen in movies, there were thin sliver poles no wider than his wrist. He passed through, setting it off in a low, calm alarm.

“I'm sure it's your keys, Malakai. I saw you place them in your front pocket.”

It was so commonplace for him, he didn't even realize he'd done it. He took them out and handed them to the guard and walked back through. He passed easily, so Oliver followed him that time as he went back to the other side and was handed his keys.

The huge guard with cropped hair and a scar over his eye smiled and greeted him, “Have a wonderful day, Mr. Brent.”

Again, someone he didn't know knew his name. “O-kay. Thanks.”

He asked Oliver as soon as they were out of earshot of the guard, “How did he know me?”

“I called ahead, of course. This way,” he said as his hand was placed on the small of his back again, sending a warmth through Malakai he wasn't expecting.

A woman came up to Oliver, tall, thin framed and... unfortunate looking. Not only did he hate himself for the thought, but he knew he had no room to talk.

Her eyes, remarkably, were sky blue like Oliver and his, if his weren't so faded. Hers however, protruded, making her

terribly bug-eyed, and her nose, big and hawked, didn't seem to be centered on her face.

“Mr. Shuster, you...called me?”

“Melanie, yes, darling. I have a client to speak with, so it may be a while. Why not go up to the offices and have Pamela get you some cappuccino and a pastry, hmm?”

“Sure,” she whispered, blushing. Her eyes cut to Mal and she grimaced before turning abruptly and rushing to the elevators.

She grimaced when looking at him. Well, he no longer felt so bad for thinking what he did about her.

They entered a room with a long table that had to have had twenty leather chairs around its dark mahogany. On either wall to the sides of it were long paintings of landscapes. Mountain ranges that went on forever it seemed, a lake in one, a stream in the other. An angel was in one, a tiny, winged figure over the peak of one of the mountains.

The trees in them were so lifelike, the clouds in the sky too. He felt like he could reach out and touch them, feel the dampness on his skin.

“Malakai?”

He turned abruptly, embarrassed at having gotten lost in the paintings. “Sorry.”

“No, you're perfectly fine. Please, sit. Mr. McMillan will be here presently.”

“You’re both going to be here?”

He chuckled in a deep voice that was more bass than his regular, soothing voice. It resounded in Malakai’s body. “Your grandmother was a very important client, Malakai. She had been a client for many years.”

“I didn’t know her. I mean, I think I met her once a long time ago.”

Oliver Shuster pulled out a chair in the center of the table for Malakai and he took it, then Oliver took the one next to him. The proximity of the man had Mal sweating. “She remembered you fondly, of course, as her only grandchild.”

“Only? My mom never had siblings?”

“No. Her father passed when she was a child, her mother, Constantina never remarried. They became estranged once your mother met your father. Your grandmother was heartbroken, understandably. She spent her golden years missing her family.”

Malakai shook his head to clear his thoughts for a moment, as they’d begun to run rampant. “She...had me. Or could have.”

Before Oliver could comment on that, the door opened, and Mal felt a cool breeze on his back. He glanced over his shoulder, then did a double take.

The man that came through the door was as handsome as Oliver Shuster, and to be truthful, he was very similar in looks.

Dark hair, blue eyes, strong jaw, and all. Only his skin was darker.

“Oliver, good to see you. And I assume this is Mr. Brent?”

Oliver rose and shook Mr. McMillan’s hand, then Mal rose and did the same. “I’m Mr. Brent.”

“Yes, Carver, this is Connie’s grandson. Malakai, this is Carver McMillan.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Malakai. Connie. Dear lady. So... dedicated.”

Mal sat hard and looked from one to the other after they took their seats, Oliver beside him and Carver McMillan across from him. He set down a pile of papers in folders on the table between them and Malakai wanted to scream at them both.

He didn’t have that kind of confidence, however, and was sure they’d throw him out of the office, so instead, he stammered, “Ded-dedicated? She never tried to find me while she was alive. How is that dedication?”

They exchanged looks which told him they knew a lot that he didn’t know. He again wanted to demand they explain, but he didn’t have to.

“I know all this will come as a shock to you,” Carver began, lacing his fingers together in front of him. His bright blue eyes, the color of a cloudless day, bore into his as he continued. “Mr. Brent, Malakai, you were never far from her

thoughts. She was a dedicated member of a very exclusive... group.”

“Group?”

Oliver answered, “Yes, Malakai. There are members across the world, but we’ve been gathering them here in recent years. There are those who facilitate grand things, like your grandmother. There are those that are helpful in other ways, but mostly, there are those, like you, that have no idea they’ve always been a part of us.”

Malakai liked documentaries and history. He’d always sneak into the living room to watch them after Dutch was passed out from drinking. Some of those were about cults, and a chill went up his spine as he heard their words.

“You see, Malakai,” Carver hurried to say, “You are a part of a great thing that’s been a long time in the making. It’s time to bring our people together. We have a battle to fight.”

“Carver, you’re scaring him,” Oliver warned, staring at Malakai.

He never could hide his emotions. “You both are, to be fair. What kind of...is this a religion or something?”

Carver scoffed, “Hmph. No. We don’t believe in religion.”

“What Carver means is religious dogma has led the way to where we are now. Propaganda led to it, greed, all of it, and we are trying to help humankind past that.” Oliver took one of the folders from those Carver had brought, opened it, and laid it

out for Malakai to view. “This is a list of those like us, Malakai. Humans, yes, but more than human.”

“More than human? What are you talking about?”

He was starting to panic again, and he felt his chest constricting.

Carver spoke to him but he didn't understand the words. They weren't English and frankly didn't sound like anything he'd ever heard. As they continued to speak in the strange language, Malakai got a little dizzy, and he attributed that to his new panic attack, but then, the opposite of that occurred, and he became terribly drowsy.

He tried forcing himself awake, but it was no use. He lay his head on his folded arms on the table and when he woke, Oliver was gently patting his back. “Are you okay there?”

Lifting his head seemed like a chore, as it was a hundred pounds, or at least it felt that way. He blinked at the two men then asked in a quiet croak, “What happened?”

“You were talking with us and you just...passed out,” Oliver explained. “We were about to call for an ambulance, then you started to wake. We can still call if you're feeling ill.”

“No, I just got...tired. You two were talking in some language. What was that?”

They both looked confused, one set of brows lifting, the other creasing and Oliver nodded to his partner. “Let's get the medic to come give him a look, yes?”

“Yes,” Carver said, then left the room with his phone at his ear.

“Malakai, we were speaking with you about the will. Constantina left you everything.”

A stroke? It had to be. Sure, thirty-year-old people didn’t usually get them, but he was sure he wasn’t the only one. “The medic, yeah, I might need that.”

“Of course,” Oliver assured. “That sum of money, it must be a shock, and of course, her favorite piece of jewelry.”

He was speaking to Malakai like he thought Malakai knew what he was talking about. “Sum of money? Jewelry?”

“Surely you remember that. We were speaking about it before you began to look ill.”

“No. I...” The way his stomach felt, like he’d swallowed a stone the size of a building, kinda made him a liar, but still. “I...don’t get sick. I never have.”

“Malakai, you’re very special. I know you don’t think so, and there are reasons for that too. Before they come look at you, I need you to know that your life is about to change.”

Money. He’d said something about a lot of money. “Sure, it will. Dutch will take all the money, but at least I’ll be rid of him.”

Oliver smiled rather knowingly and said, “I wouldn’t worry about him.”

“What...?”

The door opened and a man in scrubs came in with Carver. After talking to Mal, giving his name and getting permission to begin, he examined Mal. Oliver and Carver stood off in the corner, whispering.

The medic shined a light in his eyes, first the left, then the right and back to the left. As the light was shining, he wasn't blinded. In fact, he saw an image there, wings spreading wide across his field of vision. When the light moved, the wings faded.

Finally, the medic declared his problems coming from his panic attack and gave him a prescription of diazepam. When he asked what that was, he was told it was Valium.

“Don't take them and drive. If you have to, get a room here in the city and wait a day and night before you try to drive.”

That nearly sent him into another panic attack, thinking of Dutch's reaction to that idea. “No, I'm good now. I just want to settle the rest of this and get home.”

He stuck the prescription in his wallet and replaced the wallet in his back pocket, all the while watching the two men in the corner finish their mysterious conversation.

“Well,” Carver started as the medic left, “how about we take you to a meal and finish this. Maybe you need some food.”

He wanted to turn that down, feeling the rush to be home, but then his stomach growled and he realized he hadn't eaten that day. “Maybe a sandwich or something.”

“Oh,” Oliver said, “We have a place right around the corner we think you’ll love.”

Chapter Three



image-placeholder

THE MENU WAS SHORT, but he still wasn't sure what a lot of the food was, so he asked meekly, "Oliver...what are these?"

"Artisanal, Malakai. They are fancy names for stuff you've likely eaten a thousand times. Like this croque monsieur? That's grilled cheese. Although, they do use better cheese than the kraft slices I had as a kid."

He smiled, finally feeling as if he had something in common with Oliver. "I loved them like that."

"Me too but try one of these. You won't be disappointed. They also have a tomato bisque. That is tomato soup with carrots, roasted garlic, basil and lots of real cream and real butter."

After his mouth filled with saliva and he swallowed it as inconspicuous as he could, he nodded once and said, "That's what I'll have."

"Good, good, me too," Oliver agreed.

“I think I’ll do the avocado salad. Avocados are one of Mother Earth’s finest bounties, in my humble opinion.”

While they waited for the food, Carver asked Malakai a little about himself. Though it was a little, Mal didn’t want to answer. Compared to their lives, his was likely pathetic. “I’m just a part-time cook, part-time waiter, and busboy at a diner in my hometown,” he finally revealed after some prodding.

Oliver smiled warmly over to him while spreading a napkin over his lap. “It’s commendable, Malakai, but your life is going to change now in ways you’ll never see coming.”

With his heart revving, his breathing coming in huffs, Malakai wanted to rush out of the room, but he never left the chair. “Like getting some money? Like I said, my...the man I live with, he’ll talk me out of it and my life will only change long enough for him to spend it all, he’ll be back when he’s broke so I can keep supporting him,” he blurted, then felt his heart begin to race all over again, as well as the tunnel vision, the shaking, and then something incredible happened. Oliver reached over and lay his hand over Malakai’s, and it all stopped.

His breathing regulated, his heart slowed to normal and he was seeing perfectly fine. Chancing a look into Oliver’s eyes, he got a wink from the man and a little chuckle that was almost dark. “There you go. All better.”

“H-how did you...?”

Without answering and glossing over what Malakai had revealed about his life, Carver went on about his life changing.

“Money isn’t everything, Malakai, but I doubt you’ll have to worry over your friend. Lots of things will change for you now. We can’t even tell you all the amazing things coming your way.”

“Like what?”

“Better the surprise, right?”

Oliver and Carver shared a laugh over the private joke that Malakai wasn’t in on, and then the food came.

Oliver hadn’t steered him wrong. The food was delicious. The grilled sandwich was on thick, buttery, toasted bread and the cheeses were mild but tasty. The soup was even better, and he was glad that eating ceased some of the conversation.

But not all.

Taking a card from his jacket pocket, Carver handed it across to him. “You’ll likely have more questions later down the line. This is my personal number. Please, call anytime. If I don’t answer, I will get to you very soon.”

“What will I have questions about?”

“I’ll get your paperwork together and explain some things about it, Malakai,” Oliver explained, then took a drink of his iced tea. Once he swallowed, he continued, “Some of it will be self-explanatory, but the rest will be confusing. I’m sorry we can’t tell you more right now, Malakai, but...you wouldn’t believe it if we tried.”

“Wouldn’t want more panic attacks, would we?” Carver said with a smile.

“Carver, don’t be a bully.”

Carver chewed his salad and winked at Oliver.

Winking, private jokes, that weird language they had been speaking, all of it was making him dizzy again. He dove in, finishing his food without another word, and once they paid for the meal, they walked back to the office and sat again at the long table.

Carver unbuttoned his dark suit coat and sat in the chair across from him. His eyes were positively twinkling. “Malakai, you are worthy. I’m happy to welcome you into your new life.”

“Again with that? What new life? Are you not hearing me? I don’t have a life and don’t think anything can give me one.”

He was speaking up more than he normally would, but it didn’t make him feel powerful or confident like he always imagined. It made him feel sorry, like he was spitting in the face of these men.

Oliver soothed him with both his words and his warmth. “Malakai, please, excuse him. He’s been away from people a while and doesn’t know how to speak to them.”

Carver laughed a little loudly, but then cleared his throat and grew more serious. “Malakai, your life can change in a heartbeat. Believe me, I know about that. Once, I was unloved and unwanted, as you feel now. Then someone came in and changed everything for me. Oliver and I, well, we like to do that for others now, people like us.”

It was Malakai's turn to laugh. "I'm nothing like you guys," he whispered. "I'm..." He wanted to say ugly and gangly and awkward, but he knew that would make him seem whiney, which he was as well, at least to himself. Instead, he finished, "You two are beautiful and you have amazing jobs, probably wives or something to go home to. I don't...have any of that."

That's when he saw the dark cloud in Carver's eyes, dulling the bright blue into gray. "I had that, sure. I'm trying to get it back. I'll need your help, and others."

Before he could ask, Oliver covered for the cryptic statement. "He means, he is inspired by people that turn their lives around, Malakai. You're about to, we're sure of that. Like we said, let us know if you have any questions. Money will be placed in your account, no one else has access to it. Debit and credit cards will be sent to a PO Box only in your name. It's up to you if you choose to share them with your... friend. If not, well, then your new life can begin, and he doesn't need to know about any of it until you decide if you want him to continue to be in your life."

The change was noted but appreciated. "I have an account, but he made me put him on it."

"This is an account with our bank. Listening to your concerns is our job, Malakai. So, we'll set up the account for you, and you will be the sole holder of that account. Your grandmother's home is available to you, if you want to visit it or live there. It's in Maine."

Malakai was choking up with emotion, but he didn't have time. He began to be handed papers to sign, and he did so, reading over them just barely as he was nervous, excited, and curious.

He was given cars, a home, money, and finally, the piece of jewelry they'd mentioned.

Oliver reached into his suit coat and pulled out a small blue box. Malakai couldn't take his eyes from it as it was set in front of him.

"Open it," Carver encouraged as Malakai sat unmoving for more than a minute.

He did, his hands shaking some as he lifted the hinged lid and saw the brilliant pendant there, nestled in the blue velvet lining.

The change was silver, thick, and the pendant itself was a diamond, but none like he'd ever seen. It was pink, bright, and so beautiful, his eyes hurt just looking at it.

"It's an angel cut diamond, the rarest in the world, save for the very few others that exist."

Malakai glanced over at Oliver, asking, "Angel cut? I don't know what that is."

"No one does. These few diamonds are so rare that they are kept private. There are people who would do just about anything to have them. Your grandmother held onto this one for you for nearly her entire life."

"How can that be?"

“Wear this, keep it close, and one day you’ll understand its significance.”

Oliver took the necklace from the box and stood, placing it around his neck.

“Put it under your shirt, keep it near your flesh,” Carver instructed. “These diamonds come from a place that is most special to me and those like me.”

It was warm. That was the strangest thing. Metal, stone, gems, they were usually cold until a body warmed them, but from the second it touched his skin, it was warm. Malakai convinced himself it was because the box had been in Oliver’s pocket, but that didn’t sit right with him.

Maybe it was the day, the strange day with the even stranger men that did it, but he suddenly felt at ease. His hands no longer shook, his mind felt clearer than it had in years. He smiled at the two of them with a confidence he’d never felt.

Carver offered, “I know you’ll likely spend days thinking on what happened here, how confused you are about things, and you’ll turn them all over in your mind a thousand times. Yes, all of it is shrouded in mystery for you now, but you will be enlightened as soon as you can handle it.”

He thought for sure they were speaking about the money and all of that changing his life, but deep down something nagged that they meant much more.

One thing Carver said was certain, however. He couldn’t handle anymore right then.

He was escorted out and to his truck, which Carver sneered at the moment he was shown the thing. “This works?”

“Yeah. It goes through more oil than my diner does,” he said, the old joke he told his friends falling flat with the two men. “I’ll...I’ll maybe head over to the used car place in my town.”

“You own three cars now, Malakai,” Oliver reminded. “They’re in Maine, but they can be brought out to you when you would like them.”

Three cars. He thought, crazily, that they likely didn’t need oil added to the engine every fifty miles. “Thanks. I’ll think about it. Not right now, though, you know...Dutch.”

The two men that did indeed look so much alike, smiled the same smile at him and their eyes brightened. He didn’t mean they got happier, but they literally brightened, and it happened so fast, he was able to convince himself he imagined it.

“Thanks, for everything.”

“Our pleasure,” Carver assured. “Welcome to the family, Malakai.”

When he was away from them, driving in the truck and navigating his way out of the complicated city, he shook his head to clear it from all the happiness and thought a while on the two.

Even worried they were the heads of some kind of weird, beautiful-person cult, he still wasn’t going to turn down what his grandmother had left him. Unless he had to join to get the

stuff, he would take it and politely decline any books on how to worship a beanbag or whatever weirdness they were into.

Then it went through his mind for a split second. What if it was a sex cult and he could be the cheese in a Carver/Oliver sandwich? That had him laughing and wildly blushing all the way to the I70.

Chapter Four



image-placeholder

THE NECKLACE WAS WARM on his skin. Malakai touched it several times noting that it seemed warmer than his own skin. He didn't understand it, but he'd never been near a diamond, let alone owned one.

He tucked it under the collar of his shirt, ready to hide it from Dutch. How he was going to tell him, or worse, lie to him, that was going to be a feat. He'd never been very good at lying. But if he told Dutch the truth, he'd surely lose it all to him.

He decided once back in his hometown he would go straight to work. That was what Dutch had wanted, Mal to head to work so he wouldn't lose pay.

As soon as he walked in the door, he heard the buzz of the place cease and Lila looked over her shoulder, then shoved the receipt book in her apron and hurried over, mid-order.

“Mal! Hey! How did it go?”

He smiled at her as he looked around at everyone staring at him. “What's going on here?”

“Oh...it might have slipped you were heading to Denver to, well, you know, this is a small-ass town and I don't give two shits, it was something new to talk about.”

He forgave her immediately. “I, well, I don't know,” he finally got out then started walking to the kitchen door, swinging it open before Lila could catch him. It was hard with her short legs to catch him when he walked, and she got spitting mad most of the time.

“What the hell do you mean you don't know?” She asked as he put on his apron and tried to ignore her as he thought about how to answer.

Randy leaned on the counter, wiping his hands on his own apron. “You didn't have to come in today, buddy. Dennis had you down for the day.”

“I don't want to go home yet. I need to figure out how to...”

“Tell that son-of-a-bitch you have something he can't get his hands on and he needs to get the fuck out?” Lila said, smiling. “That is my hope, anyway.”

He looked over Randy's shoulder to see a few of the customers standing and staring in the cook's window. “Are you serious?”

Lila laughed, and Randy did as well, once he turned around and saw everyone trying to listen and not one was ashamed of it. “We'll tell you all when we find out.”

There were general grumbles, but they backed off enough to bitch at them, “I don't want it getting back to Dutch.”

Perking, Lila whispered, and not a quiet whisper, “So you did get something?”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling them both back to the other side of the kitchen. Lila was bouncing and Randy was watching her boobs as they joined in the movement.

Without so much as glancing at him, she said with an evil smile, “Not now, Randy.”

“Sorry. Couldn’t help it.”

From under his shirt, he pulled out the necklace and immediately, Lila’s eyes got huge. “They gave me this and other stuff, but the other stuff can’t be carried around, if you know what I mean.”

“Is that a fucking diamond? And what is that cut? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s called an angel cut.”

“I’ve never heard of that.” She touched it and then let it go quickly, snatching her hand back. “Cold! Why is it so damn cold?”

“Cold?” He was confused, but then another question occurred to him. “How’d you know it was a diamond?”

“Same way I know the secret ingredient in Dennis’s meatloaf and the difference between buckshot and birdshot. I have layers, like most women.” Keeping her hand far from the pendant, but moving in to get a better look, she whispered, “It’s one diamond. That’s...impossible.”

“Why?” Randy asked, staring at it too. “There are different cuts.”

“Not like this! I’ve never even heard of an angel shaped cut. Pear, heart, marquis, sure, but angel? And Mal, honey, this is perfect. It’s flawless. Like remarkably so. That color, though, it’s...”

“Pink.”

“No, more fuchsia. Not completely uncommon, but this is so clear to have color.” She pulled back and looked into Mal’s eyes. “Don’t let Dutch near it. This is worth a fortune and he’d hawk it for a hundred bucks, he’s so stupid.”

“Lila,” Randy cautioned.

“No, it’s okay, Randy, she’s right. He’s dumb, but I’m not really smart, either.”

“Shut up,” Lila breathed, then looked at the diamond again. “Honey, this is valuable beyond what you’ve ever imagined. What else did they give you?”

“A house. Money. I have a new bank account and cars and stuff. I don’t know how to even deal with all that.”

“We’ll help and we won’t take a dime from you, so trust us and not that fuck you live with. Please, with all that, Mal, dump him finally? You deserve so much better and now you have the resources to get it.”

He thought the same, sure, but he also knew Dutch. The man wasn’t easy to leave. He’d tried twice and Dutch burrowed in deeper.

“I’ll try.”

“I’ll help. Let me go over and tell him to pack up his three stained t-shirts and two pairs of torn pants, and whatever beer, if any, he has left in the fridge.” As her eyes widened, she rushed, “Hey! That’s it! We offer to buy him a keg.”

Embarrassed, he admitted, “I thought of that. Well, not a keg. I thought about offering to pay the rent and let him keep everything but a few of the things I want and then I’ll leave.”

Randy slapped him on the back and shouted, “Perfect!”

Dennis came in through the swinging doors, hollering, “Where the hell is my waitress and cook? Do I have to run the place by myself?”

“Shit,” Lila whispered, then moved over to where Dennis could see her. “Just welcoming Mal home, Dennis.”

“Oh, that is important! He’s been gone, what? Six hours?”

Randy laughed and got back to cooking, throwing two burgers on the griddle while Mal shrunk in on himself as Dennis stormed over to him. “You working?”

“Sure, Dennis.”

“Tables need bussing. I need you late tonight, too.”

Mal had helped clean the grease traps only two nights earlier and nothing else was on the agenda. He was suspicious but knew Dennis well. “You don’t want me to go home.”

“I don’t give a good goddamn what those fancy fuckers in Denver told you. I know that piece of shit you live with. If you

got something, he'll take it. If you didn't, he'll blame you and you'll show up with a black eye and I'll have to kill him. Don't feel like going to prison over that tub of fuck."

He couldn't help but chuckle over the term *tub of fuck*. Dennis reserved that for the worst of people. "I can work as late as you need, Dennis."

"Good man. Now bus the damn tables."

"Yes, sir."

It didn't help, because Dutch stormed in the doors when the diner was least occupied.

Red in the face and exuding anger, and reeking of booze, Dutch was there like a bulldozer. "Back, now."

He'd nearly forgotten the bussing tub he'd been holding, but the dishes started to clang together, reminding him like an alarm. He set it on the table while Lila stared daggers into Dutch.

He receded to the back of the diner, moving through the swinging doors like a zombie. As soon as they were alone near the lockers for the employees, Dutch gritted in a low, menacing voice, "What'd you get?"

The pendant against his store felt warmer than it ever had, and it seemed to give him a little strength just knowing it was there, hidden from him, at least for the moment.

"I got nothing except a thousand dollars," he lied and had no idea where it came from. "I'll give it all to you if you leave me alone and never darken my door again."

It was comical how wide Dutch's eyes became, how the O of his mouth grew as well. He was shocked for a good, full minute, then exploded, "What the fuck are you talking about? Me? Leave?"

"Yeah, Dutch. I'm done."

Rearing back with his fist, Dutch was angrier than Mal had ever seen, and he braced himself for the impact of the meaty hunk of ham, but then Dutch dropped it. "When you get home, I'll remind you who calls the shots around here, you little fucker."

Little? Maybe he meant skinny, because Dutch was half a foot shorter than Mal.

He left and the second he did, Lila was in the kitchen. "What the hell?"

"I...lied. I never lie."

"Don't I know it? What'd you lie about?"

Impressed with his newfound deceptive skills, Mal grinned and told her, "Well, I said I got a thousand bucks and I'd give it to him if he'd leave."

It was her turn to get wide-eyed and shocked.

"I don't know where it came from."

"Maybe from a brighter future," she said, simply. "Anyway, good for you, Mal. Good for you."

He made it home to see Dutch sitting in his normal chair, with a beer in his hand. He didn't so much as glance Malakai's

way. “Where’s the money?”

“I don’t have it yet, but when I get it, it’s yours. Please, Dutch, it’s not like we’re in love or anything. You’ll have some cash and can go find you someone that you actually like.”

The can was squeezed, beer spurting out the opening and a split in the side made by the crushing. Malakai knew he should run, that it was going to get bad, but he was tired of running from the man.

As Dutch rose from the chair, the grunt Mal usually heard absent, he knew he was in for it. The fist came hard and fast and Mal felt the cut like a cold scratch on his cheek.

Dutch had never let go of the crushed can and it had cut his face.

The next few seconds were a blur, but he could remember one thing, how quick Dutch could be when he was in a rage. Mal was hit at least a dozen times in his face, his chest, his side, and Mal was sure he felt a rib cracking.

It was painful, for sure, but it came so fast and his adrenaline was pumping, so the pain would come later. Right then, all of it was a flurry of flesh, red eyes, and a cloud of breath that reeked of stale beer and whiskey.

And it kept happening until the necklace came out of his shirt and Dutch saw it.

“Oh! You only got a little money? What the fuck is this?”

Malakai tried to get to it first, croaking, “It’s from my grandmother!”

“One you never even saw,” he scoffed, grabbing the pendant and trying to yank it off Mal’s neck.

Mal felt like someone was trying to tear away everything, his past, his family, and he felt the pull from the depths of him. The sorrow and pain he felt was huge, but the anger was worse. He screamed from both, and Dutch screamed too, only in physical pain, releasing the pendant and staggering back until he fell on his ass so hard, it shook the house.

Mal stood over him, glaring, feeling anger leaking from him and moving into Dutch. Dutch was hunching over, grabbing his middle and his voice was strangled. “How...how are you doing this?”

Mal thought fleetingly that he was right, that he was hurting Dutch just with his mind, but then he remembered the three times Dutch had pancreatitis, the pain of that doubling him over in the same way. Dutch had obviously been drinking a lot, so Mal was sure that’s what it was.

Then he thought more and realized he didn’t care. His anger washed away, his hurt, his fear. He turned to walk to another room.

“Malakai,” Dutch whispered. “How did you do that?”

Dutch never called him Malakai. He stopped his movement and laughed sardonically. “You did that to yourself.”

Dutch left soon after Mal went into the bedroom and sat on his bed. He heard the door open, the screen door slamming, and the weight in the house lifted.

The exhaustion hit him then, all that had happened, the good and the bad, catching up to him. He lay on the bed, fully expecting to rest for a few moments then get up and clean after the fight. The thought of locking the door to keep Dutch from coming back and hurting him came and left as he started to drift off to sleep.

He startled awake when the sun was out, the thin, ratty curtains letting the light in easily. He was a little surprised he survived the night.

Dragging himself off the bed and down the short hall to the bathroom, he laughed a little that he was finally rid of Dutch. The air seemed clearer; the weight was off his shoulders.

After pissing, he moved in front of the rust-stained sink, holding the rim of it as his eyes slowly moved to the mirror. He stopped short of looking into his own face, knowing what he'd see.

After each row with Dutch, he had to use the makeup he'd bought online. Not that it covered the bruises completely. They showed through, but he'd ask to work the kitchen the couple weeks while they faded. There were only the people, the friends he worked with that saw them and they never ceased to lecture him.

When his eyes rose to the mirror completely, he blinked, then again. He then turned his head one way and the other. He

took some toilet paper and wiped off the mirror, but that didn't change the reflection any.

There were no bruises. Not one. He felt his face next and the pain that was usually there just wasn't. Smiling, he couldn't believe his luck.

Then he noticed something else. From the time he turned eleven, he'd had acne. Sometimes it was worse than others, but there was always a little bit, regardless.

Again, with the mirror and his own hands, he searched out the tiny bumps, but there were none.

He backed to the wall behind him, never taking his eyes from the mirror, and he leaned there, shocked. "What is going on?"

After stripping off his shirt, he got into the shower to clean his body, sure, but he also needed to clear his head. Had he imagined the fight? Well, fight was stretching it. He had gotten smacked around like usual, but there were no signs of it.

He looked over his body too, feeling it for pain, and when he found none, he couldn't imagine how it was happening, but he was ready for it.

The soapy water slid over his thin frame, his skin feeling every bubble, the water not quite steamy, but warm enough to help with the chills he had.

His hand wandered to the pendant, and he held it while thinking over all that had happened. Maybe he was going

crazy, maybe he had dreamed it. He was exhausted when he went to sleep. It was completely possible that he'd dreamed it.

He dressed quickly and went back to the mirror seeing that he was right, no bruises or acne. The smile was new as well, a wide grin that told him he was happy, even though he hadn't quite felt it yet.

The truck was low on oil, so he put in another quart and stopped at the gas station to grab two more before going to the diner to help Lila and Dennis open it.

Mal glanced over at Lila, only to do a double take. There was a huge hickey on her neck. He didn't say a word until they were alone by the lockers. "You might want to feed Randy."

"Hush. That was a great time last night. I'm dragging ass, but it was so worth it."

Mal laughed a little and asked, "Are you two still making it in the van?"

"Sure. Reminds me of being a young girl, getting hot in the back of his car. Those moments are few and fleeting." Lila seemed to notice him and then it dawned on her. "Shit. Sorry. How did it go with that prick?"

"He...left."

Lila grabbed his shoulders moving him to face her, and she started to look over his face like he had that morning. "No black eyes, broken nose, split lip. Wow. What? Did he find Jesus or something?"

“Not likely. I kinda stuck up for myself. Like, you know, you’ve been telling me to do forever. He was pretty drunk and he had a stomachache or something. I don’t know, but he left.”

She smiled as she let go of his shoulders, but then she hugged him. “Damn, Mal. I’m happy for you.”

“I am happy for me, too.”

After letting him go, she wiped her eyes, then checked her false eyelashes to assure they were still in place. “Now, get moving to that house in Maine.”

“I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

Her hand was on her hip in the way it was whenever she was ready to start a stream of curse words. Mal smiled despite that and said simply, “You.”

“Me? Oh, fuck no, Malakai! You are not going to use me, Randy, Dennis or anyone to get out of doing something you need to do!”

She may not understand, but he had to try. After ducking his head, pulling the will to form the words, he explained in a kind of plea, “You’re my family. I don’t know anyone there. How can I leave my family?”

“Oh, please!”

He brought his head up to stare at her, shocked his words didn’t make a dent in her annoyance. “What?”

“That’s a fucking excuse. I get it, Mal, change is scary, but this place, shit, it’s a dead end. At least for you. For me, I’ve been around the block a few times, and a small, out of the way place like this is perfect for me. You’re just getting started in life, Mal.”

“I’m only eight years younger than you.”

After rolling her eyes, she got a little misty. Her eyes welled with tears and she glanced over her shoulder as Randy came through the backdoor. “Yeah, but eight years is a long time for a lady like me.”

“What happened?”

“I love the idiot. I went in for some fun, and now...?”

Mal hugged her and knew right then she’d never let him stay. “I’ll go, but...will you go with me? For a little while?”

She pushed him away from her, her eyes huge as she looked over his face. That’s when she finally noticed. “Where are your pimples?”

Absently touching his chin, he admitted, “I noticed that.”

She slapped his arm playfully and congratulated, “Who knew sticking up for yourself would clear up your face!”

“What? Lila!”

“It’s true. Maybe your nerves were causing them. Did you sleep well last night?”

“Well, yeah, I did. Really well.”

“There ya go.”

After she walked away, he realized she hadn't answered him about going with him to Maine. "Shit," he said, laughing. He'd have to corner her about it later.

Chapter Five



image-placeholder

AFTER ALL THE CUSTOMERS that day, the staff was exhausted. At quitting time for the early crew, Randy, Lila, and Mal sat at the table by the window, the one they'd claimed for themselves, drinking coffee, and laughing tiredly.

“What’s different about you, Mal?” Randy asked. “Did you cut that greasy hair?”

Lila leaned over the table and reached out to feel it. “It’s not greasy today.”

Mal reached up to his head, feeling his hair and realizing she was right. “Weird!”

“Shit, didn’t notice. Maybe that’s it.”

“His zits are gone,” she informed Randy. “He booted the shithead last night and it cleared up his face.”

“Good for you, Mal. Good for you.”

After making Lila promise to think of going with him to Maine, he went home, tired and happy. The road there, bumpy as it was, wasn’t like it usually felt. He’d always felt a doom hanging over him, but not anymore.

When he got in his door, however, the house seemed darker than usual. It was late afternoon, but the sun was still high and the clouds that had been dotting the skies that morning were blown far to the east.

Then he knew why as he saw the counter and table littered with beer cans.

Dutch was back.

He stiffened and listened to the sounds of the house, and sure enough, feet were moving on the carpet, one step, two. Then the kitchen was made darker as the big body of Dutch blocked the little light coming in from the living room as he stood in the doorway.

“I don’t know how you did what you did, but you ain’t gonna do it again.”

Mal was annoyed almost as much as he was afraid. Dutch’s eyes were narrow, sure, but not so much that he didn’t see the seething hatred and fury. His hands were both curled into tight fists, but the thing that got Mal the most was his shaking. Dutch was shaking.

He’d never seen the man so angry.

“I didn’t do anything, Dutch. It was probably the booze. You remember your pancreatitis the couple times you got it because you were binging?”

Not a word. There was not even a flinching of his eyes or body to indicate that he’d heard Mal.

When he did move, it was quick, and he came at Mal like a steam engine. Mal backed into the counter and was trapped, and the first punch hit hard, but he had nowhere to go except back, and his head hit the windowsill so hard, he felt dizzy.

The fists rained down on him and he felt every blow like it was coming from a sledgehammer instead of a man's hands. He was stuck there, unable to move, and his head hit the windowsill a couple more times, making his vision blur, then he was gone, lost into the blackness.

As he went, he knew he'd probably die right there, in that kitchen. It would be over before he could move to Maine, to say goodbye to his friends, to live a life at all...

He was in a place that was so dark, he thought he'd gone to hell. The total lack of light was scary, but there was sound. It came at first as whispering, like a thousand people were all there, just out of sight.

It was warm, but not hot, so he figured they'd gotten hell all wrong. Maybe it wasn't a fiery pit, but just dark. He didn't know what was worse.

"Malakai..."

The voice was closer and came out of the whispers. It wasn't loud, but it was much clearer than all the other voices.

"Who are you?"

His own voice was loud, however, and he flinched as he heard it echoing back to him.

"Malakai, my son. You're finally here."

He knew his father's voice well. That was not his father.
"Who are you?"

That time he meant his voice to be loud. It didn't reverberate like it had the first time, and he felt that the darkness was swallowing his words.

"I am your true father. You're about to embark on a journey, one that will scare you, but don't be afraid. I am with you, as all your family is."

"I don't have a family. My dad, he...he's not you. Everyone else is dead."

A face came out of the darkness, and then more of a man came with it; a tall, beautiful man that looked younger than him, smooth face that was long and narrow, bright blue eyes that lit the darkness.

He glowed. The man glowed.

Now he knew he was dead. On earth, men didn't glow.

"You're not dead, Malakai."

"How'd...I didn't say that out loud."

"You don't have to. You have wonderful gifts, son. You'll soon learn how to use them. For now, go back and take care of yourself. Beware the hunters."

As he faded back into the darkness, Malakai moved, trying to catch him, but the faster he moved toward the man, the faster he faded.

Then, he was falling. It was as if he stepped off a ledge and he was falling through the darkness, screaming silently, as the darkness took his voice.

Flailing his arms, he tried to slow the fall, which was stupid, he knew, but in a panic, he couldn't help it.

Then he was back in the kitchen, sitting on the floor, leaning on the doors under the sink. He was dizzy and he felt the back of his head, rubbing over drying blood caking his hair.

Realizing he was still in danger, he came out of his daze and started looking for Dutch.

It didn't take him long, as Dutch was on the floor near him, on his back, his belly a mounded silhouette against the white fridge.

The table was near him, the wobbly leg finally given out, and the cans and trash were scattered around it.

It hurt a little, but he moved to stand and as he did, he never took his eyes from Dutch, waiting for movement.

He was on his feet and sliding silently around him, though it was hard to see in the dim room, he was ready to jump at any sort of movement.

Then he locked onto Dutch's eyes, but that just made his heart drop as he saw Dutch's eyes were wide open and any second, Mal knew he could be in danger again.

“Dutch, I'm going. Don't try to stop me. Everything is yours here, I don't care, just let me go.”

His heart was thumping in his chest, throat constricted, waiting and waiting for Dutch to move or at least blink. He did neither, and the longer Malakai stood over him, the more the realization set in that Dutch wasn't just lying in wait for him.

Dutch was dead.

It scared the shit out of him, but he had to know for sure. Dutch's eyes were always dull, and yeah, they were filled with blood, but that wasn't abnormal either. He crouched next to him, moving a trembling hand out to touch him, and once he did, shaking him a little, Dutch didn't feel right.

He'd never checked a pulse in his life, but he set his fingers on Dutch's neck like he'd seen in the movies. Moving them around, he felt nothing, but he didn't know if he was doing it right, so he stood and reached into his pocket for his phone.

It wasn't there. He searched on the floor, but when he found it, the screen was cracked. It must have fallen and gotten stepped on while Dutch was hitting him. He went into the living room to find Dutch's flip phone on the table by his chair. He opened it and dialed 9-1-1, then waited, telling the operator that Dutch was on the ground, unmoving.

He let the phone drop after the operator assured him the police and ambulance were on the way. He picked it up again, calling Lila and begging her to come to the house.

The sheriff came first, along with two deputies, and one of the deputies took him outside to talk while the other two checked on Dutch and looked over what they were calling "the scene."

Lila pulled up just as the deputy was questioning him, and she got out of her truck, running over as she hollered, “Get a lawyer!”

Malakai stared at the deputy, who rolled his eyes before turning to her. “Ma’am, please stay back. This is a crime scene.”

“Crime? I didn’t do anything.”

His mouth turned down into a scowl before he commented, “We’ll see.”

Lila was right there with him, holding his hand tightly. “Listen, that son-of-a-bitch has beat on this man for years. If Mal fought back, it was self-defense.”

Mal knew she wasn’t making it better. “I didn’t fight back. He cornered me and I was knocked out. When I came to, he was...on the floor, like that, like how he is right now.”

“Funny,” the deputy said, looking him over with narrowed, scrutinizing eyes. “You don’t look beat up.”

Malakai felt over his face and then down his torso, and it was true, he didn’t feel any of the usual pain from one of Dutch’s rages. “Bruises take a while,” he said, then turned to Lila and asked in a whisper, “Right?”

“Right, Mal. Right.”

The ambulance came then and Malakai felt his entire body stiffen. They rushed in after the sheriff came out to wave them inside the house, then he walked over to Mal. He was built like a bodybuilder and had stubble on his face, a face that looked

like he'd been in a position of power for a very long time. "Young man, was this a fight? Lots of things knocked around in there."

"The table leg was ready to break," he said offhandedly, his mind in a fog. He was scared, sure, but more confused.

"Mal, it's gonna be okay. You didn't do anything to him, right?"

"No. I mean, he was hurting me, and I was out, and I even had this weird dream..."

The dream all came back to him, and it had felt so real, like he was there in that darkness. The face appeared, that beautiful face, he felt like the words the man had spoken had gone right through him, like radiation waves.

"We'll figure this out, Mal."

"Yes, we will," the sheriff confirmed, but his words betrayed that he thought he was going to figure out that Mal was guilty of murder.

After Dutch was taken from the house, in a body bag on a gurney, Mal felt it was all the more real. If he got hurt in some way that looked like Mal had done something, he'd be jailed. The dream of his new life would be dashed.

He went home with Lila after gathering some clothes. The sheriff told him he wouldn't be allowed back for a few days while they investigated. The drive to Lila's was silent, as he was lost in the abyss of his own thoughts.

She lived in a small house in town, right down from the diner and post office. He felt exposed, even though the town was usually pretty dead after five. Rushing in the house, he waited for Lila to close the door, then he sat on her couch, which was covered in a pattern that was Native American in style.

Her whole house was bohemian, she told him, lots of wicker furniture, macrame, and plants. She also loved candles and had them everywhere along with lanterns to hold them. He'd always loved her house, but right then, he felt like it was the last real house he'd know before he was thrown in prison.

She sat next to him, holding his hand. "Tell me what happened."

He had thought it all over a thousand times just on the drive alone. "He was there when I got home. He was drunk, yeah, but pissed. He thinks I hurt him the other night when he had his pancreatitis. At least I think that's what it was again. So he wanted to hurt me back and he did. He caught me by the sink and I couldn't get away! I tried, but he just kept hitting me. I hit my head a couple times and passed out, and when I woke up, he was on the floor."

"Honey, now, I'm not accusing you, but do you think you might have blacked out and not passed out?"

"What do you mean?"

She swallowed and squeezed his hand. "Like you blacked out and didn't realize you did...something. To hurt him, I mean. Was there any blood or anything?"

“No. He was just lying there, eyes open. It was creepy, but I didn’t see any blood or anything.”

To think that he blacked out and did something terrible, even to Dutch, felt like another punch in the gut. “Lila, I’m really scared.”

“I know, sweetheart. Tell me something else, okay? Where did he hit you?”

“All over! Like, all over!”

Carefully choosing her words, she dealt him another blow. “You don’t have a mark on you. Now, you cover up well, but I could always tell when he’d hit you. Honey, your skin is radiant, and there is not a bruise on you. Maybe under your shirt?”

Letting go of her hand, he nodded and then pulled up the bottom of his t-shirt. He looked and so did she, but his skin was smooth, unbruised. There wasn’t a red mark or anything.

“This is gonna be a hard sell to the cops.”

“He really did hit me.”

“I believe it, honey. I know the man. I don’t doubt for a second he was there and struck out at you. Maybe your body has finally tired of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, well, this is weird, but I’ve read a lot on spirituality. Monks have trained their bodies to not feel or show pain. There are people who’ve done that, that can stick

needles into themselves, sleep on nails, walk across hot coals. Subconsciously, maybe your body is trying to defend itself.”

He let go of his shirt and let it fall back against his skin. He’d noticed something else, after lifting it.

He wasn’t bone thin any longer.

“What’s happening to me, Lila?”

“I don’t know, sweetie, but we’ll figure it all out.”

She pushed a valium on him and made him lay on the sofa, covering him in a blanket that had stars, suns, and moons all over it. Before falling to sleep, he noticed her books, so many romance novels, sure, but there were a ton about spirituality, and he planned to read them all.

He woke in the morning and went to the bathroom, skipping his morning urination for the moment so he could stare into the mirror.

No bruises. Not one. He stripped off his shirt and looked front and back for any sign of the beating, and there were none.

Without knocking, Lila opened the door.

“Lila!”

“I’ve seen dicks before, and besides, you’re mostly dressed. Anything?”

“Nothing. Lila, if this is my own body doing this, why now? If I could ever need the evidence of a beating, it’s now.”

“I don’t know.”

Her makeup was gone, but she was still beautiful. Even with her hair a mess, she was someone he'd admired for her physical beauty. He'd always been the ugly duckling, he thought, so he appreciated good people that were also beautiful.

“Did you... gain some weight?”

So she noticed too. “It looks like. I don't ever weigh myself, so I can't tell that way.”

She moved into the room and had him spin around for her. “You have an ass.”

“What?”

He spun to the mirror, straining to look over his shoulder, and he saw it. His ass had been flat all his life, but suddenly, there was a bump there, under his jeans. “I haven't been eating much. How did I gain weight?”

“Gaining weight doesn't necessarily give you an ass.” She squeezed it, making him jump. “And not one that is rock solid.”

“Lila!”

“I know you're gay, Mal. I'm not hitting on you. Besides, you're not my type. You're much too nice.”

He smiled for the first time since everything had happened. “But it's... good?”

“It's good. Let's do this, get in the shower, look around on... everything, and tell me if anything else is different. I'll

go put on coffee and throw something together for us to eat. Take your time.”

He didn't want to take his time. He had an urge to know, to find out what was happening to him. He stripped down and pulled her shower curtain open, getting the water started.

The shower was full of flowery smelling body washes and shampoos, but there was one bottle of men's body wash, and he figured that was Randy's.

He took a washcloth from the neat stack of them near the shower and poured a little of the body wash on it before he began to wash over his body.

That's when he knew, it was definitely changing. He didn't feel his bones like usual, hand running over them, reminding him with each shower that he was overly skinny. He felt muscle mass, and it was true, his ass cheeks were hard and much rounder than they'd ever been.

When he was finished with the shower, he stared in the mirror once he cleared it from the steam. Staring at his face, he noticed so many things.

His eyes weren't as sunken, and that may have been because his forehead didn't seem to protrude like it had for so long. He'd never had real cheekbones, but there they were.

The brighter look of his eyes was hard to notice, but his scrutinization was hard that morning, and he noticed, and not only that, but his hair was darker, and not because it was wet. Even wet, it was darker.

“What the hell is going on?”

When he went out with the towel wrapped around him to grab the bag he'd packed the previous night and met Lila in the hall.

She was staring at him, her eyes wide as they moved over his body. “Lila...”

“Sorry, but that is some eye candy. Damn, Mal!”

He would be embarrassed if he weren't so shocked. “Really?”

“Yeah. You look good.”

She shook her head and moved past him. “Eggs are gonna burn.”

“I'll be right there.”

He dressed quickly after looking at the clock. “We're gonna be late for work.”

“No, I called Dennis. I told him a little of what happened. Sorry I didn't ask, but I didn't think you'd mind. He said Randy could cook and he'd take care of the tables until we could get in there.”

“Okay, cool.”

As they ate, he caught Lila staring a few times, but he couldn't blame her. He wished for a mirror where he could do the same.

“Mal, this is all weird. What is going on with you?”

He felt tears welling in his eyes and he answered, “I wish I knew.”

“I’m gonna get us out some books tonight and pull out my laptop. Maybe we can find some answers.”

If all the changes were good, like the fact he finally had an ass, he wouldn’t question it, but the beating he got without a bruise to prove it, and Dutch dying, all of that was a huge downside he was unprepared for.

Chapter Six



image-placeholder

HE NEVER GOT THE chance to get to work. As soon as they left the door, a sheriff's car pulled into the driveway behind Lila's truck and Mal felt the fear coming on strong.

"Mr. Brent," the deputy said as he made his way to them. "We'd like you to come give your statement now."

"I'll drive him," Lila said, standing firmly in front of Mal.

"That's fine. The ME from Colorado Springs will be here later this afternoon. They had a slow day, so we'll know by tomorrow what happened."

"He told you what happened."

The deputy squinted in the sunlight and got a little brazen himself. "He told us, ma'am," he started, the way he said ma'am all but spitting it at her, was telling. "That the deceased beat him. Yet... look at him. Does he look beaten to you?"

"Well, being you all didn't bother to send him to the hospital to find out if there were any injuries not seen on his skin, I wouldn't know. We'll see you down there, with Malakai's lawyer. Let's say... around noon?"

That angered the small man and his hands curled into fists, so like Dutch's had done right before the beating. "Lila, maybe I should just go now."

"Not a chance," she whispered. "I may read a lot of romance and other things, but I also have read my fair share of true crime. A lot of people are railroaded into confessing about things they didn't do. A lawyer, Mal."

"Noon's fine," the deputy gritted, then turned on his heel and got back to his car.

They went back into the house, and Lila started making calls, the first being to Dennis, telling him they wouldn't be into work that day at all, and then one to someone she said she'd had a fling with a few years ago.

"He's from the next town over and he's the only lawyer I know personally in these parts. He's good, won more than he lost he always bragged, but if he can't handle it, he can tell us someone that can."

"Lila, lawyers are expensive."

"You have money now. If not, you have a house to sell. Better to lose that than lose your freedom."

They met with Sam Joiner, Lila's ex, at Lila's house as soon as he could drive the thirty miles. He was handsome enough, but nothing like Randy. He was older, in his forties, receding hairline, but he was handsome in the face, somewhere between Paul Rudd and Brad Pitt.

As they sat at Lila's table, each with an untouched cup of coffee in front of them, Lila laid out the story for Sam.

He listened, and his face was blank, not showing shock or boredom. Once Lila was finished, Sam sighed long and loudly. "Well, well, let's see, no signs of the beating, but they never sent you to a hospital?"

Before he could answer the man, Lila jumped in with, "They're small county sheriffs, Sam. You know how things work around here. If he was one of the big farmers, or owned some hardware store, it would be different."

"True. I've come across a lot of shit like that here. Malakai, I can't promise anything, but unless they find a stab wound or a gunshot, well, it's gonna be hard to prove your guilt." He and Lila both smiled, but that was short-lived. "Wait a minute, now, with no marks on you, it'll be hard to prove your innocence, if they find anything you could have physically done to him."

"I didn't," he said, but after Lila asked if he'd blacked out somehow, he wasn't as sure about it.

As he waved his hands over his notebook, he backtracked a little. "Listen, Malakai, I'm not pointing fingers. My job, as your lawyer, is to make them prove you are guilty. It's not up to you to do that."

Lila smiled over at him. "See? I told you that you needed a lawyer."

“I told you so? Lila?” Sam was laughing at her as he asked and she playfully smacked his arm while she gave him a very crusty side-eye.

“When I warn someone, they should listen.”

Mal had the idea they were reliving old times. “Well, thank you, Lila, and thank you, Sam. I appreciate you going with me. I... don’t have money right now.”

“You won’t need any right now, Malakai. Let’s see what all this is about before we talk about money. I am acting as your attorney, however. I will not divulge our conversations to anyone. That goes with or without money given. Okay?”

He let out a sigh of relief. “Yeah. That’s great.”

When the three of them walked into the sheriff’s office, the woman at the front told them to go back to the conference room in the back. Lila mumbled, “Is that what they’re calling interrogation rooms now?”

“I guess,” Sam answered.

There was a long table in the room, a metal table with holes around the rim, and five metal chairs there. It was like any interrogation room he’d seen in movies, minus a big two-way mirror.

The sheriff and one deputy they’d seen the previous night came in, folders tucked under the deputy’s arm.

“Mr. Brent,” the sheriff said as he sat across from Malakai. “I see you have an attorney. Feeling guilty about something?”

As Mal opened his mouth to answer, Sam placed his hand over Mal's and told the sheriff, "He's not taking those loaded questions, so let's move along."

The sheriff's grin told Mal he definitely thought Mal was hiding behind the lawyer. "Fine, then. Well, the ME from the city is here, and she's already at the hospital. We should know something before you leave. Knowing that, is there any part of your story you'd like to change?"

Mal looked over to Sam, who said, "Malakai, you've told the sheriff everything you've told me, right?"

"Y-yeah. I told you both what happened."

The sheriff nodded to the deputy, who took some papers from the folder on the table. "Write it all out for us, exactly what happened, sign it with witnesses and if there is any deviation from what you told us, or what the facts show us, the least you'll get is perjury."

"Sheriff," Sam started, sitting back in his chair and a smug smile broadened on his face. "He has a lawyer here. You can dispense with the threats. My client isn't lying, and if the facts don't match with his statement, then you'll jail him for that. Plain and simple, but there was no blood. There was no murder weapon and until the ME comes back with their findings, you can't hold my client. We'll give his statement, and we'll be leaving."

"Don't go far. I don't want to waste the gas collecting your client."

Everyone's eyes were on him as he slowly wrote out what had happened the previous night. Lila's question about blacking out came to him more than once while he was writing, but he remembered his head hitting more than once. He knew he was hurt. He couldn't prove it because his body was doing weird things, but he couldn't tell them that.

All he could do was write the truth in his messy handwriting and once he was finished, he pushed the paper across to the waiting sheriff.

Reading it over, the sheriff looked up at him several times, and Mal could almost read his thoughts. He didn't have a scratch on him.

He left with them, and the next three hours seemed to stretch on into infinity. Lila gave him a beer, and he drank it absently, though each time he brought the bottle to his lips, the smell of it reminded him of Dutch.

“Am I going to prison?”

Sam and Lila exchanged worried glances, but Sam said, “Not if I can help it.”

“He's good, Mal. He worked in Chicago for years but tired of the city. Like most of us, he craved a small town. I told him he should move west, but he likes the wide open spaces of this hell pit.”

“I still like it,” he informed her. “Nice people, if you don't share your political stances with them. It's... quiet. I guess I craved the quiet more than anything.”

“He lives by the old church in Riley’s Crossing. That creepy old building they’ve been trying to sell for years.”

“I bought it,” Sam said, ducking his head while he blushed. “I didn’t want neighbors.”

Lila laughed, her smile more than warm. Mal knew she liked Randy, but she had never looked at Randy the way she gazed so sweetly at Sam. It made him wonder why they had stopped dating, and why they didn’t seem to dislike each other a bit.

He’d seen a lot of breakups and none of the couples had been so pleasant to one another.

Sam’s phone rang at just after two, and when he answered, his face and voice were all business. Lila and he listened to the one-sided conversation, which was short, and then waited while he ended the call and cleared his throat.

“You are off the hook, Mal. There were no bruises on the body, no punctures or gunshot wounds. The man died of an aneurysm.”

While relief flooded him so thoroughly that his legs went numb, he fell back on the couch and tried to hear it again. He was sure he’d heard wrong. “Aneurysm?”

“Yes. Seems he fell over dead after his brain was flooded with blood. It was almost instant, as instant as any of us get besides a bullet to the head.”

Lila laughed and whispered, “Way too good for that shithead, but it’s over.”

“It can’t be over. It... really?”

She went to Mal and hugged him around the neck. “It’s over. They can’t possibly blame you for that. Honey, it’s okay.”

It seemed too easy. A few hours before that, he’d had wild visions of surviving prison, then... it was over. Just like that.

“It...”

Lila broke open a bottle of wine and agreed, “Yeah, like the whole thing was weird. Dutch? Just dying like that?”

“I’m a lawyer, not a doctor, but from what Malakai said, he was furious. Anger causes your blood pressure to soar, so it’s not unlikely that, if he had a weak vessel in his head, it would burst after a blood pressure spike.”

Put that way, Mal could see it. In fact, his mind formed the image, which wasn’t at all pleasant. The thumping of the heartbeat, getting quicker with the anger, a weak spot making a pouch of blood until it couldn’t take the pressure and burst. The blood flowing over the rigged groves of the brain, flooding it.

“Mal? You just went white.”

He blinked to lose the image and glanced over at his friend. “I was just thinking about that. It’s... terrible.”

“Not terrible for a guy like that. Mal, most of us have illnesses we live with for a long time, or an accident that might or might not kill us fast. For him, it should have been painful.

He should have known it was coming. He was an evil man, Mal. You know that better than any of us.”

As he slumped his shoulders, he agreed. “I guess.”

“Listen, I need to go. Lila, can I talk to you a minute?”

Mal watched them walk out the front door, and he smiled. It was obvious that Sam wanted another shot with her and he hoped for that. There were plenty of times that Randy had said he didn’t want anything too permanent. They were in it for kicks. She deserved to have a guy that wanted her, loved her, would cherish her.

The plants in the room made it feel like he was outside in some jungle. He sat back on the couch, staring around at them, feeling more at peace than he had in years. Maybe it was true, Dutch passing away let him feel that way, or maybe it was all the other stuff doing that.

When she came back into the house, she was grinning hard, and she leaned back on the door.

“So?”

“So, what?”

“Oh, stop! Are you two going to give it another shot?”

She went over to the couch and fell back on it right next to him. “No. He wants to, but no.”

“Randy? Come on, Lila!”

“No,” she said while folding her hands together on her lap. “Not Randy. I told Sam that we’d revisit the idea once I came

back to town.”

Mal shook his head and found himself in a state of confusion once more. “Where are you going?”

“With you. I can’t, as a good friend, let you travel all that way on your own, not knowing a soul, can I?”

As a fresh wave of relief flooded him, he felt himself sink into the cushions. “Guess not.”

Chapter Seven



image-placeholder

DENNIS WAS BESIDE HIMSELF when he learned that not one, but two, of his employees were leaving. He cried a little, which was strange to see, but it touched Mal's heart.

Randy wasn't in tears, but his mood for their last couple of days was silent at best, and at worst, he was snapping at all of them.

They drank beer in the kitchen after closing their last night, and Randy argued with Lila for the first half an hour. After, though, he seemed at peace with it, and hugged Mal tight when they were about to leave the diner. "Keep in touch, okay? And watch out for her. Don't let her... start dating every guy in Maine the minute she gets there."

"In other words, send her back to you? Maybe she'll be ready if you offer her more than hookups in the van."

He smiled and nodded as he cut his eyes away, redness descending on his cheeks in the process. "Yeah, yeah. And Mal?"

"Yeah?"

“I’ll take care of that... mutt you feed.”

Mal’s whole life brightened. “Really?”

“Yeah. And if he doesn’t piss all over the place, I might even take him home.”

Mal hugged him tightly, and barely kept his tears back. “Thanks, Randy.” He pulled back to see tears welling in Randy’s eyes as well. “His name is Teddy.”

“Teddy? Mal...”



image-placeholder

He'd spent most of his days before leaving, giving stuff away by trucking a lot over to the couple of thrift stores in town. He realized early on that few things in his home were something he'd want to bring along with him.

They loaded Lila's F150 with the rest, both taking very little besides their clothes. Lila had given all her plants to other people, which made Malakai sad. "They were so beautiful."

"The beautiful thing about plants is there are always more. I took cuttings from my favorites and can start them again. Believe me, Mal, I've moved a bunch. I always have plants."

"Good. I don't know what this place looks like, but plants can't hurt."

"You're right, Mal. Here's heading out on a new adventure."

It felt that way, like they were on an adventure. They were stopping in Denver to see the lawyers for the keys and the paperwork. They were staying there for the night and then they'd be on their way in the morning to the seaside state of Maine.

"I've never seen the ocean. It seems so... big."

"The ocean is great. I've lived by both in my lifetime, and loved them for their own beauty, but there's also something about the middle, with no big water. Then you appreciate the land more, and the small waters. The lake up past Limon. That's my favorite place right now."

"They have lakes in states that are along the ocean's coast. I think."

"There are plenty of lakes in ocean states. I guess I just learned to appreciate places for what they were," Lil whispered dreamily. "Montana was beautiful, rugged, with lots of animals. North Carolina had great food, the ocean, of

course, and foliage that blew me away. California, now, there was someplace I loved. I lived near the Oregon border, so there were these enormous trees, forests that were just plain mystical.”

“Sounds beautiful.”

“There’s beauty in every state, every country. Shit, I’ve read about deserts in the Middle East and Africa that seem so barren, but you look a little closer and they have this amazing life in them.”

“I like the way you see things, Lila. I don’t know if I ever could. To me, a desert is a desert, like sand and wind. I’m not even sure I’ll like the ocean. It’s so big, yeah, and blue, but that’s it.”

Her open-mouthed laughter was contagious and soon he was laughing, though he wasn’t sure of the joke. “What?”

“Oh, Mal, this is going to be a trip, watching you seeing everything for the first time.”

Everything he would see would be new, and as much as that thrilled him, he was frightened, too. Change wasn’t easy for anyone, he figured, so it shouldn’t be for him either. Though he had to admit, so far, all the changes were for the better.

Dutch dying, well, that was hard. He hated the man, but he was dead, gone.

When they arrived in the city, Lila easily navigated the streets to the coffee shop where they were meeting Oliver and Carver. Malakai looked up at the tall buildings all around

them, wondering if he was going to be able to get to the top of one eventually. Everything else was changing. Why not?

Lila's eyes grew wide as he saw the two handsome lawyers. Mal leaned to whisper, "You have a handsome lawyer of your own, if you want him."

"A couple of spares never hurt anything," she informed him as they approached the table.

After introductions, they all took their seats and Mal found his stomach was filled with butterflies.

His life was about to change. Again.

Oliver started, "These are all the papers you need once you get there. We've set up an attorney to help you through it all, but you're free to seek different counsel if you'd like."

"No, it's fine. I wouldn't know who to get, anyway."

Carver smiled over at Lila. "You've got a companion. That's wonderful. It's a little intimidating to do things on your own at first."

"I plan to help him settle in, then head home. Unless he needs me."

"Good, good," Oliver said. "Anyway, the home has been managed by a woman there, you know, to keep the place up while we arranged all this. You'll meet her once you get there. Her number is on a sticky note on the inside of the folder."

Carver passed that folder to Mal, and he took it, opening it to see the note. "Magda. Pretty name."

“Yes, she’s a lovely person,” Carver told him, looking at Lila. “You will like her.”

“Maybe. I don’t often get on well with women. They usually don’t like me.”

“I’m sure that won’t be the case here.”

Mal looked through the other papers and saw a banking statement. When he saw the number at the bottom, the amount in it, he sucked in a noisy breath. “Is this...?”

“You have over twenty million,” Oliver whispered. “Please, be careful of where and when you divulge that.”

Lila assured, “I’ll make sure of that.”

Mal was reeling, unable to imagine that much money. “You never said... It’s so much!”

“It is, Malakai,” Carver said, soothing him with a little smile. “If you like, we will arrange an accountant to help you with it. Anything you need, Malakai. Your grandmother paid our retainer well into the next ten years. If you’d like to replace us, that’s doable as well.”

“No, it’s fine. I... don’t know what I need.”

“Mal, I’m gonna help you. I promise,” Lila whispered.

Mal had a million questions, but one stuck out from the rest. “What did my grandmother know that I don’t? Why did she stay away?”

Oliver and Carver grew serious and Carver confessed, “We know enough, Malakai, but she never gave us permission to

divulge it. What we can tell you is to speak to your father. He knows what she did. I don't think it's everything you are seeking, but it might be enough to accept all this."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lila demanded. "Listen, if this is some game, you've messed with the wrong guy."

"I assure you," Oliver said to her. "We only have Malakai's best interests in mind. All of this is serious. No games at all. His grandmother was a fine woman, but she had a lot of hardships in her life. The money, home, cars, they couldn't help with that. Neither will they for him. If we can help him, we intend to."

Lila deflated some, but still warned, "I will take care of my friend. No matter what. He's special."

"Oh, we know," Oliver agreed. "He's more special than we can say."

Mal heard it, but it just flowed into the sea of confusion and was lost there with all the other things that were swirling there.

When they left, Lila was driving, and Mal asked her, "Can we make one more stop along the way?"

"Sure, honey. Anything."

"I need to talk to my dad."

She got quiet for a moment, then asked, cautiously, "Are you sure? You haven't spoken to him in... a long time."

"Yeah, I know. But... if he has some answers for me, I need to talk to him."

George Brent lived in Kansas, not far from where Mal lived, but as far as another star system in emotion. From the time Mal was born and Mal's mother died, George had held it against Mal. Never close with his son, George had done what was needed to keep food on the table and a roof, though a leaking roof, over his head. Other than that, there was no affection or father/son closeness. He barely spoke to Mal, pushed him off on all the women in the town to watch him while he was pretending to be at work.

He'd started drinking early on in Mal's life and just got better at it. He hadn't abused him all the time, but enough that they stuck out in Mal's mind a lot. Everyone said that was why he'd ended up with Dutch, because he was used to that treatment. Maybe it was true.

The town fifty miles over the Kansas border was just as small and dusty as Mal's hometown. There were a couple of garages, a grocery store, and the normal places like gas stations and bars. There were plenty of bars, which was why Mal figured his father had moved there.

“What's the address?”

“I put it into my GPS. It's just a few blocks down once we turn left at the light.”

Dusty, yeah, and sad. There were few people on the street. The park that was to the right of them as they waited for the light to turn green was small, and the playground equipment was old, rusted.

It was one of those towns, like his own, that screamed poverty and downtrodden, but still, the people stayed for whatever reason.

“I’m scared, Lila.”

“Don’t be. If he tries to hurt you, I’ll beat the fucker.”

Mal smiled and said, “If you don’t fall in love with him.”

“What?”

Mal explained, “He’s handsome and has this brooding thing that women love. Women were always all over him. He’d bring one home now and then, but he let none of them too close. He... never stopped loving my mom, I think.”

“You never talk about her. I mean, I know she died when you were born, but besides that. You must have heard things about her.”

Mal thought back and all the memories rushed him. “Sure. When my dad would get really toasted, he’d talk about her. She was his angel, his life. They met and ran off together. They had this beautiful life, and then it was over. She got pregnant right away, I guess, because they didn’t get a year together. She had me and was gone.”

“That’s not much. I’m sorry, Mal. Everyone should know about their mom.”

“Yeah,” he said, then looked out of the window, waiting to see the shack he figured his dad would be in, but when the house came into view, the numbers there confirming it, he was shocked.

The house was nice. A one story, bright white, with flower bushes in front, and a big tree with a tire swing. The lawn was mowed, the covered porch had nice wicker furniture, colored with bright blue and red pillows and cushions.

They parked across the street, and Mal couldn't stop staring.

“This is it?”

“Yeah, the numbers, all of it. This is... different.”

“You've been here before, right?”

“A long time ago. It was, well, there was no porch, only steps, and no paint. The wood was old and cracked. It's nice now.”

“Yeah,” she breathed.

He got out of the truck and started across the road when he heard laughter. Children's laughter, coming from the side yard of the house. Mal walked that way and saw something that both surprised and hurt him.

His dad was there, salt and pepper hair shining in the sunlight, and he was chasing around two kids, a boy and a girl. The boy was around ten years old, the girl maybe twelve, and they were laughing as George chased them. The little girl had long blonde hair in a long ponytail, her cheeks red from playing. She was extremely cute. The boy had darker hair, but his cheeks were every bit as pink. They were beautiful kids, unlike him, when he was that age. He thought maybe that's why George might have love for them when Mal had gotten so little.

When George saw Mal, however, standing in the middle of the street, he stopped the game and stood staring back at him.

Mal wanted to run, to scream and run from him, but instead, he stayed right there, unmoving. He didn't know how to move his feet or speak, but George got closer, coming slowly toward Mal.

When he got within a few feet, he asked, "Mal? Is that you?"

He didn't answer with words, just a small nod.

"You... look different."

"You too," he said and meant it. His father had always been handsome, and age had only made him more so. There were laugh lines feathering the outer corners of his eyes. He had a trimmed beard that was neat and the same salt and pepper as his hair.

He was thin, but not overly so, like the last time Mal saw him. He had a little meat on his bones and his eyes were clear and brown, not bloodshot from booze.

The kids had followed George and were hanging onto his legs. "Oh, shoot, sorry. Savannah, Monty, this is Mal. Mal, my step kids."

"Step... kids?"

"I got remarried about three years ago. She's at the store. These are hers and well, now they're mine too. I'm trying to adopt them."

His heart broke open then, and some of the tears that leaked from his eyes were all those moments when he'd dreamed that George would love him like he obviously loved the kids that hung onto him.

"Come in, please. I have so much to talk to you about."

Lila was by his side then, like magic. "I'm Lila, Mal's friend. We don't have a lot of time, but we can come inside for a bit."

If it weren't for her, he'd have run far and fast, but as it was, he followed them all into the house.

It was clean, neat and tidy, older, but nice furniture, painted walls in pretty shades of green. The kitchen where George led them was bright white, like the outside walls, and had plates of cookies and a loaf of homemade bread on the counter.

They sat at a round wooden table that was scuffed a bit and painted blue. George poured them lemonade while shooing the kids to their rooms.

As he sat, he wrapped his long fingers around his glass and started, "I didn't expect to ever see you again, son."

"Son. Yeah. Um, me neither."

His eyes were planted on the table as he whispered, "I got so much to be sorry for, Mal. I was a shitty dad. I know that. I'm trying to make up for that with these kids. I didn't think I'd ever get the chance with you."

"You don't," Mal said, biting words that he hadn't meant to sound so vicious.

George winced and Lila whispered, “Mal...”

“No, ma’am, he’s right. I got no right to expect him to forgive me. I was a miserable drunk, pining for a woman long gone and making Mal’s early life miserable along with me. I can say sorry until the cows come home, but it don’t make it right.”

“No, maybe not,” she said, “but you can help him. He... his grandmother died, and a few things have happened to him recently.” George’s eyes came up and looked into Lila’s before they moved to Mal’s. “He needs to know about his mom, about things that happened before he was born. You’re his last hope for that. Maybe, if you can, it can start some healing between you two.”

“I’ll tell you anything you need me to if I know it, Mal. Anything.”

Mal’s hurt over seeing his father giving the love he’d craved for so long to other kids was pushed to the back of his heart for the moment. “I’d appreciate it.”

Lila began slowly, keeping an eye on Mal, like Mal was going to snap. “Um... what did you know about her family? I understand she left them to be with you.”

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “Rose... we met at a carnival. I was working it, having run from home myself. She was... damn. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Sweet too, sweet as pie. We talked and I could tell things were bothering her, but she wasn’t one to complain, you know? She had something going on, but she never told me. We met for three

days straight, while the carnival was there, and we'd talk and laugh. I kissed her on the Ferris wheel that third night. I knew I loved her from the start, though. She asked if she could go with me, but I didn't want her traveling around with those likes. Instead, I got my pay, and we went to the next town over. We got married not a week after I met her."

Mal knew that. He'd heard all of it. "Did she ever tell you why she wanted to leave?"

"Yeah. She said her parents were pressuring her to do this and that. I figured to go off to some fancy school or something, but she said that she was supposed to get married to some rich guy. I don't know the details of that. She was only eighteen, and they would have married her off."

Lila looked a little shocked. "Married? No college?"

"No. I thought all those rich'uns wanted their kids to have those fancy degrees. Never once thought they'd be married off, like some of those weird Mormons that have a ton of wives. But, yeah, she said married. She didn't say a lot about them, after, you know. Her mother found us, came to see us a couple times, but Rose, she didn't take kindly to it, so she chased her off, yelling about heaven and hell and where she thought her mom was going, if you know what I mean. Then... she passed. I thought I'd never smile again. I guess I didn't much until I met Riley. She and these kids, well, they healed me up some."

"And I couldn't? I couldn't heal you, Dad?"

Again, he ducked his head and confessed, “I was a shit person with you. I blamed you, and it weren’t your fault. You were just a baby.”

“No, it wasn’t my fault.”

Tears leaked from his eyes, and he swatted at them with his fingers. George looked up at him, and he was old then, his eyes showing his sorrow and regret. “I can’t ever take it back, son. But now, I see what I did. I see what all that pain caused. I am sorry, and if you can forgive me someday, I promise to try to make it up to ya.”

He’d waited his whole life for those words, but when they came, they fell flat for him.

Lila broke in, “Thank you, George. If there’s anything else you think of, to tell us about her family, or anything, please, let us know.”

“The birth,” he whispered. “That was the part that was... weird. Before you were born, Mal, she held my hand. She didn’t want to go to any hospital, and I don’t know why. A friend came to help her have you. She was a midwife. She held my hand before she made me leave the room, made me promise to name you Malakai and made me promise never to let her folks get hold of you. I didn’t know why she said it.”

Lila whispered, “Like she knew she was going to die.”

“How? There was no blood. She wasn’t in any more pain than I’ve seen on the TV or anything.”

“I don’t know.”

Mal shook his head to clear it of the image. “Where is she? The midwife?”

“Took off outta here as soon as they took my Rose away. I never seen her again.”

Lila looked over at him. “We need to find her.”

“I’m thinking the same.”

When they were set to leave, Mal took a stiff hug from his father. “You keep in touch, if you want to.”

He wanted to say that he wouldn’t, but then the kids came outside again and flanked George. “Kids, say goodbye to your brother.”

Mal looked into each sweet face and said, “It was nice to meet you. I hope to come visit again.”

The little girl, Ashley, hugged him, and Kent shook his hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said proudly.

Mal nearly lost it when they left. He had so many emotions churning, it was overwhelming.

Lila saw it. “Mal, listen, we’re not getting to Maine anytime soon. I’m going to look this lady up on my laptop tonight. We’ll stay in a motel and head out to find her tomorrow. I think both of us need a drink.”

“Or seven,” he said lowly. He never thought he’d be craving a huge glass of something hard, but between his dad and Dutch, he’d never felt the need for one so badly, but there it was.

They checked into a roadside motel, got a room with two queen beds, and Mal lightened a bit. “This will be the first time I’ve ever slept with a woman.”

“Oh, god. I’m your first. I’m flattered,” she teased.

They unpacked their overnight bags, then Lila went out to grab them some burgers and alcohol. Mal stared at his phone nearly the entire time she was gone, wishing for the balls to call the attorneys.

He might have if he knew what to say to them. He had a million questions, sure, but they would likely not know the answers. If they did, that might confuse and frighten him more.

Lila returned and handed him food, then poured them each a plastic cup of whiskey. He smelled it, blanching, but he gulped some, feeling the burn all the way down to his gut.

“So, any thoughts?”

“Too many. That’s what the whiskey is for, remember?”

She smiled at him while sitting on the bed across from him. “I... I think we need to find out more, sure, but Mal, don’t delve so hard into this that you forget to move on to Maine. I think it’s gonna be good for you.”

“I know, and I think so too, but this is all getting worse instead of better. Not knowing, wondering. I mean, I don’t even remember my grandma and she left me a fortune! But then again, why would my mother not want me around my grandparents at all? None of this makes much sense.”

“It may never, Mal. The big players are, unfortunately, gone. Maybe someone that knew your grandmother knows something. Anyway, we’ll talk to the midwife and find out what she knows. If we have to, we’ll go to where the clues take us. But only for so long.”

“Deal,” he said, already feeling the whiskey. “I am curious about the house and stuff. I’m curious about everything right now. That kinda feels good, I guess. Everything before was so... there. There was nothing to wonder about at all.”

“A little bit of mystery in our lives isn’t something to sneeze at. We need that.”

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t know anything about my family, anything about anything, really.”

Lila came to sit on his bed with him, holding the hand not clutched around the drink. It was warm, her hand soft, but he knew she wasn’t all that soft. She was tough, like he longed to be. “Lila?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. I don’t think I could handle this without you, and I hate knowing that. Even so, thanks.”

“We all need some help now and then, sweetheart.”

Chapter Eight



image-placeholder

THE LAPTOP WAS STILL open that morning as Mal's eyes fluttered, then winced against the light coming in from the break in the curtains. He didn't remember a lot from the previous night except for a lot of laughter and tears, all of them coming from the alcohol and his friend's care.

He sat up and took it on his lap, hitting a key to make the blank screen come to life, and right away, he saw an obituary.

Margot Riat, 34, died suddenly in her home on April 13th, 1992. She is survived by her sister, Elaina Bryant, and her nephew, Max.

“What the fuck?”

Lila came awake, hearing his whisper, and turned over to see him with the computer. “Oh, you saw.”

“When did you find this?”

“Last night, after you passed out. She...”

“Died the day I was born. Like my mother.”

Lila nodded on her pillow. “Yeah. Freaky, right? You might be right, freaking out about all this. At first, I thought your looks and your luck, all of it was some coincidence, but now? I don’t know, Mal.”

She sat up and looked harder at him. “And you’re changing again. Your eyes are even brighter, your skin clear as a baby’s. I think you’ve changed just since last night.”

Mal was shaking, but it wasn’t in fear. For once, he wasn’t afraid. He was anxious to find out more. “Let’s get ready and find this Elaina.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

They paid for an extra night, in case they didn’t find Margot’s sister right away, and so they didn’t have to cart around their things. There were three addresses for the woman on the internet, and the last one panned out, though it didn’t produce her.

The small house was pleasant, baskets of flowers hanging from the eaves on the porch, a navy blue door that was welcoming somehow. The man that opened the door was about Mal’s age, and he smiled warmly.

Lila spoke. “We’re looking for a woman that may have lived here. Elaina Bryant?”

“That’s my mom. I’m Max Bryant. She moved to an apartment a few years back, gave my wife and me the house. Why are you looking for her?”

Mal couldn't stand quietly any longer. "Her sister... Margot, she was the midwife that delivered me. I'm looking for, I guess you'd say, a history of myself. I never knew my mother. She died when she had me."

"Oh, man, that's tough. I don't give her address out, you know, for safety, but I can call her and see if she'd like to talk to you."

"We'd appreciate it," Lila said, sighing.

They waited on the porch, swinging in the porch swing and as soon as he had an answer, the man came out and said, "She'd love to see you. My aunt, she loved her work. She brought a lot of kids into the world."

"That's great," Mal said as they got up from the swing. "Here or...?"

"She's gonna meet us at the café in town. She goes there every day for lunch."

Mal realized he was hungry as soon as the café was mentioned, and Lila licked her lips as she said, "Great. We haven't eaten yet."

"This place has great pie," Max confessed. "I go eat there more than I should. If the wife knew, she'd have my head."

When they got to the place, Mal and Lila both commented on how much it reminded them of Dennis's diner. Slick black vinyl on the booth seats, metal chairs around the rest of the tables. The cook's window was as wide and framed in tickets

and plucky sayings like *no credit unless you're 90 and accompanied by both your parents*.

They sat and all ordered ice water, then Mal chugged his as soon as it came. He wasn't used to hangovers and had forgotten how thirsty they made him.

“So, my aunt delivered you? That's cool, meeting someone that she did. There are a few around town, but they know, they know what happened and I guess they don't feel like asking around about it.”

Mal felt guilty then, bringing up tragedy to a family. “My mom passed when I was born, so I guess I'm searching out things too...”

“He's without much family. His grandmother just passed away, so he feels he needs some connection to all of them. We're traveling now to go to his grandmother's home.”

“Why didn't you ask her about these things? Or didn't you think of it beforehand? I can understand that.”

Lila to the rescue again. “That's it. You never know when you'll have a chance to ask. He thought there was time.”

Mal just nodded as he finished his water, the ice sliding to hit his upper lip as he tipped the glass.

A woman walked in with short white hair, carrying a huge, embroidered bag. She smiled and waved to Max, who was up and greeting her with a kiss once she neared the table. “Mom, good to see you.”

“You too, honey. And who are your friends?”

Both Lila and Mal slid from the booth to stand and greet her with handshakes. “This is Lila and Mal. Both came to talk about Aunt Margot.”

“Well, isn’t that nice? Sit, please!”

They sat across from one another. Elaina’s smile was warm, caring. As Lila asked, “Did your sister tell you much about her job?”

“Her second job,” Elaina bragged. “She was an RN for the hospital here. Oh, she never liked western medicine so much, you know, but she loved helping people. That was her way, helping people.”

“Did she say anything about her births? Or about the mothers?”

Elaina gazed at him sweetly, her hand moving to cover his. “You lost your mom?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s a shame. No, Elaina didn’t talk about them. Oh, generally, of course, a hard birth, an especially easy one. Never names. See, she felt like, as a medical professional, that there were rules about that. Everyone is entitled to their privacy, you see. I don’t believe there were laws back then about that, not in her field. I’m not sure, but if there were or weren’t, she’d have never broken her personal code. I’m sorry now about that. I wish I could help you more.”

Before Mal could respond to that, Elaina was digging in her oversized bag. The server came over to the table to take their

orders and Elaina said to her, “We’re not quite ready, dear. Give us a few more minutes.”

“Sure, Elaina,” the quiet young woman said, then rushed back behind the counter.

Elaina pulled out a manilla envelope and handed it to Mal. “These are some pictures. You can have them, as I have triples of all my photos.”

“Wow, thank you.”

“There are some with the mothers in there. Those that wanted pictures with their midwife. Quite a few wanted them, actually. The names and dates are on the back, though I’m sure you’ll recognize your mother.”

He’d had pictures of her, a very few that his father would stare at for hours when Mal was a kid.

He didn’t look at them, though, as they talked and ordered lunch, Lila getting the tuna salad and Mal a burger. Elaina and her son were sweet together and to the two of them, and the time flew. Soon, they were saying goodbye to them, each getting a wonderful *mom* hug that brought them both more emotion than they saw coming.

In the motel room, Lila started to apologize to Mal, for leading him to a dead end, but Mal was taking the pictures from the envelope. There were five, and Mal sifted through them while Lila spoke. “We will probably find more in Maine, you know? Maybe pictures or your grandmother might have written you a different note? Who knows?”

Shuffling through the pictures, he felt as if he knew Margot, her smile as genuine and warm as could be. She wore scrubs in every picture, her hair was sandy blonde and shoulder length, combs or barrettes holding it back from her pretty face.

She was young, in her twenties, maybe creeping up to thirty. She had green eyes, like a cat, emerald green, and he liked her immediately. Maybe she wasn't his mother, and maybe she couldn't tell him in words what happened, but knowing his mother was in the company of someone friendly and loving, it helped.

Then, he saw the last picture. It was Margot, in dark blue scrubs, and her arm was around a woman that was so lovely, it was nearly too painful to look at her. Well, the pain was more likely coming from the fact it was his mother.

Her eyes were big, brown, framed in dark, long lashes. Her smile was wide, like Julia Roberts wide, and her long neck reminded him of a princess. There should be diamonds there, on that beautiful slender neck, that showed it off to the world.

“Mom,” he whispered, and Lila came to sit by him.

“Mal, she's just beautiful.”

“Yeah,” he agreed before something took him, a blackness, not unlike the one he was trapped inside of when Dutch died. Only the darkness didn't last this time. He was taken into it, then shown the other side, and he felt himself shaking uncontrollably.

A light came through it all, foggy and blurred, but light. A scene appeared, and as it came into view, he saw it become lighter, so bright, in fact, that he was being blinded by it.

He heard sounds too, women screaming. Two women screaming, by the sounds, were there, inside that impossibly bright light. He moved, though he felt as if he were floating, and he got closer, like he was moving into the light with them.

When he was there, inside of it, he could see it all. His mother was on a bed, a bed with a blue and yellow flowered quilt, and she was clutching it, screaming, her protruding belly moving with her ragged breathing.

Another woman, Margot Riat, was there too, holding his mother's legs apart. But the light... that terrible, beautiful light was coming from there, his mother's... birth canal.

It surrounded the baby's head, and then, as he continued to watch in horror, his mother, from the top of her round belly to her vagina, was splitting open, like the baby couldn't come through on its own so her body was tearing open to bring him into the world.

Him. Malakai.

Blood flowed to the quilt, staining it red, her face paling as the blood left her body. He was watching his own birth and his mother's death, and he thought he was losing his mind.

Margot was on the phone, trying to get an ambulance, but it seemed the phone wasn't working. There was a pounding on

the door, and Margot ran to open it, but she pulled and pulled the door. It wouldn't budge.

The light was more intense than ever, but then... it stopped and the baby lay on the bed, smiling, blinking through the wetness on his face.

And his mother... she was gone, but there was something else. She was whole again. Her stomach had repaired itself, and there was no sign she'd ever been torn.

Lila was shaking him, yelling for him to wake, and he came out of the dream, vision, whatever it had been. He was lying on the bed with Lila over him. "Mal!"

"I'm... here, I..."

Lila was white as a ghost, and Mal got up and held her shaking body. "What the fuck was that? You just fainted or passed out! You were shaking, like you were having a seizure."

"I'm okay. I... had a—I saw something."

As he explained, Lila let go of him and took the picture in her hand. "This? You touched this?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I picked it up, saw it was my mom and Margot."

She stared at it for a minute, then looked at him, into his eyes. "Did you see her die too?"

"Margot? No, she was screaming, trying to call 9-1-1, then she was trying to open the bedroom door. I assume Dad was

there.”

“Call him. You have his number. Call him and ask if she walked out of that house.”

He did, and George went back over the story. Margot left, as they’d thought. He would have mentioned her dying, too.

They then called Elaina and Mal asked her what day that her sister died.

“Malcolm, honey, she died in her sleep. It was completely unexpected, as she was only thirty-one years old.”

Malcolm? He moved past that, as he’d been mistaken to have that name several times. “Can you tell me what she died from?”

“Oh, yes. The poor thing had a weak artery in her brain. She had an aneurysm.”

Mal dropped the phone and Lila grabbed it up, apologizing to Elaina. “Sorry. He isn’t feeling well.” She placed the phone on speaker. “He’s here now. We both are.”

“I don’t know what else I can tell you both. She was young, yes, but many people die of such things.”

“We’re sorry to bother you again, ma’am,” Lila said. “Mal is just so curious about things.”

“I understand. It’s not an inconvenience to speak to him or you, sweetheart.”

They hung up and Lila was staring at the picture again, but the elephant in the room couldn’t be ignored. “The same thing

that killed Dutch. Lila...”

“I understand, Mal. There’s something bothering me, though, about this picture, and about seeing your dad. Your dad had really gorgeous brown eyes.”

“Yeah, and?”

“So does your mom.”

“Lots of people have brown eyes, Lila. So?”

Lila grabbed the laptop and started to explain, “It’s weird for two brown-eyed parents to have a kid with blue eyes, Mal. It happens, sure, but it’s really unlikely. Their eyes are very brown. Your eyes are bright blue. I don’t know, it’s not impossible, but it makes me think...”

“That my dad isn’t really my dad?”

She looked up at him and nodded a little and he was thrown back to the other vision, the one of the man coming through the darkness, telling Mal that he was his father.

“Lila, I’m really freaking out right now.”

“Me too. I think we need to get to Maine. There has got to be something that explains all this.”

“Let’s get going. I don’t want to wait another night. We’ll take turns driving.”

“Let’s pack.”

Chapter Nine



image-placeholder

THEY DROVE HALF THE night, but both were too exhausted by the revelations and had to stop again. Mal was glad he'd inherited the money or they'd be sleeping in the truck.

The motel was nicer though with the same things the last one had. A TV they wouldn't watch and two queen beds. They each took one, laying on top of the bedspreads, hands threaded together over their stomachs.

"You're changing more, Mal," Lila finally said after the silence rode on much too long.

He'd seen the mirror. His forehead was smooth and even with his brows no longer hanging heavily over his eyes. His cheeks themselves were concave, showing a bone structure he'd never had, and his body was developing muscles and weight.

"I know. I see every time I look in the mirror."

The changes were subtle, but he noticed. Lila pulled out her phone and scrolled through her pictures until she came to one

of the two of them in the diner. She sat close to him, turning his face to hers.

Her eyes moved to the phone, then to him, and back to the phone. “It would be hard to tell if I didn’t know you, but the picture doesn’t lie. Your forehead, it’s... moved back. Or your face moved forward, whatever. Your eyes don’t look shrunken anymore.” She realized what she said. “Sorry, I know you’re... you were embarrassed about that.”

“Yeah. Were.” He took the phone and stared at the picture. “I wasn’t all that great looking, but it was me. I am starting not to feel like me anymore.”

“Mal, you could go to a doctor and have your face completely changed, and you’d still be you. This, it’s weird, but it’s the outside of you. The inside is still the sweet, good person I’ve been lucky to be friends with for a long time now.”

Mal let himself be embraced and he knew then that if he was going to get through any of it, it would be with her help.

“Let me run and get something for us to eat. It looks like we’re not going to sleep anytime soon.”

Mal shook his head and offered, “Let me go. Finding my way around a strange town might help take my mind off things.”

“Okay, but don’t get so lost in thought that you don’t pay attention to the road.”

“I won’t, Mom.”

“I am not old enough to be your mother, Malakai!”

He chuckled as he left the room and headed to the truck down the metal stairs.

The air was fresh, clean, and crisp, the sky bright with stars. The night was perfect, the temperature not too hot or cold. He liked the small town, but he hated Kansas. As much as his hometown was flat and boring, it was because, as he'd always figured, the spread of Kansas and its landscape.

And people. Nice until you showed you were different from them.

There was only one fast-food chain open, so he ordered them some simple burgers and a couple of extra for breakfast, so they wouldn't need to stop. As much as that night made him feel good there, he was sure, once people were out and about, and the sun was out to show the cracks of the place, he'd hate it.

As he stopped at a red light, probably the only traffic light in town, a car pulled next to him, though it was only a two-lane road. He looked over and saw a man that captivated him immediately. He was driving a truck too, so he was as tall as Mal.

He looked to be mixed race, either black or Latino and Caucasian. He could be wrong. He had been in the past, but he had creamy tan skin and long, shiny black hair.

The guy looked over at him and smiled, and it wasn't a simple, friendly smile. If he wasn't mistaken, and he probably was, it was sexual.

The light turned green, but Mal didn't move until the truck next to him did. It moved slowly, then got in front of Mal just as he let his foot off the brake.

Mal drove slowly, and as soon as he took the lead, he saw the lights flash as he passed the other truck.

He wasn't completely stupid. A small town in a conservative state, well, he could be getting set up to get a beat down. If he took the advances of a man, was alone with him, he could find they weren't really alone. Men could flood out of another room and beat him. He'd heard a lot of stories like that.

Still, there were those closeted men in towns like the one where he found himself, and he could be one of them.

He pulled up alongside of the truck, rolling the passenger window down so he could holler, "You okay?"

"Sure, sure, just... saw you, and never saw you around here before. Want to grab a beer?"

He wanted to yell that he did, indeed, want to have a beer with the man, but he had food, and he had Lila back at the motel. "I was grabbing food for my friend and me. I could meet you. I didn't see any bars open around here."

"Up the road, the next county. Just take a left on this street up here at the stop sign. It's about three miles up that way."

He felt himself warm at the piercing gaze of the man's extremely light eyes. "Okay, then. I'll be there."

When he got back to the room, he told Lila about it, and she was on the fence, like him. “It would be good for you to get laid.”

“A beer is not getting laid.”

“Tell that to my twenty-year-old self,” she said offhandedly. Her face screwed up as she thought and took a burger from the bag. “Well, if you’re careful, I don’t see why you can’t go have a beer with the man. We’re gonna be together a lot, so... we might need some space now and then, and if it’s given in pursuit of a hot man...”

The laughter felt good after the day they’d had. “Then I’ll go. Are you sure you’re okay here by yourself?”

“I’m great. I’m going to eat both these burgers and fall into a food coma.”

He found the bar with no problem, and sure enough, the guy’s truck was out front, along with a Dodge Charger. He went in and saw that there was a bartender, young, muscled, and tatted, and the guy he’d gone there to see was sitting at the bar.

He walked over and took the stool next to him, and that’s when he got a closeup look at him.

He had the lightest blue eyes he’d ever seen. In fact, they were more gray than blue. Long, straight nose that was narrow, then his lips... full, but his mouth wasn’t very wide. Kissable lips, he thought, then felt a blush rising.

His hair was long and sleek, tied back with a frayed piece of leather. Mal noticed his hands as they were wrapped around the bottle of beer in front of him. The fingers curled all the way around it and then some. Long, thin, like a piano player.

“Hi,” he said, then ordered a beer when the bartender came.

“Hey,” the guy from the truck returned. He held out his hand and introduced himself. “I’m Draven Greene.”

“Malakai Brent.”

“Malakai? Well, don’t we both have uncommon names? Mal or Kai?”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t tell me people call you Malakai all the time.”

His smile was full and sincere. At least Mal thought it was. It made his eyes narrow happily and crinkle on the sides. He was more handsome than Mal first thought. “Huh? Oh! No, no, it’s Mal. Kai would have been so much... cooler?”

“I like Mal. It suits you.” He paid for Mal’s beer under Mal’s protest, then asked, “Table?”

“Sure.”

They moved to the farthest corner of the bar, right under a red neon beer sign, the light spread over their table and their faces.

“So, Mal. New in town or passing through?”

“Passing through. I own a house up in Maine.”

“Maine? Long way. Why didn’t you just fly? Are planes a thing for you?”

“No. I had some stuff to take with me that wouldn’t fit on the plane, but not enough for a moving truck. It’s all pretty new to me, the house and stuff.”

Draven was watching him closely, like he was sizing Mal up in some way. He didn’t mind, as that’s what people did. And he was doing the same to Draven.

He noticed that Draven’s left eyelid hung just a bit lower over his eye than the right. He saw a tiny scar on the right brow, so small that he nearly missed it. His hair was sleek, but clean, the smell of it something like a scented candle that was neither flowery nor fruity.

His right forefinger was callused, and so was that thumb, making Mal wonder if he played guitar instead of the piano, like the length of his fingers had made him guess. And Mal noticed that Draven never took his eyes from Mal from the moment they sat at the table.

“I moved here from Oregon. I miss it.”

“Why did you move here?”

“Work. I travel a lot. I’m never in the same place for long at all. I like it enough, but one day I’d like to settle down somewhere. With all the travel, I should be able to make an informed choice when it’s time to settle in one place, I’m hoping.”

“What’s your favorite so far?”

Lifting his head to think left his neck exposed. There was a little tattoo on one side, some kind of symbol, but the rest was smooth and beautiful. Mal fantasized kissing there, moving up to his chin, leaving a trail of kisses.

When his head righted, he started, “For big cities, for sure, Chicago. For smaller places, I don’t know. There are a few. I like trees, hills, if not full mountains. I like the ocean too, though. Oregon was great, but there are places in the east that are just as nice, for completely different reasons.”

“Maine?”

His eyes lit at the mention of it again. “I love Maine. I was working there, kinda recently, about a year back, and lived in this little shack, they called it. Sure, it was small, one bedroom, barely a shower in the bathroom, but it was nice. Faced the water. Now, once it started getting toward winter...”

“Cold?”

He nodded and sipped the beer a little, never taking his eyes from Mal. He set the beer down and continued to stare, a smirk forming on his lips that was purely wicked. “You’re a small-town boy. I can tell.”

“I reek of it. I don’t think I’ll ever get the smell of onions and grease out of my hair.”

“You need someone in the shower with you to help you shampoo, maybe.”

That was all it took for Mal’s face to burn, like he was sitting too close to a fireplace.

“Oh, lookie there. You turn such a pretty shade of red.”

“Shut up,” he said, laughing.

They talked for a while longer, Mal trying not to divulge anything of value that could let on what he didn't want anyone to know.

As for Draven, he didn't say much. He listened, which was such a complete reversal of Dutch, it was nice. Outside, in the truck, Draven sat beside him, confessing, “I had a good time tonight. It's difficult finding a nice guy, you know, that is so... similar to me. In ways, you know.”

“Gay?”

Draven laughed and said, “Yeah. My mother warned me a million times not to say it to strangers. She is terrified of me ending up getting hurt because of it.”

“Good advice. I debated whether you were going to hurt me if I had a beer with you.”

Draven moved in for a kiss and Mal didn't back away from him. They locked their eyes until the moment Draven's lips touched his, and then Mal's closed as he centered his full attention on the kiss.

His mouth opened as Draven's did, and Draven's tongue touched his gently. He could get lost in that kiss, and he thought he did, for a short time at least. That was until his body lit and he moved into Draven's, wrapping his arms around the man's neck.

He was brought tighter against Draven as Draven backed to the wall, and their bodies rubbed against one another as their mouths tasted one another, Mal finally moving down to lick and suck on that neck he'd so coveted.

A lick up the side, teeth scraping there before he was on Draven's mouth again, kissing him deeply, nearly desperate in his need.

When he was sucking Draven's neck again, Draven whispered, "You're... not bad. Are you?"

Mal looked into his eyes as he pulled back from the kiss. "What? I'm not bad. I'd never hurt you."

"But you've hurt someone."

Mal didn't understand. "I've... never..."

Suddenly, the truck door opened and Lila's voice rang out, "Stop right there, mother fucker. You stick that in him, and I'll blow your head off."

Mal's head whipped to the side and saw her holding a pistol on them. "Lila!"

He thought she meant Draven's dick, and he was more than confused until Draven spread his arms to the side and Mal slid from the seat of the truck to stand outside with Lila, then backed away from him, seeing a long, ornate dagger in his hand.

"What's... what the hell is going on?"

"Mal, come here, behind me."

Malakai did as she said, heading over to her, stumbling from his legs suddenly going numb. “Lila, what’s happening?”

“I got a bad feeling. I don’t know where it came from, but I had to come look for you.”

Draven kept his arms out to his sides, as wide as the truck cab would allow, but never released the dagger. “You know what he is?”

Lila never faltered, holding the gun straight, her hands unshaking. “He’s my best friend. He’s a good person. Can’t say that for you.”

“It’s my life’s work to find them,” Draven said, but looked at Mal. “I, I didn’t feel it from you. I don’t think you... but you have to be. You killed your boyfriend.”

“I didn’t kill him! He had a stroke or whatever.”

“Aneurysm. That’s what it’s called, and a lot of your kind wield it like she’s wielding that gun.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Lila demanded.

Dropping his hands, Draven said, “Shoot me if you want. I won’t be the last.” He turned the key of the truck, then he stopped, gazing over at Mal. Mal saw so much in that gaze. Draven’s pain and anguish, and something else.

His care.

Finally, dropping the gun once Draven drove back to the road, Lila cursed under her breath. “Fucking asshole.”

“I guess, thank you. I would have been... dead.”

Lila hugged him and that's when she began to shake. "I was so scared when I saw that knife."

"Yeah, it didn't please me much, either. Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Gay basher the hard way?"

"No. I mean, sure, it could be, but he was enjoying the kissing. I could tell, and that was beyond his physical response to it."

"Fucking freak, whoever he is. Fuck! I'm so glad I came to check on you!"

"Me too, believe me, but..."

"But? There's a *but* there? How the hell is there a *but* there, Malakai?"

He didn't know why, but it saddened him that they hadn't gotten to get to know one another, other than the fact he was almost killed. "I'm being stupid, that's all."

"Aw, honey," she said, reaching over to cover his hand on the seat with her own. "You liked him."

"Yeah. Just my luck, a hot guy, sweet too, or he pretended to be, would want to kill me instead of being with me."

"Well, Mal, to be fair, it would never be more than a one-night stand. We're moving you to Maine."

"He said he traveled a lot but wanted to settle down, eventually. That made me hope, I guess. Don't pay attention to me, Lila. I'm just pathetic."

His heart felt broken, and that made no sense. Lila seemed to understand. “I met a guy once that was everything I ever wanted. We were traveling by train if you can believe it. I got a great deal on a train ticket this one time. I, of course, found the bar car almost immediately, and the beer was six bucks a can. I had enough for three, so I started doing what I do, flirting for alcohol.”

“Lila!”

“Hey, it works. Anyway, about nine cans in, I was feeling no pain, and in comes a god in blue jeans and a flannel shirt. We got to talking. We talked all night long. He was charming and beautiful and had money. He paid for drinks for all of us in the car, food too. But he only had eyes for me that whole night. He wanted my number, but I didn’t have a phone at that time. He got off a couple stops before me and I never saw him again. I fell in love that night, and hell, I was pretty heartbroken. Then, I turned it around. I thought, hell, I got more in that one night than most people get in a lifetime. I was treated like a queen, flattered, and sex didn’t come into it, so it was just... a long moment of wonderful. I don’t know, I guess. I still think about him.”

If he could cut off, in his memory, the time before Lila came, and he was aware of the knife, he could do the same with Draven. “That... yeah. I can think of him like that.”

“Aren’t we a pair? Two suckers for love, dreaming of guys that we’ll never see again, or that will try to kill us?”

“Yes, aren’t we a pair?”

Chapter Ten



image-placeholder

AS DRAVEN WALKED STRAIGHT shouldered into the building, ignoring the others staring at him, he knew what was coming. They didn't look happy, but of course they didn't. He'd messed up and not in a small way.

The lights were dim the farther up the stairs he went. They didn't like it too bright, the elders. Those that had done their time and now sat around judging the younger hunters. He knew how hard their lives had been, so little life for themselves, as that was what he was living.

Still, they can't have been perfect. They can't have gotten every one of them their first try.

The tenth floor came and went and as he got to the landing for the eleventh floor, he took a deep breath. He was about to have his ass chewed.

He walked into the doors of the old building, the creak of the thing making a racket to wake the dead. His boots on the old wooden floors weren't quiet either. The elders may have liked it that way, so they'd always know when someone was coming.

The walls were faded light green, like a prison. The doors, those that were still hung in place, were solid wood, scuffed and scratched to hell. There was no artwork on the walls, no plants. Sure, there weren't plants. They'd surely die in the dim lighting.

As he went down the long hallway, the only door painted white was before him. It looked much newer, and it was, the cheap knob gleamed with cleanliness.

He knocked, though they were definitely expecting him. When he heard a strong voice summon him into the room, he swallowed the lump forming in his throat and turned the knob, pushing the door to swing.

There they sat on old recliners and rickety kitchen chairs. There was a gigantic television set to a soccer game, and TV trays with dirty glasses filled with water or their alcohol of the day.

"Draven," Kendrick said, his voice booming in the mostly quiet room. Even the television was muted.

"Hello, Kendrick." Pointing his eyes to the others, he included them, "Marcus, Nil, Osiris, Basil."

"Draven, you've failed," Kendrick said, nearly matter-of-factly. His head of silver hair turned to him, narrow eyes taking him in.

He was in a recliner, the footrest up and his ankles crossed on it. He was more than casual, if not lazy. Draven moved

closer to him, head high as he agreed. “I did. I didn’t know his friend would come to save him.”

“Seventy, Draven. There are seventy men and women out there we must kill before year’s end. How can we do this, making excuses?”

Draven’s jaw clenched. He took the time to calm his anger before replying, “We can’t. It was my first try with him. I will try again, and I will kill him.”

Kendrick turned back to the television, ignoring him, or so it seemed. The others never so much as glanced his way.

The world where they lived was death, was dirt and the killing of those that had great powers. They should live a life, since they no longer hunted. Instead, they were fine with sitting in front of the television, judging those that go among the predators.

“Can you?”

“I’ve killed them before. I can now.”

“But he’s... different. Isn’t he?”

Draven had no idea how Kendrick knew that. “He doesn’t seem to want to hurt anyone. I think he killed the man out of fear. He doesn’t know what he is.”

“He will, and once he knows his power, he will use it willingly, knowingly.”

“I know where he’s going. I’ll follow him there.”

Kendrick nodded in an exaggerated way. “Don’t fail again.”

With that, he was dismissed.

He went back down all those stairs, his boots louder on each set as he passed floors. When he was back in his truck, he slammed both palms on the steering wheel. “Damn! Damn it!”

He hadn’t gotten a chance to tell them anything. Not that he likely would. The taste of him, the feel of his lips, they were there still, reminding him of the moment they’d shared.

His entire being warmed at the memory of staring into Malakai’s eyes, of seeing him there. Not the predator, the evil being they thought him to be, but him. The man under all that, or besides all that. He was good, Malakai. Draven felt it in his fucking soul.

Sure, he’d change. Power did that. As soon as he realized his power, chances were that he’d become like the others. There were a few that didn’t, that kept their humanity. Malakai could be one of those, but it didn’t matter to the elders. They wanted them all dead, and like they so often reminded the active hunters, they were born for this. It was their sacred duty.

Sometimes, however, he wanted to run from it. Sticking that blade into a person, even though the person wasn’t exactly a person... it took something from him. Maybe that was why the elders sat together up in that building, living a half-life. It had taken from them, too.

He couldn’t imagine it, sitting up there after fifty years of killing and being a shell of a person. He didn’t want it; didn’t think he could take it.

He drove down the street in the city, the dirt of it, the stench of sorrow and loneliness plaguing him. People, humans, on steps, wasting away, like those poor tired souls in the tall building.

Telling Malakai lies, he'd felt them all in his gut. The first was his choice of where he'd live. Chicago. Well, it wasn't just that city. He'd never live in any city. There was life in the small places, trees, rivers, the sea. He'd once thought of getting a houseboat and sailing off where no one, not man nor other, could find him.

As he neared the light, the red glowing there, he stopped, staring at people crossing. One woman had a phone to her face, talking into it a mile a minute. It was work; he was sure by the fake smile on her face that she lost as soon as the phone came away from her ear.

An old man cross in the opposite direction, and he looked wistful, like he was remembering some glorious time in his long life. Draven couldn't imagine any of the codgers in the tower ever smiling that way.

Driving through the light, heading east, Draven touched his lips, remembering Mal's warmth and his openness. Draven, in all his adult life, had never felt that from any man. They weren't open, were barely warm, and the touches they'd given him were greedy. No, Mal was different, and he had to kill the man.

It made his entire body ache with the thought.

He took the dagger out of his jacket and laid it on the seat next to him. As the miles started to pass, he'd glance at it now and then, thinking of it covered in Malakai's blood. A tear escaped his eye at the thought, and Draven's hands gripped the wheel hard.

"I don't want to kill you, but I have to. I hope you can forgive me."

Chapter Eleven



image-placeholder

THE HOUSE WAS THE most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. It was a classic beach house, huge porch that wrapped the house, a tall, conical roof to the left, white lace curtains in the windows, and the loveliest shade of blue covered the shiplap siding.

“Mal, this is beautiful.”

He agreed. “Is it really mine?”

“You have the deed. It's yours. Mal, this is breathtaking.”

The yard in front was a jungle of bushes and plants, separated by a cobblestone walk. The white picket fence was taller than average, vines growing through the slats. Everything about it screamed *welcome home*.

“I can't believe it.”

The air smelled like salt and moved in a slow caressing breeze. The soil under his feet was soft, and the house seemed to brighten as he stared.

“Let's go in and check it out. The paperwork said they would leave the key under a planter on the porch.”

They went through the gate and the moment he did, he felt a chill. It went through his body like he was plunged into a tub of ice water, and then it was gone.

“Did you feel that?”

“What?” She was climbing the stairs, looking around for the planter. “There are twenty planters up here and they all have flowers that are blooming. Someone is watering them.”

“Oliver said they had someone looking after the place.”

He saw all the planters, but one caught his eye. It had white flowers in it, begonias, if he remembered right. The rest of the flowers were blues, purples, and pinks. “That one.”

“Okay, suddenly-psychic.” She lifted the terracotta pot and there it was, a shining brass key. “Well, what do you know?”

“Open it!”

His excitement and hers matched. She set the key in the door, turning it easily.

The door itself was beautiful, stained glass in a fan that they could see through, but Mal didn't want to see the place that way. He pushed the door once it was unlocked, and they somehow got in together, side by side.

They both gasped at the place. The floors were dark wood, shining like a spotlight was on them, a curling staircase of the same dark wood leading to the second floor. The walls were white, but off-white, and the windows were heavily framed in the dark wood as well.

There was a column by the stairs that was white and an archway under them that led to a narrow hall. To the left, there was a big room that had windows that nearly went from floor to ceiling, except for a long window seat covered in simple blue cloth.

The furniture was a simple rattan couch in the big room on the left, and the long dining table in the room on the right had basic, straight-backed chairs. There was a candelabra with long white candles on top of a white lace runner.

The rugs were all blues and whites and creams, and the art was understated beachy scenes or sailboats.

The table by the door held a wide wooden bowl, and in it was a notebook. Mal grabbed it, thumbing through to see instructions, the caretaker's number, numbers for plumbers, handyman, and gardeners.

"I've always wanted a window seat," Lila breathed. "This place is amazing."

"Let's go around and then pick our favorite room."

He knew the kitchen would be his from the moment he saw it. It was open, blue/teal cabinets, shining chrome handles and knobs on the doors and drawers, white tile flooring and the huge island was open shelves filled with cookbooks and platters, white plates and silver serving trays.

They rushed to open cabinets, taking out navy-blue transparent glasses, big blue mugs, and small white teacups. The window was a bay and had shelves filled with pots of

growing herbs and there were bird feeders on the other side of it.

“Watching them while doing dishes would make it so much less of a chore,” Lila sighed. “Oh, god, Mal, this place is crazy beautiful.”

There was a big white table with a long-leafed plant in the center, and beige, natural placemats. Each window had a baby blue valance, and the refrigerator was stocked with drinks, fruits, and vegetables.

The small bathroom off to the side was only a toilet and sink, but it was porcelain and brass, old fashion looking, but Mal could tell it was brand new.

There was a guest room downstairs, simple, with a slatted-wood headboard and matching dresser, an antique basin and pitcher there straight out of the 1700s.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms, one being a sewing room with a small twin bed for a guest, they assumed. The next one, however, was obviously the main bedroom, as it was huge, had windows on two walls and the other held the door for the en suite bathroom and walk-in closet. In the bathroom, the clawfoot tub held center stage, right in the middle of the room. The long brass faucet arched tall over it, and there was a wooden tray that fit over the middle. “This is a dream! I’ve always wanted a tub like this, with a tray where I could sit with my glass of wine and a book. Oh, Mal, this is so beautiful.”

“Look at the shower.”

They both went inside of it, as it was big enough for a crowd, and there were two showerheads, one coming down from the ceiling and the other on the wall, that one detachable. “I’m going to live in here,” Mal proclaimed.

“Glad we’re close, because while you’re living in here, I’ll be in that tub.”

The last room, after a hallway bathroom that wasn’t as grand but was still big and beautiful, was another bedroom. This wasn’t for a guest. Mal slowed as he entered it, seeing a picture on the wall of his mother.

“Mal... it’s her room. Your mom’s.”

“Yeah,” he said, swallowing a lump of emotion. “It is.”

The bed was a queen. A canopy jutted over the headboard, white lace, and it faced the window that looked out over the waves.

There was a bookshelf of books she’d read, another with CDs next to a small CD player. He thumbed through them to see he liked a lot of the music she had.

Lila opened her closet and started to pull out some clothes, laying them over the pink bed quilt. “She had nice things.”

Her vanity was set against the wall where she had pictures. There were friends, lots of boys, and his mom, brown hair curled and styled beautifully, red lips in wide open smiles.

He took a picture from the wall, one with his mother in a pink sweater and jeans, standing with friends. “She looked so happy.”

“Mal, this is personal. I’ll go down to get us some food started.”

He sat on the bed with the picture and whispered, “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry I killed you.”

A drop landed on the picture, and he nearly didn’t realize it was from his own eye. He’d seen so few pictures of her. His father had worn one out from holding it in his sweating, dirty hands night after night while he drank his booze. So many times, he’d taken it after George passed out, staring at it, wondering about her. If there was one thing the house could do for him above all the other obvious ones, it was that he may get to know her better.

When he went back to the kitchen, Lila was shaking a mason jar. “I made some salads. We’ve been living on burgers, so it might be a good idea to get some vegetables in us.”

“Good idea. Homemade dressing?”

“Yeah. There were some amazing raspberries in there. I used a mortar and pestle to smash them up good and found good olive oil in the cabinet.”

“So, you can cook?”

She laughed and confessed, “I love cooking, but not the short-order kind. Sit here at the island and let’s eat, then we’ll clean up and explore a little. If you don’t mind, I’m going to rifle through those books in your mom’s old room. I saw a couple there that caught my eye.”

“Rifle away. I’m betting she’d like someone to see what she saw, read what she read.”

“I’m guessing the same.”

They ate right there in the kitchen, and Mal took in all of it. The birds were landing on the feeders, eating lazily, like not a predator in the world existed. The clouds dimmed the sunlight for a moment and then were gone, leaving the world bright once more.

It was perfect. Too perfect. Even the sound of the seagulls and the ocean in the distance, was too perfect.

“We need to get you to the beach.”

“Tomorrow. I need some sleep.”

“I’ll take the guest room down here,” Lila offered.

“No, I will. You take the main bedroom.”

“Mal, it’s your house. I get that room was your grandmother’s, but it’s yours now. Take it, but don’t be surprised if I spend a couple hours in that bathroom every night.”

“I don’t mind. I’d give you the entire house, Lila. Thanks for... all this. Bringing me here, hanging with me. And even saving my life.”

She gazed over at him and whispered, “Honey, you really are my best friend. Shit, more like my little brother. Anyway, the only family I have. We’re kinda in this together.”

He appreciated that more than he could ever tell her. He felt that way, like she was a sister to him. They clicked immediately when they met and just got closer. “We know all of each other’s secrets. We have to stick together.”

“I agree. Now, if we’re not going to the beach today, how about we explore a little more? I’ll help you get your grandmother’s things packed from her closet and chest of drawers, and then you can decide how you want to change around the room.”

“I feel like I’m invading.”

“Honey, of course. That’s normal. But, hey, it’s that or you pack your stuff in around old woman underwear.”

He laughed at that, blanching. “Okay, point taken.”

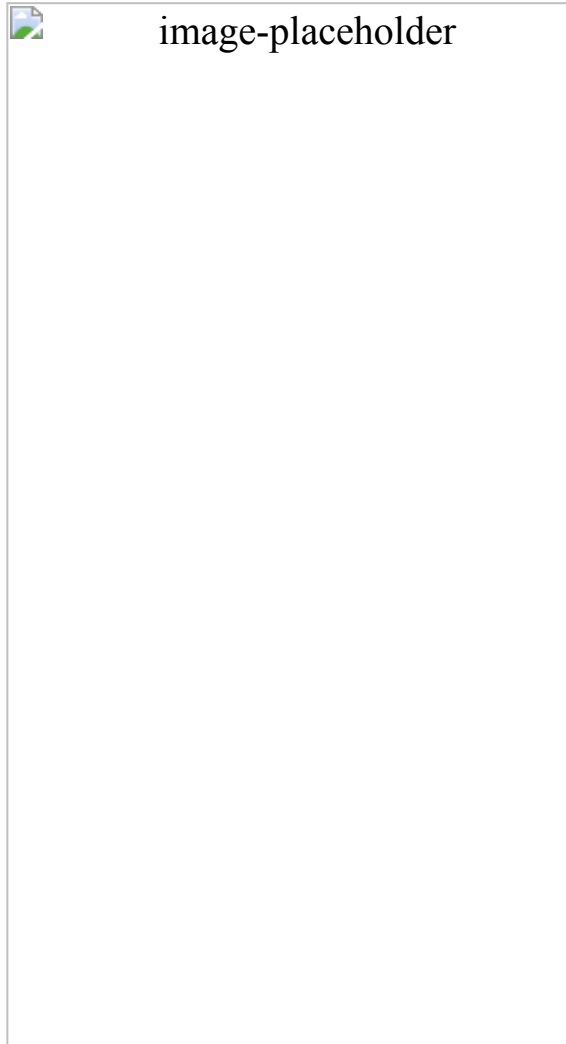
“We’ve got a lot of work to do in that area, but otherwise, the house is set up for as long as you need it to be. You can change other things later, if you want. The thing is, the bedroom has to be the first space you pick to be yours. Get to know the house slowly after that.”

“Why the bedroom?”

She sighed and explained, “It’s where you need to feel comfortable. You sleep there, you get dressed there. Those things make us feel vulnerable, no matter how strong we are. To make it your own, you can feel a little safer. I don’t know, I read it in some magazine.”

“It makes sense,” he reasoned. “But I’m glad you’re here to help me.”

“Me too, Mal. Me too.”



They started that next morning, clearing the bedroom of clothing. Lila told him that his grandmother had expensive tastes, but they were a little too conservative for her.

With the drawers free, he unpacked his suitcase and laughed at the pitiful pile he had in each drawer. His things took less than a third of the big drawers. “You need to go shopping. Your clothes don’t match the house.”

“I need to match the house?”

“Not like color wise. Your clothes are fine for a tiny town in the plains, but for a nice, richer place like this? People will constantly call the cops, thinking you broke in, or they’ll want to hire you, thinking you work here.”

“Good catch. Okay, again, you’ll have to help me.”

“Well, that will come later, after the beach and after I kick back in that tub, with a book I’ll find from your mom’s collection. I looked in the little study off the kitchen and your grandmother was a little obsessed with religion.”

That surprised him. They’d barely stuck their heads in that room on the tour the previous day. “Really?”

“Yeah. Mostly about angels, bookmarks to one in particular, although he’s not considered an angel anymore. Weird. But, to each their own, I say. Now, go get your trunks on and let’s head to the beach.”

He stared at her blankly. “Trunks?”

Sighing in a good-natured way, she said, “Shopping first, then.”

They hit two clothing stores in the smallish town. It was much larger than their hometown, but not so big that they didn’t see the entire place before they were through. Mal

found not only swimming trunks in the first shop, but Lila loaded him down with sweaters, linen shirts, slacks, and new jeans.

“We’ll get you some new underwear and stuff later. Those prices were too much.”

“I need more? Lila, I don’t want to spend all the money on clothes.”

“What more do you have to spend it on? Speaking of other stuff, we never saw a garage. We need to find all the cars you’re supposed to have inherited.”

When they got back to the house and unloaded the bags from the bed, they headed up the walk and stopped at once to see the door open wide. “Lila, did you...?”

“No, I closed it.”

“Get back to the truck,” he ordered, dropping the bags.

“Not a chance. I’ve got my gun in my purse.”

“Lila! We’ve been driving all over town! What if we got stopped?”

Lila dropped her bags and got the pistol from her purse. “Are we really gonna argue about that right now?”

Before they could take a step to check out the place, a woman came through with a trash bag in one hand and a mop in the other. She didn’t seem surprised to see them at all, but one dark brow lifted on her pale face as she asked, “You’re the grandson?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

She dropped the bag and set the mop against the porch rail. “I’m Amanda Flowers. I’m the one looking after the place.”

Mal dropped his defenses and felt terrible. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

He went up the stairs to shake her hand, and Lila followed, though Lila didn’t let her defenses down at all. “Not to be rude,” she started. “But we don’t know you. How do we know you’re the caretaker?”

“Well, one, I got the key. Two, who’s gonna break in here and wash up the place before robbing it?”

Lila didn’t let her gaze drop a bit, and it wasn’t friendly. Mal, on the other hand, tried to lighten the conversation. “I got your name on the paperwork the lawyers gave me, and I should have called. It’s my brain, you see. It doesn’t always work.”

She wasn’t pretty, her face pinched in seriousness, but she likely was when she was younger, he reasoned. Long, thin nose and thin lips aside. Her hair was drawn back almost cruelly in a tight bun, and it lifted her forehead and brows.

“It’s perfectly fine, Mr. Brent. I didn’t know you’d have a... guest. I’ve made up the guest room properly.”

“You were in there?” Lila didn’t wait for an answer to her question, rushing past Amanda and heading into the house.

“Sorry, she’s... protective of me.”

“That’s a good thing, Mr. Brent.”

“Call me Mal, please.”

“No, sir. I’m sorry, but my mother raised me to honor those that I work for. If we were friends, which we aren’t, it would be another thing, but I’m your employee, unless you’re going to replace me.”

He was confused. “I’m here now, so I guess I don’t need a caretaker.”

“I performed as a maid for twelve years for your grandmother.”

“Oh. Okay then, great, I guess. You can stay on, doing... that.”

“I am here twice a week. I buy the groceries, clean and handle calling the services needed, if any, like the plumber and such.”

Never having a house that size, and never caring for a place that big, he appreciated having the help. “I’d like you to stay on, sure. Thank you for looking after the place before I got here.” Something else occurred to him. “You said you knew my grandmother for twelve years?”

“I never said that at all. I said I worked for her for twelve years. I was hired when my mother retired. Our family has worked for the Leopolds for a very long time.”

Mal saw she was tense but didn’t understand why she’d be anxious. “Oh, well, I, uh, didn’t know her. Like at all. I was hoping, maybe, sometime soon, I could ask you about her.”

“I don’t tell tales out of school, Mr. Brent, but I can tell you a little, if you’d like. For now, I will collect Mrs. Leopold’s things and take them to a charity, if that’s alright with you and... your friend.”

“That’s fine, thanks.”

After getting the bag, she took it around back and Mal went into the house, heading back to the guest room. He saw Lila sitting on the bed, looking around the room. “Did she take anything?”

“No. I didn’t expect that, but I’m not good with anyone being in the room where I’m staying. Can you tell her to leave this room alone? I’m capable of changing my own sheets.”

“I will. I’m sorry, Lila.”

“Not your fault.” She seemed worried, but Mal knew she’d never volunteer what was on her mind without being ready.

Instead, he asked, “Beach now?”

“After she goes.”

“I think she’s heading out after grabbing Grandma’s things.”

She got up, brightening. “Go get on your trunks, then. We’ll salvage this day yet.”

As he changed, he noticed that again, his body was going through changes. He stared in the full-length mirror on the door of the closet and scanned over every inch of the front of him.

He had those lines, the ones on his hips that dipped down below his trunks. He'd always wanted those. Then his abs. They were well defined, sharp, almost. He ran his fingertips over them, not sure if what he was seeing was real.

His chest was not only defined but it was wider. It didn't seem possible, but it was. Shoulders too, broader and straighter. With his height, he'd always slumped, leaving them rounded, but they were no longer that way.

Neck was thicker, face much more handsome. And his hair had grown two inches in the last week.

He told his observations to Lila, as they started walking to the beach, and she agreed. "I've seen it, but it seems so redundant to keep mentioning it. It's weird, abnormal, but until we have some reason for it, some explanation, we won't know why."

That made sense, but it didn't lessen his anxiety about it. "Should I go to a doctor?"

"They're gonna hear what you have to say and call in a shrink."

He laughed and thought about it, heading into a doctor's office and telling them he'd changed appearances in less than a month. "Wow, yeah, I guess they'd hear that and think I was bonkers."

"A little bit. We'll figure it out. I'm going to dig through some of your grandmother's things. If anyone knew what was

going on, it's her. She's the one that left you the cryptic letter and this all started once she died."

"True. Is that why you were so weird about Amanda being in the house without us?"

"A little, sure. I really don't like people in my room without me, but I am afraid that she'll get into your grandmother's papers without us. If there is something there that explains even a little of this, then we need to see it."

"Well, then, I'll let her know not to go through the study or anything that we don't throw out on our own."

"Good. For now, though, leave all this behind us. There is the beach."

Chapter Twelve



image-placeholder

THE CLOSER THE BEACH was to them, the heavier the salt in the air. It was beautiful, that horizon that was an amazing blue, the sky only distinguished for the clouds there.

There were some people farther down the coast, but for them, the beach was clear of anyone, and walking on it was bizarre for him. It sunk a little, the sand, and moved into his low-cut sneakers, making him smile.

“Isn’t it great?”

“It’s fucking crazy! I love it!”

Seagulls called overhead, and a few landed on the beach, waddling along on the sand. The sound of it, that was what got him the most, possibly. The waves rose and fell, and not just visibly. They built to a crescendo and then lessened, like a breeze that picked up speed, then waned.

White caps, deep blue in the calmer parts, it was a painting come to life. Never still, the ocean, never still at all. The water moved over the sand and retracted, leaving the sand to glimmer. There were seashells there too, sparkling in the

water. For some reason he didn't think he'd see them, that people had collected them all.

Lila set down two long towels for them and they stretched out on the sand to simply watch the water before he dared to touch it.

"I love the mountains, I love the desert, but there is something about the ocean," she mused, leaning back on her arms.

"You need sunblock," he said, looking over at her rather pale skin. Her cleavage lifted from her bikini top roundly, and he knew, if she burned there, it was likely to be miserable.

"See, some people don't understand why girls love having gay friends. I mean, it's cliché about friendships, sure, but there is something about it. Having a man as a great friend, one that doesn't lust after us."

"I definitely don't lust after you," he said, then heard it. "Not that you're ugly!"

She laughed in a way he rarely heard, free and easy, her mouth open with it. "No, I get it. It's nice. I love men, and love having men for friends, but with straight guys, there's always something... When Harry Met Sally about it."

"What's that?"

She gazed over to him, eyes twinkling. "It's an old movie that was examining just that, the friendships that men and women have. How it's hard for them to be real friends because one, or both, want to bone."

“Oh! Oh, sure. I guess it’s the same for me, having male friends. I lust after them sometimes.”

“I know. You had a little crush on Randy.”

He was shocked she knew, and his jaw dropped over it. “What?”

“It’s okay! He’s... hot. And he’s one of those guys that you know you’ll never possess, so you want to even more.”

“Was that like your lawyer lover?”

“Sam? No. The opposite. He wanted me too much. Made me nervous. I’m one of those women, Mal, that can’t be satisfied unless she’s being treated like shit. It’s a bad trait some of us have.”

“Must be like me, too. First, there was Dutch. Then my second attempt tried to kill me, and still I think about him. He kissed so good.”

“We’re pitiful, you and I, Mal. Maybe we should get married one day. Live celibate and just have each other.”

He chuckled but knew why she’d said it. “It might be our only way to go, if we don’t find guys that aren’t trying to break us or hurt us.”

“Damn straight.”

When he was ready, Lila went with him, and the water lapped over his toes first, making him wrap his arms around himself. “It’s cold.”

“Just not body temp. You get used to it once you’re in it.”

She walked a few steps into the water, and he followed her, chilled to the bone at first, but then he did get used to it. “It’s not as bad.”

“It’s fucking wonderful,” she yelled, then leaned down to scoop some to splash him. He laughed and they began to play in the water, like two children, splashing, moving deeper, getting pushed back by the waves.

He tried to swim but found it much different from the pools he’d swam in as a kid or the couple times he’d tried in the freezing mountain lakes where he’d gone fishing.

Not in recent years had he had so much fun, though he tired fast, fighting the waves. They dried on the towels, letting the breezes help, and once they packed up to leave, Mal knew he’d return often to the beach. It had become one of his favorite things rather quickly.

They walked back to the house, waving to a few people and them waving back, though eyes stared at them, cautious. Lila explained why. “These small towns, like ours. Anyone new comes in and stays for more than a summer, and they are wondered over, mistrusted. It’s no different from back home.”

“Yeah. No one trusted you at all when you came. Then you bulldozed your way into everyone’s hearts.”

“It’s the boobs.”

He laughed at that and once they crossed the last street to his new home, he caught a flash on the fence, but it was gone so fast, he wasn’t sure he’d seen it.

Lila had, too. “What was that?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Over to the fence, she slowly walked, and then she kneeled in front of one part of it, near the gate. Mal joined her and ran his fingers over one of the slats. It wasn’t smooth, like he thought it would be. There was a ridge, like a carving, and it was hard to see, being the white paint was so thick over it.

But it was there.

“Mal, it feels like letters, but I can’t make them out.”

“I can’t, either. Weird squiggly lines, more like. I don’t think they’re letters.”

They went down the line and found markings on each of the slats of the picket fence. “I’d say we could strip the paint, Mal, but that’s a lot of paint.”

“Too much. It would take a month.”

“Maybe someone vandalized her and she had it painted over? Kids, maybe?”

Mal thought it was a good explanation, but he didn’t believe it. “We might never know.”

“I guess not.”

Chapter Thirteen



image-placeholder

THE NIGHT WAS DARK with the new moon. Perfect for those who lurked, looking for the abomination that Draven had become more than intrigued by.

Watching him romping in the water with the woman, playing around like he hadn't a care in the world. Maybe he didn't have a care. It was totally possible he didn't know what he was.

Draven drew closer, but the symbols on the fence around the entire home lit and threatened to send him flying three or four thousand feet from there. After backing off, he watched the lights turn off and on in the windows until the lights went out all over the house and the soft, moving glow of the television was all there was to see.

His hands were wrapped around the handle of the athame, the long dagger that was made by magic and the only thing that could kill Malakai and his kind.

He thought of it, stabbing the thing into Mal and watching blood flow from him, watching the life draining from those bright blue eyes.

It hurt his heart if he were honest with himself. The thought of taking that man, the one that had been so sweet, so open, or as open as he could be, while they shared that table in the little bar. His smile had lit the dim place, his eyes sparkled with happiness.

Malakai Brent was not what the others might be. Hell, he'd only seen three in his life so far, and the other two, well, he hadn't gotten close to them. He did his job, fulfilling his destiny by killing them, but were they evil?

Malakai wasn't. There wasn't an evil bone in his body, no matter what he was. If Draven had to guess, he'd make a huge bet that Mal didn't know what he was, and even if he did, he wasn't using it for evil.

It made Draven question things, and it wasn't a good idea for a hunter to question. Not one bit.

As he watched the symbols glow, knowing one step into the yard would mean his immediate and painful demise, he simply stared at them.

The study of the ancient runes had been his best lessons. He could tell the history of all of them, the meanings of them, and which being had invented them. He knew, by the combination of them, that he would feel his blood boil and needles stabbing into his heart if he stepped through the gate.

It was obvious that Malakai didn't know what they were. He was oblivious to everything so far, and Draven feared for him to learn the truth. With someone like Malakai Brent, it could

go either of two ways. The knowledge could break him, or it would make him drunk with power.

He hoped he found a third option, the one where he made peace with it but didn't use it to hurt anyone else.

While he was watching, a bird flew into a window on the second floor. As the light came on in that window, Draven faded into the shadows, watching to see what would happen. Would someone leave the house to see what happened? Would the light be put out and everyone just go back to sleep? This would tell him about their paranoia. If it was heightened, he would have to work a lot harder.

More lights went on in the house as someone came from upstairs, and as soon as the door opened, Draven saw Malakai. He'd changed so much since the bar, but it was him. There was something that screamed the Malakai he had so briefly met.

He had his phone in his hand, flashlight on , and he started shining it around the yard. The woman came out after him, pulling a filmy robe around her, snarking at him as her flashlight was lit on her own phone.

“Mal, what exactly did you hear?”

“Someone threw something at my window. At least, I think so. There's no tree there, so it wasn't a branch.”

They went through the yard until the woman yelled to her friend, “Here! It was a bird!”

Mal rushed over and the moment he saw it, he scooped it up into his hands, and Draven watched his face. Tears came immediately, and he was so obviously heartbroken, Draven felt like crying as well.

The bird wasn't dead; it was moving, the little screech was pitiful. The woman was whispering something to Malakai while her arm wrapped around him. "Its wing is broken, Mal. We can call a vet, but blood's coming from its beak too. I... don't think he'll live," she said loud enough for Draven to hear.

After shaking his head, Malakai started into the house, but before he could, the bird took off from his hands. It flew off into the night and they both watched it, shock covering their faces.

Draven hadn't gotten a good look at it, but enough so that he did see the wing had been twisted, like a broken branch on a bush. The silhouette it made in front of the lit front window there was no way it wasn't broken.

And it flew, like it had never been hurt at all. Draven nearly revealed himself as he moved to see them better. They both had their eyes to the sky as the bird flew off until it could no longer be seen. Then the woman pulled Malakai into the house, looking around to assure no one had seen the miracle.

Well, he had seen. The thing it did, however, was to make it even harder to imagine killing the man. It was his only job, his fucking destiny, the thing he'd been born to do, and yet he couldn't imagine plunging the athame into him.

He slept in his truck, close to the house. When he woke, he went through a drive-thru for a breakfast sandwich and tall coffee before parking near the house again. The two woke and Malakai walked out of the front door not an hour after Draven parked half a block away from the yard.

With his eyes in the sky, he seemed to be searching for the bird, but Draven knew it was long gone. Healed or not, the bird had had a scare.

Taking him in while Malakai was watching the sky, Draven felt his resolve lessen further. The man was beautiful, but they all were. As soon as their powers came, they became statues, perfectly sculpted. Malakai was different, though. He had a beauty that came from the inner Malakai. His heart was so pure, it didn't seem possible, given he was thirty years old. He'd had rough times, by both the man that raised him and the one he'd chosen to split the rent with.

It would be understandable for him to lash out at the world and use his powers to punish everyone that had ever hurt him. Draven didn't know if he, himself, could resist that temptation, but there Malakai was, fixing broken wings.

How ironic that was.

As he continued to follow him for the next two days, he didn't see anything amiss in Malakai's calm and gentle personality. The two left the house a few times, but Draven had no opportunity to harm him.

At least, that's what he told himself.

Then Friday came, and the sun rose to an entirely different problem.

The elders had sent someone else, assuring the problem would be solved.

“Hello, Draven,” Iokua growled from behind him.

He spun, knowing the deep, bass voice, as they’d trained together. “Iokua? What are you doing here?”

“Making certain the job gets done.”

He was menacing looking, and that wasn’t a façade. His short, sun-bleached blond hair was straight and combed back severely from his face, held there by some weird gel that was probably used in the eighties.

“I haven’t been on this job that long. I’m handling it, getting to know his schedule.”

“I’ve been here a day, and I saw two opportunities to slay the beast.”

Of course, he’d see them. He didn’t mind murdering someone in daylight, in public. He knew he’d never be held accountable by the regular law enforcement. “I’d rather not give anyone trauma if I don’t have to.”

His thin-mouthed sneer showed his contempt. “Weak.”

“Stay out of my way, Iokua. This is my kill.”

“Then kill. I’ll give you twenty-four hours and then I’m taking the shot.”

Walking away after the declaration, Iokua glanced over at the house and Draven knew he wasn't lying. The second the twenty-four hours were up Iokua would find a way to lure him from the house and kill him.

It became clear what he had to do.

He had to save Malakai.

It was going against everything he'd been raised to believe, but from the moment he met Malakai, he knew the man was different. He wasn't a normal monster, someone with terrible powers that were out to hurt everyone in his path.

He was good. Malakai was good, and he had to help him.

No matter what it took.

Draven drafted a long letter, one that told Malakai he was in danger, but not to divulge more than that. If the letter got into the wrong hands...

Once it was finished, he left the house and Iokua, hoping he didn't jump the twenty-four-hour mark, and drove off to find the mail carrier.

Chapter Fourteen



image-placeholder

WHEN MAL WOKE UP, the sun was bright and the wind as calm as he'd felt it. He checked the sky again for the bird, thinking crazily that it might come back to see him. It had always been a dream of his to have an animal that returned to see him after he helped it. As he stared into the cloudless sky, he figured he'd have to keep hoping.

When he went back inside the house, he smelled coffee brewing in the kitchen. He walked there where he saw Lila bent over a book at the table. "Hey, Lila."

"Hey," she said, then looked up, her brows drawn hard together. "Can't sleep?"

"It's eight in the morning."

Her head spun like it was trying to twist off her neck. She noticed the sun coming in the windows with her jaw dropping.

"What's going on? Didn't you sleep?"

The book slammed closed with her hand unmoving from the cover after, as she confessed, "Not a wink. That's what happens when a book is so... interesting."

“Oh,” he said as he poured himself a coffee. “Romance or true crime?”

“True crime. Only, it’s unpublished.”

With his cup to his lips, he walked over to the table to join her. A good slurp later, he asked, “What does that mean?”

She slid the book over to him. “This.”

Looking at the cover, which was pink but otherwise blank, he again asked, “What?”

“It’s your mom’s journal.”

Suddenly, it was as if clouds parted, and a beam of sun came through to light on it. He touched it like it was a sacred text. “What does it say?”

“Mal, I read it from cover to cover. Your mother had amazing handwriting, by the way.”

He smiled at the compliment and opened the cover to see her name written there, as well as the dates. “Nineteen-ninety-one to nineteen-ninety-two. When I was born?”

“Yeah. But more importantly, and this may sound gross to you, but when you were conceived. Mal, this is about your father. Your *real* father, if what I’m reading isn’t the ramblings of a crazy person, but they don’t sound that way.”

He thought of taking the book and reading it all for himself, but his curiosity was too great. “Tell me. Give me the abbreviated version.”

“See, that’s hard. It’s long and complicated. I’ll try.”

First, she got up to pour herself what was not her first cup of coffee. Mal was shaking, and he didn't know if it was more out of fear or excitement for finally knowing a little about his mother.

“See, Mal, your grandmother, the one that owned this place, she was in some cult or something.”

“We thought that.”

“Yeah, but this isn't like just some fringe cult that hands over their money to their leader and doesn't drink carbonated drinks or some weird shit. Quite the opposite. These cultists were all rich, they were all generations long. Your mom never names it, the cult, or any of the leaders or fellow members. It was all about her mother's involvement, how it was a righteous thing, this belief system or whatever. She was raised in it. But then it came to her being a true part of it and she wanted out.”

Feeling tears spring to his eyes, his voice was a whisper, “Out?”

“Your grandmother had raised her to be... the mother of a chosen one.”

Mal didn't feel like anyone chosen for anything but heartache, so he didn't get it, until he thought about his changes. “Chosen for what?”

“Mal, all it says is that there were a lot of you bred, only a few would survive and of those, you'd bring about a great change in the world. It all sounds like bullshit, I know,

something like you'd see on TV or theater, but with all the weird shit happening to you, well, maybe it's not. Mal, you mended a bird's wing."

"It might have just been twisted or something."

"Mal, I saw the thing. It was broken. And seconds later, it took flight, and that's on top of your looks and other things. Mal, please, just hear me out. I've been thinking about you, about this, your mother's words. She described your father in this book. Maybe start there. See, your grandmother waited until your mother turned eighteen and then made the announcement that she'd have you. She described everything, including the fact that your mom wouldn't live through it, but it was like Jesus' mother, Mary. She'd be revered one day, held up to the world as a martyr and a heroine."

"A martyr. Lila..."

"I know. It's fucking horrible. She was a baby herself. But that's not on you, Mal. You weren't even born yet; it wasn't your fault. It wasn't, so don't start putting that on yourself."

She knew him well because that's exactly what he was doing. He knew, because of him, she was gone. That was what he'd always known. But to know she was forced to have him made it worse for him.

"It was never said what you were, though. It just alluded to a lot of things. Where I might know, though, is having your father described."

He thought of the man coming through the darkness and telling him that he was Mal's father. He knew what he looked like. "Handsome."

"It says in there your mother met him once before they did the deed, so to speak. They didn't announce that he was the one, you know, that would father her kid. But after it happened, she wrote three pages worth. She said how gentle he was and how handsome. She cried through it, though. Not for the normal reasons, that it hurt, because it didn't. It started to and he saw that and took away the pain, she says. I don't know, maybe you should just read it, but I'm a little afraid for you to read it."

"I'll read it eventually," he said truthfully. "I want to read her words, even if it's hard. What I need now are answers."

Lila took the book back and opened it to the page she was telling him was his conception. "It says here that he was magical. Now, I'd take that as hyperbole, like he's a magical man, handsome and sweet and all that bullshit, but that isn't how she was meaning it, I'm sure. Like, you know, what I said. He took her pain. Now, first times suck. It hurts, even after the initial part, it hurts, or at least it's uncomfortable. But she talks about being taken out of all that, the pain leaving and seeing the sky and the stars, even though she was in her own bed."

"In her bed?"

Lila huffed at him. "Mal, keep up. She was transported, and she doesn't mean the way Meryl was in Bridges of Madison

County. I mean literally transported into the sky to the point she got her body dampened by the condensation in the clouds.”

“Literally. Lila, she was probably drugged.”

“Maybe. I thought of that, sure. I went through an entire pot of coffee thinking of that. But then, take your experiences over the last, however long it’s been that your grandmother died, and you started changing. Take all that and think about it. Mal, I’m not one to blow stuff up with thinking that isn’t based in reality. You know that.”

“I know that. Magic, like, real, real magic?”

“Think about it. Even Dutch, babe. The way he died, and how your midwife died? Aneurysms aren’t exactly common. Knowing one person to die that way, sure, but two?”

Downing his coffee like it was whiskey, Mal took it all into his mind. “We need to look through my grandmother’s things. Her papers and stuff. There’s got to be some hint of the cult or whatever.”

“I thought the same. Mal, it’s all spoken about in whispers, and written, well, who knows? If your mother, in her own, personal diary, didn’t say what it was, then how can we even think your grandmother would?”

They spent the next hour combing through his grandmother’s paperwork, only to find house budgets, plans for an addition to the house, shopping lists, and tax information.

“This was a bust,” Lila said as she sat behind the desk.

Mal, however, walked to the bookcase and started looking over the books. Lila was right, they were all about angels. Novels, non-fiction, even a dictionary about them. As he picked up the dictionary, he found there was a bookmark, so he opened the book to that page and saw something strange. “Lila, my middle name... it’s after an angel.”

“That’s not so weird. People name their kids for saints, angels, even Jesus. They feel like that entity will look after the child if they’re named for him or her.”

“I guess,” he said, but that didn’t feel right.

“What is your middle name?”

“Suriel.”

“What does it say about him?” She asked as she got up from the chair and rounded the desk to stand beside him.”

“He’s an angel of earth, whatever that means. It says here that it’s not agreed on whether or not he’s a fallen angel.” He looked at her, asking, “Aren’t fallen angels, like, demons?”

“I don’t know about a lot of that stuff,” she admitted. “But, if they fell like Satan, sure, I guess.” She took the book and leafed through it while Mal picked up another. Sure enough, that book, *Angels and Demons in the Modern World*, had a bookmark on the page with Suriel as well. “This is another. I guess they did name me after this one.”

“Are there any with pictures? I mean, yeah, most are artist’s renditions, but some are based on descriptions.”

He thought that was a good idea, only something else caught his eye. “Lila, it’s said he was one of the angels that bred with human women. He... he made babies with them.”

She took the book and whispered as she read, “One judged by God to have created the Nephilim.” She flipped through the book and found a passage on them. “It says here the Nephilim are creatures that were known to be giants, that had extraordinary powers, powers not condoned by God. It also says here that the great flood was made specifically to destroy those on earth.”

“The flood? Noah’s ark and all. That was done to kill them? I’ve never heard of that.”

“The classic teaching of that story is to warn humans not to sin. That’s what I got out of Sunday school when I was a kid. My teacher, a cranky prune of a thing, told us that God’s wrath is great when it comes to sin, so we’d better be good. I had nightmares for months over a bracelet I stole from some little thrift store my mom and I went to. Then, I pretty much stopped being a Baptist.”

Mal went to the desk and sat in the chair that Lila had left, and it came to him. So much had been pointing to angels. Even the paintings in that room where he met the lawyers. “Angels. My real father...”

“Mal, that’s crazy.”

“This is *all* crazy! I’m changing, Lila, you said it yourself! No one thirty years old changes appearance unless they get

plastic surgery or they're overweight and lose weight or skinny and start eating a million calories a day.”

Lila's eyes said more than her voice and they were glistening with tears and overly round. “Mal, calm down. We'll figure this out.”

“I think we did already. Think about it. My real father? My mother being sacrificed or whatever. We need to look up some things, but I need out of this little room.”

They both gathered stacks of books to carry into the parlor, taking their own couches as they started to comb through the books. The mailman came and Mal went to the door in time to see letters coming through the slot.

He opened the door and hollered, “Thank you,” to the mailman, suddenly missing Carl Rodriguez, his mailman back home.

The squatty older man rushed off, throwing a wave behind him.

After picking up the letters, he set them on the side table, not much interested in them right then, then got back to the books.

After another hour, Lila brought a book over to him. “Mal, it says here that it's thought none of the mothers lived through the births. The... Nephilim was too powerful. It... tears the mother too badly.”

“It's the thought. Well, I can attest to it being real.”

“Like I said, Mal, we don’t know anything for sure. I mean, if you are... one of these things□”

“*Things?*”

“Beings! Human and a half! I don’t know!”

Mal knew he was striking out at her for no reason. “I’m hungry. Hangry?”

She smiled at him, her voice soothing. “Honey, I get it. And I am, too.”

As they passed through the entrance, Mal picked up the mail he’d left there, and they went into the kitchen. Lila started making tuna salad as he sorted through the letters.

One was the electric bill, so he set that aside. He went through a flyer for a sale at the local grocery, then he came to a letter that looked strange. Then he saw why. “This one doesn’t have a stamp or canceled postage.”

He looked over as she cut onions. “More bullshit to ponder?”

“Probably. No return address. Just my name and this address. Not just my name, it’s my name and *friend*.”

“I guess that’s me.”

“I guess.” He opened it, nervous to do so, but he had to know what was in it. Then he read it and he felt his life spinning again.

Malakai,

We've met and I didn't leave a good impression. This is Draven. Remember me? Well, there was a reason I had that athame, and a reason I was to stab you with it.

I really feel awkward putting this into a letter, but I can't get closer to you. You noticed the strange symbols on the fence all around the property? Those are rune spells, and they're meant to keep hunters out, and as you may have guessed it, I'm a hunter.

What kind of hunter? Well, to tell you all that, I'd have to tell you what you are, and if you don't already know, I don't feel it's my place to tell you. There is a lot you may not know. But there is one thing I can tell you. I don't want to kill you. Being a hunter has never been something I liked, but meeting you, it's shown me that I may not be cut out for doing this at all. Destiny be damned.

If there is one truth in the hunter community, however, that is that we always have another, waiting in the wings in case we are killed or we fail. My backup is already here and he's given me twenty-four hours. That's much less now that you're reading this, I'm sure.

Malakai, I may have been wrong, but you seemed like a sweet man. I felt something, and I know you'd never trust me again. I don't blame you. Just stay in the house and yard, where you'll be safe until you can figure out a way to get away from Iokua. That's the hunter after you now. Please, be safe, and if you'd like to talk, call me at 202-555-9809. We can meet if you'd like. We'd have to be careful.

Draven

“Fuck.”

“What?”

Smelling like the onions she'd been cutting; Lila snatched the letter from him and quickly read over it. “That son of a bitch.”

“Lila...”

“Are you kidding me? It's obviously a trap! He wants to kill you!”

“Then why send me this letter? Why warn me not to leave the house?”

“Maybe he wants to firebomb it or some shit.” She left the letter on the table and went back to the food.

“Lila, he was right. We had some weird connection.”

“He was hot with a fine ass. That was the connection.”

“Not fair, Lila. You know I don't go for looks alone.”

“That's obvious,” she said before she realized what she was saying. She set the knife back on the cutting board and turned slowly. “Wow, that was mean as fuck. I'm sorry.”

“It's true,” he sighed, sitting hard in the kitchen chair. As he plucked up the note, he sighed again. “I don't think he wants to hurt me. He could have. We were making out for a long time. He could have killed me.”

“True, but that doesn't mean he didn't have a change of mind. Mal, he followed us here. That's a long way. What if he

doesn't know anything, and he's some psycho stalker?"

"All the things I don't know? The runes or whatever on the fence?"

"He could have seen that."

She was pushing back too strongly. He knew why, of course. Lila was the mother without a child, and she'd taken Mal into that role, trying to protect him. "Lila, I'm going to call the lawyers. If anyone knows about this stuff, it's them."

"I think that's a good idea."

After lunch, they sat together on the couch, Mal calling the office, the phone on speaker.

"Malakai," a voice answered.

They exchanged a worried look as Mal said, "How'd you know it was me? And who is this?"

"This is Oliver. I gave you my personal number, Malakai."

Lila groaned. "I'm here too, and don't ask him to take it off speaker."

"I wouldn't, Ms. O'Hara. I know you're his closest friend. He will need that, and your strength and intelligence."

"Oliver, what do you know about me and my grandmother and all of this? I need real answers."

"I understand, Malakai. What have you discovered on your own?"

Lila looked at him, nodding to let him know to go on with it.

“I don’t know anything for sure, but I’ve come to a few thoughts about what I might be.”

There was a long silence on the phone, but when Oliver spoke again, Mal got chills. “Then you are probably right. I don’t want to talk on the phone. I’ll be there this afternoon.”

“Wait. Please. Can you tell me anything about... hunters.”

“They’ve already found you? Damn it. Malakai, do not leave the house until I arrive. Lila, you too, as they’ll use you as leverage.”

“Leverage? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’ll explain when we get there. Please, take care.”

The call ended, and they both sat there, silent in their own thoughts.

Finally, Lila whispered, “I think you were right, Mal. About all of it.”

“I think so too. What does that mean? I’m... half angel? What the fuck does that even mean?”

“It means you’re magical. You have powers, and Mal, don’t let this get to you, but not only do I think you actually did, you know, cause... Dutch, but someone did it to the midwife too.”

He’d thought of that, and his stomach was sick. He felt like he could vomit over the entire thing. “Yeah. I know.”

“Mal, we need to make a plan. If Oliver and his partner, what’s his name?”

“Carver.”

“If they know about this, if these hunter assholes know, then there might be others. And this house? As much as we love it, it’s a target right now. Oliver and Carver know about it, the hunters do. We may have to leave.”

Looking around the house, the nicest one he’d ever dreamed of having, he felt his heart breaking, but he knew that wasn’t all from the house. “What am I? What does all this mean for me?”

“I don’t know, honey, but you’re not alone. I’m here and I’ll be here until we figure all this out and then after, for as long as you need me. Okay?”

Usually when she said that he calmed. How was she going to figure out the fact he was half angel?

A panic attack came on and he felt like his heart would pound right out of his chest. He didn’t think he could breathe, and he got up, running to the bathroom.

After vomiting twice, he sat on the cool tiles, his entire being shaking as the thoughts swirled around his head. The pictures of angels ran through his mind, along with the memory of that strange... dream? Vision? Of his real father.

“If you’re there, if you’re my father, I need to know some things. Instead of having all these people coming to me to tell me, why don’t you? You had sex with my mother to have me. Did you know she was going to die having me? Doesn’t that make you a murderer?”

There was no noise, nothing. The bathroom was so quiet; he wondered if he was breathing at all.

Then he felt his heartbeat, and knew he couldn't really hear it, but it suddenly seemed so loud. The thrumming was like a drummer at a heavy metal concert. Lila came into the bathroom, but before he saw it was her, his heart stopped, his breath was sucked into his lungs as he expected his father to be the face he'd see.

He wasn't disappointed. Right then, Lila was his only lifeline to keep him sane and alive.

“You okay?”

“No,” he said before he sobbed. She was right there, on the floor with him in a second. After reaching over to flush the toilet, she put both arms around him.

“Baby boy, it's gonna be okay. I swear it. I'll take on all the damn hunters or whatever the fuck they are. I'll be right here.”

“I already took you away from your life, and now? I put you in danger!”

“Oh, shut up. I've been in worse situations than this.”

The tears stopped immediately as he stared over at her. “Okay, worse than being around angels, or half angels and people trying to kill them?”

“Yeah! You should have seen some of the men I've dated. Being in mortal danger from angels is nothing compared to Bobby Tillman and his bad breath.”

She did it, made him laugh, and she hugged him tighter. “Life is a series of moments, and if you’re really lucky, some of them are exciting and you get a few adventures. Would you rather die in a bed, swimming in your own piss and shit, or be killed by some hot hunters after you put up a hell of a fight?”

“Hot? Like Draven?”

“Jesus, you do like him.”

“He was cute, and he kissed great.”

After she sighed and laughed at once, she said, “Well, it is rare to get someone hot that also kisses good.”

“Is it? I’ve never had both before him.”

“You shithead. Come on, get your ass up and come get a drink with me. I found a cabinet with wine. Some good, dusty bottles that are probably worth more than me.”

“Nothing on this planet is worth more than you,” he said, sobering the conversation. “Nothing, no one, and if we are talking angels, then none of them are worth a fraction of you.”

“That’s a high compliment,” she whispered as she wiped a smile from the corner of her eye. “Come on, before we catch a cold on this floor.”

“That’s not how you catch colds.”

“Tell that to my grandmother. She always said that and if you think I’m tough? That woman could chomp nails and spit out screws.”

He loved hearing about Lila's past. It seemed so normal, and he'd expressed that once. She laughed at him, saying it was anything but, but compared to his, it was over the top normal.

They shared a glass of wine, and then another. It helped a little to calm him and they sat in the parlor on the window seat, staring out at the beautiful day. "Do you think this is smart? Us being in the window?"

"That hot hunter you are crushing on said to stay in the house or yard, so all we can see is your yard. I'm guessing it's okay."

He worried someone could shoot him, but he wasn't going to move. He worried for a moment that meant he had a death wish, but he wanted to see something beautiful before he died.

"You might be a powerful being. That is freaky, but very cool."

He hadn't thought about that much. "I wonder what I can do, well, besides give abusive assholes a brain bleed."

Lila looked around the room and pointed to a wicker basket filled with firewood. "See if you can't move that log over there into the fireplace."

"Lila..."

"Well! How are you gonna know anything until you try it? You might be some reject from the Nephilim club and can't do anything but give abusive assholes brain bleeds!"

"Ouch! Reject?"

“Do it!”

He looked over at the log, concentrating on it with all his might. In fact, he stared and concentrated so hard that his head hurt, and he thought he might get an aneurysm.

It didn't so much as shake.

“Wait,” she whispered. “You were scared or mad when you... did that to Dutch.”

“We don't know for sure I did.”

“Keep telling yourself that, honey. Anyway, get mad about something, or scared, or put some emotion into it. Happiness, fear, sadness, anything.”

He had enough built-up emotion to move the house to another state, if indeed he could move things at all. Once again, he stared at the wood and thought about his father, his mother, his life in general and he felt the anger surging.

His father, who may be an angel, and making love with his mother to produce a child, knowing it would likely kill her. That was brewing in him, making him angrier and angrier.

As he sent all that anger to the wood, he felt it, something building inside him. It started from the center of him, right in the middle of his chest, and he felt it burning, like he'd been shot with a flare gun.

After it burned there for a moment, it spread, warming, then burning his entire torso, setting his stomach and lungs to heat.

As it spread more, it reached his fingertips, his toes, and finally, his eyes until they were covered over with red. It was anger, it was pain, and it blocked his sight for a second.

Lila jumped next to him, and he didn't understand why, as he couldn't see at first, then she yelled, "Mal, stop!"

His vision cleared, his pain and fury receding into the middle of him, and he saw it. The wood in the basket, and the basket itself, was on fire.

Chapter Fifteen



image-placeholder

LILA JUMPED INTO ACTION, getting the fire extinguisher from the kitchen and rushing back to put the fire out as the alarm sounded, the beeping loud and making his blood pressure rise.

He dropped to his knees before the destroyed basket, seeing the soot on the wall behind it, while Lila opened windows to let out the smoke.

He'd done that. The fire, he did it. It was like he was living a part in the movie, *The Firestarter*. "What the hell?"

"You maybe put a little too much rage into that stare."

She was making light of it, but there was no light in what he'd done. "Maybe the hunters have a point. If we all can do stuff like that, what does that say about us?"

"Mal! Stop that shit right now! You cannot think that's what you intended to do."

"Maybe I didn't mean to, but I did that. What if it was a person? I don't want to hurt anyone, Lila!"

She hugged him again. It seemed she had to hug him a lot lately. “Wait until your lawyers come and talk to you. In the meantime, maybe call your boy, Draven.”

“Should I?”

“Can’t hurt to be on the phone with him. Of course, that might not be true. If you all can do what you just did, I’d hate to see the arsenal of the people that hunt you.”

He hadn’t thought of that. “What if he... casts a spell on me or something?”

“I doubt he could do it over the phone. You’re protected here with all those squiggly lines on the fence. If you feel weird besides getting butterflies in your stomach over a guy that was about to stab you, hang up the phone.”

He smiled, and it felt so out of place, but she could always make him smile even when he was sporting a black eye. “Okay, yeah, hang up.”

He took out his phone after grabbing the letter from the kitchen and sat back in the wide, comfortable window seat. Clouds were rolling in from the northeast, and they were coming quickly. “I wonder if he’s going to tell me what we already know. I mean... is he going to be the first one in all these people that will finally not lie to me?”

“If he does, it might be just to gain your trust. I get you like him, Mal, but don’t just fall over yourself to give in to the guy. He could be playing you, pulling out the ideas from the book of the hunters or whatever.”

“Okay, yeah, you’re right. You’re always right.”

“Thank you! Just take that as a given and we’ll run this show with ease.”

After pecking a kiss to her cheek, he dialed Draven and set the phone on speaker.

“Hello?”

“Draven?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “Thank God, you called. Malakai, first, let me tell you how sorry I am. I... didn’t want to. I don’t even know if I would have.”

“You mean stab him? Is that what you’re talking about?” Lila demanded.

“Yes. Hello, Lila.”

“How the fuck do you know who I am?”

There was a pause before he said, “My... bosses told me.”

Mal shushed Lila as she was about to go off on a tangent. Then he asked, “Your bosses? You mean other hunters?”

Without hesitation, he answered, “Yes. They’re elders, men and women, well, very few women, but we’ve had them. Anyway, they were the ones hunting your kind long ago. Now, there are new people doing it.”

“My kind. You mean... Nephilim?”

“Yes, Malakai. How did you figure it out?”

“Why did I have to? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“It’s a thing with them, the ones building the army. Listen, I know a lot about this, but I can’t talk on the phone. This is a burner, but yours is likely tracked and you may be tapped, too. I don’t know. I do know I’m already out of the club, denying my destiny.”

Lila pushed mute to tell him, “Sounds like he’s confused.”

“Well, he’s joined a new club, because so am I.”

She turned off mute and asked him, “How do we know that you’re not setting Mal up to get killed? If we meet you or something, you have another hunter come and kill Mal while we’re distracted.”

“You don’t know that. I don’t know Mal much personally, but I did feel it from him that he’s a good person. He let himself be vulnerable. He was open, and if he was an evil being, I couldn’t have gotten near him that quickly. Listen, there is another hunter here, like I said. He won’t stop until he kills you, Malakai. Literally, until he kills you, he won’t stop hunting you. He’ll follow you all over the world.”

Lila spoke again, “How do you people track them?”

“With technology, of course, but when that doesn’t work, there are location spells. They don’t narrow things down like a GPS or something like that, but with research, it’s sometimes easier.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be for me, being I have nowhere to go.”

“I don’t want you out of the house, but I can’t go in it either. The yard would be the only way we could talk and you to be

safe, but Iokua may see me and... well, that doesn't matter."

Mal's heart was in his throat. "He'd kill you? One of his... his own?"

"Yeah. Old hunters are rare, Malakai. The few that live past forty are made into the elders."

Forty... that was a brief life. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" Lila hollered. "This fucker tried to kill you and he may set you up to be killed, anyway."

"I don't blame you for thinking that, Lila. Just know, I will do my best to make sure Iokua doesn't hurt him. Please, think about somewhere to go that they'd never find you. With spells, they might get close, but if you have no connection to a place, it would be hard."

"I don't want to leave," Malakai said, surprising even himself. "I was scared most of my life. I had a shit house and shit person to share it with, two, actually, if you count my childhood. I love it here."

"You can't leave. You can't have your friend leave. He'll use her to get you to leave the yard and the sigils that protect you."

He didn't want to tell Draven about Oliver and Carver coming. There was no way he'd put anyone else in danger. "I'll be fine for now. You... be careful too. If he wants to kill you, well..."

"I'll watch out for him. Take care, Malakai, and... I wanted to say that you are different, from your people and mine. You

don't have the heart of a killer. You just have a heart."

He ended the call with that, and Malakai felt tears rolling down his cheeks. "What am I gonna do?"

"We're figuring that out now. We've got allies."

Side-eyeing her, he asked, "Like Draven?"

"Giving us that information? I don't think that would be allowed. I'm sure, one of the things that they don't want Nephilim to understand is that they can be tracked, with or without GPS and all the modern conveniences."

"He's on my side, Lila. I just feel it."

"Maybe that's one of your powers, babe. You can read people. Finally!"

Laughing, he got the reference. "Yeah, yeah. I suck at it. Sucked."

"There ya go. Now, I need a glass of wine and some more of my amazing tuna salad. Then we'll wait for your lawyers."

"Sounds good."

He wasn't really hungry, but Lila made him eat, as he was pouring glass after glass of wine to calm his nerves. Anxiety was running rampant in him, causing him to shake. Lila left the room and came back into the room with a hand mirror, placing it in front of him, right next to his wine.

"You have fully changed. I can't see you getting more handsome."

He picked up the mirror and gazed into it, seeing his eyes first, how bright they were and lined with dark, thick lashes. His nose had straightened, and was perfectly shaped, thin but not overly so.

His forehead had receded like most balding men's hairlines did, and speaking of that, his hair was thick, lustrous, and shining.

"You have cheekbones that most men and women would die for."

His cheeks were sharp and high, chin squared. He resembled a movie star. "I'm hot."

"Yeah," she said, laughing as she brought over their next bottle of wine. "I'd do you, you know, if you did girls."

"No, I just like guys that either beat me or try to kill me! I'm doing great, such a change."

They laughed, and it did feel good to get out of his own head for a moment. He took a sip of the new wine she'd opened and liked it only a little more than he'd liked the last one. "Wine, food, and friends. I guess this is the calm before the storm?"

"Between the storms, smokey," she teased. "I'm sure there will be more, but for this moment, yeah, it's good. I think the two of us better learn to appreciate these moments."

"For sure."

When Oliver and Carver arrived a couple hours later, all hell broke out in the yard. The storm had arrived, and as Mal

and Lila watched it unfold, there was not a doubt about what the truth was any longer.

The small black car, an overly expensive model of Porsche, Mal knew, though he didn't know the brand well enough to say which, pulled up to the house and right out of a stand of bushes not twenty feet down the road, the infamous Iokua came out with a vengeance.

Before Oliver and Carver could reach the gate, the blond man came out and started throwing knives at them. Luckily, they saw him, and moved quickly inside the yard, but that wasn't the end of it.

Draven was there, like he appeared out of thin air, running to Iokua, that same knife, or athame as he'd called it, in his hand until it wasn't. He threw it, like it was a bit of paper, and it flew, hilt over blade until it landed right in the shocked Iokua.

Carver yelled for Malakai to get in the house, but his feet felt like lead, and he couldn't so much as move an inch. Before Iokua died, he got off one more knife throw, and it landed in Draven's shoulder.

Oliver raised his hands, mouthing words and turning around in a circle. All the runes and sigils glowed brightly, and then dimmed until they were dark. Carver went out of the yard, grabbing Draven, who was hunched over with the pain from the stab wound, getting him in the yard before Oliver again lifted his arms and the runes and sigils lit once again.

Mal helped get Draven into the house and the four of them waited while Oliver finished getting the protections back in place before he came into the house and rushed to the parlor, where Mal was holding a bleeding Draven on the couch.

“Help him, please, anyone!”

“He’s a hunter, Malakai,” Carver spat as he looked at Draven. “I shouldn’t have let him into the house.”

“He’s not one of them, not out to kill me.”

“You know that for sure?” Oliver asked.

Mal looked down into Draven’s gray eyes, seeing it there, the truth, the pain, and he whispered, “I’d risk my life on it.”

“That’s the problem,” Carver said, taking off his suit coat. “You’re not just playing with your own life.”

Lila came back from the bathroom with gauze and the first aid kit, kneeling on the floor in front of the sofa. “You all saved him, brought him inside. It’s on you too, if he tries to kill Mal or you two.”

Oliver hushed them all. “The small knives he was throwing...were they what he uses to kill Nephilim?”

“Yes,” Draven groaned.

“Then we can’t heal him.” He looked to Mal and explained, “Most of us can heal humans, but if they’ve been hurt with the heaven blades, we can’t.”

He still tried, holding his hands over Draven, then turning his head to Carver. “Won’t work.”

“It was a small blade, in his shoulder. I don’t think it did enough damage to kill him. The woman can stitch him.”

Mal’s head spun to Lila, knowing what was coming. Sure enough, she exploded. “Excuse me? Have the woman do it? Fuck right off, angel or Nephilim or whatever creature you two might be! You don’t tell him a thing, you don’t even warn him that these hunters will be trying to kill him, and now you dismiss me like I’m the help?”

Letting her go, Mal sat a little straighter in pride for her. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

Lila pushed Mal’s hand away before tearing Draven’s shirt to get a better look at the wound. “It’s deep, but like Lurch said, it’s not that deep. Come on, Lurch. You can help me while your friend here starts the explanations.”

“Fine,” Carver said, then they helped Draven into the kitchen, Lila grabbing the first aid kit and bandages.

“If they are messing with you, call me. I’ll be a few steps away with a kitchen full of sharp knives.”

Oliver left for a moment to go to the bathroom and get a few damp towels, handing one to Mal as he said, “They won’t work on us. The knives.”

“Good to know. Why are you afraid of the ones the hunters carry then?”

“They’re different.”

After cleaning his hands and a spot of blood on his dark blue suit pants, Oliver started to clean the sofa of the blood

there.

“Why are they different?”

“They’re made of... different materials. Something that can kill us, the Nephilim.”

“So we really are those things?”

Chuckling dryly, Oliver nodded as he affirmed, “Yes, those things.”

Mal didn’t know what to say. For all the questions that had come to him since realizing that was likely what he was, his mind was blank of them at the moment he could get answers. Luckily, Oliver started the explanation without them.

He sat and balled up the towel in one hand, staring off out of the big window to their left. “Malakai, oh, I can’t tell you how sorry I am for how we do things. It’s never taken well, by any of you. You must understand the reactions we got when we first started all this. Pain and confusion, sure, but, well, let me ask you this. If you’d come in that first time and we’d have told you that you were this magical being, the most powerful one ever in existence, would you have believed us?”

Mal opened his mouth, but nothing came out as his mind turned that over a few times. “I guess not.”

“You see, your transformation from human to what you really are, it comes slowly, sure, but it comes. When your appearance changes and when you’ve done things you couldn’t explain, then you’re more apt to accept it and listen to the stories of how all of this came to be. We only hope, of

course, that you don't meet up with the hunters first. I don't know how they found you so fast, except for your boyfriend. That kind of death may be on their considerable radar."

"So... I did kill him."

"We won't ever know for certain, but it's one power most of us share. We all have different ones, but we share a few. That's one of them."

"You're a Nephilim."

"I'm one of the first, Malakai."

That didn't compute. "What do you mean? One of the first. You're not much older than me. Draven said the elders all retired or whatever, from hunting when they're forty. You're not forty, or else you haven't aged." That hit him and he stared as he saw Oliver's eyes move to stare at the floor. "You are older. How much older?"

"The story is long, and since your friend seems to know everything, maybe we'll have her in on it. I'd hate to have to tell it twice so soon."

"Fine. Draven... will you tell him, too?"

"I'm sure he already knows Malakai."

"Call me Mal. Please. My full name seems so formal and creepy. I like it and all, but not all the time."

He smiled that warm smile that nearly made Mal melt the first time he'd seen it. It no longer melted him, but placed him

on alert. Trust wouldn't come easily for him with anyone he'd met since his grandmother passed.

“Sorry. Mal. I like that better, too.”

“When I met you, I thought I was losing my mind, but you were speaking in another language. Weren't you?”

“Yes. It's an ancient language that no human speaks. They have trained hunters to read it, like those spells on the fence. But they cannot speak it. They don't have the right... vocal cords. I guess that would be the easiest way to explain it. You'll learn it, easily, in time. You'll find you can learn many things easily now. You're rather like a newborn child, where your mind is free to learn so much more than you ever thought you could. I've seen others blossom like the rarest and most beautiful roses once they discover their truest selves. It's like coming out of a cocoon to become a butterfly.”

“The looks don't hurt, I'll admit that, but look over there, Oliver. To the fireplace.”

“I saw, Mal. I smelled it as soon as I came in the door. So, you can make fire. It's always fascinating to learn each power, but fire is... very rare. Most could never make a candle flame flicker.”

“I'm not proud of it!”

Oliver lay his hand over Mal's that sat on the cushion of the couch. “Mal, you will learn to control it. Like the other things I mentioned, you'll easily learn things, including discovering and controlling your personal powers.”

“Personal powers. Are there... universal powers?”

“Yes,” he said, his excitement piqued. “We all have a lot of powers that we share.”

A lot of powers. He thought he must be losing his mind.

Like he'd read Mal's thoughts, Oliver corrected, “You're quite sane. In fact, you're taking all this better than most. I credit your friend, Lila. She's an extraordinary human. Of those, there are so few. Not that I don't love humans, Mal. That's what we all have in common.”

“What does that mean?”

“That's more for our story.”

Mal's eyes moved to the hall leading to the kitchen, and he sighed. “I want Draven to know. He's another extraordinary human. He's given up a lot for me and risked his own life. I don't care what the rest of you think. I won't give in to any of this unless he's cared for.”

“As long as you're sure he won't harm you, Mal, I have no problem with that. He's not the first hunter to defect.”

“There were others?”

Oliver nodded and said, “A few. And they helped us more than anyone has ever helped us. We don't view them as enemies, as they view us. They made a sacred vow so long ago that we don't even know when it started. Perhaps Draven knows. He comes from hunters, that's how it goes. It's handed down, a legacy, if you will.”

“He called it a destiny.”

“It is, I suppose. In their minds, it is. Their destiny is to wipe us out, Mal. Make no mistake. One defects, two will come, three, four. You won’t be out of danger for the rest of eternity, I’m afraid. Neither will I, really. We are the targets of stubborn people, and they don’t ever give up. The best way to play the game is to become just as stubborn to survive.”

Chapter Sixteen



image-placeholder

MAL AND OLIVER WENT into the kitchen together, where Mal went to Draven's side, taking his blood-stained hand that felt too cold. That worried him. "Are you okay?"

"Been better, but I'll live," he said, before turning to Lila. "Right, doc?"

"I'll stab you again, believe me, if I think for even a second you're still a threat to Mal."

"I'd hand you the knife."

"Speaking of knives, you'll have to pull out the athame from your friend," Carver cautioned, his voice radiating with menace as he stared at Draven with contempt. "We can't touch it."

Mal hadn't thought of Iokua. "He's just lying there? If someone sees him, the cops will be here, and what do we tell them?"

"When I was performing the protection incantations," Oliver told him, "I made sure to add a cloak for the body. No one can see it but those in this house."

Mal was fascinated. “You can do that?”

“With the right teaching, you can, too.”

When Draven was stitched up and a dressing was covering the wound, he went outside, and Oliver let down the barrier again. Draven took his knife from Iokua’s chest and Carver was on the phone, telling someone to come get the body.

On the porch, Carver asked Draven, “You can’t have known him long. Why are you trying to help him and no longer hunt him?”

Draven took a moment to look at Malakai, his eyes soft and filled with guilt. The guilt wasn’t from secret ambitions, Mal knew just by looking. He felt guilt for even considering killing Mal. He then whispered to the two of them, “We can sense things other people usually can’t, and all I sensed from him was... good.”

As Mal nodded to him, he felt tears well in his eyes, but he didn’t swat at them. Draven’s mysterious looking gray eyes held the longing they both seemed to feel.

When they were finally seated in the parlor, Carver and Oliver on one couch and the others on the couch facing them, Mal asked that Oliver begin his story.

Carver nodded and surprised them as he took off his shoes and sat cross-legged. “I never did like shoes.”

Oliver smiled over at Carver. There was love there, Mal saw, but it didn’t seem to be romantic love. He soon learned why.

“Well, where to begin?”

“The beginning,” Carver suggested.

“Yes, of course. My name isn’t Oliver. I use it for business, you could say. You’ve never heard of me in historical or biblical texts, of course, but, like Draven may attest to, there are texts where I pop up from time to time. My real name is Ren. It was given to me by my other father. This, lady and gentlemen, is one of them. His name you may be more familiar with. This is Cain.”

The air felt as though the three on the couch had sucked it all right out of the room. Draven stared like his eyes would pop out of his head, but Lila was her usual skeptical self. “Cain. Like Cain, Cain? The first murderer in the bible?”

“Ouch. I hate that association. For one thing, I didn’t kill Abel. For another thing, he deserved it. He wasn’t the kind, sweet thing you’ve read in that travesty they call the bible. So much interpreted by men! It’s a sham!”

“Hold on, now,” Lila pleaded. “Slow down. It’s not real? Not that I’ve ever taken much stock in it.”

Oliver explained, “It has its moments of truth, certainly. God did create the world, but the seven days thing was not interpreted right, or else God was bragging. See, His days aren’t like ours. A day for Him is like a million years for us. And each thing he added, the sky, the animals, all that, well, he developed them over a long time. Until he got the perfect symmetry.”

“Stop blowing smoke up His ass, Ren.”

Oliver/Ren laughed and asked the group, “Tea? I could use some tea.”

Lila started to stiffen again, likely thinking they’d ask her to get it, but with a wave of Oliver’s, or Ren’s, hand, a silver tea set appeared on the coffee table, steam waving out of the long spout. As he poured them each a cup, he went on with the story.

“My father, Cain, was the very first Nephilim. More that the bible got wrong was that Eve was the first woman.”

Lila interrupted, “Lilith.”

“Yes! I suppose stories abound about her now. She’s mentioned infrequently in mostly Jewish texts, but yes, she was the first. God, being a man, made a man to rule the earth. Lilith to have children, to love Adam and to care for her family.”

“Of course,” Lila spat. “This is another reason I could never be a Baptist.”

Oliver smiled over at her as he handed her a cup of tea. “I do like you.”

She winked at him and finally smiled. “Thanks, cutie.”

“Well, this didn’t sit well with the first feminist. She refused to lie with him and bear his children. There was someone she did lay with, though. It was Sammael.”

“Wait a minute,” Lila broke in, and Draven was shaking his head as well. “I had an ex that studied on some of this stuff. Sammael is Satan.”

“Satan was used to name many of those out of favor with God. It means *the adversary*. There are many. Though, yes, I do believe he was the first.”

“Not to be mistaken for my Morning Star,” Cain growled. “That’s a much different being.”

“Morning Star,” Lila whispered. “Why is that familiar?”

Draven answered her, “It’s Lucifer’s nickname. Given to him by God when he was the favorite of all his first children, the angels.”

Cain smiled broadly as he lifted his teacup in a salute. “And he got the name for being the most beautiful of all the angels. And, well, from those I’ve seen, he was.”

“Father, you’re terribly biased.”

“As I should be. I’ve been in love with him since the beginning of mankind.”

They all looked at Ren, remembering that Ren had said he had two fathers. Mal stammered as he felt something like the world suddenly perched atop his shoulders, “Lucifer is...”

“My father. Yes. Well, my *other* father.”

“How can that be?” Draven asked in a hushed voice, reverently setting down his tea.

“Back then, the rules of procreation were a bit more malleable. Especially being that one of my fathers was an angel and the other a very powerful Nephilim. Cain, here, he gave birth to me.”

“And lived,” Mal whispered, knowing his voice was flowing with bitterness.

“Barely,” Cain told him, losing all light in his eyes. “I nearly died, and I am an immortal. Human and angel, like you. Still, giving birth to the most powerful being to be born for, oh, thousands of years, well, you can imagine that was not easily done. His magic, in the womb, leeched mine so much that he nearly turned me completely mortal. It’s one of his powers, to siphon magic from others. For him to do it to any Nephilim, it’s straining for him, but he can certainly accomplish it. We’ve had to do that from time to time with those Nephilim that were, shall we say, not on our side.”

Draven interrupted, “Those not on your side?”

Cain sipped his tea, never taking his eyes from Draven. When he spoke, Mal could hear the resentment, the hatred, but there was more. Empathy. “Yes. Religion takes a toll on humanity. It gets into a mind like nothing else has ever done. It’s the belief in something bigger that can save or kill you, that can bring you to an afterlife. The propagandists have done their work for centuries to assure no one forgot their ways of thinking, of believing. It adds to their coffers and keeps people controlled. Really, it’s an extraordinary bit of manmade magic, having complete control over masses of people. For a

Nephilim to be raised by these zealots, they can come to hate us. And, unfortunately, to also hate themselves. They feel on an opposing side to God, so they strike out at us, at themselves, at times. It's all very sad."

"And they're raised by them, because the mother dies," Draven reasoned.

"Yes. It's not usual, but it happens where we can't get to the child first. There have been many Nephilim over the course of time, and we can't always get to them first."

"Please, go on with the history, and then maybe, you can tell Mal why he didn't discover it before his grandmother died," Lila pushed as she patted Mal's knee.

"Sorry to ramble on," Oliver said, then began again. "Well, after my father's birth, it was known Lilith hadn't lain with Adam, so she was banished from the garden."

"The Garden of Eden," Lila clarified.

"Yes. Though, it's not as you may think of it. It isn't some tiny spot on earth, it's a great portion of it. When she was banished, she was sent out into the wilds, where she wasn't ruler of the animals, where there were dangers. Then, with her own magic, and that of her lover, she made a new world. Small, yes, nothing like what God could create, but it was hers. It was another dimension, as you'd understand it. She hid there, still unsure of God's intentions for her. The only ones she could speak with were Sammael and God's wife."

The three of them sat forward on the couch, Draven spitting out a bit of tea. “Wife?”

“Yes,” Carver assured them. “There is a God and Goddess, though no one calls them that... up there, I’m told. They are simply Mother and Father to the angels.”

The three were so stunned, Mal was sure they’d miss something if the two continued. “I need a break to process that.”

“Me too,” Lila agreed. “I’m hitting the head, so don’t anyone say a thing until we’re all back here.”

Draven followed Mal to the kitchen, where he was pouring himself a glass of wine, filling the goblet to the rim. “How did you not know this?”

Draven shrugged and explained, “They teach us what they know, and come to find out, that’s not a lot. We knew Cain was different, but all of this is rather new information. Ren... he’s the antichrist. That we knew too. But we had no idea he came from Cain. We thought Lucifer and Lilith bore the antichrist.”

“He’s... he’s not evil. He’s not like Damian in those movies. Ren, of the two, is the nicer one! How come you guys and the rest of the world have gotten it all so wrong, and why the hell did no one know about the Goddess?”

“To be fair, most pagan religions included a Mother Goddess figure in their beliefs. Take Greek myths, for

example. There are loads of goddesses there, very powerful. Wicca, as well, has the feminine as the stronger of the two.”

Mal thought of something, but he dismissed it at first. Draven saw he was gnawing on something and encouraged him to express it. When he did, he spoke mostly to himself and possibly Draven. “They were talking about how religion told people what and how to believe, like brainwashing. The ancient people had goddesses in their beliefs, but that was all nearly leveled by the Christians. Right? Well, after the Jewish religion.”

“Jews like to keep their religion to themselves somewhat. They don’t actively recruit. Christians, on the other hand, well, they do. And they were responsible for slaughters and wars to win the hearts and minds of the masses.”

“Witch burnings, the Holocaust, Crusades.”

“Exactly. We need to find out what became of the Goddess, Mother, whatever she’s really called.”

Lila came in and overheard them. “I’ll tell you what happened. The Patriarchy nearly wiped her out. They were determined, throughout history, to make women the lesser species, and hearing that was how it began, well, that pisses me off.”

She poured herself a drink and stared at the merlot for a long time.

“Mal, I’m not saying trust them.” Her eyes rose to Draven. “Any of them. But, so far, everything they’re saying feels true.”

Unless they have me under a spell, too.”

“No, I feel it as well. There’s something so much bigger than my face changing, and even me killing Dutch.”

Draven explained, “Mal, that was likely a defense response. When a Nephilim is in danger, and new to their powers, that is usually the first time the powers are used. They are in defense of themselves from pain or whatever, and it happens. We hunters, we can’t be killed that way. Bred that way or whatever, we are stronger than normal humans in that the simple powers a Nephilim possesses don’t hurt us.”

Mal sipped the wine, then took a longer drink and looked to Draven when he set his glass on the counter. “I know I need to hear it all. All about Nephilim, hunters, angels, all of it. I needed this first, but when I go back in there, I want to hear it all, including everything you know.”

“I have already given myself a target on my back. I’ve already come to terms with that, and the fact I’m being disloyal to a group I swore my loyalty to. I have seen bloodthirsty men, how they’ve gone after people that, sure, are different, but not all evil, like they’d taught us.”

Mal felt the truth of it by simply looking into Draven’s darkening eyes. He, like Mal, was going through a change. Maybe Draven’s wasn’t physical, but everything he’d been taught to be true wasn’t. “Thanks. I know this isn’t easy.”

“If anyone told me when I was a kid that all this was bullshit, I’d have lost it. Now? I get it. We all get taught something as kids we later find out is fake.”

When they were seated in the living room again, Carver nodded to Oliver and said, “Tell them everything. Pull off the Band-Aid, as they say.”

“Okay, Father.” He looked around the room, and there was great sympathy in his beautiful eyes. Eyes that Mal now shared.

“In the beginning, things weren’t as they are now, of course. It was an experiment, this thing called humans, the earth, the universe as a whole. There were tweaks needing to be done and rules set in place.

“Lilith made her own rules in her own dimension. That was where Lucifer went after losing his favor with God. Together, they made a place that was friendly to those of us needing to be hidden away from God and his angels of wrath.

“The most favored after my father, Lucifer, was Michael. He was given a sword made of parts of heaven itself like we angels are made of the power of heaven. It was crafted by angels and blessed by God. It’s the most powerful weapon ever created, and the only thing that can kill immortals.”

Draven took the athame into his hands. “This can kill immortals.”

“Please, put that away!” Carver cringed, just looking at the thing. “Why is it we’re still allowing him to possess it?”

“He took it from the other hunter,” Mal said. “And since you two couldn’t touch it, I’m guessing I can’t.”

Lila got up and snatched it from Draven, who put up no fight for the thing. “I’ll take it.”

“I know you still don’t trust me, and I can’t say I blame anyone for that mistrust.”

Carver said to him, in a voice that was firm, but sympathetic, “Good. It’s gonna take a lot more than killing one of your brothers to get me to trust you.”

“I understand.”

Mal was getting annoyed. “Lila, take it, hide it and let’s get back to this, please?”

“Sorry, Mal.” She rushed off to hide it, letting all of them catch their breath from the thing not in the room with them.

Carver laughed at the situation. “Trust is the hardest of emotions. It’s so easily broken, so difficult to repair.”

“Did you always trust Lucifer?”

“Yes. I was a naïve thing, so innocent, too trusting to everyone, but my trust was well placed in him. He was always so good to me. He was my first friend, my first family, really. He listened to me, let me lead him around the garden. He made me feel love for the first time and I can never forget that.”

“Do you... see him?”

“Not for a very long time. He can’t come to this dimension, and I can’t go into that one, not unless I can afford to be gone for years. Time works differently there, and I can’t leave my

son to do all this work on his own. Not that he's incapable, but..."

"He's your son and you love him," Lila said as she came back into the room.

"Yes."

"Go on, I'm back," she told Oliver.

"Thanks," he said, laughing. "Where was I? Oh, yes, well, Michael was set against us, being we were not part of God's plan."

"What is God's plan?" Draven asked.

"From what Mother said, it was to have everyone's obedience and worship. She didn't much like him, though," Carver said.

"Yes, that's what we all figured," Oliver continued. "Blind obedience and worship, but he had that from the angels. He wanted it from those with free will. It's come up short, to say the least. Even those that are highly religious fall terribly short. It angered him.

"Anyway, Michael was set against us all and given a weapon that could kill those angels and others, like we Nephilim, but then, God left Heaven and things were set into chaos. Michael and his legions of loyal angels wait for him, surely, but they also want to bring about the kind of humanity that will do as God asked in the beginning. In that way, they set about to kill all of us, blaming us for the downfall of humans, as they see it. If it weren't for us, Michael figured,

they'd all be good boys and girls and they'd obey what God wanted. The thing was, times change. People change. The bible was written by men, meanings in it changed. Other holy books were the same, changed and rewritten to mean what the humans wanted, not the angels or God."

Carver broke in, "Which is why so much of it is drivel. They left out all the good women that made a difference, they discounted us, the Nephilim. Then they tried so hard to smash all the angels together that they deemed evil for having left Heaven."

"Like Satan and Lucifer, not the same people," Mal said.

"Yes. Like that. Oh, there are those that mess with humans. It's a game to them. They hate humans, unfortunately, but we don't. Oh, my dear Lucifer did, for sure. He hated that another being took his father's favor, but then, meeting me, loving me, he saw that there could be good ones. He didn't care for Adam and all of them," he said, chuckling as he gazed off, thinking of his true love, eyes glistening in whatever memory he was thinking.

"Because they were terrible to you, Father."

"Yes. He was very protective of me."

"Well, when my parents fell in love, making me, it wasn't long before they saw the power of a Nephilim. Think of it. The power of Heaven only amplified. Angels are so powerful. It's scary, but the soul has a power that is similar but even more powerful because it is literally a small piece of Heaven. The Nephilim are gifted with that and can do great things. They are

more powerful than any angel, even the archangels. Michael's sword is the only thing that can kill us, so, Michael being cunning□”

“The bastard,” Carver spat.

“The cunning bastard figured out a way to duplicate that power. The sword can be, by him and a very few other top angels, broken, and from those pieces that are broken from it, more weapons are made.”

They turned to Draven, who nodded and affirmed, “I'd heard that, but didn't exactly believe it.”

“How many hunters are out there?” Lila asked.

“A fair many,” Oliver said. “I know what you're wondering. How many pieces can be taken from it? Well, an infinite amount, being that the sword can heal itself.”

They all took that in, and Mal swallowed as he thought of the athame. “So he can just keep breaking off pieces to be used to kill us. Great.”

“It's taken many of our numbers, sure. But there are a lot of us out there. I won't say the number, you know, trust. We are all mostly in hiding and have been. See, when Cain discovered his powers, when he had me and saw mine, we knew we had something to use to fight with. The angels that are loyal to God and Michael, well, they hate us for certain. If the angels still loyal to Him can create the perfect world, then they may get God back, which is their only goal. At least it was. Lucifer thinks they've become drunk with power, left on their own.

They've let a precious few into heaven, which has weakened it."

"Weakened it?" Lila asked.

Carver then explained, "Pieces of Heaven, Lila. It's what a soul is, and the more pieces taken, the more it diminishes. Think of all the billions of humans that have been born. If all those pieces keep being taken, and not returned, for whatever sin the angels believe they've done, then less of Heaven gets back to it."

"Yes, Father, and the less power the angels have. They, too, need that power to regenerate. Without God there, they also use that power to keep strong. It's why the Nephilim are such a threat. The more there are, the more immortals, the less that may ever be taken back to Heaven. Michael wants to call everyone home, so to speak."

"Tell them about my grandmother," Carver asked his son.

"Oh. Well, Goddess, as you'd understand her, well, she was mother to the angels. It was her power that went to them as well as God's, and when so many were forsaken by God, she grew angry. She came to earth, where so many of her children came. The ancient ones knew of her, felt her love and protection, as well as those times she was angry. You'd think of her as Mother Nature, or Mother Earth."

Another moment to let that sink in for the group. Mal couldn't believe it, but yet, it was so familiar.

“I see the dawning on your faces. The truth leaks out no matter how it’s suppressed,” Oliver whispered.

Lila asked, “As powerful?”

“Yes, or so we’ve been told.”

Carver gritted, “The first divorce, you might say. Well, second, if you count Lilith and Adam, but since they never consummated their marriage, I don’t know if that counts.”

“There’s so much more,” Oliver said. “You need to know it all.”

“Please, then continue.”

Chapter Seventeen



image-placeholder

“SO, THE GARDEN WAS made for mankind, but it wasn’t the small version you might picture. It was most of the world. Eve and Adam were sent out of there after they ate of the fruit. They had to do things on their own. It wasn’t easy for them. There was little fertile ground on which to plant and killing creatures soon lent to the creatures losing trust in the humans.

“Cain went off on his own, but one of his sisters found him. She’d left the group and Cain here started his own line of humans. The thing was, he wasn’t fully human.”

Mal, shocked, squeaked, “You cheated on Lucifer?”

“It was his idea,” Carver said, blanching. His eyes welled with tears then, and Mal wished he’d have never asked.

The mood in the room was anxious, and yet they sat there, the group, and listened like their lives depended on it, which was true. Still, Mal felt a kinship with everyone there, like the more they all spoke, the more connected they were.

Day turned to night as they spoke, and lamps were lit, food was made, and they ate pizza right there as the tale continued.

Carver ate ravenously, confessing his love of the food.

“Adam and Eve, they had more children, many more, and Cain’s wife had twins. Cain no longer wanted to lie with his wife, being he was in love with Lucifer, so she went off on her own to raise her children, and there became a line of Nephilim, though not as powerful as the original. They were farmers, as Cain was, and lived off the land, therefore the animals kept their trust in those part humans.

“The generations grew, but my father never aged, as you can see. I didn’t. We lived alone, except for the times we’d go to live in the other dimension. That was when I thrived, being with my other father, seeing the love between the two of them. When we were gone into the other place, one of the many times, however, the great flood came to purposely wipe out the children of Cain.”

A gasp was heard, and Mal turned to Lila, who choked, “That’s terrible.”

“So it was to kill the Nephilim,” Draven said, his eyes never leaving Oliver.

“Yes, but they didn’t get them all. See, the flood was only in the area where the children of Adam lived, and yes, some of the line from Cain. It didn’t engulf the entire earth, but for the people that witnessed it, it seemed that way. Some of those had already gone to live in other parts of the world. Not many, of course. Travel then was deadly. It took years to travel far. But they did, knowing the time was coming that they’d be hunted.

“Which brings me to them, the hunters. They are ancient beings. They were all sons of Cain.”

Draven sat forward, blinking hard at him. “Excuse me?”

“The two sets of humans couldn’t go forever without mating. One village became two, two became ten. The two sets of bloodlines inevitably met, mated. But for those places where God was passed down from word of mouth, they worshipped him, and eventually did the bidding of Him or His angels. There’s a reason the hunters can’t be killed by our weaker powers. They have just enough of that bloodline that they are immune. They’re not immortal, they can die, and as you saw, rather easily, but it’s not like other humans.”

“Some of us are very strong. I saw one man pick up a car and toss it over onto its top, and this woman, well, she broke through a wall. Superhuman but still human.” Draven admitted to them, his face blank otherwise. Mal felt even more for him, learning, it seemed, more about himself than he’d ever known. “I can’t believe we’re part of Cain’s bloodline.” He looked to Carver. “No offense. We were just taught to hate you.”

“No offense taken. I knew you’d been taught things about me that weren’t true. I was seen as a bad human, the worst human to be made for a long time, though I wasn’t human. Not really. I was half angel.”

“They taught us that was an abomination. Then I met... Malakai. Sorry, *Mal*. He’s the best of anyone I’ve ever met. I knew that quickly, too.”

“You’ll sense greatness or weakness in everyone you meet, I have heard. It’s an empathic power that still remains in a few of you. That’s been, regrettably, bred out of the most of you,” Carver explained, and as he spoke to Draven, his voice was much sweeter than it had been. “You are my descendent, Draven, but you also have Adam’s blood in you. It’s conflicting in a lot of hunters, and most don’t know why they feel the things they do. They’ve been taught, like the angels, that they have no free will. You are to kill and then die yourselves or waste away, sending others to kill.”

Draven’s head lowered and his shaking could be felt by Mal, who sat close to him. That proximity was difficult, because they were so drawn to each other. “We’re... we’re not that different.”

Draven’s head turned so Mal could see one eye. “I wish that were true. You’re good, and I’m...”

“You didn’t kill me. You’re not just a killer, like they’re saying the others are.”

Carver got up and moved to the other couch, kneeling there in front of Draven. “You can change things. You alone can change so much.”

They shared a moment, Carver touching Draven’s face with a soft caress of his fingertips to his cheek.

“I’ve killed two others. Of... of you. Nephilim.”

“The past cannot be changed, or we, the most powerful beings, would have changed it. What we look to is the future.

Mother Earth, our Goddess, suffers from the horrible things the humans do to her and to each other. But all it takes is one to do a kindness, to change the hatred inside of them to love, and she's reborn."

Draven's tears ran down his handsome face, and Mal felt his own begin. Everyone was quiet, like they dared not breathe, and Mal felt it, a bridge that was built in that very moment.

"You don't hate me?"

"How could I? You've come far in a very short time. It took looking into your heart and looking into that of Malakai's to see that things are never black and white. There are a million shades of gray, and even more colors that paint this world. To see that, it takes a great man."

When Carver rose, Mal reached over to hold Draven's hand. "You're part of this, of us, now."

"We need to finish and get all of you to safety."

After Carver went back to the couch and pretzeled his legs again, Oliver smiled at him. "My father is extraordinary. It's no wonder why my other father loves him so."

"The first gays. Isn't that something?" Lila asked and cackled a little. "Would love to go around to some of those churches and let them in on that."

"Oh, sure," Mal spat. "Lucifer being the first gay. That would go over well."

They all had a laugh at that.

Mal asked, “Where is he? You said in the other dimension, but... why can’t he come here?”

“Like Mother Goddess,” Carver explained, “They are a huge target. Oh, she can take care of herself, surely, but think of a mother being attacked by her children. That is very hard on her. She loved the angels; they were her children. To have them turn on her was very hard.”

“Oh. Yeah, I can see that.”

Oliver went on, “The other angels always watch for them. Lucifer feels caged, and that got out somehow, and was made into even more stories about him. That God put him into a cage, but not like is thought. Michael and his sword would come down to earth and there would be a battle that would end so much. He couldn’t have that. So, he stays there, with Lilith, with Goddess, and other fallen angels. They sneak out occasionally, and wreak havoc, those other fallen. They blame humans for so much.”

“Adam’s children, that is,” Carver clarified. “And I can’t blame them. Those were the ones that fell from grace further than anyone. They did it while still pledging themselves to God. But, in reality, money, possessions, power, those things have become the most loved. It was those things that God didn’t want placed above him. That truly was the false idols that he warned of. Anyway, his ways weren’t going to make his human children happy. He wanted them to cherish life, and then turned around and didn’t give them the freedoms to do so. Other religions, they have it closer to being right, as far as

we're concerned. Wicca, for example. If it doesn't harm anyone, live your life. I'm paraphrasing, of course."

Lila's voice was calmer too, as she asked, "I have studied a few religions. I was searching, like so many do. That always got to me, the ones that want you to live a significant life. Go out and discover things."

Carver left them, his legs uncrossing and then carrying him to the door. They all watched for his return and were surprised when he carried a rock into the house and set it between them on one of the pizza boxes. "This is God and Goddess. Goddess helped God make the world. She cared for the creatures, the trees, all the living things while God concentrated on the people and the oceans. He loved the oceans, it was said. Anyway, this is a piece of them. They touched this, imbued it with their care and powers. So many people build these churches, when all they need to do is walk out into the forest. What forests are left, that is."

Lila was back to being all business, leaning forward to stare into their eyes, one, then the other. "What is the outcome? I mean, these angels you say are bad, and I'm not arguing that being as I've never met one, but you are acting like they want to, what? Destroy the world?"

"Worlds, dear," Carver said flatly. "The universe, all the worlds on it, planets, all of it. Bring all the humans back to heaven and sort them out there. Some, they'll let have a beautiful afterlife, but the others, they'll be imprisoned for

eternity. But the souls will return to Heaven and then God can come back and pat them on the wings, or whatever.”

Lila sat back hard, stunned. She’d asked the question, but it was obvious she didn’t expect the answer.

None of them did. Mal was nearly speechless, but he managed, “And you?”

“Fix it. Finally show humans that there is something to look forward to, yes, there is an afterlife, but to also live the life they were given. Take care of the earth, revere it, and the animals, and the trees, the stones, all of it. Live in harmony. We may sound like we want some... utopia, but at least give them a chance. Delve into the conflicts that religion started, people of differing skin color, all of it. Oh, it won’t be perfect and it’s not supposed to be. Humans are good, if given the chance to be. Not being able to feed their families, they steal. So, feed them! Killing one another over senseless things, all of it. Jealousy, greed, all that they fight for.”

Mal was rightfully struck silent then. All of them were. It came down to the fact that one side wanted to save the world, the other to destroy it.

“It’s the Goddess, right? She loves the world.”

Oliver whispered, “More than you can know.”

“We’re pitting God against his ex-wife? Isn’t that some kind of Dr. Phil shit?”

Carver laughed heartily as he investigated one of the pizza boxes to snag another piece. “This food, it’s a great example of

human ingenuity. Castles, I like them too. Farms are my favorite. Planting, reaping, feeding the masses. It's all too good to waste."

"They'd be thrown in prisons, those like my father, that prefer to grow things and eat them instead of eating flesh. It's against God, they think. They have bought in to more of the twisted lies in the bible than man has."

"Okay, enough with the man, mankind shit. How about more people or humans in those sentences, because, the way that sounds, is that you also believe in the patriarchy?"

"No," Oliver said, laughing nervously. "My grandmother would come through to this dimension and have my head. Like we told you, she was the first woman and definitely the first feminist."

"I know. We sound bitter. We were for a very long time. If we could reunite the Goddess with her God, and then let them shine on the worlds again, that would truly be our goal. It's just... impossible. No one knows where God went to."

"People have had to create their own miracles," Draven said in a voice that sounded far away from the room. He saw everyone staring at him and explained, "We were told that."

"It's true, and you've done it. Medicine, technology. Oh, you've made a mess of a lot, but you can cure things, you can fix things, build things. You're marvelous," Carver said, and his laughter was pure joy. "Oh, I, like my husband, hated humans for a long time. Adam and his family treated me so badly, but then I had my twins, and they were more human

than Ren. I'm sorry, we do try to keep to our recent names. It's easier not to slip in front of people and give ourselves away. Anyway, my twins were sweet creatures, and they were mostly human. I learned a lot from them."

"They lived a long time," Oliver told the group. "With the bit of angel in them, they lived a long life. Happy, from what I got to see of them. They lived in a small village of the other children of the world, and married, had children, raised them. They were happy. I truly loved them."

"Where are they now?" Draven asked. "I mean, if Heaven is losing all these souls, is there a hell?"

Oliver sighed, "There is, but it's nothing like you've imagined, or have been told. It's here, and in the other dimension. Those that are truly evil, those that hurt others with no thought of the pain they cause, they are sent to a place where they will never see anyone ever again. It's... I'd say another dimension still. It's lonely. There are no chances of those souls to recharge anything."

Carver sat forward, his bare feet planting on the ground. "Remember when it came up that we thought the angels were power hungry?"

"Yes," Mal answered for them.

"My dear husband thinks they're secretly trying to take over Heaven."

"Like they're not really trying to get God back?"

“Yes. If you finally have freedom to do as you please instead of only being obedient, have massive amounts of power to use how you’d like...”

That frightened him. “But we’re... more powerful, right?”

Carver winked at him cheekily as he smiled. “We are.”

Oliver held up a hand as he cautioned, “Whoa, now. There are a lot of them. And, with the help of Draven’s former colleagues, and the weapons made from Michael’s sword, we are still vulnerable. We can’t depend on our powers alone. We need stealth, cunning, and we need to get Lucifer and the others back here, permanently.”

Mal’s eyes shifted right to Carver, and he saw it there, the pain of being apart from the love of his very long life. “I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Hold on, Mal,” Lila squealed. “You’re already in danger!”

“I’ll always be!”

Carver stopped the two from yelling with a soothing voice after he stood from the couch and stood over the two of them. “We’ll keep you safe, my child.”

He said it, the words, and he was a child again, wishing for the love of a parent. “Tell me about... my...”

“Father?”

“Yes.”

Lila had sunk back into the cushions. The room went quiet again. Mal waited, knowing Carver would let him down, but it

was the opposite. “We’ll meet with him soon. He’s watched you, pained, as you grew. He hated having you hurt in any way, but it did make you a better man. And it kept you safe. You see, Malakai, if he’d met with you even once, the angels would have known. But he did watch over you.”

“Then why didn’t he... help me?”

Oliver answered from his place on the couch. “He did. In little ways, that wouldn’t catch any attention from those winged bastards, as my father loves to call them.”

“Your boyfriend, that terrible man, he was enraged with you many times, but your father soothed him. He tried to do what he could. He loves you very much, as he does his other children.”

Another blow that came out of nowhere. He felt the need to vomit again but refused to show that kind of weakness in front of Draven. “I have...”

“Siblings. Two. Older than you are by a few years.”

Carver chuckled and added, “If two hundred years is a few.”

“It’s a little to us, Father.”

“Well...”

Mal felt another panic attack coming, and instead of Lila helping him, Draven took his hand and suggested they go into the kitchen.

Alone.

When Draven made that clear, Lila stiffened in worry for him, but Mal nodded at her, and she silently gave her consent. She stayed behind with the others, even though Mal knew she hated it.

He explained that to Draven. “Don’t try to kidnap me. Lila would likely tear up the world to find me.”

“I get that! Yeah, she’s a little tense when it comes to you.” They sat at the table, and Draven shyly glanced over at him. “I can’t say I blame her.”

“Tell me the truth. Was it me or the job in general?”

He chuckled dryly, like he hated the question, but when he answered, Mal knew it was truthful. “I hope I don’t come off bad, being I would like to, I don’t know, get to know you better. It was both. I was not meant to kill, no matter what my supposed destiny was. I hated it. I didn’t know the people, but the recon on them said they were bad, so I believed I was doing the right thing. Still, I hated it.”

“Thanks for not blowing smoke up my ass.”

“Mal, I like you. We just met. I tried to kill you, or I was at least contemplating it hard, but we have a bit of a sixth sense. I felt this coming off you, good and sweet and you... I know you’re changing because of your powers, but you’re so hot I kind of want to scream when I look at you. Shallow?”

“A bit,” he said, laughing. “You do realize you’re pretty hot, too?”

“I’m not terrible to look at, fine. If it was just looks, though, I don’t think either of us would be here right now. Do you?”

“No,” he said flatly. “I must have sixth sense too, or whatever. I feel goodness from you as well. I just don’t know how great it is to start... something in this environment.”

“That’s... insightful. But let’s unpack that. Do you think life, for you at the very least, is ever going to be calm? I mean, you’re a target. I am. We may be running forever. How do we get to that part of life that allows us to explore what might be between us?”

“We don’t.” It hurt him to say or even think. All the years with Dutch and before, and all he’d wanted was to be with someone that loved him. To have a first kiss, a first date, to sit on a couch and cuddle as they watched a romantic movie. All the things he’d dreamed, though, were impossible. Especially with Draven.

Draven, eyes slammed shut as he winced, and Mal felt worse, knowing that he’d hurt Draven.

When he recovered enough to open his incredible eyes again, they locked with his. “I don’t accept that.”

Straightening, Mal was speechless. He knew his mouth was hanging open, but for some reason, he couldn’t close it.

“Our lives may be crazy, nothing like anyone else, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t find something more. What good is life, especially one like yours that will last millennia if you can’t have more?”

“You’re... you’re not wrong, but what about that? You’re going to live a regular life. Me? I get to watch you die someday and then miss you forever after that. How is that fair? To either of us, how is that fair?”

From the doorway, Lila broke in, like she was known to do. “Life, no matter the length of it, isn’t fair, Mal. Not even for immortals with great powers.” She went into the kitchen and joined them at the table, apologizing for interrupting. “Listen, I should have kept my ass on that couch, but then, I thought, Mal’s gonna fuck something up. And I was right.”

Mal smiled and tried not to laugh. “You thought I’d tell him something I shouldn’t.”

“Yeah, well, that’s true, but what I overheard—and again, sorry about that, but not really sorry—was worse.”

He’d thought that he’d made an adult decision, now that he’d thought it out, which wasn’t easy. He was in the center of learning what he was, everything about himself, but his mind could do more than one thing, it seemed. Half of the time he was thinking about Draven.

“Lila, it’s so hard.”

“Love shouldn’t be easy, Mal. If you’re not fighting for it, then you lose track of what there is that’s so great about it. Believe me, Mal, something important is always hard.”

Lila walked away then, leaving a room of silent contemplation. That didn’t last, however, as Draven’s seat was

pushed back with a terrible scream of the wood legs against the tile and he was up, moving toward Mal menacingly.

For only a moment, Mal was afraid, and then his hair was in Draven's fist, his head pulled back, and Draven was kissing him, full-mouthed, deeply, passionately, with his tongue caressing hard against Mal's, his other hand cupping Mal's jaw, and not gently. He was no longer afraid, he was terrified, but not of Draven physically hurting him.

Draven was telling Mal he was going to win him over whether Mal gave in easily or not.

When he backed off the kiss, he walked out of the room, leaving Mal alone to swoon like an idiot, but he felt the smile before he knew he was going to make it and it fit the moment.

The kiss was even better than what he remembered from outside of that bar, and it was better in other ways, too. He knew Draven a bit, knew what he was, knew he wanted Mal for more than what he could get from a one-night stand.

Before he could let the smile retract any, Oliver entered the room, heading right to the bottle of wine. "I need this badly right now. Hearing my father talk about the old days..."

Able to recover a bit, he asked, "There are a lot of old days in his past. Which ones?"

"Oh! Well, the Middle Ages. He used to have a blast back then. Now he worries so about being caught on someone's camera phone."

Mal was glad he wasn't there to hear it. Carver seemed like he could go on and on with a story. "Oliver... how do you deal with... relationships?"

Oliver finished pouring the wine, twisting the bottle before he pulled it from the glass. Once it was on the counter, he joined Mal at the table. "Draven?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes."

Mal laughed and realized he never hid his emotions well. "I thought I'd be better at disguising what was happening in my head now that I have a new face."

"Not a new face, Mal. That face was always there. That's something you never asked about. Yet anyway."

"About my face... yeah... what's up with that?"

"We keep you all as hidden as possible for as long as possible. When your last close human relative dies, whether we're ready to reveal you or not, it starts to happen. It's a spell, so to speak, that we place on them. They hold your powers and your true self inside them. It's very complicated, but there it is."

"And the ugly face was your way of hiding me?"

"Not my idea, and to be fair, no one is truly ugly when they have such goodness."

"Nice try. I get it, I guess, but it was thirty years of being overlooked at best and bullied at worst. Maybe, in the future,

try another tactic to hide the Nephilim.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter Eighteen



image-placeholder

CARVER CALLED FOR MORE food as the sun rose over the windowsill. Lila was asleep on the window seat, snoring quietly, and Mal was trying, and failing, not to steal glances of Draven.

Each time he failed; he saw Draven wasn't looking his way. Mal wasn't sure if he ever would again. Despite his protests that he'd fight for Mal, he was acting terribly aloof.

Carver, however, wasn't. "When Ren, or Oliver as we call him now, was around two, my sister, Bala, came to see me. She had had enough of her parents, and I couldn't blame them. And remember, before you gross out, as the kids say□"

"They don't say that anymore, Father," Oliver corrected him.

He didn't seem to notice, "I was not her true brother. Still, I saw her being born, and watched her smiles until she was barely walking. That's when I left, you see. She wasn't like the others. Smiles, oh they were her finest point. Even in the depths of her anguish, she could find things to smile about."

“Father, you’re rambling,” Oliver teased.

“Oh! Sorry. Well, little Oliver was a precocious child. I think he gets that from Morning Star. He used his powers very early, scaring his aunt often. When the twins were born, he turned them both into the strangest purple plants.”

Oliver giggled. “I hated not being the center of attention. I still hate that, thinking about it.”

Mal loved their banter and closeness. It made him jealous. “How did their mother take that?”

“You can imagine. She was furious. When I... told her we could no longer live as man and wife, she didn’t raise an eyebrow. I think part of it was the constant worry that he’d turn them into something else. I visited her often, though, and the children, they were wonderful. A boy and girl.”

“What were their names?” Mal asked, fully invested in the story.

It was Draven who answered, “Kaul and Elize.”

Mal’s head spun to him. “You said you didn’t know these stories.”

“I didn’t know their origin. They’re the... Adam and Eve, if you will, of the hunters. They’re said to have been the earliest couple that possessed powers like we have. I never knew they were Cain’s children. I don’t think any of them do, but I’m not even sure of that anymore. The elders know things we don’t.”

“Well, then, I’m glad their legacy lives on, but not in that respect,” Carver groaned. “Why must my lovely children be

the start of those that want to kill us all?”

“You left them, Father. Oh, I know it was Bala that actually left, but if she had no future with you, why stay?”

“She didn’t go far, and I did visit weekly. I watched my children grow, and we all loved one another tremendously. Still, it was their descendants that turned back to the others, and therefore, worshiped as they did. I’m sure that is what changed them.”

“How did a man...? I mean, you had Oliver.”

“I was passed out for most of it, but he came as my stomach split apart. I wasn’t the last man that gave birth either. Not counting those trans men now, you understand, who are valid. I’m not one of those stuck in the old ways!”

Oliver proudly told them, “Father is very progressive. He believes that everyone should chase that which makes them happy, fulfilled. It’s one of the things he wishes for the world. If everyone lived their truths, without fear of judgement or hatred, it would be a better place.”

“Now *you’re* rambling, son, but thank you.”

Draven got up to pace, snapping at them, “These trips down memory lane aren’t going to stop the hunters when they come in force.”

“In force?” Mal asked, getting up and finally looking Draven straight in the eyes. “When?”

“They’ll know soon that Iokua is dead. We need to leave here.”

“Yes, we do, but you and Lila can’t leave the way we can. The others are disposing of the body now, and then we’ll have a few come to extract us all together. Unless you want to be away from Malakai,” Carver said.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Carver sneered at Draven. “If it was up to me, we’d have left already. We can leave easily, but humans can’t.”

The moment he knew that Draven really did care for him was then. When he pleaded, “Take him! I’d rather he lives than for you all to worry about me!”

The three of them froze, all staring at him until he yelled, “What?”

Oliver and Carver both stood, and when they began to walk away, Oliver whispered to Mal, “He’s marvelous.”

Being left alone with him, Draven turned to stare out of the window, over the tired lump that was Lila. Mal felt his heart beating quickly, and for once, it wasn’t a panic attack.

“Draven...”

“Don’t. This is... all wrong. It feels wrong.”

“It feels right, and you know that. Draven, why would you want me to throw you to the wolves?”

“Maybe I deserve it.” Turning to Mal, but keeping his face turned away from him, he continued, “I hurt people. I might have hurt you.”

“But you didn’t. If you want to fight for me, then fight. Don’t let me be taken away and never see you again.”

“You don’t want me fighting for you.”

“Maybe I do. I don’t know. I’m going through so much right now. I’m dealing with being something that is powerful and wonderful but seen as terrible. I have people wanting me dead, for what I was born to be! Then... I see you. I see you caring for me, wanting to save me, and it helps. It helps with all this confusion and fear that is plaguing the hell out of me right now!”

Draven was in front of him again, holding him, and Mal thought he would be kissed again, but that wasn’t what happened at all. He knew soon enough as Draven’s embrace became something more.

He was tackled to the ground, Draven on top of him, and he heard the shattering of all the glass in the house, heard a screaming that was higher pitched than anything he’d ever heard, and he felt the entire world trembling.

Then, he had hands on him, pulling him to his feet. The face he’d seen come out of the darkness was there, and before he had time to react to that, the voice came into his head. “Surrender now!”

“Malakai, son, we have to leave!”

“Who... aren’t you my father?”

He knew it was not the time, but he was confused and then he remembered Draven. He looked down at the floor and saw

him there, glass sticking out of his back, blood coloring each piece crimson red. “Draven!”

Oliver and Carver were there, pulling Lila off the floor. She, too, had glass in her and was unconscious.

“Suriel, get him to the meeting place,” Oliver screamed, and then they were gone.

The ruckus was silent, the house gone, and all he saw for a moment was blue sky. It was disorienting, and it brought terror into him, but then things changed again and he was somewhere else.

There was a sea, a rock wall, waves slamming on the shore below it. Birds were screeching overhead, and the sky rumbled with thunder. Mal lost his balance completely and fell to the hard cement. The coolness of it welcome, as he was hot, so hot he felt like his skin might start on fire.

“Malakai? Are you okay?”

He turned his head to see the face again, that face that had come so brilliantly out of the darkness what seemed like years before, though it was weeks. “Who are you?”

“I think you know now. Come, we must get you into the house.”

“House?”

As he was helped to his feet, Malakai was turned to see what looked like a castle wall with stained glass doors so tall they could fit a man standing on another’s shoulders. They were opened by someone in a black suit and he was rushed

inside them, then quiet took over once again and he was set into a comfortable loveseat near a fireplace that was thankfully cold.

“What’s happening?”

His voice was no louder than a sparrow’s and his body was shaking, though he was so hot. “We had to get you out of there. They’d found you.”

“Who found me? What’s happening?” Before those questions of his could be answered, more came into his mind as it started to wake from the sudden trauma. “Where are the others? Lila! Draven, Oliver, Carver, where are they?”

“They’re on their way, but we had to move everyone separately.”

“Separately? They said you couldn’t move humans like that, what I’m assuming you just did to me!”

“We can. It’s just not good for them.”

His entire body exploded in fury, and he rose from the loveseat, screaming, “What? It’s not good for them?”

Suriel’s voice was calm, and Mal was sure it was to try to stop his panic. “It’s preferable to death, Malakai. Oliver and Carver were being cautious, afraid to upset you at all. They waited too long, so it will be necessary to hurt them some. From what I saw, they likely won’t notice.”

“They were stabbed by all that glass! What the hell happened? I thought hunters couldn’t penetrate the spells.”

“Malakai, sit, please. They’re bringing you food. You’ll need it. Your magic has been sapped from the trip.”

“Trip? We disappeared and reappeared! It’s like the movies or something!”

He did sit, though, because his legs refused to hold him.

Before Suriel could answer, the man in the black suit came back into the room, holding a tray of food and orange juice. “Sir,” he said as he set it on the coffee table.

“Thank you, Joshua,” Suriel said to him, and then the man was gone again, through more tall doors.

The room was lined in bookshelves, and on those shelves were books and crystals, some in the shapes of pyramids, some spheres, other’s rough and stabbing upward from the main rock.

The wood was dark, rich, and the floors matched them where there weren’t soft colored rugs. “Where the fuck are we?”

“Italy,” he answered simply.

Mal groaned as his head fell back on the cushion. “My first time ever being out of the country, and it was this way.” After righting his head and staring into the man he both longed for and hated at once, he asked, “Where are they?”

“Joshua just told me they’re here.”

He started to get up but was too dizzy to do it. “Where?”

“Upstairs. They’re being healed.”

“Healed? By?”

“Oliver, I believe.”

He remembered Oliver lamenting that he couldn't heal the wound made from the little knives Iokua had thrown at him. “You can't heal wounds made from Michael's sword... and it's kids or whatever.”

He chuckled and sat next to Mal, handing him a glass of the orange juice. “Drink. You need your strength back. Then we'll go check on them.”

That was all the incentive he needed. He ate toast with the most delicious jam he'd ever had and drank three glasses of juice while Suriel stared at him. That made him uncomfortable as hell, but all he could think about was getting to his friends.

When he'd finished, he stared at his empty glass with the pulp clinging to it. “You're my father.”

“Yes. And, I know you have a million questions for me, but □”

“No,” he said flatly. “I don't have a lot of questions because Oliver and Carver answered them. No, I'm sorry, Ren and Cain answered them. I have statements. A lot of them. Like, gee Dad, thanks for abandoning me directly after my conception, and killing my mother!”

Suriel flinched like Mal was going to hit him, but whispered, “I deserve all that.”

“Yeah, you do, and a lot more. Right now, I need to see Lila and Draven.”

He stood on his own and did feel better, though he still felt hot. He charged to the doors but realized he didn't know where he was going. "Are you coming?"

"Yes, of course."

They went through the doors and Mal found himself in an extravagant foyer, a twisting dark stairway leading upward from marble floors and a crystal covered chandelier that hung low but gave off little light.

"Up the stairs," Suriel directed.

They walked them together, quietly, though the sound of Mal's sneakers made a slapping sound that unnerved him.

They passed closed doors down a long hall, but before that, he heard Lila. He smiled as he heard her voice, screaming and using every curse word he knew and a few he'd never thought were curses but she made them so.

"If you don't get the angelic fuck away from me and take me to my half-angelic fucking winged motherfucking friend, I'll tear off your head and take a menstrual heavy piss down the goddamned cloud fucking hole!"

When he rounded the corner to see into the room, he saw her red faced and standing, pointing a finger in Joshua's face.

"Ma'am... I... I'm not an angel!"

"It's fine, Joshua," Suriel said to him as he walked into the room.

It was obvious Lila was about to tear into him next, but then she saw Mal and ran over to him. They hugged tightly, and Mal felt tears in his eyes. He hadn't realized before that moment how worried he was about Lila. "I thought you were dead," she said to him.

"I thought the same."

Lila pulled back, wiping off her tears with the back of her hand. "I woke up here, freaking out. I didn't mean to make that guy feel bad. I thought he was one of them." Her head turned, suddenly noticing Suriel. "Who the fuck are you?"

"This is my father," Mal explained in a dulled voice. "We've just met."

"Oh, really?" She moved to stand right in front of Suriel and poked his chest. "You have a fuck lot of explaining to do."

Suriel moved his head to see Mal to ask, "Does she always use this kind of language?"

"Yes."

Lila started in again, "You don't show up for him all his life, but now I suppose you want all kinds of credit for rescuing him from whatever the fuck just happened, but let me tell you, angel *fuck*, it's not gonna work!"

"I don't expect forgiveness or credit. This isn't at all the way I wanted to meet him. I stayed away because of what just happened, and that may not seem like a good excuse, but you see what can happen."

“What did happen?” Mal asked, pulling Lila back to him.
“What was all that?”

“Angels.” He moved his eyes to Lila and corrected, “Angel fucks.”

She ghosted a smile and then returned to her resting bitch face.

“When hunters need them, they have an... incantation to summon them. With the death of one of their own and the other missing, as I understand it, they must have thought they needed angel power. They got it. Angels, at least the higher chorus, don’t miss a beat with the protection spells that were around the beach house. They blew in the windows while taking them from the fences. That home is no longer safe for you.”

“Well, that’s a surprise,” he commented sarcastically.

Lila pulled Mal to the bed and made him sit for the rest of the conversation. The room was cozy and done in earthen colors, which helped him to calm down. The quilt on the bed was rose gold colored and silk, and Lila pushed him on it, then sat close to him.

“We need to see Draven.”

“I know, Mal. I asked, and he’s supposedly fine, but Oliver and Carver are with him.”

Just then, that didn’t help.

“I’ll take you to him in a moment, I promise, but for now, know that this was dangerous. Bringing humans this way is

never good for them. It takes a lot from them, but Oliver and Carver did heal them both.”

Mal looked behind Lila to see her shirt torn to shreds and blood stains there, but pulling it up a little, he saw no signs of wounds. “You look okay.”

“I felt terrible when I woke up, but now I’m good. I guess it worked.”

“I’m glad.”

Suriel sighed, and vowed, “I’ll never, ever, let those bastards get that close to you again. They would have killed the humans and, if they had enough angels, or the sword, they could have killed you all.”

Mal heard that and knew it was true, but it didn’t stop the anger or pain he felt then, being in the same room as his father. “Can you take us to Draven and then leave us alone for a while? I have a lot...”

“To process. I understand. I’ll be here, though, when you’re ready.”

They turned down the hall and farther up came to another room that was similar to the one where Lila had been. Draven was sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands until he heard them coming in the door and he looked up, lifting from the bed to embrace them both.

“I thought...”

“We know. Us too.”

He pulled back and touched Mal's face lightly. "This was why I wanted us gone."

"You should have told me."

"I... was scared. But we're fine, it seems."

Lila nodded and then made Draven spin around so she could see his back. "You, too. All healed."

He touched his shoulder and said, "Except this. They still couldn't heal this, but I'm okay."

"What is all this? I mean, we barely figure out what you are, Mal, and then we're here, being chased by actual angels."

"What Oliver and Carver said must be true. It confirms it. The hunters are working with them, and they're after us."

Draven shut the doors so they could speak alone. "I could have told you that. There are spells, I told you that part."

"Still," Lila said with a dry chuckle. "How much do you believe of all this shit? Mal and me, we're new at this."

"Sorry. Crash course for you two." He took the stool from the vanity and brought it over and sat on it while Mal and Lila sat on the floor. "Listen, we transported here on Nephilim power. Nephilim power leaves a mark. These? They're powerful and old, so I'm sure there are protections in place, but I don't suggest we stay here long."

There was only one problem with that. "My father is here. My real father."

"That was him, wasn't it? Suriel."

Lila's face turned to angry stone. "That son-of-a-bitch."

"Lila, he's trying. I'm angry too, believe me, but I'm hurt and upset right now. When I can get past that, I do want to try."

"I understand, Mal. Can't he go with us to somewhere else? Somewhere safer?"

"I'll ask. I think I need a few hours with him. Find out why he'd sacrifice my mother for me to be born. I get Nephilim, to them, are super important, but to sacrifice her and the other mothers, it's just not right."

"I agree," Draven said in a soothing voice. "It's one of the biggest reasons I was okay with doing what I did. I thought they were all evil for that exact thing."

"It's not a great trait," he agreed. "Let me talk to him, Oliver, and Carver. I need to know what's going to happen. I need to know that they're finally done with the sacrifices and then we'll figure it out from there."

They were both nodding, though he could tell each of them had something more to say. None of it, he reasoned, was likely very nice.

When he found his father outside the door of the room, he asked if he'd heard their conversation.

"I didn't need to. I feel it from Draven and Lila, the anger, and fear. Mostly the fear. I get that, I do, and I'm so very sorry for all of it. If I didn't believe in all this so much, I'd have never brought you all into it."

“You didn’t bring them into it. I did. Well, Draven was set on his own course, but I think he’d have left with or without me. I need to talk to you, Oliver, and Carver. I need to set things right for them... and my dead mother.”

With his amazing eyes widening, Suriel seemed to be struck speechless, which was why he’d added it all. He didn’t want an argument or any kind of fake agreement.

“I’ll gather them in the library. The room you first saw. Do you remember how to get there?”

“I’ll find it.”

Chapter Nineteen



image-placeholder

SEATED THERE, MAL'S ENTIRE body was so stiff it was starting to hurt. He couldn't help it, though, seeing the three of them there. The two Nephilim and an angel, sitting across from him on a couch, the three of them stiff, all wearing suits. Mal expected Suriel to be in some kind of robes or something, but he was in a cream-colored suit that only made his pale skin whiter.

A breeze blew in from two open windows, letting in the scent of ocean air, only it was a little different from the smell near his old beach house. The ocean changed with the position it was in the world, he guessed.

Just like people.

“Malakai, listen□”

“I'm Mal. You wouldn't know that, you know, never meeting me before.”

His head lowered and Carver pleaded, “Please, Mal, your animosity towards him is understandable, surely, but he's suffered at not being with you. He's suffered greatly.”

Mal laughed harshly, barking it out as his mind wove that into the mix. “Really? I’ve been here! I’ve always been here. You know who’s not here? My mother! You know, Lila found her diary, and it said plainly in there she’d changed her mind.”

“I didn’t know, Mal,” Suriel whispered, his eyes barely meeting Mal’s in a show of complete guilt and pain. “I thought she’d consented. Her mother was... very loyal to the cause, and some may say too loyal. It painted everything she did. If we’d have known that, if I’d have known how fervently Constantina wanted this, wanted this to be her legacy, I would have known it was wrong.”

He shook his head, thinking how it was all being pushed onto his grandmother, but then he realized. “Constantina... she was the one who wanted this?”

“Yes,” Carver said. “Mal, we don’t go around impregnating helpless women! We’re not rapists.”

He was at a loss. “What are you saying?”

“Constantina wanted to be a mother to a Nephilim. Her family, from far back, has been a family that was dedicated to our cause. In 1846, one of Constantina’s great-grandmothers had her, then gave birth to a Nephilim. From there, it was the goal of the family to create as many as possible.”

“They sound like a cult, like we first thought.”

“For them,” Oliver explained, “It was very cult-like behavior. Believe me, we don’t recruit for great numbers. We find those that are lost, that need some kind of purpose. Many

times, Malakai, we've had women that volunteer because they're already sick. Many have little time to live and want to leave something in the world that will let them live on, and that is children for a lot of them. Others just want peace."

"Why didn't you tell me that before, when we were talking about all that?"

"We had a lot to tell you," Oliver said, then backtracked. "No excuses. I understand that you must be feeling terribly protective after the fact of your dear mother. We should have told you."

Feeling better about that, at least, he relaxed his stiff shoulders. "Fine. You try to pick people that want to do it."

"No, we only do," Oliver corrected him. "They must give consent, but we understood now that your mother didn't after all. Her mother flogged her with it. Constantina wasn't a good person, though we know it wasn't her fault. It was what she was raised with, and it just continued a chain until only one child was born to that line and Constantina sacrificed her only child."

"I'm glad now that I won't be in her home. I'd like to burn it to the ground."

Suriel was staring, waiting to say something, but Mal spoke first. "So, if I forgive you for that, why should I forgive that you never had a presence in my life? Do you even know what you left me with?"

“I thought I was leaving you with your grandmother. This was before we knew she coerced your mother. When Rose ran, then met George, again, we thought it would be fine. They loved each other deeply, so I assumed he’d treat her son with love, too. I was wrong. I was wrong on so many counts and I don’t expect forgiveness.”

“Good,” Mal said, though his vehemence was a tad less. “I’m not exactly ready to forgive.”

“Kids,” Carver sighed. “The hardest thing out of all the hardships of the world. Love, too, I suppose.”

“Parents, too,” Mal said to him. “Bio parents or not, they’re difficult as well.”

“That’s true, Malakai,” Cain agreed flatly. “I had trouble with mine too, as I’ve told you.”

Mal made up his mind then, and told the three, “I want a place that’s safe for Draven, Lila. and me. I want to see you, Suriel, often, but I don’t want you staying there. I need to think about all of this, and I need a break from it, too.”

“I can imagine, Mal,” Suriel whispered. “You’ve been through so much in such a short time. I know of a place. It’s back in the states, so you won’t feel foreign to the people, but the town itself is protected from the hunters. If they don’t find you, the angels won’t.”

“Why? Why aren’t the angels able to see us?”

Carver answered that. “We’re more powerful than they are, and we have our own spells to cloak ourselves with. From the

moment you were conceived you were cloaked. When you are coming into your powers, another cloak is needed. The necklace we gave you, it's your cloak, Malakai."

Mal touched the wings of the pendant. "I thought it was my powers."

"No. They come naturally, as we said, when your last relative is gone. Some never know of their powers, some are in their fifties. Lines of succession only, of course. No one would get their powers if we made it to where someone that was your great-great aunt's child's child was counted."

He laughed a little, but he felt no actual humor. "I can see that, I guess."

The room, the smell of the ocean, the need for more, though the inability to take more, it hurt him. He felt like he was in a meat grinder and even the ground meat was being put back inside the top to be ground again.

"How long will we be here? Draven doesn't think it's safe. I know that you all and his former people don't get along, but I trust him."

As a smile spread on his face, Oliver said, "I envy you. Someday, I hope to find a good man."

"You're gay? Are all Nephilim?"

"No, but we are plentiful."

"I'm not. I love human women," Suriel said. "If I didn't think you'd destroy me in a blink, I'd get to know your friend. She's... extraordinary for a human."

Mal sat up proudly. “She’s great, but don’t go near her.”

Suriel smiled as he ducked his head. “I would never. I respect you all too much. I hope you know that.”

Still not in the best of humor with any of them, he said, simply, “Good.”

Carver answered the initial question finally. “You can stay here until you’re ready to leave. The next place won’t be near the ocean, and I get the feeling you’ve become fond of it.”

“I don’t care where I am. Just so long as it has a bed and it’s safe.”

“I think we can arrange what you need. Thank you, for... your goodness, Malakai,” Carver said, sincerely. “Your life, you could have become jaded to the point of striking out, and instead, you are nothing but good.”

He stood and a power surged through him. He thought he’d finally accepted what he was, and he wanted to embrace it. “I’m not that good. I’ll hurt any of you or anyone else who tries to mess with my life again or tries to hurt my friends.”

“Speaking of which, Mal,” Suriel said as he rose to face him. “You have others that could be in danger. Your adopted father, his family, your friends back in your hometown...”

“Keep them safe. All of them. No one else will be hurt because of me.”

They were taken again with the magic of the Nephilim, in one place for a moment, then they were in a completely different place. Their phones were gone, left back at the beach

house in Maine, but they were given one phone with one number in the contacts.

Suriel and Oliver had been the ones to take he and Lila, respectively. Draven was there a few moments later with Carver.

That was when Mal could take a breath and look around while the others helped the drained and groggy Draven and Lila into the cabin.

They were in the woods, and he knew not to ask where. They wouldn't tell them, telling him it was safer. The cabin was nice, but basic, leather couches with colorful blankets folded over the backs which he used to cover each of them after he helped them lie on the sofas.

He saw a set of swinging doors, short, hung in the middle of the doorway, like a saloon, and suddenly, a tall drink of old-fashioned whiskey sounded like heaven, but he had to keep his senses sharp.

Pushing through them, he smiled a little, seeing the wood stove and big fridge, a short counter with shelves under and over it, holding cooking pans and eating ware. A hanging pendant lamp with a bright white glass shade cast a soft glow over the round table and wood chairs.

There was a door on the other end of the kitchen that led outside, and he went to it, opening it to look outside into the night, the soft hum of a generator coming from a shed twenty feet from the door.

It was completely self-contained. He doubted many humans knew of its existence, let alone hunters or angels.

He wondered how quickly they could recover and leave.

When he went back into the kitchen, he found some food in the wooden locker that was on the left of the fridge and took two cans of soup to the stove. After making a fire, he put them into a pan and checked on his friends.

Lila was asleep, but Draven was sitting up with the blanket around his shoulders. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Draven croaked, his voice strained. “That shit... man, it takes it out of me.”

“Sorry. Hopefully, next time we move it won’t be that way.”

“Next time? I thought they said it was safe here.”

Mal joined him on the couch and leaned over his knees, trying to find the right way to say what he was thinking. “I don’t trust them. Not completely, and I know we all get this overwhelming feeling that they’re truly good, and maybe they are, but on that slim chance that they aren’t, I have to protect the two of you.”

“Don’t change all this to protect us, Mal. I don’t want you in harm’s way to protect me, and knowing that lady on the couch over there, she’s likely to tear off your face.”

“She would,” he said, laughing quietly. He gazed over at the best friend he could ever have and was even more sure of his thoughts. “Draven, we discussed the fact that they may be using some kind of magic to make us think they’re the good

guys, but one thing I knew from a long time ago is, not everything is black and white. There are really no good guys or bad guys, not really. The bad guys have moments of good and the good guys, well, we're the good guys in my book and the three of us are flawed."

"I have to admit to thinking the same. I mean...I thought all my life that the hunters were the good guys, fighting for God, Heaven, angels, all that, only to realize for myself that was bullshit. To see the elders, you don't see a bunch of men and women living their glory for saving the world, or whatever. They're broken, body and soul. That reeks from them."

"For me, it was the fact that Oliver and Carver acted like the hunters and angels were totally evil. For me, that makes no sense. Maybe the hunters were all brainwashed. Like you, there is hope to get through to them. Perhaps neither side has the best interests of the world at heart. Maybe they're both in that gray area, and I'm being groomed to fight for one side that isn't any better than the other. Or maybe I'm just afraid. Either way, until I know the whole truth, I'm not fighting for either side."

"Where can we go? Where can we run?"

"You knew the runes and sigils on the fence were spells of protection. Oliver and Carver put up a cloak over Iokua's body. By the way, that name? Yours, for that matter."

"Like Malakai is so common?"

They laughed, and it felt good in the middle of all that tension. "Yeah, I guess. But Draven, Iokua?"

“They said we have an uncommon destiny, so we should have uncommon names. Would you be afraid of a guy named Joe?”

“If he made me feel like you do, yeah.”

Draven turned his head to Mal. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So, we go. I might know of a couple of places. I can do sigils and spells, yeah, maybe even find some that will hide us for both. It’s getting there that’s the problem.”

“I could zap us there, if I can figure out how to do it.”

“No! I’m done with that. If I buy a vehicle for us, I could do the spells on it. I could be the one to get out and fill up the tank, get us food.” He swallowed and let his head drop. “I can’t imagine how hard this is on you, Mal. And here you are, on this terror filled road trip around the world and you’re okay. You haven’t shattered.”

“I’m shattering on the inside, maybe. For now, I can’t let it out. Besides, if I shatter, what does that do? What does that look like? I might go crazy, and magic might shoot off me, hurting people. Until I know what my specific powers are, I need to hold it together.”

Draven moved his hand from under the blanket and grabbed Mal’s, squeezing it until Mal sat up and moved a couple of inches closer. “You, I felt good from Mal. I know you didn’t know magic at the time and couldn’t have possibly spelled that on me.”

“Ditto.”

“I knew magic. Not... like you can do. Be careful who you trust.”

“Right now, I trust you and her over there. That’s it.”

“I get it,” he said, and he squeezed Mal’s hand a little tighter. “Maybe I’m just after you for your heart.”

He laughed, feeling his face heating. “Yeah, well, it’s been broken and glued back a few times, so it’s not great.”

“Bullshit. You have a big one, and it’s perfect.”

Side-eyeing him, he saw Draven was serious. “Thanks. Right now, let’s get Lila to safety. Of the three of us, she’s the most vulnerable.”

“Wouldn’t take bets on that. She’s the toughest one of all of us.”

“That’s pretty true.”

Mal turned his face, looking at Draven dead on before he was overcome with need for the man. In the middle of everything, he shouldn’t so much as think about kissing him, about wanting him.

Not all things could be put off in the world they now lived, however. He saw the fire as much in Draven’s eyes as he felt in his own and leaned in, tentatively, as he’d always been, but Draven closed the distance, kissing him roughly, holding his head in place, deepening the kiss.

“Get a room,” a hoarse voice whispered to them.

The kiss stopped as they both began to laugh with embarrassment. And that was when Mal remembered the soup he'd started to heat. "Help her and I'm gonna get your food."

"Okay," he said, staring down with a goofy grin on his face. "Okay."

As they sat eating noisily, the slurping drowning out part of their conversation, Mal explained his thoughts to them.

"Away from them, I've been thinking more and more."

"Looks like you were thinking of getting laid," Lila commented between bites."

Again, Draven ducked his handsome head, but Mal lectured, "Lila, let me get through all this."

"Fine, fine," she said, but the twitching of the corners of her mouth said differently.

"I was telling Draven; I don't think this is a black and white thing. One truly good, the other bad. Why are we, on one side's word, throwing in with them? The longer I'm away from them, the more I feel it."

"Mal, that is very true, I'll give you that, but one side doesn't have hunters that call big time angels to come and smote people, or whatever the fuck it's called."

"Smote, smite. Those are the words they use," Draven confirmed.

"I get that. I do, and I think my dad, Carver, Oliver, I think they think they're doing the right thing, but think about it.

How do you make the world this great place? Everyone's happy, living their truths, no wars, no killings?"

"Take away free will," Draven whispered. "You don't think...?"

"I don't know what to think. I know, of the two, they seem like they're better, but not if they want to come and force everyone to be... fake happy. And destroying the world isn't an option either. Right here in this room are two amazing humans. If I have met two, then there are a million more at least. Not perfect, but good. So, yeah, I'm not dealing with that side unless I hear their goal is not that. But our supposed side? Is it better?"

"I wonder if that's why God left," Draven pondered aloud. "His loyal angels blamed humans for God's displeasure. Oh, I'm sure they blamed Lucifer and all the fallen, sure, but they think to wipe out the world, worlds rather, that God will return."

"I'm sure they hated us," Lila said as she set down her empty bowl on the wooden table. She had more color in her cheeks and was a little less shaky. "Just because some angels showed it, that doesn't mean that the rest didn't secretly loathe us, too. Why wouldn't they want to kill off the humans? That would make God return, in their minds, but it would also do away with their competition for his affection. It makes sense."

"It does," Mal agreed. "Then we've got the other side. They love humans, have lived among them, fallen for some, made weird, disjointed lives with them. But, they see the problems,

and want to fix that somehow. If they're led by fallen angels, those that remember how great it was in heaven, then why not make heaven on earth? What was the difference?"

"Free will," Draven said. "Jesus, can it be that simple?"

"Yeah, it could. Or we may just be simplifying it," Lila said, miserable. "I mean, I don't trust either side, to be truthful. But maybe there is one side we can get to."

"The side with my father."

Both watched him, ready for some breakdown, but he wouldn't have one. He felt stronger, and he thought it may be the powers he held that did it. Then again, maybe it was just him, emerging out of the sad, weak soul he'd been.

"We need to get to Mother Nature, or whatever," Lila said in a rush. She got up, pacing, though she wobbled a bit as she hadn't regained her strength yet. "Not trying to be a man hater, but all these men, they want to control everything. Control humans, heaven, all of it, but what about her?" She stopped to face them both. "Does she have a say in this?"

"We can't know that, and they wouldn't tell us," Mal agreed, gathering some of her excitement.

"Let's take a few days here," Draven continued with their thought train. "Mal, call Suriel while we're here. Get a feel for him. I know it'll be hard, being you want to know your real father, but sense things he's saying. Then, while he's not here, I'll hunt us down an RV, one I can drive. I'll get it ready. Protection spells for angels, hunters, and Nephilim. While

you're talking to him, see if you can't get out of him how we get in touch with the Goddess."

"That might not come easily."

"Spells..." Lila whispered, obviously off in her own thoughts.

"What, Lila?"

She locked eyes with him. "Spells! We were talking before about how other religions had the Goddess as part of them. Not all of them have died off. Witches! Wiccans, whatever, they worship the Goddess. They worship both but are more in touch with Her. If we can ask one how to do it, maybe some spell that calls Her, it's possible we can talk to Her and finally find out the truth."

"I'll go searching tomorrow, figure out where we are and then find a way to get to town so I can pick up some supplies that they didn't leave us, I'm sure. I can make some markings on my body, and Lila's. It's not foolproof, but it will throw them off, all of them."

"How?" Mal asked.

"Tattoos," Lila said, slapping Draven on the arm. "I may start to like you, after all."

"Well, miracles do still happen."

Chapter Twenty



image-placeholder

WHEN DRAVEN CAME OUT of the bathroom after his shower, Mal did a double-take to see what he'd thought he saw. Draven's long, beautiful hair was gone, completely, and his face was cleanly shaven.

“What the...?”

“Listen, spells and sigils, technology, all of that is good, but why not add a few good, old-fashioned precautions? Disguises are time tested.”

“To not always work, but I get the gesture. I guess I should, as well.”

Draven came to him, moving slowly, but with purpose. As he neared, he whispered huskily, “Don't you change a thing.”

“You like how I am?”

He ran the soft fist he'd made under Mal's jaw. “I like the stubble.”

“I never could grow a good beard. Maybe now, I can.”

“You'd be sexy with a beard.”

“I’m his beard,” Lila said as she entered the room. “Sorry, guys, small place and I have eaten half the kitchen. Now, I’m bored.”

Draven laughed silently, and Mal, for the first time since everything started, wanted to yell at his friend. “It’s okay, Lila. I thought I’d put a bell on you for just such occasions.”

“Tell me something. How are you two going to do this? Love on the run, sorta thing?”

Mal rolled his eyes hard, but he admitted to himself he’d wondered the same. “Lila...”

“Just asking. I think you two are a great couple. If Draven understands he can’t hurt you and live through it.”

“So, you’ve said.”

Lila looked him over and said, “I liked the hair, but this doesn’t suck.”

“Thanks... I think.”

“So, what are the plans?”

They let Lila in on all they’d spoken about while she was eating. She wasn’t skeptical, as Mal had thought. “You want to stay here for a month? That’s fine, so long as we can restock the kitchen and maybe get some books. I’ve looked all over and there are no books.”

“We can always ask our hosts. What kind of books?”

She sat as she contemplated. “They hate the bible, I get it, they come off badly in it, but I need one of those. I need some

books on angels. I doubt they'd let us have a computer, but ask for one, on the off chance. I need some Wiccan books. I know they likely won't let us have cell phones, but ask for at least one of those, too."

"Got it," Mal said as he memorized the list.

As Draven and Mal sat across from her, Draven listed, "Maybe some guns. I know, that's scary sounding, but we might need them. Ammunition, some clothes. We don't have a lot of things to wear. I need to get out of all this black."

"Are you still going to go to town?" Mal asked, suddenly terrified for him to do so.

The air got thin suddenly, and Draven answered quietly, "I am, but not until after we get a visit from your daddy. If he dropped in while I was gone, he would miss the extra human."

It felt ominous, having Suriel coming to see them. "If I knew when that was, it would help. I could call out to him, I guess, but will that work?"

"It might, so don't do it now. We have gone back and forth on heading out on our own. We need solid plans, so you're safe, Mal," Lila told him, her jaw tight.

The cabin was nice, comfortable, but he'd learned that anyplace wasn't great unless he felt safe, and the cabin, being theirs, didn't feel that way.

The log rails that led upstairs caught his eyes. Someone stripped off the bark and gave it a new purpose. He felt that

way, like a log, stripped of the bark, given a new purpose, not that he'd ever had a real purpose.

“Mal?”

“Stripped bark...”

They must have thought he'd finally lost it, as they flanked him suddenly, Lila's arm moving around his waist. “Mal, what are you talking about?”

“My magic. It's powerful, and yet I need protection. Why can't I protect myself?” He moved to face them both. “Why not give me the knowledge of how to protect myself?”

“What are you saying?” Draven asked.

“Yeah, Lila is right. We need to figure out a real plan. A month, yeah, because, in that time, I want to know all my powers. Oliver said we all have similar ones and different ones. I'm going to ask my father, but in case he's not truthful, I'll need those books too, that Lila asked for. A Nephilim has the powers of the soul and angelic ones, which is why we're so scary to those against us. I'm super powerful, but no one has offered to help me with my powers. To teach me. I may look different, and I have powers, but they're feeling me out, at least.”

“I think I know what he means,” Lila said to Draven. “Oliver and Carver mentioned something about bad ones, Nephilim that didn't work out. If Mal is one of those, it would be easier to kill him if they had to if he didn't know how to use his own powers to defend himself. That's not bad, necessarily.”

I'd probably do the same, but this is Mal. If they won't show him, and if they decide because he isn't just handing over all this trust to them right off, that he's vulnerable. As vulnerable to them as he is to the hunter and the angels."

"Damn. Smart. But, then again, they've had since the beginning of time to figure these things out," Draven said, nodding and biting his lip between sentences. "Mal, you have got to learn them, whatever they are. That would be better here."

"Where the protections are in place."

"The angels will feel your powers," he confirmed. "And the hunters if they're hard core tracking you. Right, so we're here a while."

"Short while, but long enough for me to learn."

"Then it's set," Draven said, smiling at him. "You're going to be a powerful being that no one will mess with."

"I already am."

Chapter Twenty-One



image-placeholder

THE SKY WAS FILLED with stars as Malakai stood outside the cabin. The trees were so thick, he couldn't see into the forest, but he was no longer scared of things that go bump in the night. No, because he felt like he was one of those things now.

The air was crisp, cold, and he liked that. It reminded him of home. On those winter nights when he'd pull into the driveway at his home and stand outside, readying himself before facing Dutch another night. Those times were the best back then, those moments of solitude, the stars, his only companions. The breeze would dry away the sweat from work, the smell of the grease and French fries, and he'd feel calm.

He wondered, looking up then and before that, if he was connecting to something he didn't know he was a part of. Oh, he knew at last, and possibly always knew, that Heaven wasn't some place above the stars. It was another dimension, a place no one could get to with a plane or even a rocket.

It was in him, that place. But more than that, so was the world. He walked to the trees and plucked off a few needles

from the pine, bringing them to his nose so he could breathe in their scent. The soil under his feet, that was more, the rocks, the water that gurgled somewhere in the distance.

Draven joined him as he was letting the needles fall from his fingers. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“So beautiful.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Mal shook his head as he stared up at the stars again. “These moments should be shared. The calm before the storm, as they say, right?”

“Right. You’ve got a lot of storms ahead. I will be there, if I can, to help you navigate them, if you want me there. Still, I can’t fathom what you might have to do on your own. Lila and me, we can’t do what you can.”

“I know. For once in my pitiful life, I’m the one with power. It still doesn’t feel that way. I remember every punch in the face given to me by my ex. I remember begging him to stop hitting me. To me, I’m still that man. I want to embrace the rest of all this, but I guess I’m hoping more than making it happen.”

He was spun to the side so Draven could hold his face in both hands. “That guy, he’s there, sure. We all, every single one of us, are a collection of our experiences. From diversity, that makes a lot of us become something more. No powers are needed for that, and from what I’ve seen? You don’t need them either.”

For anyone to say that meant so much to Mal. He was doubting himself, like he always had. Draven moved in to kiss him and he felt his insides light enough to bring the sun back from where it had disappeared into the horizon.

His kisses, though there'd been few, made him feel wanted and beautiful. His lips pushing on Mal's, their breath halted, the warmth of his body pressing to Mal's...

He was being lowered to the soft ground, and Draven lay next to him as they continued to kiss. Draven's eyes opened as he pulled away from him for a moment, smiling heatedly. His eyes were so light, they seemed to brighten the surrounding dark.

“Mal, I like you. I shouldn't, and it goes against everything I've ever been taught, but the moment I kissed you that first time, I felt everything I'd ever known crumble.”

Mal was choking on emotion, his throat closing with it, eyes blurring from tears. Here he was, hearing everything he'd ever wanted to hear from a man, and it had happened at the worst possible time. He leaned his head on his hand as he moved up, his elbow sinking in the dirt. Draven was smiling in a way that Mal knew he wanted more from him.

The thing was, Mal wanted what Draven had to give. A life, a man that wanted him, all the things that were there in front of him.

“I like you, Draven. So much...”

“Shh. You have a lot on your plate. I don’t intend to be another problem. I can’t help wanting to kiss you and more, but I get it. It’s a lot right now.”

He smiled as the feeling of Draven’s lips lingered on his. “Kissing is... not a problem. I’ve never been kissed like you kiss me. That’s so pathetic to admit, but it’s true.”

“We all start somewhere, Mal. Your start can be now. I’m happy to be the first.”

“I’ve been laid.”

Draven moved in again, and before his lips touched Mal’s, he whispered, “No, you haven’t. You’re all brand new.”

It was slow and easy, no pushing by Draven as they kissed on the ground, and Mal’s arms wrapped easily around Draven’s neck. The kissing was slow too, but it wasn’t easy. Draven’s lips were greedy, it seemed, and they never left Mal’s while they rolled from one side to the other, Mal on top, then Draven.

He smelled of fire and air, Draven did, as he loved being the one to stoke the fireplace inside the cabin. It suited him, being that he awoke the heat in Mal flawlessly. Draven’s tongue slid effortlessly against Mal’s then he moved his mouth to kiss over his freshly shaved jaw.

It was all Mal could do, once Draven’s lips were on his throat, to not tear Draven’s clothes off, begging him to fuck.

But that couldn’t happen yet. There was a fear growing in Mal that his unproven powers could hurt those that he cared

about, so he held himself back, pulling away from Draven.
“We should go inside.”

“I agree. Let’s go to my room.”

“I... can’t. I can’t. Not until I feel like I’m in control of myself.”

Draven got to his feet, helping Mal to his. “Lack of control is the point,” he said with a little chuckle.

“Not sex. My powers. If I got off and suddenly you burst into flames...”

“Right! Oh, right. Okay, yeah,” he said, and then he laughed again. “Thanks.”

“We will. I promise, we will.”

Back in the cabin, they saw Lila with a bowl of popcorn on her lap, staring at the wall in front of her.

“What are you looking at?”

Lila answered him, “TV. A great movie.”

Mal thought she’d surely lost it. “There... there’s no TV.”

“It’s in my imagination. Actually, it’s not a movie, per se. I’m remembering a great book I read. I’ve made it into a movie, starring all my favorite actors.”

Draven laughed and joined her, grabbing a handful of popcorn. “So, are you gonna catch us up?”

“Sure! Sit, Mal, and let’s watch this movie.”

“God, you guys are crazy.” He sat and grabbed some popcorn, munching it as Lila told them the plot and described the characters.

They all woke up on the sofa after having a late-night laugh session. He couldn't remember having so much fun.

Suriel came later that morning and surprised them by knocking on the door.

Lila answered it before Mal or Draven could stop her. She griped after allowing the angel into the cabin, “It's supposedly protected. If I got shot, you could blame him and his buddies.”

Suriel tried to hide a smile by turning his head, but it didn't work. It was all over his face.

The room felt heavy, but Draven and Lila retreated to the kitchen to give them some privacy and they sat on the couch, far from one another. Suriel said to Mal, “I heard you calling me in your sleep.”

He was wearing a light-colored suit again, slick material catching the light from the fire. He was terribly handsome, but Mal figured all angels probably were. His dark hair caught the firelight even better than the suit, and it shone with an easy light.

“Malakai... I'm sorry, Mal, I know there is so much you need to ask me. I know, now, how I've wronged you.”

“Good. At least that's out of the way. Now, if you want to make up for it, tell me about my powers.”

His head spun to Mal as his pretty eyes got wide with surprise. “Excuse me?”

“Which part is confusing to you?”

Like he was searching inside Mal’s brain, their eyes locked and Mal felt like his mind was being pierced.

“Are you trying to read my mind?”

“I can’t read the mind of a Nephilim. I’m trying to understand.”

“What’s to understand? I have powers I don’t even know about yet and I want to learn to use them and more so to control them, so I don’t accidentally set my best friend on fire or give her an aneurysm. How is that hard?”

Covering his face with his perfect hands, hands that didn’t have an age mark or even much of a wrinkle at the knuckles, his muffled voice said, “Of course.”

Mal reached over to pull away his hands and they looked at each other again, only Mal felt less on guard than he had. “That’s not all. I think you have the gist of what I’m thinking. Are you going to go back and report what you know to Oliver, Carver, and the rest?”

“No. I owe you more than that, Mal. All I can ask is for you to be careful. You are very powerful, but there are other Nephilim that are more so. Ren... your Oliver, is the product of the most high and powerful angel that has ever been. He could cut you down if you cross him. And even he’s not the most powerful.”

Thinking about that, Mal asked aloud, “Who is?”

“I can’t speak of him. He’s...still searching for his truth. It’s been a long time for him, and he still hasn’t decided which side he’s loyal to, though both have asked for his favor.”

He knew that his father wouldn’t say, though he did feel it was more to protect Mal than to harm him. “The angels that came for me that day... Do you know who they were?”

“At least one archangel. I felt that. Not Michael. He will not waste his time on one, and not one of the most powerful. Sorry, Mal, if that sounds harsh.”

“Archangels. They’re the big ones, huh? I mean, I don’t know much. I was never into the bible, but I’ve heard things about it.”

“They aren’t in the bible all that much, for all the distinctions. They’ve been written about in other holy texts. Mal, there are many powerful beings in this world and other dimensions. Gods, even. The God and Goddess that made us, that made the world? They’re two of a million, but are the makers of all. When He left, He left the world barren of leadership. Other gods took over their parts of the world and made their own truths. It’s said that his wife made them what they are. She is the mother of us all, and she makes certain that we have something to turn to when we get into trouble.”

“You know that’s who we’re going searching for. How do you know that?”

“Lila. Her mind is angry when she sees me, and her anger lets me see inside a little. I’m sorry, I can’t say I didn’t mean to search her mind, but I did so only to protect you.”

“Protecting me.” He stared into the fire, his heart burning like it was right there in the flames. “That seems to be important. But can I hope that it’s because I’m your son or is it that I’m a Nephilim and important to your cause?”

“Can’t it be both?”

The answer swung much lower than he was hoping. “Are you a... regular angel or a fallen one?”

“Does that matter?”

“Yes,” he said simply.

“I’m fallen, by all the definitions of that. The angels, they were made to have tunnel vision. When the one they obeyed wasn’t there to lead them, they started to think, and for beings not meant to do anything except obey, that’s dangerous.”

“So, they’re all bad and you guys, you’re all good?”

“No. Not really. We all have our faults. Mal, I don’t expect you to follow us blindly. You wouldn’t be any better than the angels that are trying their best to wipe out mankind. Of the two...”

“The lesser of two evils.”

“I don’t want you to think we’re evil, Mal.”

He sighed, “I don’t. I don’t think one thing or the other right now. What I need from you, as my father, someone who left

me without a mother, with a man that hated me for killing her, I need you to do some things for me. If you can't, then you can't count on me to ever be on your side."

"Mal?"

Looking at him was hard. He felt love coming for him, and that would cloud his thinking. Still, the man was his father, as much as it bothered him how it came about. "Yeah?"

"I've had many children, but so few made it. I wasn't there to help or protect them. It was better, I thought. If I'd have been there to help raise you, a target would have been on you from the time you were born. Still, it never set well with me that I couldn't watch my children grow. The three that made it, you and two others, I would give my powers, my life, anything, to help you. I won't beg you to trust me or the others. But I will show you that I can be trusted. I'll do whatever you ask of me."

There were no good feelings traveling through his body or mind. He wasn't being spelled; he was sure of it. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, what all do you need?"

Chapter Twenty-Two



image-placeholder

SURIEL CAME EVERY OTHER day after he brought them the things they'd asked him to bring. Lila had a constant fort made of books surrounding her as she combed through old Christian and Jewish religious texts, modern takes, and books about all pagan religions.

An RV arrived the third time Suriel arrived, driven by a man who was obviously spelled, as he walked off down the dirt road in a daze after he delivered the vehicle.

“I can't drive. I get... nervous when I try,” Suriel explained, then assured the man would be safe and sound and unfazed by the spell.

Then, the next time he arrived, he took Mal to the back of the cabin to a field that was rich with late summer wildflowers and tall grasses. A chill was in the air, it being the very last breaths of summer as autumn began to cover the land in gold and rust.

The air, the trees, the grass, it all made him feel connected to something greater than himself. It always had. He felt the

wind blowing his hair back from his face and knew he could take power from it.

“Now, we angels have different powers from all our brothers. We have like powers, surely, but we all have taken special connections to things, whether given to us or merely from sharing with that thing we’ve connected to.

“Nephilim take those powers from their fathers, only they’re amplified by the soul inside of them. That’s why their powers are so much more powerful.”

“So why did I have to run from the angels?”

“Those are archangels, Mal. They were the first and their powers are greatest. Against one, you’d likely be fine, but more than one, and they could end your life.”

“Oh,” he said miserably. “But wait...” He thought about the little he’d heard of all things heavenly and asked, “There were four. Are all of them on Michael’s side besides Lucifer?”

“There are seven, Mal. And we don’t know the allegiance of all of them. All we know is that two, Rafael and Michael, well, they are united in their cause. That’s enough.”

“I see. And one touch of Michael’s sword, I’m done.”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get my powers up and running. I need to be able to defend myself as much as I can.”

Suriel came to him, holding his upper arms gently. “Close your eyes and think of something once I move away. Think of

something terribly good or terribly bad, feel it, and then, when you know the power is spiking, control it. Make it come out the way you want it. Force it to obey you.”

“Force it? How can I force it?”

Mal had forced nothing in his life. To think of forcing something so huge, it threw him.

“Mal, you can do this. I know you can. I have faith in you.”

He tried to take that and hold on to it. He set his mind on something good. He figured if he tried to do that, if he got out of control, it would hopefully be a good power and not something that would burn down the forest.

As Suriel backed away from him, Mal closed his eyes and, in his mind, he searched for the greatest memories he could muster.

There were some as he was a child, exploring the ditches where he'd get lost for hours, making up his own adventures, far from the cranky father and bullying kids. He'd find treasures he hid in the tributaries there, bottles, tins, even an old watch once.

Those memories, though attached to terrible ones, however, couldn't compare to more recent ones. The recollections of Lila, offering to leave with him to face his new life. His face changing, and with it, his confidence. Only, thinking about it, it wasn't his looks that had done it; it was the people that were beside him through it all.

He felt the power, just like Suriel said he would. In the pit of his torso, right between stomach and heart, it began radiating like heat, only it didn't hurt. It vibrated, no... no, it pulsed. Like he'd swallowed a warm strobe light, it pulsed inside him, drumming to the beat of music he couldn't hear.

Then he felt it growing, and it was no longer only in the pit of him, but in his throat, his thighs, his groins, then his elbows.

He opened his eyes as it moved to his hands and feet, and he lifted his hands, palms up, channeling the power there. It shocked him to feel it moving, leaving a trail of warmth all over as it made its way to his hands.

“Mal, you're doing it. Your hands are glowing! Keep going!”

He opened his eyes and saw them for himself.

It was like his veins had been injected with neon; they were glowing, and from that glow it engulfed his entire hand in light. He could feel it, a heated, radiant sun-like heat. Then, a flame started in the middle of his palm.

It wasn't very big, in fact, it was no more than a Bic lighter would cast, but there it was, and he was controlling it. “Dad... see that?”

“Yes,” he said, though he wasn't impressed. In fact, his voice told the tale that he was frightened. He looked up to Suriel and saw the same fear in his eyes.

“What's wrong?”

“Fire. It's just... uncommon.”

“Uncommon? Really? You knew I started wood on fire in the beach house.”

“I thought it was a fluke. Keep going, please. I have to know your powers.”

The flame flickered out, and he curled both hands into fists. “What do you mean? I thought this exercise was for me, not so you could check off a list!”

Suriel’s eyes suddenly moved from Mal’s fists to his face. “Of course it is, but I can’t help but be curious.”

Mal didn’t believe him, but he didn’t voice that. Instead, he held his palms up again and made the flame come much easier, but it wasn’t coming from the happy thoughts he’d started with, but his anger at the man... the angel, in front of him.

“Tell me the truth.”

“All right, Mal. I was concerned about the fire you started. It’s not common. We angels have control over some elements, sure, but fire is destruction. I’m not an angel tasked with destruction.”

“I don’t understand.”

Suriel slowed his quivering voice. That scared the hell out of Mal, an angel nervous like that. “It’s elements, Mal. Those are the seraphim’s thing. Death, destruction, all that, we can do things like that, but it doesn’t come easily. There are choirs, or a hierarchy of angels. As we go down the line, we get... weaker. Not weak, but, you understand, we don’t have the power of a seraphim.”

“Choirs. That, here, means a group that sings together.”

“I know. It’s why we treasure humans, Mal. Yes, there are terrible humans, evil and hateful, but there are so many that are beautiful, sweet, giving. They can turn anything beautiful.”

“Let me try something else.”

“Yes. I need you to try to manipulate the earth.”

Suriel backed away, farther than before, and Mal closed his eyes again, bringing up emotions. Only that time, all he felt was confusion and despair. He’d given up his life—granted, his life wasn’t great—but it was his. Now he’s being chased by people and beings that wanted him dead. Being hated to the point he was seen as a creature that needed put down like a sick animal.

The loss of his mother, the neglect by his human father, the abuse by Dutch, the running from forces that were bound to destroy him. Even the good that he’d found during all of it couldn’t compete in that moment with the pain and constant struggle he’d endured.

Falling to his knees with the weight of it, he hammered down a fist, frustration and anger overflowing from him. As soon as he did that, the earth shook, and not an easy rumble, as it threw him to his side and his eyes came open as he hit the ground with his shoulder.

He saw it then; the chasm running from the exact place where his fist had slammed, widening, growing longer, headed for Suriel.

The trees around him were toppling over, the grass shaking into a blur. Suriel stared at the ground as the crack got closer to him.

Everything was loud, tree trunks splitting, the ground itself cracking open, making a scream like an animal was dying. The thought sped through his mind that it was true, the earth was a living thing, and he was hurting it.

He scrambled to his feet, falling back over twice as the earth shook him from standing, but once he was planted solidly, holding his arms out for balance, he looked to Suriel and saw the chasm nearing him. He was the one to scream then, letting out everything in that sound that came from depths he didn't know he had inside him.

The earth stopped moving as the sound diminished to a whimper, his body the only thing shaking. A few trees continued to fall, and the wind was whipping up, but otherwise, the earth was still.

He jumped the chasm and ran for Suriel, and once there, he saw the crack was an inch or so from his feet. Suriel had never moved.

“Are you okay?”

Suriel was shaking, his body convulsing with it. “You...”

“What? Don't tell me you couldn't do that yourself.”

Suriel didn't answer with words, but he moved his eyes to Mal. “No. I can't affect the earth like that, and I can't make fire.”

The breeze blew harder then, the sweat on his face drying instantly. He had no words, but he lifted a hand and closed his eyes, again bringing up memories of good things.

The power went through him much faster. He was feeling it like it was now a natural part of him, and he knew it was, but before, when he'd done things, it had felt foreign. Not any longer.

The wind started growing in strength, pushing at his raised hand. His hair blew into his face and it was harder to take a good breath. Suriel moved a step back when Mal opened his eyes, and past Suriel, Mal saw the trees begin to bend.

His hand curled into a fist, and he lowered it to his side, the wind subsiding instantly. Even the breeze left the world still and calm.

“That’s three.”

Suriel nodded slowly. “I don’t think we need to bother with water.”

They walked back to the cabin in silence, Mal finding Lila on the couch. “What’s wrong?”

Suriel stood near the window and he was the one to answer. “He’s not my son.”

“What?”

Draven came in from the kitchen, having overheard and asked the same. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Suriel turned to explain, while Mal sat, his limbs numb, his voice gone.

“A Nephilim, like any child, takes traits from his parents. For humans, that means brown eyes, blonde hair, long fingers. For a Nephilim, however, it’s different. They take the powers of their fathers, amplifying them, of course, with the soul inside them.”

“Okay,” Draven said. “That makes sense, but why do you say he’s not yours?”

“There is a hierarchy of angels. I’m much lower than some, higher than others. I’m even counted as one of the archangels in some writings, but I’m not. I’m confused with another, which is common, given the angels don’t announce themselves to humans most of the time. The highest, the seraphim, are higher than archangels to some humans, but there is much they get wrong.

“The seraphim and archangels are the same. There are seven, previously eight. Each had control over the elements, all the elements, earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. When one of them fell, Lucifer, there were seven, and the elements weren’t given to all of them in balance any longer.”

Lila held up a hand for him to stop. “Wait, explain that.”

“Before, the angels on high could manipulate all the elements equally. If they came to earth, they could cause floods, fires, winds that could wipe out an entire village. They caused earthquakes as well, all to show God’s wrath or

disdain. But after Lucifer fell, they took on one element that they could wield to destroy. The others were lessened.”

Draven sat on the couch, staring at him with his jaw hanging open until he shook his head for a moment and then asked, “Like, Michael, say... What are his?”

“Well, Michael is the highest of the high. We all know this. Yet, he still cannot wield the elements like he once could. His strength now is fire.”

“You thought I was *his* son?”

It gave Mal a new set of panic attacks that all occurred at once. Suriel, thankfully, said, “I no longer think that Mal. I mean, it was a brief thought that he would make a Nephilim, being he hates you all so. Still, what better thing to do? Make soldiers that could equal your enemy? I have the power of fire, in a way, but nothing like Mal can conjure. We all have small traits that we can use to manipulate the elements, but Mal’s... they’re too strong. He must have come from an archangel, and one that didn’t lose his power over all the elements.”

They all were thinking the same. They all stared over at him. Mal couldn’t fathom it, and he got up to pace. In fact, as his feet hit the floor, the slap of his shoes there, he thought he was trying to run from the thought before it could form.

Suriel went to him, stopping his progress. He gripped his upper arms, forcing Mal to meet his eyes. “It’s not a terrible thing.”

“I need to see him.”

“You... can’t! No one sees him!”

Mal felt his eyes burning, and he saw them by the reflection shining in Suriel’s eyes. “I need to see him,” he growled, and the floor beneath his feet cracked.

“Mal! Mal, calm down,” Lila pleaded as she rushed over to him. “Mal, breathe. Calm down!”

Mal heard her voice through the fray inside his own mind. There were screams there, roaring, like lions in the brush. Screeches like eagles, the giant flapping of wings.

Staring at Suriel, he saw him change, and in that change, the human form of Suriel left him. His face was replaced with one that was birdlike, and he saw Suriel’s wings. There weren’t two, however.

After a quick count, he saw that Suriel had twelve wings, and they glowed gray/white.

“I see you. The real you.”

“Then your powers are complete. You can wield them now, all of them, but controlling them is still the problem.”

He looked away and sought Lila’s face, but he couldn’t find her. In his sight, everything was glowing, like light came from everything in the room, blinding, but it didn’t hurt. In fact, it felt as if it was giving him power.

“Mal! Mal, you’re... shining!”

Draven was the one to bring him back. He felt him, felt himself being pulled into Draven’s arms, being manhandled

until he was being kissed, being pulled back to earthly things, and the one that got through to him. One that was only supposed to be for humans.

His lust overcame the rest and he let himself be kissed. He felt Draven's breath, felt his hands holding tightly around Mal's waist, pulling him, pressing bodies together.

When the kiss ended, Draven's face was there, smiling. "You're back."

"I'm... back."

Lila turned him to her and hugged him close. "Mal... you're crazy powerful."

He didn't know what to do with himself, so he moved to the couch and sat there, covering his face with his hands. "I'm the fucking antichrist."

"No," Suriel said as he went to him, falling to his knees in front of Mal. "All that you've heard isn't true. Men wrote about us, about all things holy, but they didn't know! The angels, those that are in Heaven, Mal, those that didn't fall, do you think them good?"

After moving his hands, he saw Suriel's face. There were no lines there, not like a human. There were no beauty marks, not one lash on his eyelids was not long and curled. He was perfect. "You look like a human now."

"Most can't take what we actually look like, Mal. And no, Lucifer doesn't look like some horned, red monster. He's so beautiful, in both forms. Mal, the angels that stayed, they've

been used to punish humans, and it's still all they know. Only they have grudges now, being they think humans took their father from them. It's no worse than what they have accused the fallen of. Jealousy, hatred, all of it. They think, though, that they're still under God's command."

"There are no good guys or bad guys on either side, Suriel. All are out for something selfish and they're using humans as bargaining chips, or worse. They're fighting over the outcome of humanity."

Dropping his head, he confessed, "I've thought the same for a long time now. Making the Nephilim...surely, it adds power to one side, but it also places humans in danger." He looked up at Mal again, his eyes glistening. "Some have had to be killed to keep the power from consuming the world. No one's told you what you can do because everyone's afraid of it."

Suriel rose to his feet again and told the others, "Make sure he stays calm. I need to go speak to Oliver and Carver."

Mal's head rose to him as more of the truth dawned on him. "Ren... Oliver, he's my brother."

Chapter Twenty-Three



image-placeholder

THE WINNEBAGO WASN'T NEW, but it was clean and nice enough to live in while they made the trek across the country. Once Mal insisted on meeting with Lucifer, Suriel finally gave in and did what Mal wanted.

The hardest part of his decision was that Mal had to watch Draven being tortured. It was for the best, he supposed, in the long run, but Suriel offered to give him markings on his body that would effectively make him completely invisible to angels.

There, in the living room of the cabin, Mal had to hold him while Suriel burned the markings onto his skin. Draven screamed, and the pain was so clear on his face that Mal felt it. Red, tight, mouth open as the sound escaped him, the sound of deep, horrible agony. He just hoped he could trust that those marks would indeed shield him.

Draven and Suriel got the RV and took two days etching the sigils into it, painting over each one to hide them from onlookers. Lila stayed in the cabin with Mal while the other

two got money taken from Mal's account, closing it out in another state so they wouldn't find them.

They learned they were in Georgia, and Mal was near the ocean. He couldn't see it from the cabin, but he felt it. It had become like an old friend, making promises it might not keep, but Mal trusted it regardless.

Packed with supplies and gassed up, they left on a Tuesday, Mal taking the embrace given him by the angel he thought fathered him. "He had to have been invited, Mal. Don't forget that. He isn't a monster."

"Why would he let everyone believe I was yours?"

"Like Oliver, you're precious, Mal. You have the true, old power of an archangel inside you. He must have... done it to assure we had enough power. The angels can come as one, but they are many."

"What does that mean?"

"You'll learn that in time. For now, stay hidden in the vehicle and when you find him, you'll know your true self."

The cryptical things the angels said were worse than their other sins. "I know my true self and it has nothing to do with my father or my power."

Suriel smiled at him, lifting his head proudly. "Maybe you're not mine, but I'd like to think we're connected. You're special, Malakai. More than who fathered you, more than your powers, yes. You are so much more."

“Thanks. I appreciate that, and that you helped me get my powers controlled. I appreciate it more than that. You know.”

“I do. Take care. Those humans with you, they’re good ones. They are who I’m fighting for.”

“Me too.”

Suriel left him in a blink. Suddenly, he was there, alone, out in the woods. He felt the trees as they swayed in the gentle breeze. “Sorry I knocked some of you down,” he said, unsure if they could understand him. He felt as if they could, and more than that, he felt like She could hear him through them. “I’m coming. I hope you’re okay with that.”

A smell came on the breeze then, a scent he was familiar with, but that made no sense. It was lilac. It was possibly his favorite scent in the world, as he remembered the times when he went on adventures in the ditches near his home. There were a series of lilac bushes that were each half the size of his home. When they’d flower in the spring, he’d sit in the ditch and close his eyes, smelling them. It made him feel like anything was possible.

“Thanks,” he said, knowing in his heart that it was a signal.

He entered the RV, the creaking step noisy as he stepped inside, ducking his head. “Sorry, Mal,” Lila said as she watched him. “It’s not exactly made for tall guys.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, laughing a little. “I just need to get away from here.”

“Where they put you. I get it. You’re going to be on the road soon. You won’t be controlled by anyone.”

He sat near her on the small couch that sat across from the booth style table. “I don’t know quite what to do with myself right now.”

“You’re doing better than I would. Listen, Mal, all of this is a lot. You were just getting used to the fact you’re a Nephilim, then now to find out who your real father is...”

“He’s the biggest and best angel. I should be good with that.”

“But we’ve all grown up on stories that make him the big bad guy. And he might be, but we won’t know until you confront him. Mal, he’s the highest of the archangels, Suriel said. He’s powerful beyond reason, so just be careful.”

“I’m more powerful than him. I will be careful, yeah, but I’m also done tiptoeing around these beings. They’ve messed with my life; they’ve killed my mother and they’re the lesser of two evils? I’m tired of all of them. I want out of this mess, but I know that’s not right, either. Right now, I need to confront my real father. That’s it for now.”

“Then that’s what we’re going to do. Confront him.”

“Not you,” he argued, unflinching. “You and Draven aren’t in this.”

“Bullshit,” Draven called from the driver’s seat. “We’re not letting you go in there alone.”

Mal smiled at their concern and protectiveness. “I’m the powerful one, remember?”

“You’re going to face the first archangel. The strongest, possibly, of all of them. We’re going with you. I only wish I had my athame.”

Mal caught Lila’s face as Draven said it, the way her eyes moved to the side, then her lids lowered. He felt it then, that she was hiding something, and he was pretty sure he knew what it was.

As they left the cabin and its protections, Mal stiffened, waiting for the sky to change and be filled with wings. That didn’t happen. The symbols on the RV worked, or seemed to, and he breathed a little easier as they made their way to a paved road.

Mal watched the trees break off onto buildings as the road widened, more cars on it showing him passersby that were on their way to normal, daily chores. Work... errands, whatever they were headed to, so much different from him.

He’d never felt like one of them, though. Not really. From the time he was a kid, he felt different from the rest of the world. Not one person could he relate to or talk to more than chitchat. Lila was the only exception.

“Mal,” she said, as if proving his thought. “The dynamics of all this are complicated. Like you said, the lesser of two evils, or, maybe, more appropriately, the greater of two goods.”

He moved his vision from the window to her, taking her in as she smiled wistfully. It didn't seem to fit the situation, but then again, it might fit much better than his own musings.

“The greater of two goods...”

“I thought of an old saying. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Some people think they're doing the right thing, but... they end up hurting a lot of people on the path to doing so. These two... factions, they both think they're doing the right thing. They'll go to any lengths that we, well, me as a human and you as a human you thought yourself to be, can't imagine. Still though, like humans, they are doing things they think will save the world. In the case of the angels, well, they're saving their world, Heaven, and maybe getting their father back. The others are saving this world, which, in the books that are now packed in that closet back there, this world is considered hell in a lot of belief systems. Being in hell, being in this world, in this dimension or not, is their world and they want to save it.”

“That all makes sense. But what is the other saying? For true evil to happen, good people don't get involved? If we don't take a side, if we play the middle, waiting to see who wins, or which side is right, that makes us evil.”

“We have no intention of not taking a side, Mal. I think we're on the side we need to be, but that doesn't mean that we don't push our side to do the right thing, whatever that may be.”

Inside, in the deepest places of him, he didn't feel evil. He knew it was there, lurking in the dark, like everyone else. There was no black and white. He'd thought it, and they'd spoken about it. There was a sea of gray in every direction. That sea he so fell in love with the moment he touched the salted waters told him that. Like that ocean, there was no light or darkness that took its whole. Deep in the bottom was darker than anyone could imagine, and at the top, it churned, light soaking in the color of the sunlit sky or the moonlit night.

“How do we convince beings that think all humanity is little better than animals that need tending to, to do things differently after all these millennia?”

“Force? Flirtation? Flagrant fooling?”

“Are you on an F kick?”

They laughed, which felt so good. Draven called back, “No having fun without me!”

He winked at Lila and got up, bending nearly in half to keep from smacking his head on the roof of the RV so he could get to the front and Draven.

When he sat in the other captain's chair, he buckled in and glanced over at Draven, who was smiling as he drove. “This was one part of the job I did like. Traveling the open road, all that. I always thought if I wasn't a hunter, I'd have probably been a truck driver.”

As Mal chuckled, he looked out of the front window, seeing the long strip of black that cut through the fields and forests.

“We were just in a city. Now we’re in the country again. It’s pretty cool, I guess. Seeing so much, in such a short time.”

“It’s better in the west,” Draven mused. “From desert to mountain to ocean in a day’s drive. From tall pines to palm trees. It’s a mind trip. Then, if you go up and down the coast itself, you go from burning heat to rain in a couple of days.”

“I’d love to see that. Maybe if all this gets sorted out, you’ll show me?”

Draven nodded after glancing over at him briefly, then putting his eyes back on the road. “I’ve been thinking about all the places I’ve seen that I would love to show you. Then, there are a million places I’d love to see that I haven’t yet. Places we could explore together.”

Suddenly, that was his greatest dream. “Draven, we haven’t had a lot of chances to... get to know each other. I mean, we know plenty, but...”

“As more than just a couple of people running from and to a bunch of angels?”

They laughed together, but it was short. “Yeah. You... are really good to me.”

“Ditto. You, Mal, make me want to get up in the morning and fight another day. You’re worth it. Even if this doesn’t work out for us romantically, I don’t ever not want to know you. I want to be your friend if I can’t be more.”

“I want more,” he confessed in an act of pure courage that he had rarely felt in his life. It was coming easier.

Reaching a hand to touch Mal's knee, Draven said hoarsely, "So do I, Mal."

The fact they hadn't, in the time at the cabin, fallen into bed together meant something to him. Before, in the old life that seemed so distant, he'd have let himself be taken to bed, or an alley, or wherever, in minutes. In fact, if he hadn't been trying to kill Mal at the bar where they'd met, and if Lila hadn't stepped in, saving him, he'd have given himself over easily.

That's not what he wanted from Draven. He wanted something more. The Draven he knew the man to be was the same man, who hadn't had a face or voice before that, he'd dreamed of meeting and falling for.

"When I was a kid," Draven started, smiling sardonically. "There was always a lesson, a chore. I had a destiny, and my mother drove that into me. There weren't a lot of hugs or affection. Mal, I know you miss your mother, and for the record, I think she'd have been a wonderful mom. The thing is, living your life for what might have been, it only makes things harder. I forgave her for not being sweet with me a long time ago, and only because I credited her for showing me how to be strong. Still, in the back of my mind, I blamed her for not showing me how to be sweet with other people. I fell for a guy once. He loved me, but he couldn't know me. He couldn't know why I traveled, why I had nightmares, why I had to keep myself distant. And instead of trying to explain any of it, I struck out at him, arguing, yelling, and it tore us apart. I tore us apart."

Mal nodded to himself mostly, as Draven's eyes didn't leave the road. The gold-colored carpet on the floor held his own gaze for a long while. "I wasn't taught sweetness, either. I was taught apathy."

"Apathy."

"Yeah. Ignore what's happening around me. It makes it easier. I read a lot when I was young. I lived inside of books. That's how Lila and I first got to be friends. I'd see her reading on her breaks. Not books I liked, even so, readers have a way of being drawn together.

"I read about love, about commitment and all that, and it seemed to only live on pages of books. Then, becoming her friend, and loving the people I worked with at the diner, I saw that those things I'd read could be real. The romance part, no. That I was truly convinced would never happen for me."

"It wasn't your looks, Mal. I know that's what you're thinking. You've bloomed into this incredibly handsome guy, but you haven't changed. At least not your heart. You've gotten more courageous, yeah, and you have more confidence. That may be partly from your new face, but mostly I think you never got the chance to find those parts of you."

"Yeah? You think?"

"If you saw me as a kid, wow. Skinny as a rail, like you were, geeky, glasses, pimples!"

"You sound like me. Only I wasn't just a kid when all that happened."

“And magic didn’t make me change,” he pointed out to Mal, slapped a hand on the steering wheel as he huffed. “That’s where I’m jealous. I worked for years, drank nasty weight gain drinks, worked out daily, and hard!”

“Yeah,” Mal said as he laughed. “I’m kinda happy I didn’t have to do all that.”

“Jealous.”

“Hey,” Lila called from the tiny kitchen. “Who wants a hotdog?”

They both were hungry and called that back to her. Mal requested his favorite ice cream for dessert, Draven whispered, “I really do like her.”

“Yeah. She’s the best. I’m lucky to have her.”

“Now, we both are. I’d trust her over just about anyone. Except you,” Draven confessed.

When it was time to get gas, they were all nervous. Draven had pulled over on a dirt road so they could prepare. “I think it’ll be okay. I’ll jump out, run in, pay, and be back fast.”

Lila got up and hugged him, which surprised them both. “Be safe,” she said to him, then let him go, turning to the kitchen counter like she was embarrassed at the show of affection.

Draven, on the other hand, glowed, like all those hugs his mother refused him had been replaced. “I will.”

Mal didn't embrace him, per se. He pushed him to the door of the Winnebago and forced a kiss on him that made him feel the power inside him, just like the first time Suriel had taken him into the field.

He felt it surging, felt the kiss intensify, heat flowing through his hands as he held Draven's face. That's when he stopped the kiss, still worried he'd hurt the man he was growing to love.

Draven was laughing as it stopped, his eyes opening slowly. "I think I'd put myself on the line all the time if that was my sendoff."

"That's not funny," Mal snapped.

"No, it's not," Lila agreed. "Like it or not, we're a team now, all of us important."

"I was kidding, sheesh," he said, still laughing as the door of the RV opened and the sun shone in on them. "I'll be back," he said, then stopped as he looked back at them. "Those are the worst words to use in a horror movie."

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock," Lila said to him, then laughed. "Go! And get back."

The gas trip went off without a hitch and they were back on the road quickly. Mal drove next, giving Draven time to rest, and Lila sat with him, handing him snacks as his copilot.

"I'm not even hungry. Why are you feeding me?"

"Something to do," she said simply, popping a Bugle into her mouth and crunching it.

“I always wanted to do road trips. The thought of seeing so much, seeing different people, all of it. Now, I really just want to get there.”

“Really?” She asked, skeptically. “You want to get to a place where there’s some magic gateway into another dimension where Lucifer, who everyone thinks of as Satan, even if he isn’t, lives?” He started laughing at the truth and absurdity of it. “There, we’re supposed to find out if it’s true that this formerly known as Satan guy really fathered you, giving you these amazing powers that have everyone from human hunters to actual angels freaking out. Yeah, let’s hurry!”

They were both laughing by the end of her rant, making Mal have to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Yeah, I guess I sound insane.”

“You do!”

He sobered enough to say, “I’m the son of an archangel, a seraphim. If we’re right, I am the son of not only the most powerful angel, but the first angel. The first in all the millions of them, from what Suriel told me.”

“That’s an enormous pressure on you. That’s the short and curlies, babe. That kind of pressure doesn’t stay contained for long.”

“Yeah. I feel it building as the fear does. The curiosity that’s filling me is the only thing holding the rest back. Lila, I want this to be okay, but I don’t see a lot of ways for it to be okay.”

“Does it count that I feel like it’s going to be okay?”

He’d trust her instincts more than facts put in front of him. This time, however, it was hard. “I want that to be enough, but...”

“Until you see for yourself, you won’t.”

“I guess not.”

The next two stops for gas had them all on edge. It seemed like Draven was being stared at each stop, and a man even came up to him in Arkansas, asking directions. Mal was a second away from taking off out of the RV to defend Draven.

When he got back in, he was wired, so Lila drove while he and Mal sat together in the very back, where there was at least a door to give them privacy.

If anyone could call it a room at all, it would be a bedroom. It was small, the bed maybe a foot and a half from the walls, two long closets where night tables should be. Overhead, a line of narrow cabinets for more storage. Mal lay on the bed, staring up at the bottom of those, smiling. “We’re becoming paranoid.”

As he lay next to Mal, Draven sighed, “It’s good we are. It means we’re taking all this seriously.”

The proximity and the fact they were on a bed made Mal feel the need to get closer to him. He had to express his desire, but he couldn’t do it without confessing his feelings and his scattered thoughts.

“We could die any minute. Sure, only a bunch of angels could kill me or one of those swords, but it’s possible. I don’t want you to feel sorry for me or like you have to protect me. I really like you, Draven.”

Draven turned to his side so his eyes could glow over at Mal. “You think I want you because, what? I feel sorry for you? That I’m protective of you?”

“Maybe.”

“Malakai, don’t you ever think so little of me. I get you weren’t always self-confident, but you have to know, from the second I met you, the least I felt is lust for you, and the most... Well, I was drawn to your good heart. Remember the way we talked at the bar that night?”

“We talked about... nothing, really.”

“No, that’s not true. You told me you liked to cook. You told me about books you’d read and about your friends. You didn’t give away your hometown or your friends’ names, but I saw your eyes as you spoke about all that. Then, when I was already drawn in, you told me about your friend that took in the stray dog you used to feed every day.”

Mal chuckled silently as he remembered that. “He was a sweet dog. Is one, I mean. Hopefully.”

“See! You are going through all this and still worry over a stray dog. Mal, you’re different. I’ve had a lot of dates, and that one was the best I’ve ever had.”

Mal reached his hand up to grab the back of Draven's nearly bald head and pulled him close, nipping at his bottom lip. "Yeah, me too. Until you tried to kill me," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, that part didn't register as a top moment in my life."

Mal had thought a lot about that night, all the moments of it, but especially that. He asked to the man that was huffing hot breath on his lips, "You hesitated. That's how I knew you didn't really want to kill me."

"What?"

"You are sworn to the death, right? You not only hesitated to stab me with the athame, right? That's what you call it?"

After kissing him lightly, Draven nodded, his breathing quickening.

"You hesitated to stab me, and then Lila came, gun on you, and you still didn't stab me. Another hunter would have done it, anyway. A last act of loyalty to your cause."

Draven nodded again, his kiss a little rougher after, and Mal closed his eyes as he felt Draven's lips touch his, finally releasing the last moment of doubt in Draven. It had been a nagging itch for him, wondering if everything had been a very elaborate ruse, but thinking back on the moment where his life could have easily ended, even if it meant Draven would die at Lila's hand right after, the curtain rose, and he easily saw it.

He moved over Draven, letting him take over the kissing, a hand skimming down Draven's side, stopping at the slight curve of Draven's narrow hip.

“We might not make it through all this, Malakai.”

Mal looked into Draven’s crazy beautiful eyes, saw his longing there for a life filled with happiness, love, and not death. He dreamed the same dream.

Their kissing began again, Mal letting it take him far from the RV, the tension, the fear and soon Draven was over him, controlling it, making Mal feel nothing but good. His body was heating, the power surging in him, but for the first time, he knew he could control it. There was only one thing he needed from it right then, and that was making love with Draven.

He opened his eyes, grinning happily as he whispered against Draven’s firm, full, delicious lips, “Watch this.”

With a blink, Draven’s and his own clothes were aflame, burning off them but not hurting either. Draven moved, feeling over his naked body, like he couldn’t believe his clothes were gone, or that he wasn’t burned. “How did you...? Never mind.”

He was chuckling while running his hands over his body, then he looked over to Mal, finally seeing he was naked, too. When his eyes landed on Mal’s cock, they widened comically. “Did that come with...?”

“No. Always had that,” he answered shyly.

“Well, damn. I guess that makes sense. If mine had grown in a couple of months, I would have been shouting it to the world.”

Grabbing a pillow and shoving it over his face, he laughed, though it was muffled, even to him.

The pillow was taken from his face by Draven. “Don’t do that. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, believe me. It’s... very nice.”

“Thanks,” he whispered, falling in love with Draven in that moment, as if he needed to admit that before he felt their connection further.

“I guess I should ask before we, you know, get started. Do you want me in you, or do you want to be inside me?”

Mal’s breath hitched as he tried to answer, but it wouldn’t come until he swallowed and calmed himself. When he could make any words, they came slowly. “I was... never... given the choice.”

Draven moved in and kissed him, his tongue sweeping over Mal’s as he held his face tenderly. When he spoke, it wasn’t slow; it was only firm. “You’ll always have a choice with me. You have a voice with me, Malakai. I’m finding I live to hear it.”

Mal moved quickly, spinning, so he was on top, holding Draven’s head in his hands, kissing him roughly, no longer tender in any of his touches.

Draven spread his legs, wrapping them around him, pulling him closer, hands wrapped tightly right above his legs. Mal felt engulfed in him, placed in an envelope of care and protection.

There were no longer lingering doubts, no, but there was something lingering. There was a need that Mal had in the middle of him, and Draven filled it right there, in that bed. Someone to care so much that he wrapped himself in Mal, that he wanted nothing more than to be with him.

It was selfish, maybe, but it was what he wanted, and from the moment he met Draven, he'd filled that need. It was then, while they made out in a passionate, lustful way, and yet he felt the emotions coming from it, felt Draven pushing away his own doubts.

He had no lube and couldn't imagine leaving Draven to look for something that would work, but his beautiful Draven read his mind. "In the closet there. I got some at the last place I got coffee when we gassed up."

"Fucking brilliant man," Mal commended as he reached into the closet to a travel bag where Draven kept his toiletries. He pulled out the brand-new tube of lubrication, staring at it, taking in that it was as new as their sexual relationship.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?"

Glancing over at him, he breathed, "Yes."

"Come here. I'll make it better."

Mal fell over the top of him easily, kissed his neck as Draven purred, "In my arms, Mal, if I can, I'll keep the world and everything else from hurting you ever again. I'd do anything."

"I know. And I'd do the same for you, Draven. I..."

Draven moved Mal's hair from his face, staring all over it, like he was memorizing it.

"It's not changing anymore."

"I know. And, if it did, I'd still love you. I'll love you no matter what, Mal. I didn't start out wanting to love you. I couldn't help it. If there was anyone in the entire universe, in all the dimensions that I would ever give my heart to, it's you."

Mal smiled down on him like the sun was shining through him to make Draven glow with the light of his confession of love. There were no dingy curtains that the fading light barely penetrated, only the light of them, of their blooming, perfect love.

"I kinda have a huge crush on you too. I think it's called love." He kissed him again, deeply, maybe to show him rather than tell him, but when he came up for air, the words tumbled from him, anyway. "I fucking love you, Draven."

"Then make love with me, and we can celebrate that. It might be the only time we can."

Mal knew why he said it. It wasn't only the truth, but it was to assure that he knew the gravity. They were starting a love affair at possibly the worst time, when they might be moving to their own demise, but Mal saw it differently. They were walking into a future that wasn't assured, but they were walking there, hand in hand, in love, with the greatest emotion to guide and protect them.

He was inside of Draven, pushing slowly into his tight heat as he languished kisses on his mouth and throat. The bottle of lube was still open beside them, catching Mal's eye as he bottomed out inside of Draven, lingering there while he smiled over at it.

Draven knew they'd make love, and soon. Mal knew that Draven had taken things slowly, waiting for Mal to make the move to it. He guessed burning off their clothes had done the trick, letting him know he was ready.

When he moved to slide in and out of Draven, he watched the man's handsome face, saw his joy, his pleasure, and knowing he did that, made Draven happy. For the first time in his life, he was truly making someone happy, making him feel good.

And, selfishly, he felt great too. Draven milked his dick, tightening around Mal's cock, holding him close again with legs and arms, and the way he moved his lips and teeth over Mal's neck and jaw, it was heaven.

Kissing, oh their kissing made it all better, raised it higher than Mal had ever felt. It was love, sure, it was lust and need, fear and courage all at once, that lovemaking. Heat radiated from him, the power within him joining in on the celebration as he sped his thrusts, grunting low from his diaphragm. He thought of how it must feel to fly with Draven, to feel nothing below them or above them, only them, in the air, and then he felt it.

“Mal,” Draven whispered, pulling away from his lips. “We’re floating.”

Mal looked, and he saw them a foot off the bed, but it didn’t shock him. He’d willed it. “I know.”

“Fuck me in the air, baby. Fuck me good, Malakai.”

He’d never much liked his full name, thinking it much too formal for him, but when Draven said it, when that husky, deep voice made the sound of it, it jarred him in all the best ways.

He could move so much easier in the air like that, and he did move fast, holding Draven in his arms so there was no chance of him falling and getting away from Mal. Not that there was much of a chance of that, as Draven was still wrapped around him, arms and legs clinging like he’d fall from a cliff if he let go.

Hanging there, in the air, the RV moving but never catching up to them, like they moved over the road as it did, but suspended there, Mal’s cock buried deep in Draven, moving over his prostate, making Draven grunt in a heady way. His eyes opened and closed, like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to watch Mal fucking him or if he wanted to savor the feeling of it.

Mal thought of some tricks and rolled them in the air until Draven was over him, and he watched Draven’s laughter as he threw his head back. “This is insane!”

Draven rose a little until his head hit the ceiling of the RV, and he placed his hands flat on it. “Fuck me like this.”

“Kinky,” Mal said, but started to move his hips crazy fast, lifting them over and over, watching Draven get off on that. His cock felt as if it was growing, swelling, and he filled the man with it, pushing in deep before sliding back quickly and ramming it home once again.

Their laughter turned to deep, cutting moans, and then Mal made Draven whimper, like he was begging to stop, or maybe begging to go harder. Fuck him like the animal Mal felt like in that moment.

He bared his teeth, hissing at the man, but Draven was doing his own animal noises, growling as he was fucked. Draven’s fists beat against the ceiling, and his ball sat heavily on Mal, tightening, his hard cock slapping his own stomach and Mal’s in a hitch-pitched drumroll that spurred him further.

He grabbed onto Draven again, spinning them in the air, and then dropped back to the bed. Mal grabbed him and turned him onto his stomach, raising his ass in the air so he could better pound him.

The way the flesh and muscle of his ass jiggled, like a blur, his tattoos were too, black streaks in his vision. He had many tattoos all over him, but until then Mal had never known how many. He was perfect, a piece of art even without them, but the ink brought it out plainly, and Mal felt saliva ready to fall from the corner of his lip as he lusted more for the man.

He was so tight around Mal's cock, so hot inside, beautiful, sexy, and Mal's mind began to come loose, drawing him into the sex and he forgot everything for those long minutes, everything that had plagued him for weeks was gone, and the world only comprised Draven, their sweaty bodies in the back of that RV, and the scent of their sex.

When he came, he let out a roar that was cut off nearly before it began, and he felt his hot cum filling the insides of Draven, even as Draven collapsed to the bed, spent himself.

They lay there for a full ten minutes, catching their breath as they kissed over one another, Draven breathing into his ear, laughter and sighs of joy with the breaths.

Then, when they lay still again, Mal noticed they were stopped. "Draven... why are we stopped?"

Draven was up and out of the bedroom, naked, rushing to the front to Lila, Mal right behind him. Lila was in the passenger seat, air pods in her ears while she stared out the front window at the rest area.

Draven startled her by placing a hand on her shoulder and she made a yip before she grabbed the pods from her ears. "Fucker!" Her eyes moved down to see his dick, and she turned away, laughing. "You're fucking naked!"

Draven seemed to realize it at the same moment she said it and took off back to the bedroom, and Mal covered his dick with both hands. "Sorry, but it freaked us out, being stopped?"

“Sorry, but I don’t drive with my air pods in. They block out too much sound. Which is exactly what I needed them to do.”

Mal hadn’t considered how loud they were while fucking, and Lila just laughed as his entire body heated. “Oh. Sorry…”

“No, Mal,” she said, keeping her eyes on his. “You needed that. You both did. Now, could you maybe go get dressed?”

“Yeah. Sure. And I’ll drive.”

“Thanks.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



image-placeholder

IT WAS FOUR HOURS from the time he took over from Lila and he was still smiling. Draven rode in the passenger seat after Lila went back to the short couch to nap. She'd clarified that they'd be washing the bedding before she'd even lie on the bed.

Draven was pretty happy himself, whistling along with the radio. "This is country music."

"And?"

"You like it?"

"It's all that's on, but I don't hate it. I'm half black, so I don't need R&B all the time."

"Oh, so your white half likes country music. Got it."

Draven laughed and informed him, "I like all music. Even that old, classical shit like Mozart and shit."

"Not me. I've actually never been huge on music. I know, I know, that freaks everyone out. Most music depresses me but I like a few songs. I mean, hear me out."

“I’m listening.”

Mal glanced over to see Draven’s arms crossed over his chest, the smirk on his face telling him that Draven would judge him, regardless.

“Lord,” he said, laughing. “All right, well, love songs for sure sucked. I never thought I’d...find a guy like you.” He kept his eyes on the road for his confession, wishing away all those former thoughts. “Break up songs were just... meaningless because I never really loved or felt loved by the guys I was with. Happy songs didn’t fit either. I mean, I wasn’t miserable or anything. I just wasn’t overly happy, unless I was at work.

“Hard songs, like heavy metal stuff, that was just annoying. Hip hop and rap was okay, I guess I liked that the best. Except the sad songs there too, or love songs. They told stories and I always like stories.”

When he got no jeering comments, he looked to make sure Draven hadn’t fallen to sleep, and when he did, he saw tears in Draven’s eyes. “Mal...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just, you’re so sweet, man. For all the pain you’ve gone through in your life, for you to be so sweet hearted, it’s amazing to me.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a trait I never appreciated in myself. It made me a walking, talking doormat.”

“Not with me, Mal. Never with me. I want to share my life with you. I never in my life want to hurt you. I promise you that.”

Like a fairytale it was, their love. He had wished for it for so many nights, lying under cheap sheets, staring at a stained ceiling. “I’m the powerful one. I’ll protect you.”

“We can protect each other.”

What neither of them knew in that moment was that their vows would come to pass sooner than they thought.

When they needed to get gas and a little food, Mal found a truck stop with a small grocery attached. Again, like all the other times, Mal was nervous, staring out all the windows before he’d let Draven leave the RV.

“Mal,” Draven whispered, forcing him to turn and face him. “We’ve done well so far. The markings on me are working. Suriel did right by us.”

“I just...this is the first time since... we...”

“Confessed our feelings, yeah, verbally, but we knew. I did.” His eyes were locked with Mal, and his hands planted on Mal’s hips. “Malakai, my sweet love, I’m going to get food, then we’ll pull around to the pumps and I’ll get gas. Think of this as the last time. I think we’ll make it if we go straight to the desert.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah.”

Lila held his hand as they both watched Draven leave the RV. Lila squeezed his hand, the door closing, both not taking a breath at all for a long moment.

“Lila...”

“I know. Like he said, Suriel did right by us so far, and there’s no reason to believe it would change now.”

“We’re so close.”

“We are. We’re a state away.”

They sat in the front so they could watch Draven make his way into the store.

It was a big place, a lot of semi-trucks driving through or parked in the back lot. The line of gas pumps was long, people moving about slowly except for the drivers, who were rushing to get back to their trucks and loads.

None of them looked like angels, not one wing anywhere, so that was why, when it happened, they were both shocked so badly, neither moved for a full minute.

The ground cracked like an earthquake had shaken it apart, but there was no quake until it started happening. Like Mal’s chasm he made back in Georgia. The hot asphalt opened like a new book was being cracked open for the first time.

The line was straight and narrow at first before it began widening, and it moved away from them and right to the grocery, where Draven was at that very second. When they did react, Mal rushed for the door, but Lila held him back. “They’ll know you’re here!”

“They already do!”

He tore out of the door of the RV, Lila on his heels, both running toward the store, avoiding the crack, but barely. Mal reached it first, and he looked everywhere as soon as he got inside the door. He was noticing, strangely, that people who should run and scream from the entire building shaking, the corner where the crack was starting, cracking and crumbling the glass and the walls, were standing, blankly.

None of them moved, all standing still, staring off into whatever dream they were inside of in that moment. Lila grabbed his arm, pulling him along. “He’s there!”

Mal forgot the other people, rushing for Draven, who was sliding down the wall near the restrooms.

Snack cakes, chips, over-the-counter pills, magazines, all were being shaken from the shelves. Soda was spewing out of the dispensers. Sale pictures were falling from the walls, crashing down, the glass shattering.

The world was exploding, it seemed, and they were in the middle of it. What was worse, Mal knew he caused it. Reaching Draven, he turned to tell Lila to get him back to the camper, but he saw she was running back to it already, out of the door, dodging the crack as it continued to widen.

“Where are you going?” He screamed, but she didn’t hear him. The roar of the world tearing apart kept all sounds from escaping.

He picked Draven up into his arms and followed her, but before he could get outside of the building that was ready to come down around his ears, he stopped in his tracks. Three massive angels were there, glowing red, their wings expanding, blocking his way.

The cracking stopped, the noise, the shaking, all in that second. Draven slipped from his arms, and immediately, he stood in front of Mal, chin high as he faced the unstoppable foes.

“All this to get one man?”

The angels were not angelic in their faces, as they were stone cold fury. Normally blue eyes were shining red, brows low over them, and their mouths thin slashes. One stood in front while the others were a foot behind him on either side. The front angel spoke, but the voice felt as if it came from the three of them. “Move or die, hunter.”

“I’m not moving,” Draven said, and then it happened.

The air around the angels looked distorted, like it was being seen in a funhouse mirror that was crackling with electricity, and then it narrowed so quickly that Mal didn’t have a second to think. It became a rod, and that rod impaled Draven, easily moving through his chest as if it was a piece of steel.

His heart broke into a million pieces then, and he screamed out with all the pain he felt. The one man his heart had opened to, the one man who’d given him as much love as he’d taken, was dying on the floor of some random truck stop at the hands of the things religious people held so high.

Mal dropped to his knees, gathering a dying Draven into his arm, holding him close. “Don’t die, please!”

“Malakai,” he said, his voice weak but still resounding with that deep love. “Don’t let them win.”

Before he could assure Draven that he’d never give into them, he heard screaming behind the angels, and he looked up to see Lila, the athame drawn over her head before she stuck it deftly into the back of the angel to the right of him.

The angel’s mouth opened wide; a soundless scream caught in the place’s air. His fury left his face as shock replaced it, but that was all Mal saw before he turned to shining white dust and disintegrated before Mal’s eyes.

The other angels turned, but Lila was already on the move, leaving the building and heading to the left, towards the back of it. With their attention drawn to Lila, Mal stood with Draven in his arms, and he screamed out for Suriel.

Like he’d been there all along, Suriel appeared and he looked around him quickly before he took Draven from Mal. “It’s only three, but soon, others will join them. You won’t see them, Mal. They’re going to join inside the angels’ bodies! Go kill them before they can, and I’ll be back for you!”

Mal had never considered his powers but he felt them then, pulsing through him like he was trying to be torn apart from the inside with jackhammers.

He ran to where he’d seen the other go and turned the corner in time to see the two of them striking down Lila on the

asphalt. Mal stopped a few feet behind them, watching them turn to him. For a moment, he saw the fear in their eyes, right before their eyes turned up to the sky, and Mal knew then they were calling in reinforcements.

Holding his palms out in front of him, he thought quickly back to all his lessons and then remembered what Suriel told him about his personal powers, how they were archangel powers and were massive. Thinking of both the people he loved being gone from his life, suddenly, there was nothing more for him to lose.

The others, though, caught his peripheral and he closed his eyes, willing all the living beings in the direct area to be gone from there, moved to a place where they'd be safe.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw the people were gone and he let loose his powers from the pain and sorrow that had been building from the moment he saw Draven and Lila stabbed.

The power was great, and he felt it come from the middle of him to move out of his palms. The light of it wasn't a light at all. It was brown, murky, barely glowing. It looked like it felt, sludgy, moving quickly, but muddy.

The clouds of it moved around them. It surrounded the two angels that were left. Their wings moved, as if they were trying to fly from there, to get away, but they were stuck, like the murky cloud of power was cement and they could not escape.

Their faces showed their pain, like the angel that Lila had stabbed with the athame. Their beauty was gone, and their faces cracked, like they'd done to the ground when they landed on the earth, hunting him.

The angels disintegrated, like snow falling from the sky. Their bodies were ash, floating to the sky as their wings disappeared altogether.

He watched, amazed, and let his hands drop to his sides, the feeling of being drained of all energy, of falling to his knees, it all felt surreal. Nothing was real, and once he was alone he was scared.

He was terrified of the future, alone, without the man he just discovered he was completely in love with, without his friend, the one person who he'd chosen to be his only family.

The world began moving with the dust that was the three angels and he realized why. There was movement.

Men were inching their way into the building, all of them holding shining blades of differing sizes. They were dressed in leather, in jeans, and all had determination in their eyes.

They were determined to kill him.

One, the closest, had a long, thick sword, and he was holding it in front of him. The blade glinted in the light coming in from the broken corner of the building, and he was moving quickly.

"Take me," Mal said, meaning for the man to kill him. He had nothing else to lose, no life ahead of him, but instead of

being stabbed with the sword, he felt his body quake for a split second, the darkness overtaking him, and he felt every cell in his body shift.

Then, he was in a new place. What was strange about the warm sand where he kneeled was the light. It was day, yes, but the light looked green, and when he moved, he felt like he was underwater.

“Malakai,” a voice said from behind him, and he spun to see a beautiful man there, dark hair and eyes that twinkled with joy.

Their voices, the whisper of the man’s long white robe moving against his black shirt and slacks, were as distorted as the sights there were. Like it was a dream and not real. His mouth was filled with his favorite taste, *dulce de leche* ice cream. It was madness.

That man’s joy, in the middle of his thin, handsome face, enraged Mal. “Who are you?”

“I’m The Morning Star, Malakai. I brought you here before the hunters could try to kill you.”

“Why didn’t you let them?” He screamed, the ache of still being alive making him bend over with the pain. “Why didn’t you let them...?”

Hands were on him, straightening him and the man’s dark black eyes turned to blue in a second. “I couldn’t allow that.”

“They’re dead. They’re... gone. I loved him! I loved her!”

“They’re fine, Malakai. And so are all the people that were in harm’s way. You got them out. Your powers saved all those people and those you love.”

Confusion set in and he looked around him but didn’t see a soul. “What...? Where are they? Where are we?”

“Where you were traveling to. This is the other side. It’s... a safe place for us. The humans you saved came just to the entrance and were taken back to their homes. Their memories wiped clean of the entire ordeal.”

“Safe... a safe place for us?”

Mal had only felt safe when he had Draven and Lila with him.

“When you used your powers for those people, you sent them here. The two you were with all this time, they told me where you were and how to get you.”

None of it made sense. “You knew where I was?”

“I felt you, yes, but it was blurry where you were. I’m guessing because you were close to the man called Draven. His markings were well placed.”

“The markings...”

“He had many before Suriel added to them. The hunters are hard for us to find, Malakai. Not only that, but having the blades made with my brother’s sword, it makes things... fuzzy. But we’ll discuss more after you see your friends.”

“See... them? And they’re really alive?”

“Come. I’ll take you to them.”

He followed the man, the Morning Star, as he called himself, over the small mounds of sand, around cacti that were all over, interspersed with bushes of little more than sticks. The sun, even in the place they were, was strong and warm, lighting on his face, making him feel like he should sweat, but he wasn’t.

There were buildings in the distance, small, one-story homes, all lined in a row. They were heading to the last one in the row, and even in the greenish light around them, he could tell the house was white.

There was a road that was a broken blacktop, and it hadn’t seen its best days in years. He thought the other dimension, as everyone had called it, would be perfect, like new.

The porch steps creaked loudly, making him jump, but he followed the Morning Star up the three of them and then they both entered the house, Mal following. When the Morning Star moved, Mal saw them, sitting on a tattered brown sofa in the middle of an otherwise barren room.

They were alive! They both looked up at once, and their faces changed from the worry they were both showing to surprise and joy.

Mal rushed to them, and they both stood, engulfing him in four arms, tightly. Mal felt a rush of love and happiness he’d never felt, and he began to cry immediately.

“How?” He asked through his relieved sobs. The feel of them, he didn’t want to pull away, but he had to see them again. He placed a palm on each cheek as he did, staring from one to the other. “How are you alive?”

“Him,” Lila answered, nodding to Morning Star. “Lucifer.”

Mal knew that was who it was, but hearing the name, it sent him reeling regardless. “He saved you?”

“It’s one of my tricks,” Lucifer said, laughing. “Come, Malakai. Let’s talk over here.”

Moving was strange in this dimension, and the sounds of his footfalls echoed ever so slightly. Mal held onto them like any second they’d be taken from him.

They walked through a door, and the room didn’t fit the house, at least what he’d seen of it. Lila gasped and Draven stared at the fixtures, which were all seemingly made of leaves.

There was a deep carpet, white as snow, and pillows all over the floor. The leaves hung down on vines, cradling thick pillar candles that shone much brighter than normal candles. In the corners there were Moroccan lamps holding the same candles, the trays set around the pillows held wine in fine decanters, glasses set around them. Lucifer waved a hand at a pile of pillows in the center of the room. “Please, sit.”

He, himself, sat cross-legged on the floor near them as they all took a pillow to cushion them. Lucifer was smiling gayly, hands folded on his ankles. “So, you think you’re my son?”

“I... I was told that I was.”

“Well, I hate to tell you this, but I have one son. Ren. He’s my pride and the love of my life, only equal to my husband, Cain. I miss them both terribly, but time is but a beat of a bird’s heart. I will be with them once all this row with the angels, my dear brothers, is over.”

The beat of a bird’s heart was fast, which, in Lucifer’s long existence, was true. In his, it was not that simple. “Suriel, he told me that my powers come from an archangel, or seraphim.”

“The seraph, yes, I’ve heard you have great powers, and to take down not one, but two angels, I don’t doubt that. Being that powerful, you leave a... trail. Power is like any other kind of energy. It doesn’t just die. There are traces everywhere you are. That’s how they found you.”

He didn’t understand. “I was locked in an RV for days, and only Draven left.”

He winked over at Draven cheekily. “And he left some of that energy... on you? Maybe in you?”

As Lucifer chuckled and leaned over to lie on his side, Mal watched him take great pleasure in his guess.

“Our...” Mal then whispered the rest of the question, “Sex?”

“Yes, dear boy. Your sex. You may have not known, or maybe you did, that you used great powers when you fucked.”

Lila groaned, “You’re kidding me. They can trace Draven now, after they fuck?”

“Yes! Isn’t it romantic?”

Nearly choking, Draven looked over his body as he screeched, “Romantic?”

“Yes. To be so connected as to leave traces of your power on your lover, it’s romantic and only for those who are totally committed to one another. It’s why Cain and I can’t be together as much as we’d like. We... make more than traces, but of course, he being a Nephilim and me a former archangel on high, and now one here, well...”

Mal didn’t find it funny in the least. “I got him hurt!”

“Malakai, please, don’t trouble your head. He’s fine now. Aren’t you, Draven?”

Draven nodded but took Mal’s hand. “I’m good. Lila is good. He healed us. Put his hands over us and voila, we were completely healthy.”

“You can likely do that too, Malakai.”

Oliver was suddenly there, at the doorway of the room, catching Mal’s eye. “Mal, you okay?”

“I’m good, now, I guess.”

“Dad, hey.”

The two embraced as soon as Lucifer was on his feet. Mal watched them, again, jealousy ripping through him. They

loved one another, and it showed in the way they greeted each other. “Good to see you, son.”

“Missed you. Father says hello, and he sends his love.”

“Send mine back,” Lucifer said as he moved to stare into his son’s face. “We were discussing some things.”

“Like him being my brother? Dad, did you...?”

“No, son. And I’m sure Cain is angry, but tell him not to be. This Nephilim, as wondrous as he is, I cannot take credit for.”

“Then, who?”

Mal agreed as he rose. “Yes, who could it be, then? I thought you were the only archangel to fall.”

“No, I’m not, but the other died a couple hundred years ago. It couldn’t be him. It has to be one of those that are still in heaven. Something isn’t right, and I will get to the bottom of it.”

“The prince of lies,” Malakai said. “I’ve heard you’re called that.”

They all turned to him, shocked. “Mal,” Draven cautioned. “Don’t...”

“No, I’m sorry, but this is enough! Who is my father? First I thought Suriel, then you, and now...?”

Lucifer smiled warmly, and it seemed sincere. Taking Mal’s shoulders into his grip, he soothed, “I understand it’s crazy making all the questions. I promise you, on the life of my true son, that I will find out who fathered you. It’s forbidden for

those still in heaven to so much as consider laying with a woman and making a child. As you've seen, you're all to be killed. Angel and human alike are set to wipe you out, but there is someone up there, sneaking to possibly add to our numbers, or maybe it's the opposite. It's possible they're fighting fire with fire, as the human saying goes."

"I'm supposed to be fighting for them? The fuckers that just tried to kill Lila and Draven?"

With his smile broadening, he said, "And you may think we did that to force you to our side." His eyes moved to Draven. "Isn't that right?"

"Were you reading my mind?"

"No, Draven of the hunters. I'd like to. I'll take a guess you have all the information I could ever need to wipe out the hunters, if I wanted to. I don't work like that."

He stepped away from Mal, from all of them, pacing slowly around the room. While Lila sat stiffly on one pillow and Draven took Mal's hand, they all watched the man that had haunted many the dreams of the pious over the centuries.

"I have always been the bad guy, the evil one. To the minds of the human, even those that might not believe in me, in the dark recesses of their minds, the propaganda got through and they fear me. It's not what I want, but I'll admit it's come in handy at times.

"It's difficult, but Cain, out there, living among people, he's more adamant than ever to save humanity. I'll say I have been

skeptical over the years, considering the things they've done, but he insists there are many more good people than bad."

"There are," Mal whispered, then looked over to Lila.

Draven agreed. "I've dealt with the bad and little of the good, but I've seen it. Sometimes you have to look hard. The thing is, we've heard a little of the arguments of both sides. Yours... feels like you want to take free will."

Stopping his movements except for his eyes, which moved to the side to stare at Draven, Lucifer said, "Oh, it does?"

Mal saw it, that Draven could be right. "Is that what you want?"

"Free will, no, we don't want to take that, but the bad infect the good." He went back over to sit and Mal and Draven did as well. "Please, understand that over the time you all have been on earth, you've developed hatreds, jealousies, competitions that cause terrible things to happen. Abuses, murders, rapes, all of that, it happens when the bad corrupt the good. Think about it, they abuse a man as a child and he develops behaviors that lead him to carry that abuse onto another. That has to stop. So, in those cases, we heal their hearts and minds. That may seem like taking free will, but all we want is to set a harmony into human beings to quell their problems."

Mal was the one skeptical. "There's no changing human nature unless you change them. What if changing them, you take what's good? Humans are fighters, and that doesn't always mean violence or wars. It means they fight for what they want, what they need. They keep trying when all seems

impossible. Intelligence, arts, all the things that are good could change too. Sometimes, it's those things that most hurt them that make them special. Not given obstacles might not give them drive like so many have."

"I should be okay with a child being beaten, or worse?"

"No, but..."

Draven held his hand tighter. "I understand wanting to right the wrongs of the world. I was raised on that mentality, but if we decide, if *Mal* decides to take your side of things, maybe you let him in on all your plans. Maybe you let him have some input. Your Nephilim are some of those that have had challenges in their young lives. He came out as one of the good ones. Who knows if his life was better when he was young, if he'd have turned out like this?"

"I'll...take all of that into consideration. I promise. For now, I'm more curious to find out who fathered you."

Mal nodded, agreeing, "I am too. Would the angels be doing that?"

Lucifer smiled like he knew the answer. Maybe he did. "Imagine, if you will, being made only to obey. All your existence, and that is really all it is, existing, was to serve. The last word that was spoken when it came to Nephilim was that they were abominations. They know nothing else. Now consider that you've been all this time without The Word to guide you. You're lost, alone, no idea where or what to do to help or hurt those that need either. Those angels, as harsh and frightening as they truly are, are lost. They are trying to get

back to being servants, knowing what to do. I try to hate them, my brothers, but I can't. I pity them. Where I and a few others were broken from that servitude, many more weren't."

Draven nodded, seeming to understand, but Mal didn't. "Why don't they give themselves free will and stop trying to kill off all humanity?"

"Malakai, they can't. As I said, they fear the unknown, what is outside of service to their Father. They'd be like us, the fallen. That is death to them. It's unfortunate, sure, but it's the way it is, Malakai. I'm sorry, you like to be called Mal."

"How did you know that?"

"Suriel told me." He rose again and finished, "I asked a lot about you."

"Oh."

"Come along with me. Mother's home."

Chapter Twenty-Five



image-placeholder

DRAVEN WAS THE FIRST to ask, “Mother? As in...?”

“You all call her Mother Nature. She likes that.”

Lila was up and following before Mal or Draven could move. That made Mal smile. He figured another woman’s company was welcome after all the men, even if the woman was *the* woman.

They went through another door to the north side of the room, which was strange in itself, being the house had not seemed that wide from the outside. They passed through, and he understood why. It was a magical doorway to a place that was unlike any he’d seen, and yet so familiar.

There was a paradise right there, where there should only be desert. Bathed in a clear, greenish colored light, it was a world all to itself. Oh, there was sand, of course, in the form of a beach lined coast that stretched for as far as Mal could see, leading to a green ocean. From the place where the beach left off and jungle began, however, it was lush, truly, totally green and so lovely, none of them could stop twirling to get every

sight they could manage. Lucifer watched them, delighted with their reaction.

Trees a hundred-foot high that held vines connecting them, red flowers as big as Mal's head, lining the vines were moving, like they were caught in breezes blowing in different directions, but Mal felt no wind at all. They moved independently, like a dance to silent music.

It was warm, but not overly so, and the world was filled with fragrances of flowers and plants. The air felt thick, but not cloying, as there didn't seem to be heavy humidity. Everything was... perfect.

Each leaf was massive and dazzling, the veins running through them purple or bright yellow, depending on the plant. Birds took off in all directions as they passed, and they were nearly silent in their flight. Every step they took met by soft earth, darker it became as they moved through, on a well-tread path that was lined with more flowers crawling on grounded vines, tiny compared to those in the trees. White, green and yellow flowers, all the colors on the same vine.

Another few feet and egg-shaped, orange fruits hung from the vines in between each bright red flower, and Lila thought to take one from a vine and she brought it to her nose, inhaling the scent of it. It was so big she had to hold it in both hands. The skin was shiny, so much so that Mal could see Lila's reflection in it.

“Go ahead,” Lucifer said, grinning. “Taste it.”

“Okay, *Lucy*, if you don’t enjoy being associated with those stories, maybe don’t tell a woman in paradise to eat a piece of fruit.”

He threw back his head as he laughed heartily, and Mal even got a giggle from it. He took the fruit from Lila and sunk his teeth into the firm but smooth flesh. The flavor took over his very existence, sweet, salty, if that was possible, at once, the fruit melting into his mouth without him having to chew a bit.

As his eyes rolled back in his head, Draven took the fruit of him. “That’s all the recommendation I need.”

He took a bite and Lila plucked another piece of fruit from the vine, and soon the three were groaning in the pleasure of eating the strange, orange fruit.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it? Mother gets to experiment now. She’s made delicious foods that are all good for a human body. There isn’t one thing She’s made that wouldn’t cure a person of terrible illnesses.”

“What does this do?” Lila asked him, staring at the fruit.

“I have no idea. You’ll ask her, and She’ll enjoy explaining. I’m afraid I’m a terrible student, but my beloved husband and Mother put their heads together often about such things.”

“Cain, the farmer,” Lila whispered. “Makes sense.”

Together, they moved deeper into the jungle, and there were animals beginning to appear. A tall stag stood in the center of

the trail, and near him, a small black bear sat against the wide trunk of a tree, eating blue colored bananas, peel and all.

They stopped, seeing the bear, each ready to run, but Lucifer explained, “None of the animals need to fear each other here, or beings like us, like that deer. He knows the bear is full and won’t go after him.”

As they passed, the bear barely glanced up at them, as he grabbed another bunch of the blue fruit and started eating them, one at a time, like he was at a movie, eating popcorn.

Sunbeams came through the thick overhead canopy of thick leaves, finding slight breaks to let them fall to the ground. As the sun touched pieces of soil, more plants grew, and Mal saw one grow a foot as he moved along the trail.

A pond was passed, teeming with fish that leaped from the glass-like surface and splashed silently back into the dark depths without seeming to displace a drop. Mal saw the sun glinting off the surface, and the trees were hanging over it, all perfectly reflected.

Reeds that were growing on the shore of it exploded as they passed, and the fuzz inside was like snow, falling over their heads and the scent was like crisp sheets, dried in the breeze. There wasn’t anything that wasn’t beautiful, and he felt the life-giving force of everything around him.

Draven took his hand as they walked by two lovebirds, rainbow in color, shining white beaks rubbing against the other, and Mal smiled over at him, sighing that he could still do that.

As his warm hand held Mal's, Mal thought on the sight of him, bleeding, his blood pumping from him too quickly. It broke him all over again, but it was over. Draven was fine.

At least that's what he told himself, but it didn't feel that way. They'd always be hunted. Unless they didn't make love or do anything else that would leave a trace, they'd always be found.

A woman sat in the distance, right on the ground, covered in a thin piece of cloth that draped over her ample breasts and wide hips. Her belly was rounded, her thighs thick, and her long, curly black hair flowed over her shoulders and arms.

She had dark skin, as dark as the soil, and her wide eyes were as black. In her lashes were tiny leaves and around her neck, a living necklace of what seemed to be fairies.

"Whoa," Draven whispered, barely audibly. Mal's sentiments were the same, but they had stopped to stare at Mother Nature. Lila, on the other hand, was walking slowly but steadily toward Her, like she was being drawn there.

"Mother..." Lila said as she closed the space between them. She kneeled on the grass, smiling like she'd just met her ideal, and knowing her, she had.

"Child. How are you? Feeling better?" The woman asked, as she held out a hand to Lila, who took it and Mal watched as Lila glowed with the greenish light of the place.

"I'm much better now."

“My children have a knack for healing. I could stir that in when we were cooking them up, so to speak.”

“Thank you. I’ve... dreamed of you.”

“Of course, you have, darling girl. All the women of the earth are my daughters, but there are a few, like you, that were made especially for motherhood.”

Lila took her hand back, letting it fall to her side. “Excuse me?”

“Not your own child, Lila. You were made to be the mother to others that I couldn’t.”

Mal drew closer to them, though he wasn’t comfortable interrupting them. Draven was by his side, and both had stopped breathing, so amazed they were at what they were watching. Mother Nature was absently placing her hand near her long, graceful neck and letting the tiny fairies there were climbing down to her arm.

Lila didn’t seem to notice.

“Others?”

“Like our Malakai.” Her eyes moved to him, and She waved a hand over the earth next to Lila, causing the grass to thicken and grow in two wide circles. “Come, Malakai, Draven. Sit and speak with me.”

They moved like they had no choice, but Mal didn’t feel fear or anything except total peace. It was foreign, being he didn’t think he’d ever felt much peace. Well, except when he used to feed the stray dog. That was when he felt peace.

“Of course, it was,” Mother Nature said as he sat near her on the grass that was a cushion, with the way she’d made it grow. “You, my darling, are a giver. Like my sons, you serve, but you also serve the world and those living in it. You three are special and chosen to do great things. Lila and Draven will help me here, and you’ll go out, watching over those like you, and other special humans.”

The only thing he heard was that he was going to be away from the two people he truly loved. “What?”

Lucifer was there, sitting next to her in a blink, and chided his mother with a lilting voice. “I hadn’t gotten around to telling them, Mother.”

“That’s not my fault,” She said with a loving smile granted to him. “It’s only the truth of the matter, son.”

Mal was on his feet, screaming, “I’m not leaving them! They’re coming with me!”

“No, Malakai,” Lucifer said, but then Lila stood and placed a hand on Mal, immediately soothing him.

“It has to be this way.”

Mother Nature smiled up at her, Her teeth glistening in the light that showed through the trees. It distracted him, and Mal feared then, a fear that shook him to his core.

“Sit, Malakai, please,” She said to him, Her words flowing from her like the gentlest waterfall. “You need to know how this place works.”

He did sit, but he was stiff with worry and fear, to the point he felt his chest tight, like any second, his heart would explode and kill him.

Lucifer began, "Lilith made this place. You know about her, of course. Cain's mother, the first human woman."

"Yes, we know," Draven said. "Oliver and Carver told us. Ren and Cain, that is."

"Yes. Well, once she made this place, it was here for so many others, including me. I give off a powerful trace when I leave to go into the other world, where you all are from. For some that come here, it's necessary. Those that die in that world, who aren't charmed into going to heaven, well, they come here, or they roamed the earth as spirits. Their souls are seeking the right home, if you will. Not all trust it here, and they don't trust heaven."

"Isn't that torture?"

Lucifer lowered his head and answered simply, "Yes."

"Let them go to heaven, then," Draven yelled. "Or get them to come here!"

"We can't force them," Mother Nature interceded. "It's got to be a choice. Free will, darlings, is what they need to be true humans. With that, however, they choose things that aren't always good for them. Sometimes, after a long time, they choose, but not always. Some never trust, or they forget they even have a choice. It's all very sad, but what we want, more than anything, is for them not to be lost any longer. Those still

living, when they leave their earthly bodies, we want them to know there is another place. It's hard, though. Anyone we've given the knowledge, once they tell people about this place, they are killed."

"The angels. They are... horrible!" Mal was incensed, and still hurting over being told he couldn't be with Lila and Draven. "But... What about this place? Why do they need to stay here, or why do I have to leave?"

"Oh, sorry," Lucifer said. "I got off track. Well, when Lilith made this place, it was used to hide from those that sought to kill her. She made it so angels couldn't find it, that only certain humans could. Then, when her own son, a Nephilim, needed a place to hide, she opened it to Nephilim. Nephilim use this place to have peace. They can move in and out of it easily, but humans cannot. Like you've felt here, Mal, and you can return here. You can stay, if that's what you choose, but you're needed out there. Your destiny is to help those that need to be convinced of their powers."

"Lilith, she's never left?"

"She did, at first, a lot. But not only was she being hunted, she'd age. She became an old woman before she got help. By me. We worked with her for a very long time to reverse her age enough for her to be comfortable and keep her from aging more when she left."

"Do that, to them! Please?"

His heart was shattering. The thought of walking through the inhospitable world without them was unbearable.

“I can, Mal, but it’ll take time. A lot of time.”

By that, Mal was sure he meant centuries or some crazy amount of time that would still be terrible for all of them. “I need them with me.”

Lila spoke, as she was staring at Mother Nature, but then turned her head to him. “We can’t leave now. We didn’t exactly die, but if we go out there, we will. Or, if we don’t die, we’ll age. Time moves differently here.”

“How do you know that?”

Mother Nature answered, “I gave her all the knowledge she needs.”

Mal was crying. The tears felt cold on his face. Everything in that dimension was off, opposite of the world. “I can’t be without them.”

“Mal,” Draven whispered, “You want us. I want to be with you, too, but you don’t need us. You’re stronger than you can imagine, and that has nothing to do with your powers.”

“You’re special, above most of the Nephilim. You’re made of a powerful angel, though he’s cloaked your identity from us. I don’t understand why that is, but you, sweet boy, will be a leader one day because of your great powers.”

“I don’t want to be a leader,” he choked, squeezing Draven’s hand hard. “Without them, powers or not, strength or not, I’ll be lost.”

“Then stay,” She said, smiling. “I’d never force your hand. You’ll be welcome here, loved, respected, and you’ll be with

your people and, more than that, you'll forever be safe."

Mal knew that what she said was true, but it nagged at him that he could help others, taking care of other Nephilim. He wanted to help, wanted to have a purpose that would be good for others like him. When he felt Draven's hand in his, though, his heart broke into a million pieces. "Can I think about all of this?"

Lucifer answered him, "Of course. They'll be safe here. I swear it. They will do a lot of good too, as I'm sure is important to them."

After leaving Lila with Mother Nature, the two walked through the thick foliage of the jungle where they found themselves. They saw more extraordinary things, birds so large, they could carry either of the men off to their nests to feed their young. There were waterfalls, lakes that led off to the distance and more trees than Mal figured the real earth could ever hold.

Each plant they passed was new to Mal, each flower opening as if to greet him. There were fairies flying around like insects, and some lit on the branches of trees to watch them.

Draven was as solemn as Mal, off in thought, the sorrow coming off him matching Mal's own, and it seemed out of place there, in that peaceful, beautiful world.

"Mal, I love you. That means that I'll always love you."

He knew that, without a doubt. “I think if you stay here, you won’t age. I think... I think it’s one reason you need to stay here.”

“I thought the same. If Lilith is still alive, here, somewhere here, then that has to be it. There’s no death here. There’s no pain or sickness. It’s truly a paradise.”

“Like the Garden of Eden. They made their own. It’s... so much to take in. I don’t even understand it all, Draven. What if it’s not good? What if there is really a hell, and this is it.”

“I think our earth is hell, Mal. Not that it’s all bad, but there is pain and sickness there. There is death. It’s a circle, sure, birth, death and all that and we’ve accepted that, but what if there is another way? What if no mother ever has to lose a child again, or like in your case, they don’t have to leave their child?”

“My mother... is she here?”

“Mal... I don’t know. Could she be?”

“I’ve got to find out. If...if she is, how can I leave? I’d leave you, Lila and a mother I’ve dreamed of having as long as I’ve lived?”

Draven took his face into both hands, and he stopped Mal’s thoughts and fear in the way his eyes held him. “You need to leave, Mal. You know you must. There’s no other way. You were born to make a difference. If you only take one Nephilim and raise them, teach them, love them, then you can make a

difference that could make the other world, our world, into this.”

“Without free will, Draven! That’s what we worried about!”

“We have it! You can stay or go. Lila can learn things from the Great Mothers of the world. Mother Nature, Lilith, others, and they can, in turn, teach others. We can make things better, but you need to be out there to do your part.”

“How can I leave you?” He asked with his voice breaking like it would fall away and he’d never speak again. “I just found you.”

“I’ll be here. I’ll always be here, and when you want me, come to me.”

“What if...?”

“Shh, baby, don’t. Don’t even think it. You’ll live and so will I. If Lucifer and Cain can do it, we can. They’ve loved each other longer than time itself, and so will we.”

They held each other in the middle of that jungle, where it was hard to tell the ground from the sky. Draven kissed him tenderly, nipping little pecks on his lips as he let Mal cry for the unfairness of it all.

True love was rare, and he had known that from the time he could comprehend it. The love he felt for Draven, his hero, his strong, sweet man, wasn’t something he’d ever find again.

They lay on ground that was softer than any bed, with the grass and plants to cushion them. Draven took a vine that grew

close, sniffing the red flower on it before taking it into both hands and wrapping it around Mal's wrists.

"What are you doing?"

"Loving you. I want to have your body, explore it, and I need you to be still."

Mal smiled despite all the broiling pain inside him. "Be still. You don't think I can be still?"

Coming up from licking a swath up Mal's stomach while pushing up his shirt, Draven whispered, "Not with what I'm going to do with you."

Chills went through him as he heard those words and tried to imagine what Draven was saying, but he'd had limited experience sexually, and nothing kinky or more than brutal romps for three or five minutes.

Only Draven had given him more, and their first coupling had been for them, needing to finally touch, physically connect. It was all kisses and touch, but Mal knew this was very different.

The vines were wrapped around both wrists, and they tightened more on their own. Mal loved that Mother Nature had made it obvious that the plants were alive. On their earth, they were seen as just dead things that grew. Few saw the beauty and importance of them. He was sure it was Cain that had requested that.

Draven ripped his shirt open, then unfastened his jeans, slowly unbuttoning the top button, then unzipping them even

slower. All the while, his eyes darted up to Mal's face, as if he was gauging Mal's reaction, searching for Mal's discomfort. Not finding it, he continued until he was gently pulling Mal's jeans over his hips.

With his feet planted on the soft ground, he lifted his hips high, letting Draven know he was perfectly fine with what was happening. Draven chuckled a little, the message being that clear, and after removing Mal's shoes, his pants and underwear were taken from him and he lay there, exposed, warm, in love and his lust grew by the second.

He was hard, his cock lay over his lower abdomen, covering his bellybutton, leaking there, making him feel even warmer and sticky. That was where Draven started to lick, right there at his navel, moving Mal's cock to the side of it, holding it back as it tried to move back in the way.

His tongue was firm as he licked, dipping into his flesh, getting every drop of the pre-cum. Draven made little noises of pleasure, enjoying the feeling and taste of licking over Mal's stomach before he moved up, headed to the right and the nipple that perched at the top of his pec.

There he stayed for a long time, making Mal crazy as he licked and sucked it, sinking his teeth there, teasing that he'd bite hard enough to hurt but never quite doing it. That's what he was doing, revving Mal into a frenzy, making him yearn, teasing, taunting, and effectively taking Mal out of his head.

Draven knew him without knowing him for long. He explored every part of his body, slowly, like he was

memorizing it. Draven's tongue licked over Mal's armpit, sniffing there, and when Mal started laughing, both from being tickled and the embarrassment of it worried he didn't exactly smell clean, Draven reached up and placed a hand over his mouth.

“Shh, baby. This is where most of your pheromones live. You're imprinting them on me right now, and that is the only scent I'll long for, for as long as I live.”

Not only did that turn him on something fierce, it melted him, knowing that Draven wanted him, even his scent, forever. He'd never been wanted in that way, so completely. Not many had wanted him at all. Draven was different in so many ways that it scared Mal, excited him, but gave him something soft to have in his life.

A soft love that was strong, too. That was Draven.

When Draven finished with his armpit, he moved to Mal's throat, sucking there, hard and long enough to produce hickeys. Mal's eyes rolled back in his head, his throat being one of his strongest erogenous zones, and Draven took those subtle clues of his eyes rolling and his low, breathy moan to work more there.

Nibbling a little, like he had on Mal's nipple, Draven extracted nearly silent pleas for him to continue, or at the very least, to start to fuck him. The thin flesh over his Adam's apple, a name that meant more than it had ever in the past, was kissed and licked. That sent his hips to moving, humping the air.

“Still, Mal. Stay still for me. It’s my time to have all the fun I want with you.”

Mal let his hips fall, and he looked at Draven, who’d come up from his tasting and was smiling devilishly.

“Maybe you’re the real Satan.”

“You haven’t seen anything wicked yet, baby.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



image-placeholder

DRAVEN'S HEAD MOVED AND as he watched, Draven's eyes widened, Mal turned his head to see what he was witnessing. When he did, he sucked in a lungful of air and didn't let it out for a long time.

The vines to the right of them were entwining, and the tips were moving back and forth on one another, imitating kissing. Their lower parts were moving against one another, and Draven whispered, "They're making love."

"Do you think...?"

"Your traces. I'd bet on it."

They both laughed and the only reason his laughter stopped was because Draven moved up just enough for him to place his mouth fully over Mal's, kissing the breath out of him.

Mal wanted nothing more than to wrap himself around Draven, as Draven had done for him, but Draven wanted him to be still, to let him have his way and Mal would give him anything.

The last place reachable on him that was given attention was Mal's dick and ass. He lay helpless, his cock taken into a warm mouth, moving into Draven's throat as Draven devoured him. Mal's eyes were closed, his head back, exposing his neck and making it hard to swallow, but Draven didn't have that problem. He swallowed continually around the head of Mal's cock, milking him like he had when Mal fucked him.

Licking, sucking over the shaft and giving even more work to the head, he languished in pleasure. Then his balls were next, and each was moved around in Draven's mouth while his tongue bathed each. Mal's words were garbled but his voice grew louder with each ball, then he let out a sigh of disappointment when Draven let the last one fall from his lips.

Last was his ass, and Draven didn't take that part of him gently. He dove in, mouth, tongue, fucking Mal aggressively, then his fingers got in on the game, one, then two, stretching Mal, wetting him, delving deep enough to rub roughly over Mal's prostate.

"Draven, please!"

"Shh. I'm working," he whispered while he continued his finger-fucking. "Never disturb a man's work, Malakai."

The way he said *Malakai*, in that rough, deep way, it laid him out like a rag, unable to move or react. That didn't last, of course, as soon as Draven went back in for seconds on his meal of Mal's ass.

He took a long time, fingering, then tonguing him, getting deep, then shallow, keeping Mal from being able to even guess

what was going to happen next. Mal's body was in such an unfamiliar place, both figuratively and literally, that he couldn't keep up with all his senses going off at once.

His skin felt like it was overly sensitive, the slightest whisper of a caress of a blade of grass making him jump. His hearing, the lewd way it sounded as Draven ate him, it was purely erotic.

The scents of their sex were strengthened by contrasting with the smell of the flowers, the soil and foliage. They were animal and earthly scents, and theirs contrasted that, but it also blended in with it in the strangest way.

The green-colored sky above him was clear, but the strange part was, a sun shone brightly at the same time that stars were twinkling there, as if on a black, midnight sky where the moon hid in its newness.

Everything was made brighter, clearer, and then his eyes would water, blurring the bizarre world, making colors bleed together, and sharp lines curve.

His legs were each placed over Draven's shoulders, and he kissed Mal again, fully, his mouth tight against Mal's. Sucking Mal's tongue, he sent Mal reeling, spinning in his own mind, his body quaking. He wanted the man inside him, needing it like he needed air, and soon, he was filled, Draven moving easily inside him, like he'd used that tube of lubrication from the RV, but the RV was gone, along with the entire gas station.

How he knew it, he didn't know. It had succumbed to the chasm and fallen into it. It was the place, the other world, and

Mal wondered in awe and delight if the gay Nephilim's, Oliver and Carver, or Ren and Cain, had thrown that into the mix. They'd made lube unnecessary.

"What's funny?" Draven said as he stopped, fully seated, in Mal.

"No lube. Never mind."

"Does it hurt?"

"No! No, it feels better than anything ever. Please, Draven, don't stop. Fuck me like it's the last time."

Draven caressed fingertips over his cheek. "It's not the last time, Mal. I think we have forever."

Forever... that didn't seem real, even after all he'd seen and experienced. "Still. Pretend it is."

"Okay, baby. Let me love you this way, and we'll worry about forever later."

Mal couldn't stay still once Draven started, but he tried to temper his movements as he felt Draven's thick cock moving easily inside him. Their eyes were locked, their breaths coming out in huffs as Draven made love to him, rolling his hips at a nice, easy pace.

Mal fell harder for the man with every thrust. It wasn't just lust between them. The beauty of the act didn't fall from his notice. There, where the very plants mimicked their movements, he saw it, what a joyous dance they shared.

Draven moved his eyes from Mal to Mal's wrists and said to the vine, "You can release him now."

Mal looked over, startled as they untwisted from his wrists, moving away from the two over the grass.

"What the hell?"

"Isn't this incredible?"

"Yes. And so are you."

Mal moved then, wrapping around Draven, moving with him more aggressively, and the way his hips met Draven, he took the man deeper, and welcomed him fully.

Draven's mouth met his again and again, kissing him, tasting him, sucking another mark on his neck. Mal didn't have to ask why. As he knew, Draven wasn't about to not mark him before sending him off into the world.

Mal forced his body to leave them, not allowing them to heal, like his body tended to do after he realized his powers. He wanted them, wanted them to always be there, so when he looked into a mirror, Draven would be there.

They rolled on the grass, never parting, but once Mal was on top, and he placed both palms on Draven's incredible chest, he rode him slowly, lifting off him barely before sitting again, smiling down on the beautiful face of the man that he loved.

The journey had been hard, it had been fraught with danger, but there they were, safe, content and making love like there wasn't another care in the world. That, Mal knew, had been Draven's goal all along and the rest was just an added benefit.

When Draven came inside him, Mal could feel the cum moving there, leaking up instead of out, rushing into the places inside of him that only Draven could touch. They didn't move from one another until the darkness blanketed the land and they were holding onto each other like they truly wouldn't see each other again.

“Draven, how am I going to leave?”

“You're just going to. You have things to do that Lila and I can't be part of, but we'll be here waiting. When you're tired or you need to be with us, we're here, baby. I don't want you to go either, but you have to. I doubt I'll find the answers here. I still don't trust either side. You, Mal, can help others and figure all this out.”

He knew that was the truth, though he didn't want to hear it. He wanted Draven to lie to him, to tell him he didn't have to leave. They could stay there, in that magical place, and live forever in each other's arms.

Later, when the dawn was breaking, and the sun rose high to play amongst the other stars in that green sky, they dressed and walked hand in hand back to the house that they knew really wasn't a house.

Lila was on the floor of the room of pillows, her hands deep in a pot of soil. “Hey, guys.”

“Lila, what are you doing?”

“Planting something. I've always wanted to have a huge garden, but I lived in rentals. Mother is building me a house

made of plants and wants me to... commune with them. Her words," she said in a lilting voice. "It's amazing here."

Mal sat with her, watching as the seed she'd planted grew. "That's... so weird."

"Isn't it? Good, weird though." Her smile faded as she looked over to him. "You're... leaving. Aren't you?"

"Yes. If I stay much longer, I'll never go. Draven and I talked half the night."

"Only talked? Mal, we have got to discuss the advantage of see-you-later sex. It's fucking great."

"Shut up," he laughed, blushing so badly, he felt like his face would melt right off. "Seriously, I'm going, I'm going to find out whatever either side doesn't want us to know. I mean, I get you're all happy, being here with Mother Nature or whatever, but still..."

"There's a war that's bound to happen, Mal, and only the Nephilim can stop it. I got that much, and she gave it to me. She's...okay with being here and she's okay with being around her kids and all, but she's worried. I felt that right off, and it's you guys. It's why one side wants you so bad and the other side is trying to kill you. You're the keys to all of this. I just don't know how yet, and they won't tell you or me or anyone until it's time."

They'd thought the same, Draven and him. "I'll find others. I'll do whatever I have to do. I'm coming back, Lila, I swear it."

“I know you will. Even if you didn’t want to see me, you got a booty call right here that will drag you back again and again. That doesn’t mean I will not miss you like crazy.”

“Ditto.”

They embraced, and Mal felt his tears coming in a fast stream down his cheeks. Lila’s own were wetting his shirt, and he knew then that she hadn’t been totally overcome by the place. She loved it there, there was no doubt, but she loved him more, and that was all he really needed to know.

“Take care of yourself. I know you’re all powerful and shit, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be hurt. Those angels and hunters will not give up on you or the other Nephilim. You’re important, Mal, more than you can even guess. I feel their need for you and the others like you. I can’t see through it all yet but being here... it’s bringing something out in me.”

“What?” Draven asked as he sat with them. “What’s changing you?”

“Her? Mother Nature, or maybe it’s a thing Lilith did to the place when she made it. Think about it, she made this place as an alternative to the world we’re from, where men have ruled from the literal start. This place was made for women. I mean, men can come here too, as we’ve seen, but it’s for women, and I think we... grow? If that’s the right word. The powers that we already have, instinct and intuition, it grows here. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“Does any of this?” Mal asked, laughing.

“Yeah, it does,” Draven said in a whisper. “Lila, be careful with these thoughts, and don’t try to act on anything yet. We need to be here, discovering what all this is about like Mal has to do on the outside.”

“I believe that too, Draven. God, this is all just so...”

“Magical,” Mal said simply. “We, in that world, we ask for miracles and rarely get them. We read about fantastic places and people in fairy tales and fantasy books, but being them, seeing them, it’s not something we expect will ever happen. This is the magic so many pretend is only fiction.”

Lila hugged him again and this time, it was goodbye. At least for a while.

Draven found Lucifer, who took them to the front door, where Mal could leave and walk to the gate that Lucifer said he’d easily find now that he knew what he was looking for.

“You’re going to be great, Mal,” he encouraged. “And handsome thing you are, you’ll be chased by men and women alike.”

Draven glowered at that. “He knows where he belongs.”

Lucifer’s laughter was contagious. “Oh, I have no doubt of that, seeing those... What do humans call them? Love bites?”

Draven blushed and told the Morning Star, “Go away now, huh?”

Lucifer cackled as he slapped Draven on the back solidly. “Goodbyes are bittersweet, but reunions rock the walls.”

Rolling his eyes, he whispered, “You’re leaving me with him.”

“Yeah. I’m suddenly glad I get to go.”

Draven’s smile dropped at the corners, and he had tears that welled in his eyes. “Like Lila said, take care of yourself. Avoid churches, anything like it. The hunters told us they found many in those holy places. I don’t know why. I don’t know so much. I wish I knew more.”

“You can tell me where the hunters gather. I need to see them.”

“They’ll have moved that, Mal. I defected, remember? They won’t trust me not to tell you.”

Mal smiled and wiped away one tear that escaped Draven’s precarious hold on them. “Ah, well, I guess I’ll have to go there and see if I can’t get some tingles.”

“Mal, you’re determined to put yourself in danger.”

“No, now that I know where you are, and I have this gift of popping in and out of places, I can get back here so you can kiss my wounds all better.”

He was trying so hard not to smile, but Draven’s lips curled up again, giving Mal what he’d needed.

“There. Keep that there. I want to go out of this dimension, remembering your smile.”

“Okay. Okay, fine.”

They kissed and Mal pulled him so close, he was sure it was hard for Draven to breathe, but breath wasn't as important as that embrace. When he walked away, to the glowing gate that was nothing more than a gate of a chain link fence, or at least, that was what it seemed to be, he did cry.

It was cleansing, though, those quiet tears, washing him clean of all the fear and worry. He knew Draven would be safe, and Lila would thrive. He'd work hard and do what he had to, taking respite back with his loved ones.

A movement in his stomach caused him to place his hand there, a warmth spreading through him. "I know you're there."

He stepped through into the world he'd always known and walked off into the desert to set on his tasks, and prepare for the child to come. "I guess taking you with me is a piece of Draven that I didn't expect. Your other daddy will be thrilled." He stopped his movements and gazed down at his stomach. "I hope."

Epilogue



image-placeholder

FIVE YEARS LATER...

First, a vase exploded, the flowers flying into the air before falling slowly to the hardwood floor. The water was everywhere, splashing on the television, the family pictures and the newly painted eggshell wall. The glass became little more than sand, it was pulverized so well.

A bolt of tiny lightning flew by his head, the crackle of it was loud in the home, and the smell was that of a coming rainstorm, only the rain wouldn't come, and the storm had already brewed, right there in the house. Then the red pair of Converse next to the front door started to burst into fire, burning enough to let the smell of burning rubber block out the smell of ozone.

It was chaos, vicious and something only two with great powers and little restraint could cause.

Like two little Nephilim that were about to lose every privilege they had.

Mal's patience was thin as the two ran around the living room. He'd told them a million times to stop using their powers in the house, and to never use them on each other, but they were young and full of life. He couldn't blame them.

Freezing them in their tracks with the blink of an eye, Mal stared over at Steven, his natural child, the one that looked exactly like Draven except for one feature, moved the only things he could, his sky-blue eyes, to Mal.

Leo didn't know how to unlock his eyes yet, so Mal waved a hand, releasing both.

Once they could move, both turned to him with contrived guilt all over their usually sweet faces. He asked them in a terse voice, "What is the rule?"

Leo giggled as only a four-year-old could, but Steven huffed, "No powers in the house." His dark skin was darker with the anger and blush, long hair frazzled from the chase. Steven was his child, the one that had nearly killed him when he was born, but both survived, though Mal worried he might not live through raising the boy.

Then there was Leo, who was shining and red all over his paler face, the dimples that were at the corners of his wide mouth heavily indented as he smiled brightly, even in his guilt.

"You have half the prairie out there. You couldn't go outside to play?"

"What if the angels come, Daddy?"

That was always Steven's way of getting out of trouble.
"Then Daddy will make them go away."

"But, Daddy, we"

"No talking back! Now, go outside and play and come back in soon. I'm making dinner now."

His thin little shoulders slumped as he took Leo's hand and led him out into the cloaked yard, Mal laughing after them, the brothers close as thieves but rowdy with their powers. He loved them dearly, even if they frayed his nerves something awful.

It would be easier, all of it would, if he had Draven there to help him raise them. He longed to do it, Draven. Each time he had to watch his husband and children leave the other dimension, he wept, and Mal felt it. In fact, he felt it for months.

Leo was the son of Suriel, confirmed that time. His mother had passed at Leo's birth, but she would have died soon if not. She had cancer, and it was bad, draining her until she was pregnant with Leo. She thrived while he grew inside her, and was smiling as she held him, and her life ended.

He hated he couldn't heal cancer. It was just outside of his powers, but the way Leo shined with her light told him she lived on in him.

Besides the kids, Mal had gone on with life outside the dimension with a few trips back to see Lila and Draven. He missed them all the time and took Steven to see his other

father as often as was safe. The desert was crazy with angels, as they had looked more actively for the other world. Not to mention, months would pass during the couple of days they were inside the other world. They had school, friends and child lives to lead. Draven insisted they enjoy them.

He'd tried and failed more than once to find the hunters, but once Steven was born, his destiny was to raise him, and then Suriel came to him, begging for his help with his son, Leo. Raising them left a lot undone, but it was more than worth it.

As much as Mal had loved the coast, he set his life in his old world, the prairie. There, he knew he could keep his sons safe, and they had plenty of open space to learn their powers. He wouldn't have them coming on them later in life, like he had. He wanted them to learn them and someday, fight with him to keep the angels from destroying the earth.

The one thing he still searched for was the war he was told would occur, and his place in it. Mother Nature had told Lila that they, the Nephilim, were the ones that would stop it. They'd be between the forces of angels and gods, and the humans that were mere pawns to either. Oh, he believed Mother Nature and those surrounding her thought they were the good guys, but he'd learned long ago there were no good or bad guys in the scheme of it all. There were beings that thought theirs was the righteous cause. Like any other war.

Dinner was chicken and peas. It was a sadistic trick he'd played, being they broke his favorite vase and burned his

favorite shoes. “Eat every pea on that plate, both of you,” he warned. “Or no tablets for a week.”

“Daddy,” Steven complained, his eyes wide with the threat. “I use it for learning!”

“Steven, don’t give me that. There is good, old-fashioned paper and pencil if you’re so concerned about learning.”

“What’s that, Daddy?” Leo asked and Mal turned to him, ready to pick at him for asking such a silly question, then he realized he’d yet to teach him on the medium.

“I’ll... show you tomorrow.”

When the boys were in bed that night, Mal went to the window seat, so like the one that had been in his grandmother’s home. That’s where he sat every night. Not reading, but writing. Like his mother, he wrote diaries.

He still hadn’t seen her. He’d asked, but no one could tell him where she was. He worried over that, but he supposed, if she were in heaven, then it must be a place for the good to go, just like the other world Lilith created. She could only go to a good place, he knew. She was good and pure.

Draven... he thought of him and that was the person he truly wrote the diary for. Draven was missing so much of Steven’s and then Leo’s lives. Little things Mal knew Draven would be thrilled to witness had gone past and would never be recaptured.

So, Mal wrote. He wrote pages and pages every night, and when he took a breath from the writing, he’d gaze out,

imagining the world bathed in a green light, and wondering where Draven was in that other world.

“I miss you so much, Draven. God, this is so crazy we can’t be together.”

“Hello, Malakai,” a voice said from somewhere in the darkened room. Mal jumped to his feet, the pen and book falling from his lap to the floor, and he searched the darkness for the source of the voice. “Who’s there?”

Emerging from the dark, a man stepped out, and Mal searched the air, the man’s very body, for any sign that he was magical. There didn’t seem to be any, though there was an echo of it, like he’d been touched by strong magic, but it only lingered, like sawdust when a carpenter built a piece of furniture. “My name is Gabriel.”

“Gabriel,” he whispered, of course, knowing the name. It was commonly known to be the name of one of the archangels. He’d studied them and any religious text he could find to learn more about the winged creatures, so set to kill him and his sons.

“Yes, that one. The former angel. Archangel, to be exact.”

“I don’t feel your powers. Are you here to kill me? My… my sons? How did you get in here? We’re cloaked from the angels.”

“No, I don’t want to kill you,” he said flatly. “And they gave me the means to find you when I brought my gift.”

Then, when Gabriel had finished speaking, as Mal stared in his face, he saw it. He saw his own face there, the cleft chin and square jaw, the sky-blue eyes that his son had as well.

The truth dawned on him, like clouds had parted at last. It was a similar feeling, the familial warmth that had told him he was carrying Steven soon after he was conceived. Only this... was a little different.

“You’re my... *you’re* my father!”

Mal was too stunned to move, and Gabriel didn’t take a step toward him. They simply stared at one another for a long time before Gabriel spoke again. “I am. I... didn’t know why I did it, except to possibly be accepted by my brother again. Lucifer was my favorite brother, the one that raised me, taught me, loved me. I missed him, but I was too afraid to leave heaven. I thought, like all my brothers, that to so much as speak to Lucifer was a sin. So, I waited and then... when the Nephilim started to be born and heaven was up in arms about them, I saw a chance. I sneaked into your mother’s room the night before Suriel. I spoke to her, telling her everything. I told her about what you’d become, and she knew you’d be her greatest legacy. Malakai, I did wrong by her, and by you, too. I was afraid.”

Mal listened to him but didn’t feel sympathy at all. “You’re a coward.”

As he dropped his head, he admitted, “I was.” When his head rose again, it didn’t rise high. “I’m hoping to change that. My first step was to make something up to you.”

“What could you possibly fucking do? I’m a freak, I am hunted, my mother is dead, my husband is stuck in another world where I can’t see him except to sneak in a couple times a year. He’s got two sons that he rarely sees! My best friend is there! How the fuck can you make up for any of that?”

Another man came out of the darkness, and before Mal got a good look at him, he felt the immense power of an angel. He set up his hand to strike out, but then the face became clear, and Mal’s body stiffened in disbelief.

“Me, Mal. It’s me,” Draven said in a sob. They moved to one another quickly and Mal couldn’t believe he was holding him, right there, in the house where Draven had never visited.

He felt the same, his body, his skin, but the power was inside him, making Mal whisper, “What is this? What’s going on?”

Draven pulled back and held his face, telling him what Gabriel had done. “He came to the dimension. He came right inside. I... we all freaked out a little. Lila was screaming. Lucifer was ready to attack. I was standing in the doorway to protect Mother, and then he set his eyes on me. He knew who I was to you, and he told me, Mal, that he was your father. We all were shocked, but Lucifer let down his guard and they hugged it out. Then, he told me he was going to give me his grace, his angel powers. He was going to become human so that we could be together. We don’t have to hide anymore in that dimension.”

It was as if the world had opened, and the sun was shining on him at long last. His happiness was complete, and he started to sob and laugh at once, his entire body shaking with both. He started kissing over his husband's face, holding him, clinging like he thought Draven would fade away and Mal would wake, understanding it had all been a dream. When he could breathe again, he turned to Gabriel, who had tears in his now-human eyes.

“Thank you. I... this is... what will *you* do now?”

“Be human. I guess I'm excited to see what the fuss is about.”

He laughed and went to Gabriel tentatively as he hugged the man. “I can't say it's all completely forgiven, but this is a great start.”

They stared at one another a long time, both trying to figure out what their new roles in life would be. Mal had no clue, but Gabriel seemed sure as he said, “I'd like to be in your life, if I can. But more than that, I have so much to tell you about the angels. Being one of them until so recently, I know their plans. Mal, you are in for a fight and so are your sons and husband.”

“A fight for humanity.”

“Yes.”

As much as he feared that, as much as he feared his sons and Draven having to fight, he knew what Gabriel said was true. “I'm ready.”

“You are a leader, Mal. I guess you’ve been told that and being the son of one of the highest powers of heaven, well, it’s inevitable.”

“I knew that. I’d like to hear all you have to say, but for now, stay in my guest room and you can meet my sons in the morning.”

“I’d really love that. Yeah, that’s... that sounds perfect.”

Gabriel left them to the guest room, and Mal spent the night holding his husband in a bed that was no longer cold and lonely. They didn’t even make love, they were so happy to lie together there, talking, laughing, and of course, kissing. In the morning, when the boys opened the door to greet him like they did every morning, Draven jumped from the bed and gathered them in his arms as they made a wonderfully loud commotion because of the surprise.

“Dad! What are you doing here? Daddy said you couldn’t come here, ever!” Steven was so happy, he was shaking and giggling through all his words.

“I... got a present that helped me leave the other place and come here. Is it okay if I maybe live here with you guys?”

Leo slapped his hands over Draven’s chest. “Live with us?”

“Yeah, Leo. I’m coming home. Is that okay?”

“Yeah!” they both screamed and started crawling all over him while Mal watched. Then Mal’s eyes moved to the door and saw Gabriel watching. He gave Mal a wave, and Mal knew he would leave for the time being, letting them discover

life as a full family instead of one with a missing dad. Mal figured Gabriel knew what that was like.

As Mal returned his gaze to his family, watching them from the bed, he thought back to years before, waking up to the sun and hating his life. He thought back to seeing a stained wallpaper greeting him, the smell of pot and beer and then his life had changed.

He was seeing bright eyes and smiling children, laughing, and hugging their beautiful father. He felt the love in the room, the happiness, and he finally knew he was home.

The world might need him for a war, but that wasn't that morning. That morning, it was them, a family and the start of a new, wonderful life.

The end... for now

About Autumn Bridges

Autumn Bridges is on a journey to write a great gay paranormal book that will live with the reader for years after it's read. She has written in the past, but decided to dedicate her time with paranormal, as it's truly her passion, growing up reading King, Koontz, and Saul.

Evolving as a person and as a writer is her goal, and she'll bring with her the loves of her life, her partner, furbabies, and her grown kids.

She hopes you'll enjoy her tales of angels, demons, shape shifters and whatever else the dark places in her mind produce!

(Autumn is the pen name of another author writing contemporary MM romances. This pen name is for her paranormal romances.)

You can find everything Autumn at <https://autumnbridgesauthor.weebly.com/>