

A
TASTE
OF SIN

SONS OF SIN
BOOK ONE

TONYA BURROWS

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CHAPTER ONE

On a good night, Perversion was a teaming cesspool of depravity. And tonight was not a good night.

The one and only Lust was in the house and the moment he walked in, the club erupted in an orgy, its eager patrons unable to withstand the pull of his curse.

From his seat on one of the u-shaped black leather couches along the back wall, Lux could see ten—nope, make that eleven couples in various stages of copulation. Not the least of which were five of his six brothers, who had fended off the first swarm of people as they hustled him to the corner seating arrangement, and now entertained themselves with the rest of the lust-drunk crowd. On the couch to Lux's right, Xanthus, a.k.a. Gluttony, ever willing to live up to his curse and indulge himself to excess, cheerfully engaged in a foursome. Two half-dressed bartenders straddled his legs while the admittedly hot DJ did things with her tongue ring that—

Okay, that was interesting.

Lux turned away only to see Aviatus, Greed, bend a white-skinned, red-eyed Goth princess over the nearby bar. With those peepers and fangs, she was not human. Vampire, maybe. Definitely a Deadly Seven groupie out trolling for one of his brothers.

Yeah, they had groupies.

Creepy if you asked Lux, but both Avi and Xan seemed to get off on having a fan club. In fact, all of the club's patrons tonight were probably groupies. He'd long ago asked his brothers to make sure the people succumbing to his pull actually wanted it to happen because he knew better than most what violation felt like. So on feeding nights, his brothers bought

out a club, sent invitations to the supernatural underworld, and the groupies swarmed in hopes they'd get a taste of the one and only Lust with a capitol L.

At least Avi had the decency to fan his leather duster out in a tent around him, and the vamp, 'cuz Lux so didn't want an eyeful of his brother's white ass pumping away. He'd already seen enough sex, and the night was still young. Had heard enough, too. With the DJ busy showing Xanthus her tongue ring, the death metal music had stopped, leaving nothing to mask the moaning and the sounds of slick flesh sliding against flesh. Even if he could close his eyes and ears to it all, the smell of sex permeated the air, thick and musky in his nose.

Why did he agree to this?

All right, stupid question.

Still, didn't mean he had to enjoy it.

He lifted his glass to his lips but thought better of it as his stomach rolled over. alcohol wasn't what he needed. What he required came with human contact, and the idea of touching one of these women made his skin crawl.

"You good, bro?"

Lux met his youngest brother's dark, all-too-knowing gaze across the table between them. If any of his other brothers had asked, he'd plaster on a smile, down his drink, and pretend everything was a-okay, but Leviathan had the charming habit of reading people's auras. You couldn't lie to the guy.

"No, not really." Lux set his drink on the black glass table. "I'm gonna get some air."

Leviathan frowned. The human woman with black and neon green hair on his lap didn't notice that he'd stopped participating and continued to kiss his neck, his jaw, then nibbled on his earlobe. She shoved his shirt off his shoulders, popping the buttons. He let her but kept his eyes focused on Lux. "Hey, I know you hate this, but you need to—"

"I know." It came out harsher than intended, and Lux drew a steadying breath. "I know. Just— need some air first."

"I'll go with you." Leviathan tried to pluck the woman off himself, but she clung like a shadow, tunneling her fingers into his long, curly hair and yanking his lips to hers.

Lux snorted. "Yeah, right." He got to his feet and stepped over Revelin, who had somehow ended up on the floor with his woman du jour. Rev spared a worried glance, but at that point, even if he wanted to, he had less of a chance at getting away than Leviathan.

“I won’t be long,” Lux promised both of his brothers.

“It’s dangerous for— you to go— alone,” Leviathan said between the woman’s feverish kisses.

Maybe. Probably.

But, hell, he had to get out of here. He couldn’t breathe. He hitched his chin toward the back hallway, lit with a line of pulsing white neon tubes along the ceiling. “I’ll take the emergency exit into the alley. Nobody’s back there. Everyone in here’s too busy to come after me now.”

“I don’t— like— this.”

“Sure you do. You’re banging a Goth chick with green hair. What’s not to like?”

“Not— what— I— meant.” Leviathan caught the woman’s shoulders and shoved her back. “Godsdammit, woman, give me a sec, would ya?”

But of course, she didn’t. As long as Lux stood there, she wouldn’t. Wasn’t her fault; just his curse in action, making her act on her basest impulses, and the woman would feel hot and needy for hours after he left. Of course, that was probably what she wanted, given the ornate number seven tattooed on her hip. Another groupie. She licked her black-painted lips and, panting, reached down Leviathan’s pants.

Leviathan cursed between his teeth.

“She’s dying for you, bro. Put her out of her misery already.” Lux nodded at his brother, his equivalent of a reassuring pat on the back. “I’ll be back in five.”

Katherine O’Dwyer sidestepped the inebriated frat boy reaching to pinch her butt and pinned him with a cool stare. “Hands off if you want to keep them.”

“Wh-what?” Shock flashed across his young, Hollywood-handsome face. With those looks, he probably didn’t hear the word “no” from anyone, especially not from a member of the opposite sex. Who did he think he was, anyway, Danny Zuko in a remake of Grease? He sported slicked-back hair and even had his own black leather jacket. How cute.

“You heard me, kid.”

The surprise flared to outrage, but it didn’t last. He’d taken her rejection as a challenge and his gaze narrowed on her predator-to-prey.

He was too drunk to realize who the predator actually was in this

situation.

He muscled closer, invading her personal space, trying to use his football player physique to impress her. Or intimidate her.

Why did men always think a “hell no” meant she was playing hard to get?

Not that Danny, here, was a man yet. If he was over the legal drinking age, she’d eat the dagger she always kept tucked in her boot.

“Aww, c’mon, babe.” His breath reeked of too much beer, pizza, and tobacco. “Lighten up. I juss wanta buy ya a drink.”

Kat suppressed the urge to stab him. “Not interested. Back off, or I’ll turn your nuts into fuzzy dice for your Adam’s apple.”

Hands raised, Danny stepped back. Kid was either more intelligent or less drunk than she first gave him credit for. Too bad because she would’ve loved taking him down in front of all his snickering friends.

Kat dismissed him and scanned the club from her seat at the crowded L-shaped bar. Lots of college kids. Skimpily dressed coeds and cocky frat boys like the Danny Zuko lookalike, all bumping and grinding against each other on the raised dance floor platform as neon strobe lights flashed. The hip-hop dance music thumped so loud she felt each beat in her chest.

Waste of time sitting here like this. The target wasn’t here. Dammit.

Another place ticked off her list of known hangouts, which left only one other club in the city where he might be: Perversion, that gothic nightmare in the warehouse district.

Oh, goodie.

Kat had saved that one for last for a reason. She would rather let a frat house full of drunk boys paw her than go there.

With a sigh, Kat left her beer untouched at the bar and pushed through the crowd. She hadn’t wanted the drink in the first place, had ordered it only so she’d blend in and not raise any suspicions.

Blend in. Hah.

She was a six-foot-tall, redheaded, two-hundred-year-old demon hunter. She did not blend in anywhere. She could act the part of the modern woman, dress the part, but she always felt two bloody steps behind the rest of the world. Everything moved so fast compared to her former life as an Irish potato farmer’s daughter.

Especially technology.

She reached the street below the club and fished her cell phone from her jacket pocket. The damn thing beeped at her, its battery indicator blinking.

Ugh. The bane of her immortal existence.

Well, second bane. If all went well, the first would be disposed of tonight. She thumbed in her boss's number. "He's not here."

"That means Perversion—"

"Headed there now."

"You should take backup," Asa Smith said. "If he's at Perversion, he's not alone."

"He's never alone," she pointed out and strode toward her bike parked at the curb. She may have difficulties with gadgets and gizmos, but the sleek Suzuki Hayabusa was one technological advance she adored.

Back when she was still human, she had loved taking the fastest, spunkiest horse in her father's stable and turning it loose in the rolling green fields near her home while she clung to its bare back, her hands fisted in its mane, her own hair streaking out behind them in the wind. They would run as if the fires of hell chased their heels until they were both panting and sweat-slicked. Now, since horseback riding was all but a dead art in modern cities, the Suzuki was the closest she got to that wild sensation of freedom.

God, she missed that, and the surge of nostalgia came with a bittersweet yearning for a life that hadn't been hers in a very, very long time. All because of her target, the Holy Grail for demon hunters: Luxuris, the one and only demon of Lust. And he was her kill. She'd pulled a lot of strings within The Immortal and Supernatural Regulation Society—the ISRS—to make sure of it.

"Kat?"

She realized Asa had been speaking and forced her wandering thoughts back to the conversation. "I heard you." Sort of. Still, she could guess what he'd been going on about and added, "But I don't need backup. Besides, Dracian and the others can't get within a hundred yards of Luxuria without succumbing to his powers. I can."

Asa stayed silent for a long moment. Her phone beeped again. Shit.

"Look, my battery's dying."

Asa made a sound that was half an exasperated sigh, half chuckle. "Big surprise."

She'd just pretend that wry note wasn't in his voice. Better for all involved.

With a graceful move befitting a lifelong rider, she tossed a leg over the motorcycle's seat and picked up her helmet, juggling it and the phone. "I

have to go.”

“I don’t like this,” he said after another long second of silence crackled over the line.

No. Oh, no. She knew that tone of voice. It was his maybe-we-oughta-regroup-and-reconsider-our-plan voice. “Don’t you dare think about pulling me back, Asa. We’ve never been this close before, and we’re running out of time. We know the Seven are out tonight. And for once, we know he is with them.”

More silence. Asa could be such an infuriatingly tight-lipped bastard sometimes.

“Asa.” She didn’t bother to hide the plea in her tone. “Please, don’t. I’ve waited almost two hundred years for this. Please don’t take it away from me. I can do this.”

“I don’t doubt you,” he replied after another second. “You’re one of my best, and, believe me, I know how important this is to you. Just...” He trailed off. Sighed. “Be careful. Lux is dangerous. Even to you.”

CHAPTER
TWO

F reedom.
Sort of.

Lux grimaced at the rotting stench of the nearby dumpster as he pushed through the back door of Perversion and drew in a lungful of cool, damp city air. At least he could breathe out here without his brain firing off sense memories better left buried.

He braced his hands on his knees and breathed deeply. In, out, in, out. Pretending he didn't remember—that the sights, sounds, and smells inside the club hadn't picked at his emotional scabs until they started to ooze. Pretending he hadn't balanced on the razor edge of a panic attack all night.

Cold sweat rolled over his eyebrow and stung his eye like a tear. Closest he'd come to crying in... ages. Millennia. It would feel so good to pop the cork on the bottle in his chest and let everything he kept locked away there come bubbling out. Maybe then, the cold pressure squeezing his heart would ease. Perhaps then, he could do what he needed for the good of everyone around him and not be such a fucking pussy about it.

Except he didn't dare. Popping that cork—man, he dreaded to think of all the nastiness that would come spilling out. So he sucked it all back and shoved the cork down tighter.

Yep, s'all good. No issues here.

With one last fortifying breath, Lux forced himself to straighten and go inside but couldn't bring himself to leave the back hallway. The tubes of white neon running along the ceiling cast a garish glow, making the black tiled walls feel like something out of a carnival funhouse. It did nothing to help the nausea churning in his stomach.

He sagged against the wall, slid down until his butt hit the floor, and shut his eyes. Wondered, not for the first time, if a spell existed that would let him trade places with his brother Tristin. The lucky sonofabitch never left the house for fear he'd zap some poor bastard into scrap metal with just one touch. What Sloth did with all his free time was anyone's guess; only so much cleaning a guy could do. Still, Lux would trade places in less than a heartbeat if given a chance. He'd much rather have the Midas touch than the shit he had to deal with.

“Uh, hello?”

Lux jolted so hard at the feel of a soft hand on his shoulder that he whacked his head against the wall. A yelp of surprised pain escaped his throat before he ground his teeth together and scrambled out of the woman's reach.

She took a large step backward. “Whoa. It's okay. I'm sorry I startled you.”

Startled him? Shit, she scared a millennium off his life. His heart thudded so hard she had to hear it, too. Panic skittered up and down his spine like the prickly legs of spiders, and his lungs constricted, threatening to cut off his oxygen.

Trapped.

Alone.

Unarmed.

With a human female.

Not a good place for him to be.

He gazed over the woman's shoulder at the club's main room, so close, and yet there may as well be a chasm between him and his brothers, who had no clue he needed their help. Like, right fucking now. He glanced back at the alleyway door. He could bolt out that way, but he did not want to be alone on the street where he'd come into contact with any number of people.

The woman reached toward him, and he recoiled, then felt like a complete ass for the instinctive move. She was only lending a hand to help him up.

Relax, stupid.

Still, he hated the feel of another person's hands on him and barely tolerated contact with his own brothers. “Don't touch me.”

The woman blinked. “Um, okay.”

A moment passed. She crossed her arms over her chest and just stood there, a puzzled expression pulling her brows together. A stray strand of red

hair tumbled from the pile on her head, and she absently tucked it behind one ear.

Why wasn't she trying to jump him?

She couldn't have been in the club when he arrived, even though she had come from that direction. For one thing, she wasn't naked and wrapped around one of his brothers. She wore a long-sleeved shirt that molded her body like a second skin and somehow looked smoking hot despite leaving everything to the imagination except a zipper-sized strip of flesh above her breasts. The bright blue fabric was a welcome splash of color in the oppressive blackness of the club and matched her eyes. Combat boots capped off a pair of endless jean-clad legs and tipped her over the six-foot mark.

"Are you okay?" she asked finally.

He managed only a dumb nod in reply. People didn't talk to him— well, his brothers, but they didn't count. Humans never wanted to have a conversation with him. All they ever wanted was to fuck him until they either passed out from exhaustion or went insane.

She shifted from foot to foot, again drawing his attention to her legs.

Gods, those legs were gorgeous. He had an excellent view of every shapely curve from his seat on the floor. Couldn't help imaging what it'd feel like to peel off those painted-on jeans, to have those legs wound tight around his waist as she arched into him and he sank—

His fangs punched into his mouth, and his cock perked in anticipation. Disgusted with his body's instinctive reaction, he averted his gaze. He hated when people eye-fucked him, so why the hell was he doing the same thing to her?

Because, yeah, he needed to feed.

All of the Seven's curses were double-edged swords— one edge influenced everyone else while the other side tortured them. He threw off an aura of sexual lust, but his part of the curse was a vampiric bloodlust that he couldn't ignore or he'd go insane. He'd come out tonight to sate it, and his body had chosen her.

Lucky girl.

All right. He'd make it fast. He'd take what he needed, then get his ass home and stay there until the next time he had to do this. His brothers could find their own way home.

Lux climbed to his feet, and the woman didn't back away as he unfolded to his full height. For some reason, he had fully expected her to cower. She

seemed so shy and unsure of herself— but then she smiled at him.

No, his first impression was about as wrong as first impressions got. This one had a backbone of pure steel hidden behind that innocent and gentle exterior.

“Do you have a name?” she asked.

“Lux.” It popped out before his brain told his mouth to shut up. What. The. Hell? He never told humans his name. Not that any had ever asked before this. They were usually too busy trying to get into his pants.

“Latin for light,” she said. “Not a name you hear often. It’s nice.”

Actually, his name was short for Luxuris, which eventually became one of the Latin words for lust— meaning rank, offensive, self-indulgent sexual desire— but he wasn’t about to give this woman a lesson in ancient languages. It’d blow her tiny human brain.

She shifted closer. “You don’t talk much, do you?”

He moved back even as an irrational part of him wanted to step into her, press against her, and explore all the differences between their bodies.

Faex, since when did his curse affect him, too? That was a new one.

And where the hell was Leviathan anyway? It had been more than five minutes since Lux left the club. This would be the one-time Leviathan wasn’t acting like his usual anal self and counting down every second of those allotted five minutes. Of course, the green-haired Goth girl might have something to do with that.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Wicked amusement glinted in the woman’s eyes, and she stepped forward again. “About the not talking thing.”

Lux opened his mouth to reply but stopped without making a sound. Whoa, wait. Amusement shone in her eyes, and something else— excitement, a hint of trepidation?— but no lust.

No. Lust.

He studied her expression. She had a broad smile and adorable freckles over her nose and those mesmerizing blue eyes, but—

Nope. Not even the faintest spark of desire.

How was that possible? His curse was so powerful that it even got the better of his brothers when he let his emotions get out of control. Very few species were immune.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “What are you?”

She smiled, and he noticed the knife a split second too late. It came out of her boot, slipped between his ribs, and popped a lung before his brain even

processed its existence. Pain sawed through his chest with every indrawn breath. He swore and caught the wrist of her knife hand, simultaneously twisting it and shoving her away. She lost her grip on the blade, but so did he, and it clattered to the ground between them.

Blood spurted, hot and sticky under his palm. Godsdammit, that hurt. He healed fast, but now he wouldn't breathe right for weeks.

The woman straightened and shoved back the mass of wild red hair that had fallen out of its clip. She was laughing.

Laughing.

The little bitch.

Lux's vision flashed red, his fangs elongated, and she stopped laughing pretty damn quick when she got a load of his hardware. He lunged.

"Shit!" She ducked, scooped up the knife, rolled to her feet, and plunged it directly into his heart in one smooth movement.

If she thought that would kill him, she would be disappointed.

Lux sensed the pressure and the pop as the blade broke through muscle and flesh, felt it slice grooves in his ribs, but registered only the throb in his fangs, the consuming need to make her bleed. He launched forward again and would have ripped out her throat if not for the sudden, dizzying shift in his equilibrium that had the ground swaying like an earthquake underneath his feet. He smashed to the floor on his knees, his kneecaps igniting molten sparks of pain up and down his legs. The red haze over his vision flared white, then dimmed to polka dots of black and fuzzy shades of gray, and his bloodlust took a backseat to the sudden, irresistible pull of unconsciousness.

No. Had to stay awake. Had to get to his brothers and get help. He tried to stand but discovered his right leg useless and his left numb to all sensations except for pain.

Cell phone. If he could get to it, he could speed dial one of his brothers... but his fingers wouldn't work. He tried to squeeze them into his jeans pocket, and his hand flopped like a dead fish at the end of his wrist. He slapped at his leg. Maybe he'd get lucky and hit the right button.

The stab wounds in his chest burned like nothing he'd ever felt, fracturing his every thought. Like a liquid wildfire spreading through his body, consuming nerve endings in heat and pain.

What had she done to him?

So much pain.

Had to stay conscious.

Had... to... stay... conscious...

Kat stared down at the demon Lust as he writhed on the floor in pain for several agonizing moments. His back arched off, and his hands curled. Jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck strained. He almost looked like he was having a seizure, which was impossible. Demons didn't have seizures.

Shit. She hadn't known there would be pain. At least, not like this, like his whole body was on fire. After everything he'd done, she should enjoy watching him endure such agony. He deserved it and more, but she wasn't sadistic and depraved like him and his brothers. It made her uncomfortable to watch another being suffer—no matter who that being was. She lifted her gaze to the wall and stared hard at it until he finally fell silent.

She looked down again. Lux had gone deathly still. She couldn't even tell if he was breathing and had to curb the automatic urge to check his pulse. So what if he died? That was the point; her whole reason for living the last two-hundred-some odd years. She wanted him dead.

Except.

She rubbed at the ache between her breasts. That hollow place in her chest where she vaguely remembered having a heart felt more like a black hole than ever before. She should be happy about this. She'd simultaneously gotten her long-sought revenge and saved the world from a demon apocalypse. Quick, quiet, easy, and with days to spare.

But maybe it had been too easy?

No, dammit. This was a win.

Why did she doubt it?

She had to move. It was only a matter of time before the rest of the Seven came looking for him. She shot a text off to Asa with the last bit of battery power in her phone and told herself she only felt empty because Luxuris hadn't put up the fight she'd expected from a demon as notorious as one of the Deadly Seven. She'd craved the challenge. After so many years of dreaming of this moment, she felt a little cheated.

In truth, nothing about Luxuris was what she expected. He was the worst of all the sins from the legends she'd heard over the centuries. He spread lust like a plague. If he wanted women, he took them, willing or not. Men too—the sex of his victim didn't matter as long as he got off. When he finished, he gutted them for the fun of it.

Like he'd killed her mother, sister, and baby brother all those years ago. She had to remember that.

Kat had fully prepared herself to walk into Perversion tonight and find Lux reveling in the orgies he'd created. Instead, she'd found a lot of supernatural beings and some of his brothers engaging in various sex acts and him sitting in the back hallway like a man— demon, dammit, he was a demon— suffering from significant emotional pain.

And, holy mother of God, what about those fangs of his? None of the lore mentioned his vampiric tendencies, but he'd definitely had a mind to rip out her throat and drink her dry after the first time she stabbed him. She'd staked enough vamps in her time to know bloodlust when she saw it. Good thing the saint's blood blade worked its poison fast, or else she would be minus a voice box right now. A trachea, too, for that matter.

Now came the hard part.

Kat studied his huge body, still amazed at his size. It wasn't often a man towered over her like he had.

Fitting him in one of the ISRS's black panel vans wouldn't be a problem, but getting him into the alley where one would be waiting for them was a different story. None of her colleagues could get close to him. In theory, the saint's blood should counteract his powers, but nobody had ever gotten close enough to the Deadly Seven to test that. And on a mission this important, nobody wanted to try it right at this particular moment.

She was on her own.

The way she liked it best.

Kat crouched beside Lux and fitted her arms under his, locking her hands in front of his broad chest. Hot blood gushed over her fingers from his wounds. Christ, the man—demon— was solid muscle. His short black hair tickled her nose and a day's worth of dark whiskers chafed her cheek as she leaned over and gave his motionless body one hard tug toward the back door. He moved a whole two inches. He also let out a soft moan of pain.

Breathing.

Still alive.

She would not feel relieved about that. Nope, not relieved one little bit. She wanted Lux dead.

Really.

CHAPTER
THREE

*S*omething isn't right.

The mental alarm blared inside Leviathan's skull like a Klaxon horn, and he surfaced from another game of tonsil hockey with Sabrina, the green-haired Goth chick. She took his breaking away as an invitation to yank her micro-miniskirt up around her slim hips and straddle his thighs.

He felt like groaning, and not only because she started grinding against him as if her life depended on getting him deep inside her as fast as possible. What an abso-fucking-lutely perfect time for his conscience to kick in.

Not right.

His gaze latched onto her bare breasts, so soft and round, bouncing right there in front of his face. Ah, screw his conscience. His mouth watered for a taste of that pale skin. He clamped one nipple between his teeth, and her back arched like a cat's. Flexible girl. Nice. Lust delivered a powerhouse kick to his gut and sent—

Lust.

Oh, fuck. Lux. Where was he?

Not right.

Leviathan released Sabrina and had to lean to his left to see beyond her magnificent knockers and scan the rest of the club. People lay in exhausted, naked heaps on the floor. Those who hadn't worn themselves out had found new partners for another go-round. A fight broke out at the far side of the dance floor, which meant Lux couldn't have come back yet. His curse always overrode the rest and fights usually evolved from Envy warring with Pride and Wrath. With Lust gone, the other sins came out to play.

Well, shit.

Leviathan focused on Sabrina's breasts again and groaned. If he left all this sexy lushness behind just to find Lux stubbornly brooding in the alleyway, he would kick his brother into the next millennium. He didn't let himself indulge like this very often. Really, couldn't he have one night away from playing the part of family herding dog to his brothers' wayward cattle?

Problem was, Lux wasn't like the rest of their brothers. If Lux said he'd be back in five, he would whether or not he wanted to come back. The fact that he was now nowhere in sight gave Leviathan an uncomfortable itch of foreboding along the back of his neck.

Fetch, doggie. Fetch.

Resigning himself to the fact that he wasn't getting laid tonight, he scooped Sabrina into his arms, glad he hadn't done more than unzip his fly. It would be difficult to walk with his pants around his ankles and her wrapped around him like a vine. He avoided her seeking mouth and carted her over to where Xanthus entertained himself with the DJ and two bartenders.

Gluttony was getting his fill tonight. Lucky bastard.

"Hey, Xan, have room for another one?"

Sprawled naked on the leather couch, Xanthus grinned up with a wicked gleam in his blue eyes. Red lipstick smeared one side of his mouth. Black lipstick smeared other body parts.

"Hm, yeah. I always say you can never have too much of a good thing." Xanthus sat up and helped pry Sabrina's arms from around Leviathan's neck. "Not that I'm complaining, but why are you giving her up? You need to get laid, dude."

Didn't he know it. "Lux went outside for some air."

Across the club, glass shattered, and people shouted as another fight broke out.

Xanthus gave a low whistle as he leaned to one side to eyeball the two naked cat shifters as they tore at each other's hair, their nails stretching into claws, scouring for blood. "Annd he's not back yet."

Leviathan watched the two females tumble to the floor and roll over a broken bottle, leaving a blood trail in their wake. Envy worked hard on them, tweaking their naturally jealous personalities, and how sick was it he got a little thrill watching his curse take effect?

He shook his head and pressed his fingers into his eyes, knowing the color had shifted from brown to a glowing emerald. They didn't call him the green-eyed monster for nothing. "Lux said he'd be gone five minutes. It's

been at least fifteen.”

“Mr. Punctual? No shit?” Despite Xanthus’s flippant tone, Leviathan knew his worry meter had also spiked at the news. Xan acted like a frivolous party animal with about as much depth as a mud puddle, but that was all it was: an act. Not that he’d cop to it.

In the next booth, a man clawed out of a pile of naked bodies on the floor and grabbed a half-empty glass of beer from the table, downing it in three long swallows. When it was gone, he threw it aside and grabbed another drink, then another, and another, as if dying of thirst.

“Uh-oh,” Xanthus said. “My not-so-better half’s come out to play, too.” He caught Sabrina’s hand as she reached for the bottle of vodka on the table in front of them. “No, no, sweetheart. You’re not thirsty. No alcohol poisoning for you tonight.” He kissed her, and she responded just as enthusiastically as she had with Leviathan.

“Baby,” the DJ whined and pulled on Xanthus’s arm. “What do you need with her? You already have us.”

“Get out of here, Envy,” Xanthus said, snagged the DJ around the waist, and hauled her onto his lap to nuzzle her neck. “I don’t want my girls getting jealous of each other. Go on and drag Lux back inside. Orgies are so much more fun than riots.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Leviathan grabbed the bottle of Grey Goose before Sabrina could get her hands on it again and headed toward the back hallway. It was never pretty when all their brothers got together in the same place without Lux present to temper their curses. Envy always had to provoke Wrath and Pride, but his other half enjoyed being a shit.

Okay, technically, there was no “other half.” He’d been alive and sin-free for all of five minutes before Daddy Dearest used his famed ring to fuse the conglomeration of every envious deed ever done by humans with his newborn soul. So, no, his curse wasn’t like a possession, with Envy a separate entity locked inside his mind. He *was* Envy. *He* enjoyed being a shit and saw it as his time-honored duty as the youngest sibling, but he also hated to see any of his brothers in pain. Unfortunately, that was a constant state of being for his oldest sib. So, despite his earlier sentiment, if his bro wanted to stay in the alleyway and brood, he’d sit beside Lux and share this overpriced bottle of vodka.

“Today’s your lucky day, brother. I come with the gift of libations—” Leviathan stopped short as the steel exit door shut with an echoing thud

behind him. “Lux, my man. You out here?”

Stupid to ask, ‘cuz he obviously wasn’t. Nothing moved in the alleyway, not even a stray rodent, and that niggling itch of foreboding morphed into a true skitter of fear.

Leviathan yanked open the door and looked down the hall, wondering if he’d somehow missed Lux and—

Shouts. Glass breaking. Another fight.

No, Lux hadn’t slipped back into the club unnoticed, or else the sounds coming from inside would be a whole helluva lot sweeter.

And... what was that? Halfway down the hallway, near the restroom doors, something wet gleamed on the floor.

“It’s nothing,” he tried to tell himself. Someone just spilled their drink on the way to the john. He took three steps toward the puddle and slammed to a halt like hitting a brick wall. That wasn’t alcohol. His nose caught a metallic tang laced with faint hints of the sensuous spice that clung to his oldest brother like a seductive, beckoning finger. Lux’s blood.

“Fuck.” Leviathan dropped the bottle of Goose and grabbed his phone. His stride ate up the distance of the hallway as he listened to the rings. “C’mon, Tris, pick up.”

“What?” Tristin snapped just as Leviathan was about to hang up and try Lux’s cell. Probably should have tried that first, but he had a bad feeling, a sick ball of dread weighing down his gut. Pulling a complete Houdini like this was not Lux’s style. And that blood....

“Hey, is Lux home?”

“No, you idiot,” Tristin said. Indifference colored his tone, but that was par for the course for Sloth. “It’s just me, myself, and a bottle of lotion.”

“Yeah, TMI, bro. Listen, I need you to go into my room and pull up the GPS signal for Lux’s phone.” He remembered what happened the last time he asked Tristin to do something on his computer and winced. “And, Tris, for the love of all things technical, please wear your gloves when you do it. I really don’t need another solid gold computer.”

“I’ll make it silver this time.”

Sad thing was, he wasn’t joking. Probably. Never could tell with Sloth. “Tris, I swear to the gods, if you hurt my baby, I’ll sneak into that acid trip of a bedroom one night and pluck out all of your piercings. Every single one, got me? Then I’ll sic Envy on you and give you a bad case of jeals for everything Justin Bieber.”

“Ouch. Harsh, bro.”

“I mean it.”

“Relax, Levi. I won’t hurt your precious computers.”

“Good. Call me when you lock on the signal.”

More fights had broken out in the club by the time he reached the dance floor, and his brothers had gone from bumping uglies with the ladies to knocking heads. A naked guy made like a bull and head-butted Revelin in the gut. Rev caught the man’s shoulders and used his own momentum to send him flying. He landed on top of a glass table that shattered under his weight.

With a feral grin, Rev turned to find another opponent, the white neon lights along the ceiling splashing over his bare, tattooed chest. Then he spotted Leviathan and his grin faded. “Where’s Lux?”

“Gone.”

“Duh,” Avi said and ducked an airborne beer bottle. “Where’d he go? Home?”

“No, but I have Tristin checking his GPS.” Leviathan sidestepped a drunk girl who launched herself in his direction, and, Christ, the woman screeched like a crazed banshee. He’d know. He dated one once a bazillion years ago and had spent a good year deaf after he’d cut her loose. “He’s supposed to call me back with the info.”

Rev grunted. “If you want it in the next century, you’re better off going home and doing it yourself. Tristin will drag ass like always.”

Rev and Tristin had never been close, but lately, they’d been sniping at each other like ten-year-olds every chance they got. It was getting old.

“Give him a break,” Avi said.

“Yeah, Tris always comes through when we need him.” Leviathan dialed Lux’s cell even though his gut told him it’d go to voicemail. It didn’t even ring once—shot right to an electronic voice saying, “leave a message,” and nothing more.

“No answer?” Avi asked.

“It’s off.” His stomach cramped with dread as he shared a knowing look with his brothers. Lux never turned off his phone while out in public. Never with a capitol N-E-V-E-R.

Avi scrubbed a hand over his face. “Shit, this is bad.”

Yeah, and he hadn’t even told them about the blood in the hallway yet.

“Can we still pick up his GPS signal with it off?” Revelin asked.

“Yeah.” Thank the gods—and his technical genius—for that. “The

transmitter feeds off the phone's battery but doesn't have the same power switch. As long as his battery holds out, we can track him."

"Uh, guys!" Xanthus shouted from his hiding place behind the bar, and they all looked in his direction. Apparently, the DJ had an enormous, tattooed, and very pissed-off shifter boyfriend who didn't like the idea of sharing his woman now that Lust had left the building. "We need to am-scray. Like maybe before the Thing, here, rips me apart. Please!"

Typical.

Leviathan heaved out a sigh and pocketed his phone. Why had he expected tonight to go any smoother than their usual nights out? And he didn't even get lucky.

Should've stayed home in his sweats, trolled his favorite Reddit threads, and haunted Facebook and TikTok.

"Okay. Devak and I will distract the tattooed Thing." He glanced at the silent shadow hovering in the corner, so black it pulled all nearby light into it. Devak—Wrath—materialized from the swirling vortex and gave one solemn nod of agreement. Leviathan turned back to his other brothers. "You guys grab Xan before the shifter makes dinner out of him. We'll meet you outside."

CHAPTER
FOUR

Drums.

Lux started awake with a groan, blinked groggily at the ceiling, and decided he would march down to his brother's room and throw Tristin's drum set out the fucking window.

Except the beat sounded... wrong. When Tristin played, he all but attacked the drums with the frenetic energy of a hardcore punk-rock fan. This was a slow, steady, and constant sound, like the beat of war drums.

Or the beat of a heart.

Pain blazed through him, a sudden strike of searing heat followed by bone-numbing cold, and he arched off his bed, a scream lodged in his throat. No, not his bed. He lay on a cold metal table, naked and shackled with thick iron bands that cut into his flesh with every jerk of his body.

He forced himself to still. To breathe through the fear and the pain and study his surroundings. The room looked like any other operating theater in a hospital, and yet the gleaming tools hanging on the back wall were for pain, not healing. Several other metal tables lined up next to his— autopsy tables with holes in the tops and a tray underneath to catch blood. Three on each side of him, and he had a sick feeling he knew who those other six tables waited for. Water dripped steadily into a large steel sink in the corner, creating the drum sound that had awakened him. Chains draped from the ceiling like morbid cobwebs, others hung from metal studs fastened into the concrete walls.

A modern torture chamber.

Then Lux blinked and no longer saw metal, concrete, and plastic, but stone, wood, and ancient iron instruments. His blood ran arctic cold.

Gods, not again. He couldn't be back in that stinking stone room with the merciless guards who wanted to fuck him and hated him because of it.

Or what if he wasn't back? What if after all these centuries, he never actually left? His brothers hadn't found him, and his torturers had carried his captivity on through the generations to modern times. What if the life he remembered sharing with his brothers was nothing more than a coping mechanism cooked up by his brain?

No. That was panic talking. Too much history there to be a figment of his imagination. Like the time Xanthus, Avi, and Leviathan threw him a birthday party and almost burned down the city of Chicago because the idiots put two thousand plus candles on his cake. Then they blamed the whole thing on a cow kicking over a lantern. No way he could make that kind of shit up. His imagination wasn't that twisted.

So... what the hell happened?

The sexy redhead with the knife.

The memory came back in a rush of images, and he cursed, but it lacked heat. He felt more relief than anything else. Until the second he recalled her face, he hadn't been entirely sure of his sanity. Even now, that shred of doubt lingered in the back of his mind. What if he had imagined the Great Birthday Party Fire of 1871? What if...

"No, no, no." He meant to shout the words, but they came out sounding guttural. He had escaped. He had lived with his brothers in a variety of places all over the world, moving every couple hundred years, and their current home was a rambling mansion on a cliff outside Seattle. The redheaded woman had stabbed him in the back hallway of Perversion and brought him to this prison. But he *had* escaped his previous captors all those centuries ago, and he would escape now.

Lux gulped in several deep breaths and finally calmed enough that he could focus on the problem at hand again. He lifted his head and took stock of his physical condition. A jagged red wound slashed across his side, another had opened a hole in the center of his chest, and they both burned like the fires of hell. Bruises colored his knees in shades of purple, and that indentation in his right kneecap definitely shouldn't be there. He tried moving the leg and regretted it when bile surged into his throat and his vision flared white.

Since he hadn't healed yet, he couldn't have been unconscious for more than twenty-four hours. Which meant his brothers may or may not be aware

of his absence by now. No windows broke the monotonous gray concrete of the walls, making it impossible to guess the time of day. He twisted around as much as he could without jarring his leg. Craned his neck, looking for a door, and found it on the wall directly behind his head.

It opened.

A tall woman with curly, dark brown hair strode in, and there was something vaguely familiar about her face. The shape of those brown eyes. That straight nose. Even the set of her thin lips and the furrow between her brows as she studied a clipboard. He'd seen her somewhere before, but the only time he ever left the house was when he needed to feed. Had he fed from her once? His fuzzy memory couldn't place when that would have been or even where, but the thought of blood made his stomach grumble. His fangs jabbed into his lower lip.

Oh, shit. He'd needed to feed before, but now, being injured, the need yanked at his mind and gut, an undeniable riptide that would drag him under if he waited too much longer.

"I need blood." His voice came out so low that for a second, he didn't think she'd heard. Then she glanced up, gave him a cursory once-over from behind a pair of chintzy glasses.

"I've heard that about you," she said and, gods, even her voice struck him as familiar.

"You have?" someone else asked from the door. "I had no idea until he tried to take a piece out of my throat. Would've been nice to know, Lily."

Lux craned his neck again and watched the redhead stride into the chamber. She still wore the skin-tight black jeans tucked into boots, but had changed her shirt into a soft-looking button-up with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. The top two buttons gaped open, and he caught tantalizing glimpses of the silky pale flesh underneath. The overall look landed her somewhere on the spectrum between dominatrix and farm girl and, okay, he liked it. A lot. Way more than he should, given his current situation. Still, his body stirred, and he thanked the gods for the convenient placement of the wide leather strap holding his hips to the table.

The dark-haired woman, Lily, laughed. "He's trying to seduce you, Kat."

Whoa, what? He choked on his next breath. "I'm not trying to—"

The redhead, Kat, looked at him as if he was a steaming lump of dog shit she'd just stepped in. "Don't bother. You should know I'm immune to your powers. Besides, with all the saint's blood pumping through your body right

now, you're as powerful as a newborn kitten." She motioned to the bag of blood hanging on a pole beside his table and his gaze followed the tube running from it down into his arm.

Saint's blood? No wonder his wounds hadn't healed and fire burned under his skin. He lifted his arm to yank the tube out, but the shackles prevented him from moving his hand more than a few inches in any direction.

"Iron," Lily said. "That's your weakness, isn't it, demon? Iron and water."

"And saint's blood," Kat chimed in.

Iron? Water?

Demon?

In the words of Leviathan, WTF?

Lux stared at the women, completely baffled. "Are you crazy?" That would be just his luck, to get immortal-napped by a couple of humans who got introduced to the supernatural world and went nuts vigilante-style.

The two women just stared back at him.

"I'm not a demon!"

"You only play one on TV, right?" Lily said. When he blinked, she waved a hand. "Bad joke. Can't help myself. It's in my genes."

"I'm not," he insisted and focused on Kat because, despite the determined set of her jaw, he noticed unease flicker through her pretty blue eyes. "I'm human."

Kat arched a brow. "Humans don't live to be nearly three-thousand years old."

"Nor do they drink blood. Just sayin'," Lily added with a smile that was so freaking familiar it gave him a chilling sense of déjà vu. Where had he seen her?

"Okay, I was human," he amended. "Before."

Before King Solomon stuffed the collection of every lustful thought or act ever done by humans down his gullet. He didn't really remember before, but he couldn't shapeshift like Avi, a wolf shifter, or read minds like Leviathan, a demigod, or go shadow like Devak, who actually was part demon. So he must have been human at one time.

"And now you're a demon," Kat said matter-of-factly.

"No, I'm—" Shit. He never considered it, but was there even a name for what he and his brothers were? Besides "The Deadly Seven," because that would not go over well with these demon-obsessed fanatics.

“Demon,” Lily said in singsong when he hesitated too long.

He tried again. “Whatever literature you’ve read about me—the Bible, Quran, Torah, Dead Sea Scrolls, whatever—got it wrong. We’re not—” He wasn’t getting through to them, saw their doubt stamped plainly on their faces, and let his head fall back against the table.

Hopeless.

“So what are you going to do to me?” Gods, he couldn’t believe this was happening yet again. How unlucky did you have to be to face torture twice in one lifetime? Even one as long as his. He let go a bitter, humorless laugh in a burst of air from his lungs. “You can’t do anything that hasn’t already been done.”

“We can kill you,” Kat said, still so matter-of-fact.

I wish.

No, wait. That wasn’t what he’d meant to think. He’d meant to think... something else. He didn’t want to die. His brothers...

But it was a moot point, anyway.

“You can’t kill me.”

“Yes, that’s wishful thinking, unfortunately. But we can imprison you again and make sure you stay there for the rest of eternity. For all the pain you’ve caused.” A quick flicker in her eyes again, sorrow this time. “All the lives you’ve ruined.”

Ah, he got it now. “Present company included?”

Kat shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters now is that you will not be around much longer to do it to someone else.” Beneath that cold exterior, she looked so sad that he had the inexplicable urge to reach out and wrap her up in his arms. Hug her tight. Comfort her.

Ridiculous.

And not only because she wanted him to rot away in some supernatural prison. “How are you going to do it?”

Kat turned away from him and went over to the sink to wash her hands, so Lily answered instead. “That’s strictly need-to-know and, well, you don’t. But to keep you pliable until we’re ready, we’re feeding you a steady diet of Saint’s blood with a few additives. Wormwood, henbane, ashthroat, viper’s bugloss, githrife. All the good stuff.”

Yeah, that’d probably do it. He recognized the mix of ingredients—nasty shit, all of it—as a banishing spell meant for incubi. Seeing as he was Lust, it would probably work just as well on him. Already he felt the sluggishness in

his body, the heaviness in his limbs, and the burning. Gods, the burning. If it didn't kill him, it would at least cause him a whole helluva lot of hurt. He closed his eyes, released all the air from his lungs.

"And," Lily said, holding up a needle as Kat walked over and lifted herself to sit on the table next to his, "we can't forget the blood of a virgin."

His gaze snapped to Kat, but she made herself busy rolling up her sleeve, careful not to look at him. She'd let her hair down in the last few minutes, and the bright red fall of waves curtained her face.

A virgin.

That explained why she'd been immune to his curse at Perversion. You couldn't lust for something you've never felt. You could covet it, but that fell into Envy's jurisdiction, not his. He wondered if she would be susceptible to Leviathan, and that she might be sparked a surge of—yeah, jealousy.

She. Belonged. To. Him.

Lux almost laughed at himself. Maybe he should go back to doubting his sanity, because that thought was completely cracked.

"Hold still," Lily said and jabbed a needle the size of a straw into the crook of his arm. Bruises already discolored the flesh there, some of which had yellowed around the edges. What else had they jabbed him with while he was unconscious?

Lux watched with more curiosity than alarm as Lily rigged a battlefield transfusion, draining blood through a tube from Kat's arm into his. It hit his bloodstream with a blast of heat that seeped through his veins from the injection site, up his arm to his chest and down into his stomach and legs. His cock apparently liked the sensation, because it jumped to instant attention, hard as a steel beam, demanding notice. No way had the leather strap across his hips hid his reaction this time.

Balls aching with the sudden need to release, he clenched his teeth and strained against his binds as the heat morphed to something else, something he couldn't name that filled him with utter bliss. The feeling snowballed inside him, gaining momentum, growing bigger and bigger until—

He exploded, a wave of energy bursting from the center of his chest as the climax wracked his body. His muscles clenched, spasmed, and the chains holding him groaned as they stretched and snapped. Power sung through his veins and he wanted more.

More.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Kat was completely unprepared for the flash of heat that shimmered along her arm into her chest when the first drop of her blood slid through the tube into the demon's arm. Unprepared for his reaction. His eyes flashed red and his pupils constricted to pinpoints. His nostrils flared. The hard muscles in his thighs and arms tightened as he arched, his abs rippled and flexed, his neck strained as his head fell back and his mouth opened on a silent scream.

Kat's mouth went dry and heat blossomed in her belly.

He was... strikingly beautiful.

No. She shook her head, forcing that train of thought to a halt. His physical beauty was little more than an illusion, hiding a rotted and twisted being inside. All those glorious muscles and tanned skin contained a soul as black as pitch. She had to remember that and not get sucked in by the illusion. He was a demon. He killed her family. He deserved this and so much more.

Lux thrashed and let out a low, ragged moan. She couldn't tell if it was a sound of pain or pleasure. Probably somewhere in between.

A white substance jetted from the tip of his penis and, despite her best efforts, she couldn't look away. She'd seen plenty of naked men in her two hundred years of life, understood the things their bodies did, and had always found it disgusting. But not this. This was fascinating, watching the release of all that leashed power from his taut body. Thrilling. Sexy.

The warm, heavy sensation returned, pooling deep in her belly. She wanted to touch him, drag a finger along his length just to see his reaction. Would he ejaculate again?

Oh, God, what was she thinking?

Kat wrapped an arm around herself, unsure of the heat flashing through her, the sudden sensitivity of her breasts, the wetness between her legs. “What’s happening?”

“It’s okay,” Lily said, unruffled. She set aside the needle and opened a leather-covered book, removed a golden cord bookmark. “Just a minor side effect of the blood transfusion. It will pass.”

Kat looked back at Lux when he moaned and thrashed again. As Lily’s voice rose in a haunting chant, his binds snapped.

Shit. She jumped off the table and made a grab for his free arm. He caught her head in one hand, tangled his fingers in her hair, and before she could react, dragged her mouth down to his. He kissed her so hard their teeth clicked together. She tried to fight, tried to pull out of his grasp, but then his elongated fangs scraped her lower lip, and pleasure washed over her in a forbidden wave. She didn’t want to fight anymore. She wanted to press into him, wanted him to keep exploring her mouth with his tongue, wanted to explore him with hers, wanted to keep stoking the inferno that roared in her belly until it consumed her. She ached all over, but had never felt anything so... good.

Or terrifying.

She ripped her mouth from his and gasped in a deep breath. Panting, he yanked on her hair until her roots screamed, but she resisted. She couldn’t let him kiss her again, couldn’t lose herself like that again. The veins in his neck bulged and his eyes watered.

“Help me,” he whispered. Another wave of power exploded from him, through her, leaving her hot and cold and shaking all at the same time, and with it came a startling hush in the room. His eyes rolled back, his fist loosened in her hair. When he finally collapsed onto the table, sweat coated both of them.

Kat carefully extracted the strands of her hair from his hand and rubbed her scalp. “What the hell was that?”

Lily closed the book and gave a bright smile. “Exactly what was supposed to happen.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Lux started panting again, writhing in agony. She quickly refastened the leather strap over his biceps before he could get his hands on her hair. His eyes opened, and she thought she saw—

Hell.

She whirled on Lily. “What kind of spell was that?”

“It’s not your concern,” Lily said. “You did your job for the night. Now let me unhook that IV. You’re bleeding all over the place.”

Kat looked down at her arm. Indeed, she was bleeding in big splotches of red on the tile floor at her feet. No wonder she suddenly felt lightheaded.

“Go eat something. Drink some juice,” Lily advised as she slid the needle out of Kat’s arm and pressed a cotton ball to her throbbing vein. “You lost a little more blood than is healthy.”

“What about—”

“He’s not your concern anymore. You did your job, hon. Perfectly.”

Okay. Right. Nobody else could have kidnapped the demon of Lust without his brothers finding out. And her revenge was almost complete.

She refused to glance over her shoulder as she left the room, even when his groan of pain echoed behind her. She wanted him to suffer. So why the hell did she feel so guilty for causing him so much pain right now? She’d purposely kept herself pure for that very reason, so that her blood would be the catalyst for his downfall.

She shook her head and started down the hallway. The Society owned several buildings throughout Seattle, but this one was the best-kept secret. Only a privileged few had access. In fact, she never had until this mission and she’d been sworn to secrecy by Lily and Asa. Which kind of sucked. She wanted to bask in the glow of her accomplishment, but she couldn’t even go brag about it to her colleagues.

Kat left the nondescript office building in downtown and stood on the sidewalk, watching the morning traffic pass. The humans were waking up, starting a new day of work or school, and none of them even had a clue as to the monumental thing she’d just done for their benefit.

A half a block down the street sat the Rising Sun, a local pub all ISRS agents went to after missions. She was tempted. She didn’t have to tell anyone exactly what she did, but Dracian and the others would understand. They would give her the pat on the back and the “atta girl” she so desperately needed right now.

She got on her bike, turned it toward home. She really didn’t want to go there either. Seemed like such an anticlimactic way to end her night, but exhaustion was creeping into her limbs. Anticlimactic or not, she needed to sleep.

The traffic moved at a steady pace. Too early yet for the snarls, but she wanted to get out of downtown before rush hour and steered her Hayabusa toward the International District. She'd get some food, then go home and have herself a celebratory drink. Maybe say a toast to her mother, sisters, and brother.

Help me.

God, that hadn't sounded like a demon talking. It sounded like a man in unimaginable pain.

A niggling sense of unease whispered over her skin, prickling the hair on her arms, and she turned the bike around. She'd never been one to ignore her gut instincts and right now, those instincts screamed that something about this whole thing was off. She waited a block from the office building until Lily's car pulled out of the underground garage, then gunned her bike forward, swerving around the gate before it clanked shut.

Lux still lay strapped to the metal table, shivering so hard his teeth clicked together. Lily hadn't covered him or cleaned up the mess his body had made during the transfusion. The white, sticky substance covered his stomach and pooled in his navel. Logically, she knew ejaculation was a normal, reasonable bodily function for all living male creatures, but she still found it hard to look at. Reminded her of the way it had made her feel to watch it happen. The heat. The need.

She grabbed a white hospital blanket from one of the storage shelves and tossed it over him. It was too thin to offer anything in the way of warmth, but he squirmed until he had it wrapped up underneath his chin.

"Thank you," he rasped. Fever glazed his gray-blue eyes when he gazed up at her and she had to swallow back a sudden surge of emotion. She wanted to say that she'd given him the blanket to cover the disgusting mess he'd made. That it had nothing to do with her wanting him to be warm because she didn't want him comfortable.

Instead, she opened her mouth and, "Why didn't the iron affect you?" came out instead.

He blinked once as if she caught him off guard. "I told you. I'm not a demon."

"But you're Lust."

"Yeah."

"And Lust is a demon. All the texts say so."

"The texts are full of inaccuracies and you know it." He set his teeth

against the shivers wracking his body. “Nobody ever walked on water. My brother did not swallow anyone named Jonah, and the only red sea Moses ever parted was in a wine goblet.”

Kat closed her hand around the tiny gold cross her father had given her on her thirteenth birthday, two days before his death. Despite her strict catholic upbringing, she’d long ago made peace with the fact that there was not one god, but hundreds, and all of them constantly vied for power. And, yes, there were inaccuracies in most religious texts. She knew that too. But not about this. She had poured the whole of her immortal life into researching the Deadly Seven. She couldn’t be wrong.

She shook her head. “I don’t know why I’m listening to you. You’re a demon. Demons lie.”

He heaved out a sigh and turned away from her. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Kat.”

Hearing her name on his lips sent a jolt through her, like a shock of high-voltage electricity. She yanked the blanket from him. “Don’t. We’re not friends. You can’t use my name.”

Despite everything, humor quirked his lips. “What do you wish for me to call you then? Mistress?” He made a sound of disgust. “Not very original. I expected more out of you, Kat. Then again, I probably shouldn’t, seeing as you’re completely untouched. Pure.” Heat sparked in his eyes, making them more green than gray, but he immediately shut them and his lips tightened. “That was... uncalled for. I’m sorry.”

She should tell him to fuck off, but her mouth really wasn’t on the same circuit as her brain this morning. “It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t. I hate when people look at me like... my curse enjoys the idea that you’re... pure. It was uncalled for, and I apologize.”

Kat stared at him, her mind racing to make sense of his words. He *hated* when people lusted after him? No. He was lying again. Had to be. Lust enjoyed sex, reveled in it. He just wanted to make her feel sorry for him. He’d somehow picked up on the kernel of doubt in her mind and was trying to exploit it.

But he killed her family. Witnesses saw him do it. She had to remember that; the one truth she could cling to. She turned on her heel. She had to get out of here.

“Kat,” he called.

She wanted to keep walking, to ignore the plea in his voice. But she

couldn't. Dammit, she *couldn't*. She stopped, but refused to turn and look at him. "What?"

"I'm sorry for whatever I did to hurt you. I probably deserve what you do to me but, please, don't hurt my brothers."

Her little brother's face floated to the forefront of her memory. Five years old, curly red hair, pretty blue eyes. Cheeks still pink and chubby with baby fat. Emotion swelled her throat shut and her eyes burned.

The bastard.

If he thought an apology would make everything right, he was sadly mistaken. How dare he plead for mercy for his brothers when he'd shown none to hers!

She finally turned around. "You know what? Fuck you. You are going to rot in here for eternity, which isn't nearly long enough if you ask me, and you'll never know what happens when your brothers come looking for you."

Fury sparked in his eyes. "My brothers have nothing to do with this."

"Yeah, they do. You took everything I loved from me." She opened the door. "So now it's my turn."

CHAPTER

SIX

“Report,” Asa said without looking up from his laptop screen.

“Sir.” Dracian squared off in front of Asher’s desk and took a relaxed parade rest position. He’d been a soldier before the Society recruited him, and some habits were hard to break, even after a hundred and fifty years. “We caged the First Moon Were that killed those teenagers in Lincoln Park. We’ll take care of him until the Moon is over and make sure he leaves us with a healthy dose of fear so that it doesn’t happen again.”

Asa still didn’t glance away from the computer. “Human law enforcement going to be a problem?”

“No. Rumel helped them lose a crucial bit of evidence, and Isaias hacked their network, corrupted files. They won’t be arresting anyone.”

“And what about the situation with the stolen Saint’s heart in Ireland?”

Dracian shook his head. “We don’t think it’s anything supernatural. Rumor has it there’s a cult over there trying to jumpstart the Rapture.”

Finally, Asa stopped typing and looked up. “Where the fuck did they get the idea that a mummified Saint’s heart would do the job? Humans are idiots.”

Yes, they indeed were. He’d get no argument from Dracian about that. “I sent Carrick and Javier to aid the Dublin office. They will raid the cult’s hideout and return the heart to the church. Shouldn’t take more than two days.”

“Good.” Asa tapped his fingers on his desk in succession, then closed the lid of his laptop and heaved out a heavy sigh. “Now, as to the reason I called for you. Unfortunately, we have a problem that’s much closer to home.”

Dracian tensed. Problems at home usually involved his men, but he

hadn't heard any rumblings of discontent, and he made it his job to know about these things before Asa. "I haven't heard of any problems."

"Because I've kept this as quiet as possible. It's about one of our own. She's gone AWOL and has been seen engaging in activities against the Society's laws. Mingling with demons, using her skills and resources to her own ends." He shook his head. "I've tried talking her out of it. Tried reasoning with her, but she's so hell-bent on revenge she refuses to listen."

"She?" Dracian scrolled through his mental list of female ISRS agents. There weren't many since the ISRS had been a strict brotherhood until 1846 when Asa made the exception for Kat so she could seek out her family's murderer...

The pieces clicked into place and formed a startling picture. "Not Kat."

Asa gave a solemn nod. "She went after the Deadly Seven last night at Perversion. She wounded Luxuris and kidnapped him. As of right now, we have no idea where she took him."

Suddenly filled with restless energy, his other half scratching uncomfortably at the back of his consciousness, Dracian broke parade rest and paced the carpet. It had been too long since he let his wild side run—he'd ignored the instinct for years, but there was a blood moon coming. He needed to take some personal time before he exposed himself as one of the beings the ISRS was put in place to police and got kicked out of the only family he had left.

"No fucking way," he said finally. "Kat wouldn't do that. She knows how dangerous they are."

"She's convinced Luxuris killed her family."

"Impossible. He was imprisoned until—" He stopped short and did the math. The goddess Hecate managed to unlock her son's supernatural prison. Leviathan, in turn, dedicated his life to freeing the rest of the Deadly Seven, but it had taken centuries for the brothers to reunite. Lux was the last to be found, feral with bloodlust in the catacombs under Paris. And then—

"The blood binge."

"Yes, several of his confirmed kills are around Kat's hometown."

Dracian said nothing in reply. Part of him—his heart—wanted to leave Kat to her business and let her get her revenge so she could finally start the healing process after all these centuries. But another part—his logic—knew how dangerous messing with the harbingers of the apocalypse was.

"We have to stop her," Asa said, all business. "And get Luxuris back to

his brothers before she tries something foolish and inadvertently breaks his seal.”

“How could *she* break his seal?”

“He’s Lust. She’s chaste, untouched for two centuries. How do you think?”

“She wouldn’t.”

“I’m not counting on Lust’s self-control.”

Dracian had a feeling he wasn’t going to like what was coming. He crossed his arms over his chest and braced his feet shoulder-width apart, preparing for the blow. “Then how do we stop her?”

“I’ve already revoked her immortality.”

“Sir?”

Asa met his gaze. “You have to kill her.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“**W**e feeling better now?”

Lux opened his eyes, hoping for one brief, shining moment to see Kat leaning over him. Why he wanted the female voice to be hers, he couldn't say, but disappointment's sharp blade stabbed him in the gut when he saw Lily's too-familiar face instead. She wore a bright smile, but her eyes sparked with something dark behind the lenses of her glasses. No doubt about it, this woman enjoyed inflicting pain for the sake of pain. With her, it wasn't a case of needing revenge for some unknown wrongdoing on his part. She just wanted to see him hurt.

“Oh, I feel great,” he said, even though his tongue felt thick and his skin crawled with the need for blood, the effects much like withdrawal from a particularly potent drug. “Completely relaxed. I should book a room here every year.”

“Now there's the charming Solomon brothers' wit.” She laughed and pushed her wayward curls back from her face with one hand. He swore he'd seen that gesture before and closed his eyes, trying to place it. But the hand he saw in his mind's eye wasn't hers. Bigger, broader, with something on the index finger... A sliver ring of the Ouroboros. Like the one Leviathan wore.

His eyes popped open. That was it. She reminded him of his brother. Looked so much Leviathan that she could be his...

Twin.

Holy fuck.

“You're supposed to be trapped in hell.”

“Hmm?” She blinked, all innocence. “I have no idea what you're talking

about, demon.”

“You know I’m not the demon here, Lilith.”

“Oops,” Lilith said with a grin and took off her glasses. She tossed them aside and fisted her hands on her hips. “So the serpent’s outta the bag, huh? Took you long enough.”

Lux yanked on the iron chains, wishing like hell he could break free and throttle her. “You’re lying to Kat to get her to do your dirty work.”

“Not lying. Just... bending the truth. You really aren’t human anymore and it makes it easier for her to think of you as a demon. Doesn’t change the fact she still wants you to suffer.”

“Because you planted the idea in her head, you twisted bitch.”

“Aw.” She pouted. “Is that any way to talk to your baby sister?”

A memory came back in a rush, so clear he could have sworn it happened yesterday instead of thousands of years ago. A woman in a stone dungeon-like chamber struggled to give birth. The squalling newborns, a boy and a girl, wrapped together like two halves of a whole. Solomon taking the boy away, pressing his ring face down on the baby’s arm and chanting the incantation to lock Envy, the last free sin, inside that little body. Lux remembered the way the baby’s eyes had flared green for an instant as the curse took effect. Remembered Solomon placing the infant named Leviathan in his thin teenage arms, and the sound of the woman screaming for her son as he walked away. His heart had ached for both of the babies, but more for the daughter whose mother had rejected her on sight. Leviathan at least had a support system of six older brothers.

He shook his head. It was a long time ago and the woman before him now was a far cry from that innocent, unwanted newborn. “Who are you working for, Lilith? Your mother?”

“Yeah, right.” She snorted and waved a hand in the air. All around him, the torture chamber shimmered like heat rising from pavement on a summer day and then disappeared, including the table he lay on. He landed on the bare floor so hard, air burst from his lungs in a forced exhale. The room now looked like an abandoned office—rows of florescent lights, concrete floor with snatches of gray carpet still clinging to the edges where the floor met the industrial white walls. It took some heavy duty conjuring to form something solid out of nothing, and dread rippled through him. That much power in Lilith’s hands equaled bad news for him and his brothers.

Lux staggered upright on legs that offered all the support of overstretched

rubber bands. “I see you’ve learned some nifty tricks over the years.”

“Not much else to do in hell but study up on black magic.” Lilith’s eyes flashed red before she blinked and they returned to a normal chocolate brown. “Well, unless you like wet work.”

“And you don’t? That surprises me.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I like it just as much as the next demon, but it does get tedious after a couple thousand years. Slice a human up once or twice and they’re all, *don’t hurt me, I’ll do anything you want*. It’s no fun, like squishing a mosquito. And Immortals?” She made a sound of disgust. “Bunch of whiny bitches, the whole lot of ‘em.” She tossed a pair of gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt at him. “Now get dressed, brother dearest. It won’t do to have the human cops arrest you for indecent exposure.”

Grateful for the clothes, he yanked on the pants. Didn’t help the cold sweat breaking out over his body, but at least he was covered now. “You’re letting me go,” he said, letting doubt ring clear in his tone.

“What can I say, I’m a big ole softie.” She pinched his cheek and cooed, “Specially when it comes to family.”

He knocked her hand aside. “You don’t do anything without a self-serving reason. What do you get out of this?”

“All right, fine,” she sighed. “I get an IOU from my big bro. That could come in handy. Plus I get to piss off Mother. It’s a twofer.”

“Yeah, that sounds more like the Lilith I know.” He fought with himself for a second before adding, “Thanks.”

“Oo, that hurt, didn’t it?”

“Fuck you.”

“Yeah, that sounds more like the Lux I know.” She waited until he was almost out the door before calling, “One more thing.”

He stiffened and considered bolting before she dropped the other shoe—should’ve known that was going to happen—but the door slammed shut and the lock snapped into place before he could take another step. He sucked in a breath through his nose and turned back to face her.

She held up a small vial, dangled it between two fingers so that light glinted off the dark red liquid inside as it sloshed back and forth. His fangs punched out of his mouth and the cold sweat morphed into thousands of tiny bugs crawling over his skin.

“You said you needed blood? Here ya go. Drew it up special, just for you.” She tossed the vial and he scrambled to catch it with shaking hands. He

popped the cork and downed it like a shot. Dark and smooth, with a tangy bite, it burned its way to his stomach and swamped him with an intense pleasure that almost took him to his knees. When the buzz faded and he was able to focus again, the room stood empty.

Lilith was gone.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

“He did *what*?” Zayra Lovelle turned around so fast the ladder wobbled against the gigantic bookshelf that took up one whole wall of her little New Age shop.

Kat reached up to steady her. “He apologized.”

“For lusting after you?” Zayra frowned down from the top step. “That doesn’t seem right. He’s Lust with a capital L.”

“No shit.” She bit her lower lip and debated how much to tell Zayra. They weren’t exactly friends, but the witch was as close to one as Kat had. Besides, maybe she could help. “He claims that the texts got it wrong, that he’s not a demon.”

“Well, isn’t that strange? I don’t think I’ve ever met a demon that denied he was one.”

“Me either.” She hesitated, rubbing her hand up and down the smooth, dark wood of the ladder. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to her next question. “Is it possible the texts are wrong?”

“Of course it is. As much as the world’s many religions would like people to believe it, none of these books is the ultimate word. Some of them have been so distorted over the years that they look nothing like their originals.” She finished re-shelving the stack in her arms, then dragged her finger along the spines of the books on the shelf and picked one out. “Here we are. You’ve heard of the *Lemegeton*?”

Kat nodded as Zayra clutched the old leather-bound book protectively against her chest and climbed down from the ladder. “The Lesser Key of Solomon. It’s the definitive guide to demons.”

“Or so the authors would have you believe.”

“Authors?” Kat followed her toward the front of the store, where she flipped the door sign to closed and gently laid the book out by the register. Underneath the pale green glass of the countertop, crystals of all shapes and colors gleamed and sparked with power, coming to life all around the book. “Wasn’t it written by King Solomon?”

“That’s the claim, but there’s a slight problem with that theory. The titles assigned to the demons, such as Marquis and Earl, were not used in Solomon’s time. Nor were the prayers to Jesus, since Solomon predates Jesus’s birth by almost a thousand years.”

“I always thought that was just a translation foible. And the prayers were added in later.”

“Yes, that’s partly true, but this is one of those cases where the modern version looks nothing like the original.” She opened the book’s cover and ran a hand reverently over the first page. “*This* is the original. The Solomon Key. It contains both the Greater and Lesser Keys, and, we think, Solomon’s autobiography. It was bound into book format and preserved around the same time the modern versions of each book were written. The ISRS never wanted it to fall into the general population’s hands, so they locked it away, and it’s been in my family’s care ever since. See the papyrus pages? And the writing is so clear and smooth, almost like cursive. Beautiful.”

“Can you read it?” Kat asked.

Zayra shook her head and started flipping through the old pages with all the care of a trained librarian. The metal bangles circling her wrist clinked together with each movement. “Unfortunately, no. It’s written in a long-dead Canaanite dialect. Nobody can, except maybe Lux and his brothers, if they were taught to read as children. That wasn’t common practice back then.”

A design caught Kat’s attention, and she stilled Zayra’s hand. “Wait. This page is about Lux.”

“How do you know?”

“This symbol.” She tapped the swirled design marking the top corner of the page. It looked like a broken heart with one side flipped upside-down. “He has it tattooed to his hip. But his... do you have paper?”

Zayra nodded to an old roll-top desk. “Top lefthand drawer.”

Kat grabbed a notepad from the drawer and a pencil from the cup on the desktop. She sketched out the same design, then drew two interlocking triangles around it. “This is what his tattoo looks like. The swirly heart thing

is inside a pentagram.”

“The Seal of Solomon.” Zayra met Kat’s gaze with wonder in her own. “Solomon marked him.”

“Meaning...?”

Zayra shook her head. “Could be any number of things. Solomon was famous for trapping demons with his seal, enslaving them to do his bidding. Maybe he enslaved Lux at one point.” She studied the drawing with a furrowed brow. “But I’ve never seen it with this design inside it before. Mind if I keep this and do a little research?”

“Sure. I’d appreciate it if you could contact me if you find anything out. Something about this....” Kat shrugged, trying to shake off the creeping feeling of doom. “You know that itch you get right at the back of your neck when something dangerous has you in its sights?”

Zayra laughed in a quick burst. “I’m a glorified librarian.” She waved a hand around her shop, stuffed to the seams candles, hemp jewelry, New Age self-help books, and grimoires older than Kat. “The most dangerous things here are dust bunnies, and that’s how I like it.”

“Riiight.” Kat eyed the Solomon Key. Anything that made crystals hum with power just by its proximity alone was dangerous. And she’d bet this wasn’t the only powerful artifact in the shop.

“Kat, talk to me. What’s wrong? I’ve never seen you so out of sorts before.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Just can’t shake the feeling that I’ve been set up or used somehow.”

“By the ISRS? Why would they do that?”

“No, you’re right. It’s crazy. I’m overtired, not thinking clearly.”

Zayra smiled and closed the book. She handled it with such appreciative care. “Go home and get some rest. Sorry, but you look like death warmed over. How long have you been awake?”

“Uh...” She rubbed a hand down her face and sighed, letting the weight of exhaustion drag her shoulders down. “Somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-four hours. Couldn’t sleep.”

“Damn, girl. All right. Hang on. I have just the thing.” Zayra considered the shelves behind the register, picked out a packet of herbal tea and a pale purple candle, and placed them in a bag. “Go home before you keel over, light the candle and drink this. They will help you relax.”

“Zay, you know I avoid witchcraft....”

“It’s not witchcraft. It’s chamomile tea and aromatherapy. ” Zayra shoved the bag into her arms and ushered her toward the door. “Now go. I’ll call if I find anything interesting.”

CHAPTER
NINE

Lux couldn't think straight, couldn't focus. He swayed to a stop on a vaguely familiar street lined with plain brick buildings and glanced around, trying to find his bearings. SoDo, he realized. Halfway across the city from where Lilith had held him prisoner in that abandoned office building. How the hell did he get here? He searched his memory and found nothing except a blur of severed images.

And blood. Lots of blood.

Aware of the clusters of people on the sidewalk staring at him in stunned horror, he forced himself to keep moving despite the sharp pains stabbing his stomach. It wasn't the usual reaction he got from humans, but he'd take it over them pouncing on him and ripping his clothes off. The saint's blood cocktail Lilith gave him hadn't worn off yet.

As he stumbled closer to the humans, they scattered out of his way. Many of them were on their phones— some speaking, some videoing. In the distance, sirens screamed.

Gods, it was like those sirens drilled right through his skull.

Stop! Make it stop.

Bending double, he clamped his hands over his ears and found something wet in his hair. The substance was tacky, gluing strands to his cheek, sticking to his beard stubble. He drew his hands away, saw the smear of red on his palms, and knew without a doubt those sirens were coming for him.

He'd gone on a blood binge.

Faex. He fumbled through his pockets with shaking hands, looking for his phone, and found nothing. He needed help. He wasn't going to make it home. This fuzzy, disjointed feeling meant he would crash soon—and hard. He'd

binged only one other time back in the mid-nineteenth century after his brothers found him alone in his prison, starved for blood, but he'd never forget the feeling of a post-binge blackout.

Had to get out of here.

Now.

Lux staggered two more blocks, but his knee still hadn't healed enough to hold him. He collapsed against a brick wall and wrapped an arm around his stomach. His gut hurt. His fangs throbbed. He felt full to bursting, but the need for blood still gnawed at him. Bending at the waist, he heaved up the contents of his stomach right there on the sidewalk in front of a sports bar.

"Yo, dude. You a'ight?" The bar's bouncer walked over and caught sight of the puddle of blood, the spatter of it on Lux's shirt. "Holy fuck." His midnight complexion grayed, but he hooked a supportive arm around Lux's waist and started dragging him toward the bar. "Let's get you inside. Get you some help. Can you walk for me? Hey, stay awake. Talk to me. I'm Kahlil. What's your name?"

Lux couldn't form a response. He saw Kahlil through a haze, heard him as if he was shouting down a long tunnel. And there was another sound, a steady ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-bum. A heart pumping blood through veins.

More.

Driven by pure need, Lux knocked the guy into a line of trashcans in the alley alongside the bar. They both tumbled into the booze-soaked garbage. Kahlil cursed and swung out wildly in defense, one meaty fist connecting with a lucky, glancing blow. The punch rattled his teeth, but no pain registered through the bloodlust.

More.

He struck like a viper, sinking his fangs deep into Kahlil's neck, hitting an artery that flooded his mouth with the surprisingly sweet taste of the man's blood. Too sweet. Not right. Choking, he let go, and Kahlil slumped to the pavement. Not what he wanted, what he needed. He needed....

More.

He dropped to his hands and knees and gagged until tears snaked down his cheeks.

No, no more.

Home.

He had to get home to his brothers before he hurt someone else.

"Please," Kahlil whispered and clamped a hand over the huge neck

wound. Blood spurted between his big fingers, and his complexion took on the gray cast of approaching death. “I have kids. Please, help me. I don’t want to die.”

Oh, Gods. What had he done?

Shaking, Lux crawled over and tried to staunch the blood flow, but there was too much, spreading in a pool on the concrete.

“No, no, no.” He hadn’t meant for this to happen. Hadn’t meant to hurt anybody. Hadn’t meant...

Kahlil started to choke and gurgle with each breath. “I don’t... want to— Please. Help... me.”

He couldn’t. Lux rocked back on his haunches at that crushing realization and pressed the backs of his blood-smearred hands to his eyes. Barring divine intervention, there was no help for Kahlil.

And none for him either.

CHAPTER
TEN

Leviathan stared at his computer screen, willing the little blip representing Lux's phone to blink on somewhere on the city map. Anywhere. Okay, maybe not anywhere. They'd have problems if the phone suddenly started signaling from the bottom of Puget Sound.

Bigger problems.

Worry ate at him. He would go nuts if he sat here much longer, but other than wandering the streets of Seattle shouting Lux's name, there was nothing he could do until he had a direction to start in. He pushed back from his desk and stretched his arms up over his head until the bones in his back cracked. Eden, asleep in her customary place on his shoulders, hissed at being disturbed.

"Sorry, pretty girl." He gave the snow boa's head an affectionate rub. She ignored him and wound her way down his arm to curl up under the light of his desk lamp. He smiled. "Cold, huh?"

Glad to have a task, he scooped her up, carried her across the room, and got her settled on her favorite warming rock in the eight-foot aquarium he'd custom ordered from Out of the Cage Pet Supplies. They'd done an excellent job with his design and had even hand-painted the back and sides to look like an overgrown jungle. He shut the lid and ran a hand over the neatly printed lettering on the lip that spelled out "Eden's Home." He'd been so thrilled to see that little heartfelt detail when the cage arrived earlier this week. Nobody else on earth would have thought to add it but Sylvia Roselli.

Sylvia.

He glanced toward his cell phone, charging on the nightstand.

No.

No.

He wasn't going to call her. He had no reason to call her except to thank her for the aquarium, but he'd already done that. No reason at all.

Leviathan returned to his computer and rechecked the map, hoping for that damn blip to appear—nope. Frustrated, he grabbed his iPad from the top drawer of his desk. Settling onto his bed with the tablet, he checked his email on the off chance Lux had sent him one—haha—and then scrolled through Twitter. He replied to a few direct messages and retweeted a funny quote, but his heart wasn't in it tonight.

Somehow, he ended up on Out of the Cage's Instagram, scrolling through the posted pictures: Sylvia sitting in the middle of a puppy playpen, laughing as a fluffy golden retriever tried desperately to lick her nose. Sylvia showing off the size of her albino boa, Whitesnake, with a massive grin on her face. Sylvia cashing a customer out at the register with a parrot on her head, pecking her dark hair from its braid. No matter the animal, she showed equal love and attention in every photo, and her faded denim eyes always sparkled at the camera. Beautiful. He reached the last photo and started a second look-through before he realized what he was doing and stopped himself with a curse.

Okay, that verged uncomfortably close to stalker territory.

He shut his eyes and thumped the back of his head against the headboard of his bed. Thought briefly of the green-haired goth chick. He'd picked her out of the masses at the club because, despite the green hair, she reminded him the most of Sylvia.

Sylvia, who had haunted his fantasies for weeks. Sylvia, whose voice he wanted to hear so badly at the moment, the need was a physical ache right down in the pit of his sinful soul. Sylvia, the human woman he could never, ever have.

Gods, he was pathetic.

And yet, he sat up, grabbed his phone, and dialed. Studied the computer screen as the line rang—still no blip. Damn.

“Thank you for calling Out of the Cage Pet Supplies. This is Sylvia. How may I help you this evening?”

The knots of tension he'd carried between his shoulders since Lux disappeared unraveled. Her voice's sweet and smoky tones warmed him from the inside out like a shot of honey-laced brandy. It was such a relief that he closed his eyes and savored the sensation.

“Hello?” she said after a second.

Speak, dumbass. “Uh, yeah. Hi.”

“Hey,” she said with a smile in her voice. “How’s Eden liking her new home?”

“She loves it. It’s perfect. I wanted to thank you.”

“You already did that. Twice.”

Well, shit. He was supposed to be a genius, and he couldn’t have come up with a better excuse than that? “Third time’s a charm.”

She laughed. “You’re giving me way too much credit. I didn’t build it myself, just made sure the contractor got it right.”

“Still. Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome. Again.”

The conversation died an awkward death. An equally awkward silence filled the empty space. Leviathan heard the L clattering and a parrot squawking in the background on her end. He knew he should hang up, but he couldn’t bring himself to sever the connection. Not yet.

She drew in a breath. “Levi?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask if maybe you wanna have lunch with me sometime? When you’re not busy, of course,” she added when the silence on his end stretched too long. “Or, uh, coffee. I’m not picky. I’d... like to meet you. Face-to-face, you know?”

He dropped his head into his hand. This was precisely why he should’ve hung up. “I can’t.”

“Oh.” Disappointment colored the word. She exhaled in a huff as if she’d been holding her breath. “That’s... that’s okay. Just thought I’d ask. Never hurts to ask.”

“It’s not ‘cause I don’t want to. I’d love to, but things are...” *Really fucked up.* He struggled to find a milder way to say it. “Um, complicated for me right now.”

She stayed quiet for a moment. “You sound upset. Not like your usual self.”

“Yeah, I’m worried. It’s my brother. He’s gone missing.”

“Levi!” she gasped. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. How old is he? Is he young? Have you called the police? Issued an Amber Alert?”

He had to smile at that. They didn’t issue Amber Alerts for three-thousand-year-old immortals. “No, it’s not like that. He’s older than me, and

the police... can't be involved."

"Oh," she said, stunned.

Way to go. She thought he was a mobster or something now. Was he *trying* to scare her off?

Yes.

No.

Well, dammit, he should be. It was the intelligent thing to do. Scare her off, make her think she'd end up with cement shoes at the bottom of the sound if she got too involved with him. After all, many things were more frightening than mobsters in his world—including him and his brothers.

"It's not what you think," he said instead. Yeah, and he was supposed to be the smart one in the family. Right. "We don't want to get the police involved because we can't be sure he didn't leave on his own. As I said, it's complicated."

"Has he disappeared like this before?"

If it were any of his other brothers, he could say, "Yup," and it wouldn't have been a lie. Xanthus often disappeared for days at a time. Nobody knew where he went, and nobody particularly wanted to, either. Devak stayed gone more often than not, and Avi sometimes went to live with his wolf pack—basically whenever Rev pissed him off. Alternately, whenever someone pissed Rev off, he'd go hide out in his condo downtown. Tristin once vanished for an entire year without so much as a see-ya-later—which, yeah, was still a tender subject among his brothers.

But Lux didn't do shit like that.

"No," Leviathan whispered. "This isn't like him."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked with genuine sympathy. "Put up missing posters or... anything at all?"

"You've already helped. Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder."

"Uh-huh, you're a real crybaby," she said, the smile back in her voice. "Next time, I'll wear a rain slicker to keep from getting soaked."

Despite everything, he chuckled. "Can I call you again tomorrow?"

She was silent for so long, his smile faded, his heart dipped inside his chest, and his palms started to sweat. "Sylvia?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'd like that."

Leviathan grinned at his phone for a long time after they hung up, replaying the conversation in his head until a knock sounded at his suite's door, and Xanthus called out.

“In the bedroom,” Leviathan said.

A moment later, Xanthus appeared wearing jeans and his battered bomber jacket, with a Beretta M9 tucked in the holster at his waist. Leviathan would usually tease him about the gun. As the son of a powerful witch, the guy could wield magic. The gun was only for show, but Leviathan didn't have the energy to poke fun at him tonight.

“Anything on Lux's phone?” Xan asked.

“Hang on.” He jumped off the bed and checked the computer. The map was still empty. “Nada.”

“Well, Tristin might have something on the police scanner. Bodies keep turning up in Georgetown and SoDo minus their blood.”

“Fuuuck.”

“Yeah,” Xan agreed. “Looks like big bro has gone on another bender. Better grab some tranq darts.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Kat left Zayra's shop feeling no better than she had before. She'd wanted reassurance, and all she had to show for it was a growing sense of unease, a flowery candle, and nasty-ass tea. She had to drink it, too. Zayra would know if she didn't. Zayra always knew. She strapped the bag to the back of her bike and considered accidentally forgetting to secure it. Then she could take the bumpiest road home with lots of jarring stop-and-go traffic. With any luck, it'd fall off.

From the doorway of the shop, Zayra cleared her throat. She stood there, hands on hips, pale eyebrows climbing toward her hairline. The proverbial mother duck, making sure her little duckling toed the line. "I hope that's secure."

Kat hunched her shoulders and tightened the strap. "I'd prefer coffee."

"That would defeat the purpose."

"Yeah, yeah." She straddled the bike, pulled on her helmet, and gave a quick wave before starting the engine.

The Saturday night party crowds were heading toward the bars and alcohol-fueled fun. All manner of creatures would also be out among the unsuspecting humans, trolling for drunken victims. Full moon, too, which only complicated matters. She wished she could work tonight. Keeping order in the Supernatural realm was better than sitting at home alone, but Asa enforced a strict attendance policy. If you do a job one night, you'd better not show up the next. True, it cut their numbers every other night, but it also helped keep Society members from burning out. Unfortunately, the Society had learned from hard-earned experience that it never turned out well when one of their own went off the rails.

Kat made good time to SoDo despite the heavy traffic. Slowing, she turned into the alleyway behind her loft, where she always parked her bike. The sports bar on the first floor of the old warehouse already pumped out a thudding rock beat, and she thought, not for the first time, that she needed to find a new place. Thing was, the Society wasn't big on spending money. If she put in a request for a move, she could end up someplace much worse. At least the loft was warm in the winter, dry in the summer, reasonably clean, and almost criminally cheap in a city where rent prices ranged from ridiculous to are-you-fucking-insane. So she had to listen to ear-splitting music for most of the night. During the day, it was quiet. Besides, half the time, it didn't matter because she was working; she only had to deal on these forced nights off.

She climbed off her bike, grabbed the bag with the tea and candle, and started up the metal stairs to her door before she spotted Kahlil sitting against the alley wall. Probably sneaking a cigarette again, though he usually did it closer to the mouth of the alleyway so he could still keep an eye on the comings and goings in the bar.

“Hey, Kahlil. I thought the wife made you quit.”

No answer. That was unusual. He was talkative and friendly, always willing to lend a hand. In fact, he usually jumped to help her carry packages upstairs whether she needed the help or not.

“Kahlil?” She set her helmet and the bag on the top step and started back down. He didn't move. And, wait, where was the smoke? If he was smoking, she should smell the cigarette, but the only scent in the air was the rot of the bar's garbage and the coppery tang of...

Blood.

“No.” A sick dread surged into her throat, and she picked up her pace, even though she knew—knew—she'd arrived home too late to help him. He stared sightlessly through half-open lids at the opposing wall of the alley. His lips, always so ready with an easy smile, had taken on a blue cast, his dark skin a grayish hue. His throat gaped below his right ear as if someone had stabbed him in the neck.

“Goddammit!” Kat repeatedly told her landlord that this alleyway needed better lighting and a security camera. She'd been jumped back here once, but it freaked her muggers out when they stabbed her, and she didn't keel over. But poor Kahlil didn't have the luxury of immortality.

It wasn't fair.

Part of her wanted to try CPR, try to revive him somehow, but she knew it wouldn't do any good. He was gone. Any resuscitation attempt now would only destroy the evidence the police needed to catch his killer, so she curbed the impulse and grabbed her phone. Heart heavy with sadness, she started to dial 9-1-1, but the glint of gold on his wrist caught her attention.

Kahlil still wore his watch.

She closed her phone and knelt to get a better look. Yes, it was the three-thousand-dollar, two-tone Rolex his wife bought him for their anniversary six months ago. What self-respecting mugger would leave that kind of bling behind? She looked at the neck wound again.

Not a stabbing. Teeth marks.

“Fucking vampires.” She opened her phone a second time and dialed Asa. This wasn't for the human police, and she'd be damned before she let another agent usurp this case from her. Forget taking the night off; she'd personally find and stake the vamp responsible.

Kahlil deserved nothing less.

As the phone rang, she noticed drag marks in the cooling blood and shook her head. The vamp had left him propped here so she'd be sure to find him. Like a macabre present. Or a warning. Probably both. She wasn't a popular girl in certain supernatural circles.

The call dumped into Asher's voicemail.

“Ash, it's Kat. A vamp dropped a fresh kill on my doorstep. I don't know if it's supposed to be a message or what, but I'm going after it. The victim was a friend of mine. You can't talk me out of it, so don't try. I'll be in touch.”

She slid the phone into her jacket and knelt beside Kahlil's body again, taking in all the details. The angle of the bite mark proved they were face to face when the vamp attacked, and a wound on the right side meant the vamp was left-handed—they always attacked on their dominant side. That was a lucky break. Like humans, only a small percentage of the vampire population was left-handed.

Her gaze fell to his blood-caked hands, and she tried not to think about the wedding band glinting on his finger or his poor wife and kids. Bruised knuckles. He hadn't seen the attack coming, but he fought back. Unfortunately, vampires didn't bruise, so unless Kahlil got lucky and broke its jaw, she couldn't use that to find the bastard.

Guilt surged, burning her throat. Kahlil wasn't what the Society called an

HRH or High-Risk Human, a label for people stupid enough to seek out the supernatural—ghost hunters, wannabe witches, vamp and werewolf fanatics, and the like. Kahlil probably never would have encountered the supernatural in his lifetime if it wasn't for her living above his place of employment. She had no doubt the vamp wanted her.

She shook it off. Work now. Guilt trip later. The vamp might get away with this if she didn't get a solid lead by dawn. She backed up and studied the scene as a whole. The attack happened at the mouth of the alley. They had crashed into the trash cans and rolled deeper into the alleyway as the fight progressed. The vamp got him to the ground and bit him, a direct strike to the jugular—but why so much blood? That was strange. Just like no mugger would leave the watch, no vampire she'd ever heard of would let go of its prey before it sucked every drop of blood. She'd even seen vamps lick it off floors and walls around their kills, but there was still a ton of it here—arterial spray on the bar's brick wall, a pool around Kahlil's body, drag marks, and—

Footprints.

All right. Now she was getting somewhere.

Large prints, definitely made by a male, maybe size twelve. And he was running around barefoot. Strange, but not unheard of. Vamps tended to be OCD about their appearance and had been known to strip naked before feeding so as not to ruin their clothes.

The footprints swayed drunkenly back and forth across the alley, then disappeared into the empty fenced-in lot behind the bar. And, of course, the fence had to be topped with barbed wire. Who wouldn't top a fence surrounding an empty lot with barbed wire?

Grumbling to herself, Kat took off her coat and slung it over the wire to protect her hands, then vaulted up, twisting to land in a silent crouch on the other side. She pulled her knife out of its sheath in her boot and took a moment to let her surroundings sink in. The lot had been a building at one time, maybe even part of the warehouse that now housed her loft and the bar. She could see the remnants of a foundation, some pipework, and an old toilet. A rusted-out bus sat in the middle of the lot like a skeleton of a long-forgotten beast. Bumpers, tires, sheets of metal, crates of who knew what scattered every available inch of the packed dirt ground. She wondered briefly if her landlord owned all this too. If so, he needed to be fined out the ass for all the hazards here.

She moved forward, staying low, and glass crunched under her boots with

every slow step. If her vamp hid in here, his feet had to be torn to shreds—and sure enough, she picked up a fresh blood trail heading toward the old bus.

Except vampires didn't bleed.

She stopped and frowned in thought. If she wasn't tracking a vamp, then what? Maybe a new Were experiencing his first full moon. It would explain all the blood left behind at the scene, but if that were the case, she wouldn't be allowed to avenge Kahlil's death. New Weres struggled for control the first few times they changed and couldn't be held liable for their actions under the influence of their First Moon.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something move to her left, the flash of a light gray pant leg disappearing behind a stack of tires. She turned in that direction and heard something move behind her. Two of them? Her heart kicked up, spilling adrenaline into her blood. No, she'd seen evidence of only one attacker at the scene. Had to be only one, but he was smart. Trying to confuse her, throw her off balance. She peeked over her shoulder and smiled at the rock that hadn't been there just a few seconds ago—the source of the noise. Clever guy.

She started forward.

“No!” The voice came at her from behind the tires, ragged and broken, and the jolt of recognition stopped her in her tracks.

Lux.

That was Lux's voice.

She shook her head. No way. She had to be hearing things because Lux was locked away and would never taste freedom again.

“Who are you?” Kat moved around the tires and found him sitting on the ground, knees drawn up, his hands fisted in his hair. Blood soaked his shirt and smeared his chin.

“Kat,” he whispered, the sound of her name almost a plea.

Shit, it *was* Lux.

How was he free?

Rage bubbled up from the pit of her stomach and her fists balled at her sides. The hilt of her knife dug into her palm. She wanted to cut him into ribbons and took a great amount of satisfaction in the darkening bruise on his jaw where Kahlil got in one last punch. “It wasn't enough for you to kill my family. You had to go and kill a friend, too?”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I-I didn't—”

“Yeah, you did. That man in the alley was my friend. I should cut you into a million little pieces right here and let you rot for the rest of eternity.”

She stepped forward. He scuttled backward, knocking into the pile of tires. The tires swayed ominously, threatening to topple onto both of them. In less than a blink, he was on his feet, shoving her out of the way. She landed against the wood slates of the fence, and her hand smacked a jutting nail.

“Fuck!” She cradled her wounded hand and stared at the gash on her palm, waiting for it to seal up. One second. Two. Three. It continued oozing blood. “What the hell?”

“Oh, Gods.” Lux doubled over and wrapped his arms around himself as if trying to hold his insides together. “Go,” he said through his teeth. “Get away from me. Please. I don’t want to hurt you, but something’s wrong. I can’t... control myself.” His breath shuddered out on a ragged groan. “I can smell you. I can—I need—*more*.”

His gaze lifted and touched hers, and in that millisecond before he lunged at her throat, she saw raw pain in his eyes. She also saw the fires of hell.

She deflected his first attack with her arm. Ducking her chin, she plowed into his chest like a bull, but he had a major size advantage and barely moved. He caught her around the waist and used his body to trap her against the fence, his chest pressed to her back. His fingers tangled in her hair as he yanked her head to the side.

Trapped, immobilized, she shut her eyes and waited for the slice of his fangs through her flesh. Maybe once he was feeding, he’d let down his guard, allowing her to gain the upper hand.

But the strike never came. He simply held her against the fence, her head tipped to one side. His breath feathered over her exposed skin, and a shiver worked down her spine. His tongue stroked the curve of her neck in a long, lazy line. Heat blazed across her skin at the scrape of his fangs. Her nipples tightened to painful buds, and her stomach clenched. She arched her back and pushed against him, telling herself she was trying to escape, that it had nothing to do with the sudden, searing need to be flesh to flesh.

Lux groaned, his breath hot in her ear. This time, the sound wasn’t one of pain but masculine pleasure. His erection tented the front of his sweat pants and prodded her from behind, rubbing back and forth over her most intimate place with every surge of his hips. One hand snaked down her belly, gently parted her thighs, and his cock rubbed her harder through her pants.

What was she doing?

Kat struggled to get control of herself through the fuzzy haze of sensation. She could not trust what she felt around him. He was Lust incarnated. He killed—

When his clever fingers slipped under the waistband of her pants and touched her, every thought in her mind fractured in the onslaught of pleasure. Her legs would have gone out from underneath her if not for his arm clamped around her waist.

“Hmm, Kat.” His voice was almost a purr now. “You’re not so different, after all. You want me, too, don’t you?”

Even though his fingers played over her opening, and he could feel how wet she was, she turned her head to the side, intending to deny it. She didn’t want him, not really. Not like he meant. She hated him. She only wanted him for revenge.

Except she didn’t push him away. She widened her stance, giving him better access.

Lux smiled, showing the tips of his fangs, and captured her mouth in a hard kiss that stole the protest off her lips. “I have to taste you,” he murmured and dragged his mouth down her neck again. “Just a taste.”

His fingers rubbed back and forth in a teasing caress that was too much and not nearly enough. When he tweaked her clitoris, he struck with his fangs, and she cried out from the pleasure and the pain of both invasions. Her legs shook, and she splayed one hand against his thigh to hold herself upright. The fingers of her other hand tangled in his hair of their own accord, holding him to her. She liked how the softness of his hair juxtaposed the raw scrape of his whiskered cheek against her neck, liked the feel of his big fingers, rough on her softest parts. She dug her nails into his scalp and let herself drown in the sensations. She’d always wondered why the French used the idiom *la petite mort* to describe sexual feelings. Now she understood for this truly felt like a small death.

Death.

Kat snapped to her senses. The fuzziness she felt, the heaviness in her limbs, was no longer a side effect of lust. She’d lost too much blood, and still, Lux took more.

“Stop,” she gasped.

He tightened her hold on her, sank his fangs painfully deep, and growled like a predator unwilling to give up his prey.

God, how could she have been so stupid?

The sharp sting of panic replaced the softness of desire. She had to get away from him but also had to be careful, or he'd rip her throat out when she dislodged him.

Calling up every ounce of self-defense training she'd ever put herself through, she lifted her foot and stomped on his bare instep. He jerked away, and flesh ripped, but she forced herself to keep moving. She kicked backward and felt her leg connect with his still-erect cock. He made a choked *umph* sound and crumbled where he stood.

Panting, dizzy, she leaned against the fence and watched him heave up his recent meal in the dirt. She pressed a hand to her neck and winced at the pain. Bleeding, but not as bad as she could have been. Still, the wounds should have sealed up as soon as his fangs dislodged.

Something was definitely wrong with her self-healing powers.

"I'm sorry," Lux said. He sat on the ground in front of her with a shell-shocked look about him. But when he lifted his gaze to hers, she noticed something—shame, embarrassment, fear—had edged out the fever-bright wildness.

"You say that to me a lot."

"Doesn't make it less true." He sighed and dragged both hands through his hair. "I didn't want to hurt your friend, I swear it. I sort of... blacked out. After I realized what happened, I tried to save him, but..."

"You tried to save him?" She didn't bother to hide the doubt in her voice.

"It was useless. Already too late. Gods, he said he had kids. I remember him saying that. Is it true?"

She frowned. Why would he care if Kahlil had kids? "It's true," she said and watched his reaction closely, looking for telltale signs of deceit and seeing none.

"*Faex*." He smacked a hand against the ground. "Do you know where he lived?"

"Why the hell would I tell you, his killer, that?" She'd intended it to be a low blow and it hit its mark; she could tell by his flinch but took no pleasure from it. Instead, she felt like shit. Lower, even.

"I can help them," he muttered. "My brothers and I have more money than we know what to do with. I'll have Leviathan set up a bank account and make it look like it was your friend's all along. Like a secret college fund for his kids or something. His family won't want for anything."

Since her legs were starting to shake, she slid down the fence until she sat

across from him. He really was nothing like she expected, and that niggling sense of unease bloomed into full-fledged doubt. “You’d do that?”

“I can’t bring their father back. Believe me, I wish I could. I wish I could rewind the past twenty-four hours. I would never have gone to Perversion.” He briefly met her gaze but glanced away too quickly for her to read the odd look. “Well, maybe I would have. But I definitely would have run home as fast as I could as soon as Lilith let me go. She did something to me. A spell or—”

“Lilith?”

His lips tightened. “My sister.”

“You don’t have a sister.”

“Yeah, unfortunately, I do. She’s Leviathan’s twin. Lilith, but you know her as Lily.”

“Bullshit.”

“How do you think I got free?”

That was a good question. One for which she didn’t have an immediate response.

Lux rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. “She has something planned. Obviously, it involves making me lose control, but to what end? I need to talk to my brothers.”

Right. Like she’d let him contact his brothers and bring the umbrage of the Deadly Seven down upon her head. “You don’t look out of control right now.”

He blinked. “Uh, no. I’m not. I feel... okay. Not great, but I stopped shaking, and it doesn’t feel like there are a million tiny bugs crawling over my skin.”

Kat shuddered at that mental image. She could deal with a lot of things, but bugs were not one of them. “Sounds like withdrawal.”

When his head snapped up, she realized she’d spoken her thoughts aloud. But she wouldn’t backpedal or flinch under his scrutiny. Wouldn’t give him the pleasure of knowing his hot gaze made her uncomfortable in ways that nothing else ever had.

“Shit.” He shoved to his feet and extended a hand to her. “We definitely need to find my brothers.”

She ignored his outstretched palm. “We? I don’t think so.”

“Yes. We. I was in withdrawal.” He eyed her neck as she pulled her hand away from the wound to check the blood flow. Still bleeding, dammit. Why

hadn't it healed up?

"Come here, Kat." His voice was a low rumble that sent shivers racing down her spine. If she ever let him know how she reacted to that masculine sound, she'd be vulnerable. To him. A demon.

She jerked away so hard that she almost lost her balance. "Two words for you. Hell. No."

Before she realized what he was doing, he wrapped a massive hand around the back of her neck and yanked her into his arms. His mouth clamped over the wound again, and he soothed his tongue over the ragged edges. No fangs this time. Just that light back-and-forth motion of his tongue and a gentle sucking that she felt all the way to her belly. Her knees went gelatin almost the moment his mouth touched her skin, and that scared the shit out of her. The walls of ice she'd constructed around herself to keep people out seemed to be melting, each one faster than the last. She wanted to rebuild them. She wanted to hold on to the rage that had kept her going for so long, but as Lux placed a tiny kiss on the wound, she could barely remember what the rage felt like. She felt loose and calm and deliciously empty.

"There." Lux pulled back, but only far enough to meet her gaze. His eyes had gone all dark and soft and... pretty. "All better."

She raised a hand to her neck. Indeed, the wound had healed, and heat radiated from the spot his mouth had suckled. "You gave me a hickey." For some reason, she found that more mortifying than the fact she'd let him touch her—do things to her—that no man had ever done before. A blush seeped into her cheeks, and she wanted to smack him for the self-satisfied look on his face.

"Yes, but I stopped you from bleeding to death. You're welcome."

"I can't die. I'm just as immortal as you."

"Good to know. Still sucks when you lose all your blood. Even for an immortal." He licked his lips and shut his eyes as if still savoring the taste of her. "Gods, you're perfect."

"Excuse me?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. We need to go."

"I already told you there is no we here."

"I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter."

"Fuck you."

"Kat." He caught her arm when she spun away. "Listen, I don't like it any more than you, but it has to be we. I need you."

Her stupid heart stuttered at those words. Nobody had needed her in centuries, not since her little brother and sisters... But she had failed them when they needed her the most. Miserably. Because of this man— *demon*—standing so earnestly in front of her. No, she couldn't help him—*wouldn't*. She wanted to destroy him.

“Kat, please. I need you. Okay? Earlier, you said it sounded like I was in withdrawal, and I think you're right. I think—”

She saw where this was going and ripped free of his grasp. “Oh, no. No, no, no.”

“Oh, yes. I was a strung-out mess until I fed from you.” He spread his arms in a look-at-me gesture. “Now I'm fine. Do the math.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

The street was crowded with people who had spilled out of the nearby bars to see what was happening. Cop cars sat at angles, blocking the mouth of the alley from gawkers, but from Leviathan's position on top of an apartment building across the street, and with the help of high-powered binoculars, he could see everything. The victim was a big black man, and the gaping wounds in his neck left no doubt in Leviathan's mind that Lux had dealt the fatal blow.

So, where was his oldest brother now? He scanned the police vehicles, afraid he'd see Lux sitting, handcuffed, inside one. But all the backseats were empty.

"Devak," he said over his shoulder, "can you shadow the cops? See if they have Lux in custody."

Devak gave one quick nod and faded into the dark of the night.

Crouched at Leviathan's side, Xanthus gave a melodramatic shudder. "Does it give anyone else a serious case of heebie-jeebies when he does that? Makes me wonder if he ever spies on me at home for shits and giggles."

Leviathan rolled his eyes. "Okay, first off, nobody cares what you do in your alone time, Xan."

"Yeah, well, I'm still gonna sleep with the lights on from now on."

"C'mon. I'm sure Devak has better things to do than spy on his brothers." He tried to sound confident about it, but—*dammit*, Xanthus—the idea had burrowed into his skull and now he couldn't shake it. Devak was the kind of thing that nightmares ran screaming from. Half Sombra demon and cursed with the sin of Wrath, he was also the most unpredictable of the seven of them. Even after two-hundred-plus years of living together as a family,

Leviathan still knew a whole lotta nothing about the guy, except that he had no discernible sense of humor, he was wicked deadly with stabby weapons, and that, sometimes, when he looked at you with his black eyes, you felt your soul shrivel.

Yeah, maybe sleeping with the lights on wasn't a bad idea. Just in case.

Leviathan lifted the binoculars again and watched as the coroner wheeled a stretcher from the alley. Someone had covered the body bag with a sheet, so there'd be no morbid shots of it on the news tomorrow. At least someone in this godsforsaken city had a heart.

"This is going to tear Lux up." He lowered the binocs as a lead weight of dread landed with a nauseating plop in his stomach. "Remember last time?"

Xanthus flattened his hands on the wide ledge of the roof and gazed down at the street. "It was a hell of a time pulling him back from that edge."

"We gotta find him."

"Yeah, well, we're not going to do it standing up here. Time to am-scray. The homo sapiens are starting to get antsy."

Leviathan looked down. Several of the bar-goers gulped their beers as if prohibition was going to be reinstated in the next five minutes. His own curse wasn't strong enough to affect someone from five stories up—they might get an envious twinge, but nothing more than that unless he projected it.

"Xan..." He slid his brother an unamused glance. "Stop screwing around."

Xanthus held up his hands, palms out. "What? It's not me. Well, it is, but I'm not doing it on purpose. Humans are just a bunch of self-indulgent pricks. I can't help that they're so susceptible to me."

Leviathan opened his mouth to reply, but a shadow pulled away from the others on the rooftop and took solid form.

"Cops don't have Lux." Devak's voice was almost a growl, rusty from lack of use. He tucked his huge black wings behind his back and bent to retrieve the trench coat he'd dropped before going shadow. "They think the death was gang or drug-related."

But that would change once they did an autopsy and found fang marks.

Leviathan turned to his brothers. "Go home and check my computer. See if Lux's phone has shown up. I'll follow that body to the morgue and make sure the autopsy report reads as we want it to, then I'll be home."

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

This was a bad idea. Bad, bad idea.

Pressed against the wall in her loft, Kat watched through the window as the coroner wheeled Kahlil's body from the alley below. And here she was, not only harboring his killer but contemplating helping the demon as well.

Surely, she'd gone mad.

"We can't stay here."

She turned at the sound of Lux's low voice. He sat on the edge of her bed, the only furniture in the place, his elbows propped on the torn knees of his sweatpants, his hands linked around the back of his neck as he stared down at his bloody feet.

"No shit, Sherlock," she snapped. "But at the moment, I have no idea where else to take you."

"You could take me home." He glanced up. Red and blue lights from the cop cars outside danced over his beautiful features. Christ, he really was a perfect specimen of male, like something carved out of marble by a master sculptor. Sultry eyes the color of a winter storm, straight nose, and lips made for kissing. All that dark, tousled hair that she wanted to drag her fingers through. And under the baggy sweats, his body rippled with so much power and muscle it was no wonder even the most virtuous had sinful thoughts about him.

But not her.

Nope.

She was immune.

She wouldn't think of that kiss or the way her body lit up like a

phosphorus flare when he sank his fangs into her neck. Wouldn't think about how much she wanted to push him back on her bed and find out exactly what all the sexual hype was about.

His lids lowered a fraction as if he knew exactly what traitorous thoughts flitted through her mind. But he didn't call her out on it. Instead, he asked, "Did you hear me? If you take me home—"

She turned away. "I'm not taking you to your brothers. I rather like my head right where it is, on my shoulders, thanks."

"They won't—"

"Uh-huh. Right. I'm the woman who stabbed and kidnapped you, remember?"

"Hard to forget," he muttered and pressed a hand to his ribs as if they still hurt. "But they don't need to know—"

"No." She put more force in the world than she'd planned, but it pissed her off that she felt even an ounce of concern for his wellbeing. So what if he was in pain? Yay. She planned to cause him more as soon as she figured out what the hell was going on.

"Kat, they can help—"

"No. It's not happening. Give it up."

And... stalemate.

After a long time, Lux growled. "This isn't getting us anywhere." He stood and paced across the floor like a caged hellcat. "We need to figure out a way to un-addict me to your blood."

"About that? I'm not even entirely sure I believe you are addicted. Besides." She jerked her head toward the window. "We can't leave until the cops do. They have the alleyway blocked off, so unless you have some demon invisibility trick up your sleeve, we're stuck."

"I already told you I'm not a demon."

She snorted.

Lux stared at her, his gray-blue eyes unblinking. Admittedly, it was a tad unnerving to stand there under his intense scrutiny, but she consoled herself with the fact that a muscle in his hard, razor-edged jaw ticked just below his eye. He was grinding his teeth. Good. Someone needed to take a file to those wicked fangs of his anyways. Maybe then she would stop thinking about how the scrape of them would feel in other, more sensitive places...

"Hell no," she said.

"Hell no, what?"

“Stop projecting your mojo at me. It doesn’t work. I’m immune.”

He heaved out a frustrated sigh. “It’s not something I can control. I can project it, but I can’t rein it in. I would if I could. It’d make my life a whole fucking lot easier.”

Kat didn’t want to believe anything that came from his perfect lips, but, dammit, she did. Nobody could fake the amount of venom in those words.

“How about we just stop talking now?” She leaned against the wall again, took out her knife, and began flipping it blade over hilt. At least it gave her hands something to do that wouldn’t embarrass her—because they were seriously itching to touch him.

“Good plan. I need to sleep anyway.” He settled back on the mattress and draped one muscular arm over his eyes. The sweat pants, a size too big, pulled so low as he stretched that she could follow the faint line of hair from his navel to the V of his hips, where it spread out and disappeared under the waistband.

“On my bed?” Holy shit, did that girly squeak just come out of her?

He didn’t move. “I don’t see any other furniture in this place, and I need to crash for a few. Feeding makes me logy.”

She should kick him out, or at very least make him sleep on the floor. And yet, for reasons she couldn’t begin to analyze, she kept her mouth glued shut. She slid down the wall until her butt hit the floor and watched as his breaths evened out, his tense muscles relaxing into the hard mattress. The way he lay half on the bed with his knees parted and feet still on the floor gave her a stunning view of his body in all its masculine perfection. The hard abs that rippled as he breathed. The very noticeable outline of his penis under the cotton pants. The swirly red mark of lust on his hip that she found herself wanting to trace with her tongue....

God.

Kat shut her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. Forced the image of him from her mind by sheer willpower.

She. Was. Immune.

She shouldn’t feel anything but hatred toward him. Certainly not this feverish need to touch and lick and taste. A tingling warmth spread through her at the thought, originating from somewhere low in her belly. She set aside her knife, unfastened the top two buttons of her shirt, and rolled her sleeves up to her elbows to ward off the flash of heat.

And, yes, she found her eyes wandering right back to the man. She

couldn't seem to help herself. Even sound asleep, he gave off his *fuck me* vibe—which meant he'd told her the absolute truth a few minutes ago. He truly didn't have control over it.

And she, apparently, wasn't as immune as she thought.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Heels clicking on the tile floor, Lilith walked into the ISRS headquarters and shut the door behind her. She wanted to slam it, but drawing attention to her visit was a bad idea.

The man seated behind the desk in a three-piece suit didn't bother glancing up from the computer in front of him. "You're late."

She knew that; she'd purposely waited until she was supposed to be here before leaving her den. She sprawled in the chair across from his desk. "So? I had things to do."

He shot her an unamused look over the top of the computer screen, his dark eyes sparking with annoyance. "Stop acting like a child. It's unbecoming for a two-thousand-year-old woman."

"It's also unbecoming to point out a lady's age."

Ignoring her, he said nothing else for a good ten minutes, his fingers clicking over the keyboard the only sound in the office. Impatience ate at her. She'd made him wait, had thrown off his precious schedule, so now he was getting back by making her cool her heels. That was how Ashmedai worked. And *she* was the childish one?

She stood. "I have better things to do than—"

"Sit down." His voice was all argue-with-me-and-I'll-suck-the-marrow-from-your-bones. More than one demon had pissed itself when faced with that tone, but Lilith wasn't afraid.

Okay, not *completely* afraid. He wouldn't touch her because the last thing he wanted was to make her mother angry.

Then again, it was entirely possible her mother hated her enough to serve

her up on a silver platter to Ashmedai. Leviathan was their mother's favorite.
She sat.

Ashmedai continued typing for another five minutes, then closed the laptop and folded his hands on the lid. Despite his cool demeanor, she could tell he was pissed. His nails had sharpened to claws that sliced through the fingertips of the possessed human that had once been a young duke whom the world now knew as Asa Smith.

“So, how did things go with your brother?”

“Exactly like we planned.” She tried to keep her tone flat. No annoyance. No fear. Ashmedai fed off all negative emotion, and she'd be damned—oh, wait, she already was. But she still refused to give him sustenance of any kind. “When I released Lux, he cut a bloody path across Seattle. We can safely assume he was looking for more of Kat's blood. The human police found the last body right outside her loft.”

“Perfect. I revoked her immortality and instructed Dracian to kill her as well. Fed him some bullshit about how Kat's breaking Society law and blah, blah, blah. He ate it up.”

So if Lux didn't drain her first, the Society would find and finish her. The whole plan, two hundred-plus years in the making, was diabolical, and Lilith had to admire Ashmedai's patience.

He had made things more complicated by getting her brothers involved, but he had his own reasons for fucking around with Lux. Lust had been his domain until Solomon fused it with Lux's soul, and he wanted it back, but she got the feeling he didn't have any clue how dangerous her brothers actually were.

She'd felt her twin's presence nearby at the scene where the last body was found, which meant they were close to finding Lux. When they found him, he'd tell them exactly who was behind his current blood binge, and the full fury of the Deadly Seven would crash down on her head.

Family. Such a joy.

But if it came to that, she'd give them Ashmedai without a second thought. Her loyalty was to herself, and she'd never give it to anyone else again. Trusting the wrong person was how she ended up the family's black sheep in the first place.

“Watching and waiting is getting boring,” she said instead of giving voice to her doubts.

“Patience. It takes time to set up all the dominoes. A few more days is a

drop in the bucket compared to the two hundred years we've already waited." He smiled and held out his hand to her. The claws had retracted, but the broken skin had yet to regenerate over the holes in his fingertips, and he dripped blood on the shiny desktop. The duke had been dead for centuries, his body animated only because of Ashmedai living inside his skin, and his blood was a rancid red-black substance that reeked like week-old garbage.

Lilith hated this part.

Most of the time, she could forget that her fuck buddy was essentially a rotting corpse. Except for when he was bleeding. Her stomach turned over, but she took his hand and allowed him to tug her onto the desk. As his heavy body settled over hers and his mouth closed over her pulse, she shut her eyes and willed her mind to go someplace far away.

Someday, she'd be free of him. And of her mother. And of her brothers.
Someday.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Lux woke to the feel of a hand pressing over his mouth, and he catapulted back in time to his cage in the catacombs of Paris with the sadistic guards who would starve him of oxygen to watch him suffer.

No, not again. Never again.

He lashed out in the semi-darkness. Felt the connection of fist to flesh, but the hand didn't let up. A long, lean body pressed down on top of him.

Soft. Feminine.

That body didn't belong to one of his smelly, bulky former guards, and he stilled as rational thought made a seeping return.

Kat.

Lux turned his head and found her nearly nose-to-nose beside him, one long leg locked firmly over his hips. She pressed a finger to her lips in the universal gesture for silence. He nodded. His heart still pounded a hole in his ribs, but he wouldn't make a sound.

Lifting her hand off his mouth, she leaned closer, and the ends of her hair tickled his neck. Despite the fear still pumping through his veins—or maybe because of it—his cock perked at the whisper-sweet sensation. How would it feel to have that mass of dark red fire spread over his chest? Or better yet, his thighs....

She socked him in the shoulder, and he had to bite back a cry of pain, instead letting it out on a hiss.

“Stop it,” she mouthed.

Again, he didn't bother trying to explain that he had no control over his curse and propped himself up on his elbows. The room was darker now than it had been before he fell asleep, and it took him a moment to figure out why.

The cop cars with their twisting lights had gone about the rest of their nightly patrols. They were free to leave.

Another glance around the room had him sitting straight up. Everything was as it had been before, yet something still felt wrong in the air. He looked over at Kat, and she nodded in confirmation.

“Someone’s outside,” she said on barely a breath of sound.

“My brothers?”

“No. Your brothers would’ve tripped my alarms. Whoever’s out there knew how to bypass them.”

She didn’t know Leviathan. There wasn’t a security system on earth or in hell that demi-god could not penetrate. Lux opened his mouth to tell her just that but closed it again without uttering a sound. Let her continue thinking her alarm systems were enough if it made her feel better.

Besides, she was right. It wasn’t his brothers. He couldn’t sense them nearby. “Who?”

“Ten to one, it’s the ISRS. They’re going to want you back. We need to hide you. *Now.*”

That was one way to light a fire under his ass. He was *not* going back to Lilith’s Little Chamber of Horrors. He slid off the bed and followed Kat to the corner of the room, where she pushed aside a rug that looked as if it hadn’t seen a vacuum in its lifetime. Underneath—surprise!—a trap door. The door yawned open on soundless hinges as she tugged the metal handle.

Lux froze, staring into the complete blackness, and wrestled with memories that threatened to turn him into a whimpering fool. There had been no light in the catacombs save for the lanterns his guards brought. He’d gone centuries in the darkness, half-mad and starved for blood—a skittering, feral creature that hadn’t even recognized help when it finally arrived.

“Brother,” Leviathan said and gripped the cage’s iron bars. Under the hood of his dark cloak, his expression was one of profound sorrow. “Rest easy now. We’ve found you.”

But the moment they opened the cage, he went feral. He ripped through his brothers, leaving them broken and bleeding and unable to follow...

“What are you waiting for?” Kat demanded, dragging him back to the present. “Go!”

Shit. Did she know how much faith he put in her with that first step into the abyss? Probably not. How could she? Nobody but his brothers knew the torture he’d endured for centuries in the dark caverns below Paris.

With a deep breath, he dropped into a crouch in the small hideaway, and Kat wasted no time shutting him in. Pinpricks of light still filtered through the floorboards overhead, but then he heard the rustle of the carpet, and blackness fell over him in a curtain of dust. His heart rate skyrocketed, and a cold sweat bloomed over his skin.

Oh, Gods.

Kat made sure the rug lay flat over the trap door, the edges lined up just right with the ring of dust she purposely left on the floor around it.

Perfect. Even the most discerning agent in the Society's arsenal wouldn't be able to tell it had been moved recently. She checked her boot to make sure her knife was still in its sheath, then turned to face off with the door. And she waited. She had no intention of playing the good hostess. Besides, with what she had stolen from them—sort of—they'd come in when they were good and ready. Probably in full raid gear with guns blazing.

Had to wonder what on earth was wrong with her. If she had a working brain, she'd be handing Lux over to them on a silver platter. Instead, she hid him—even planned to defend him against her colleagues if it came to that.

Yes, she'd obviously lost her mind.

But no attack came.

All right, enough waiting. She strode forward, tried the door handle, and found it jammed. She crossed to the window. Several men stood at strategic positions in the alley below, packing assault rifles and blocking her exits. She recognized them all.

What the hell?

She went back to the door and pounded on it with a fist. "Dracian!"

Silence.

"Dracian, don't fuck with me. I know you're out there."

His deep voice rumbled through the steel door, clear as if he stood beside her. "I'm sorry."

"What—" She heard the scrape of a match a half second after the acrid scent of accelerant burned her nose. "Dracian!"

No answer, but she knew he was still out there, waiting. A hunter smoking a rabbit out of its burrow.

Flames burst to life around the door. The air thickened with heat and smoke. She coughed and backed away.

What was he doing?

She was immortal. The fire wouldn't kill her, but it'd cause a hell of a lot of pain and damage she couldn't take the time to recover from.

She swore under her breath and ripped the rug off the trap door. Lux sprang out like a jack-in-the-box, gasping for air.

"Get back in there!"

Lux looked at the flames, then at the crawlspace. He winced. "You truly want me to suffer."

"Fine. Stay here and see what it feels like to have your ass flambeed. I'm leaving." She jumped into the crawlspace and groped around the floor for the latch that would open a hole into the club below. It was her in-case-of-emergencies-only escape route because once she pulled the latch and triggered the small explosive she'd rigged when she moved in, there would be no repairing the club's ceiling. Not that it mattered now, with fire eating its way through her loft.

She didn't bother to check to see if Lux was following. If so, yay for him using the brain attached to his spine. If not, he was an idiot and good riddance.

Ah, there it was.

She gripped the lever and yanked, but the gears had rusted from disuse, and it didn't give even a centimeter. She pulled again. Nothing. Not even a promising groan of gears about to give way. Real panic licked up her spine as the fire heated the metal handle and seared her palms. God, this was something she hadn't figured into her escape plans all those years ago. And even if she did get it to move, would it trigger the explosive? Maybe Lux was right to stay in the loft. At least up there, he could break out a window and jump. Down in this tiny space, she'd cook. She wouldn't die, but when you signed up for this immortality thing, the Immortal and Supernatural Regulation Society always neglected to mention that there are fates far worse than death. Like cooking your flesh beyond its rejuvenation capabilities and spending the rest of eternity as an extra crispy critter in eternal pain.

"C'mon, work, you bastard." She tried again, putting all her strength into it, but it didn't move until a pair of masculine hands closed around the lever. Lux's arms encircled her, his bare feet braced beside hers, his thighs cradling her hips. The muscles in his forearms bulged as he pulled, and the gears shifted, the lever moving ever so slightly toward them. She redoubled her grip, leaned into his body, and pulled...

The lever suddenly gave, and the explosion took the floor from under their feet. She scrambled for something to grab, something to hang onto, but found nothing. A second of weightlessness, a moment of flying, followed by a bone-jarring impact with the club's concrete dance floor.

Or, no, not the floor. Lux broke her fall with a loud *oomph* as he landed, and she found herself lying on top of him, face-to-crotch. She wanted to blush, the blood rushing to her cheeks, but she didn't have time for embarrassment now. She rolled away from him and assessed her condition. Battered and bruised, but nothing that wouldn't heal up in a couple of hours. Passing an assessing glance over Lux, she decided his condition was about the same, even though he'd curled up on his side with his hands tucked between his legs, a look of seasick agony on his face. She must have headbutted him in the family jewels when they fell.

Kat bit back a completely inappropriate chuckle. "We need to go."

"Ugh," was his only response.

"Fine. Stay here and—"

"Yeah, yeah." He groaned and shoved himself upright. "I know. My ass flambeed. I'm coming. Just... cut a guy some slack. Feels like my balls are in my throat."

"I could cut them off. That'd make me happy and solve your problem. It's win-win." Kat didn't think it was possible, but his complexion turned greener, rivaling Kermit the Frog. He cupped a hand protectively over his groin. Here he was, a big badass demon, reacting like a typical human man.

"Don't even joke like that."

"Who says I was joking?" she shot over her shoulder and broke into a jog across the dance floor toward the storeroom behind the L-shaped bar. Thank God the bar was closed now. Imagine the uproar if she and Lux had fallen through the ceiling during last call.

And thank God fire always burns up. That meant the entire first floor was smoke-free, which made breathing and finding the old basement door in the storeroom easier.

"Another small, dark space," Lux muttered as he followed her into the basement.

"What, you afraid of the bogeyman?"

"No. He's afraid of me. Where are we going?"

"A tunnel."

"Great." Sarcasm dripped from his tone.

Rage flared inside Kat, as hot as the fire upstairs, and she turned from examining the basement wall. “If you want to go back and face Dracian, be my guest. I’m trying to save your ass here, though God knows why. I should be serving your head up to them on a silver platter for what you did to my family.”

Lux sobered. “Your family?”

God, she didn’t want to go there. Didn’t have the strength to right now, and all at once, the anger drained out of her. “Forget it.” She turned back to the wall and ran her hands along the brick, looking for the faint indentations that denoted the opening of the long-covered tunnel.

Moments ticked by. Overhead, the fire crackled, and the scent of smoke drifted down to them. Shit, the accelerant Dracian used must have dripped down the walls. Accelerant was the one exception to the whole fire-always-burns-up rule.

Kat found the right bricks and started pushing them out one by one. Without a word, Lux helped until there was a hole in the wall big enough for them to slip through. The tunnel stank of dust and stale air, and she coughed as she took the lead, having memorized the layout from historical maps when she first moved into the loft.

“So why don’t you?” Lux murmured after a long while of trudging through the cobweb-infested tunnel that hadn’t seen human feet since slavery was big.

“What?” she snapped, in no mood to put up with him or anyone else at the moment.

“Why don’t you give me to them?”

“Don’t think I won’t.”

“Would never dream of it.” Behind her, his voice held a hint of a smile. “But I *do* think you like me more than you want to.”

Frustrated, Kat huffed out a breath and whirled around to face him. She couldn’t see him clearly, only the outline of his big body, a shadow darker than the murkiness around them. “Okay, let’s get something straight. I don’t like you. I hate you with every fiber in me. I’d send you back to hell with a one-way ticket if I had it my way.”

“Then why are you helping me?” His tone held no censure or amusement, rather simple, genuine curiosity, and she didn’t have an answer for him.

“Because my colleagues, my *friends*, burned down my loft.”

“Because they want me back.”

“No.” It was a hard-knock realization that had worked its way into her brain as she’d fought with the rusted lever in her crawlspace. She shook her head. “No. I found you by accident. Or you found me, whatever. Either way, they couldn’t have known you were in the loft with me tonight. So they came here to harm *me*, not you.” And, God, that hurt so bad she had to close her eyes against the pain. “My so-called friends.”

Lux’s arms closed around her and drew her against his hard body. She didn’t bother pushing him away. What was the use? As much as it galled her to admit it, he was physically stronger than her. And his heat felt good against her suddenly icy skin. She wrapped her arms around him and held on, needing an anchor for just a moment and telling herself that it didn’t make her weak.

“Kat.” He said her name on an exhale, and his breath rustled the hair at the crown of her head.

God, she was a pansy. Appalled to find herself crying silent tears, she tried to straighten away from him, but he held her tight. “Let me go.”

“No.”

“*No?* Do you *want* your balls to revisit your throat? Because I can make that happen again.”

He chuckled as his whiskered cheek rasped against hers in a gesture so affectionate her heart rolled over and all but panted at his feet.

“Ah,” he murmured, “there she is. Warrior Kat. You had me worried there for a while, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart.”

“I want you to be.”

“News flash, Lust. You can’t always get what—or who—you want.”

“All right, that’s enough.” The words came out sharp as the snap of a whip, and his arms tightened almost painfully around her. “I enjoy that barbed tongue of yours, but a guy can only take so much, so let me make something clear. What I just said about wanting you—that shit doesn’t come easy to me. I don’t want women. They want me. And, no, I’m not being egotistical. Truthfully, I’d give anything to walk down the street without sending out fuck-me vibes to every person I pass.”

Kat opened her mouth to say something—she wasn’t exactly sure what—but it didn’t matter because he steamrolled over her.

“You know the last time I was able to do that? The spring of 965 B.C. I was sixteen years old, but I can’t remember anything about my life before

that date because it fucked up my head when Solomon cursed me. So as far as I remember, I've never been anything but a walking, breathing sex toy."

This time, when she opened her mouth, it was to let out a soft, "Oh."

"Yeah. Bet your none of your precious religious texts told you that about the deadly sin of Lust, huh?" He finally let go of her and turned away. She couldn't tell for sure in the darkness, but she had no doubt his jaw was rigid with anger because when she laid a hand on his arm, his muscles felt like braided steel.

"They're not my precious texts, but you're right," she conceded. "Nothing I've ever read said that about you." As soon as the words left her tongue, she remembered they weren't exactly the truth and bit her lower lip. There was one text that may hold the answers about his curse....

"Can you read?"

If the sudden topic shift threw him, he didn't show it. "Of course."

"I mean, your native language."

"My native tongue is English."

"No, I mean your native, *native* language." When he didn't answer immediately, she rushed on, afraid she'd change her mind if she hesitated. "There's this book, *The Solomon Key*. It's written in the language of your childhood. According to a friend, it's the only known accurate account of you and your brothers, but nobody today can read it."

He was silent a moment. "You have it in your possession?"

"It's with my friend."

"Take me to it."

Usually, a command like that would ruffle all her feathers the wrong way, but something had changed in the last few minutes. She'd felt the shift inside her start when she first set eyes on him—a softening, warming—but she hadn't wanted to acknowledge it. Now, for reasons she wasn't ready to analyze, she didn't want to ignore it.

"We'll have to be careful. I don't know who I can trust anymore."

"Me," he said softly behind her, but she pretended not to hear it. She may have softened some toward him, but that didn't mean she'd trust him. After tonight, she wasn't sure if she'd trust anyone ever again.

"Do you have a plan?" he asked.

"Fresh out." It galled her to admit, but she wasn't going to pretend otherwise if he did have a plan. "After we visit Zayra, we need to find somewhere to hole up. *Not your home,*" she added when he opened his

mouth.

“Then where else—”

A voice boomed from the other end of the tunnel, drowning out his words. “We have you surrounded. Put your hands in the air and come out slowly.”

Dracian.

And he was blocking their only escape.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Lux heard the voice a half second before Kat's shoulders tensed. "Dracian," she whispered and pulled her knife as a hulking shadow appeared about twenty feet in front of him.

"Kat," Dracian said and held up his hands in a peacemaking gesture. "We need to talk."

"I think we're a little past that. You know, considering you just tried to barbecue me and all."

"Orders."

"Whose?"

"Asher's."

Kat shook her head. "Why would Asa—"

"You tell me. He said you defected. Is it true?"

"What?"

"No, she's being set up," Lux said and stepped into the pool of light cast by the group's flashlights. "You all are."

Dracian drew a short sword from under his coat and lunged.

Well, shit, that was unexpected. The bastard hadn't broadcasted his violent intentions in the slightest. One second he was standing there talking; the next, he was striking out supernaturally fast with a damn sword. Lux didn't have any room to dodge the blow and readied himself for the slice of steel into flesh—but it never came. Kat jumped in front of him, and for one horrible moment, time stopped. The sword plunged into her belly, and she bent over the hilt with a whoosh of air from her lungs. Dracian's hand dropped away, his dark features going gray with shock as Kat crumpled to her knees. The sword clattered to the ground with a muffled thud.

Lux caught her in the cradle of his arms and lowered her gently to the ground. His hand shook as he lifted the hem of her shirt to look at the wound. Not a through-and-through, but it was frighteningly deep and oozing massive amounts of blood. Dammit, where was Xanthus with his healing gifts when you needed him?

“It’s okay,” Kat whispered, her lips stained red. “Immortal, remember?”
Immortal. She was immortal. Right.

Except he’d never seen an immortal bleed like this.

And the wound wasn’t closing.

And her blood... it was a sickening, intoxicating perfume. He needed to have it on his tongue, sliding down his throat to quench the fire in his gut, to stop the shakes, the cold sweat, and the sensation of bugs skittering all over his body. He needed to pump deep inside her body as he took her into his.

But he’d never have her like that if these motherfuckers killed her. He got to his feet and snarled at them, letting his fangs descend. “I will suck you dry for hurting her.”

“Capture him,” Dracian ordered.

He tore through the first wave of attack, ripping out throats and ignoring the insignificant bites of their blades. From the corner of his eye, he saw a man peel off from the group and go for Kat. Only then did he realize his mistake. They’d lured him away from her. He was too far away and wouldn’t reach her before they did.

No.

He threw off the two men trying to subdue him. “You don’t want her.” The words came out in only a whisper but thrummed with power from deep in his chest, and every man there froze. Weapons clattered to the ground, and they all turned toward him with glazed eyes. “You want each other. You’ve never wanted anything as much as the man standing next to you.”

“What are you doing?” Dracian demanded. “Get him!”

Nobody obeyed the command. The men paired off, groping and gyrating against the tunnel walls, ripping off clothes, and trying to get their tongues as far down each other’s throats as they could.

Lux turned on Dracian and grinned. “Looks like the Saint’s blood has worn off. Interesting that my curse doesn’t affect you.” He inhaled. He recognized the scent of the man. It was the same pleasant, woodsy smell of his brother Avi and other shifters. “But, then, you’re not human, are you? Why work for people who would see you dead if they knew?”

“The Society doesn’t kill without reason. We’re not demons like you.”

“I’m not a demon.”

“Your eyes are glowing red.”

Lux advanced on him. “They do that when you try to kill people I care about.”

“You—you don’t care about Kat.” Sweat trickled down the side of Dracian’s temple, and his hands, clenched into fists at his sides, trembled. An erection strained the front of his pants.

“Ah, not so immune, are you? You’re just a fighter.” Lux took a step forward and watched the man shudder. “C’mon.” He held up his hands. “You know you want me. I’m right here for the taking.”

Dracian staggered backward a step and bent to retrieve his sword. With how badly his hand shook, the weapon was all but useless. It wobbled in the air between them. “Stay away.”

“What?” Lux knocked the sword aside and leaned in until his fangs all but scraped the guy’s ear lobe. “Do I disturb you?”

“I’m not—” Dracian cupped his hand over his cock and backed up another step, stumbling into two of his men. They went down in a twist of limbs, moaning and groping.

Lux’s smile faded as hot bile surged up into his throat. Enemy or not, he hated doing this to them. Hated putting them through the humiliation that he’d experienced over and over again. But he’d had no choice. When he noticed the curse kick into effect, it was the only weapon he’d had, and Kat needed help now.

Kat.

He turned to find her unconscious and still bleeding buckets. It wasn’t right. She should be well on her way to healing. Why wasn’t she healing?

He scooped her into his arms and waded through the mass of writhing bodies on the tunnel floor. Cradling her close, he ran, his feet splashing through puddles of stagnant water as he reached the stairs at the end of the tunnel. He had to get her to Xanthus—

Sunlight blinded him as he emerged onto a city sidewalk. There weren’t many people around, given how early it was, but enough that his heart started hammering with panic. He shielded Kat from their startled gazes as best he could and tried to get his bearings. They were close enough to Kat’s loft that he could still hear the sirens of the emergency vehicles but far enough away that he couldn’t smell the smoke.

And too far away from home.

The onlookers pulled out cell phones, no doubt to dial for the human authorities, and he decided to get moving before they tried to approach him. They were far enough away now that his curse wouldn't affect them, but any closer, and there'd be an orgy on the street. He picked a direction and took off at a steady run. He didn't have his phone to call his brothers for a pick-up, and gods knew there wasn't a working payphone in the city anymore.

But what about Kat's phone?

He slipped into the shaded alcove of a building and laid her down. She didn't stir, and her skin had gone candle wax white. Frantic now, he searched her pockets—

Bingo.

An old, no-frills flip phone. He opened it. Nothing happened. He hit the power button. Still nothing. Dead battery.

All right, so he needed a plan B.

Slipping the phone into the pocket of his sweatpants, he scooped her up again and peeked out at the street. Soon, with the city coming alive for another day, it would be swamped with people, and there was no earthly way he'd make it home on foot. But Kat needed medical attention, and a human hospital was out of the question—

No, that wasn't true. One hospital would treat her, and it wasn't far from here.

He held her close and broke into a run.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Leviathan wasn't one for stereotyping, but he had absolutely expected a creepy old dude to come through those big metal doors marked "morgue," not Medical Examiner Barbie. The woman was tall and thin—okay, maybe too thin to be Barbie since her breasts barely qualified as a handful—with long blond hair pulled back into a ponytail and intelligent pale blue eyes shining from behind black-framed glasses.

She glanced around the hallway, spotted him leaning against the tiled wall, and started forward. "Detective Solomon?"

"Yes." He pushed away from the wall and wished he had a badge to flash to prove his identity. But he didn't, so he flipped the mental switch of what Lux called his "x-ray vision" and studied the woman. The auric glow radiating off her was so pure it made his sinful side rebel under his skin.

Suppressing the urge to let Envy play with her, he sifted through the bright colors and found the gossamer thread that, when tweaked, shot a strong suggestion to its owner's mind. He sent an encouragement down the shimmering length to take him at his word without question. Crawling around in her mind, her private space, sucked—but it was a necessary evil in this instance. It was also a nifty trick for counteracting his curse in the short term. He found the thread again with the intention of telling her to ignore any feelings of envy she might experience around him, but stopped short and re-examined her aura. This close to him, she should all but sizzle green with jealousy. And, yet, her aura remained pure.

For the love of all things unholy, the woman was a saint. A fucking real deal *saint*.

She smiled warmly and held out a hand in greeting. "I'm Dr. Juliette

Kitts.”

The part of him that was sin scrambled to get away from her touch, and it took every ounce of self-control he possessed to accept her offered handshake. “Dr. Kitts, it’s a pleasure. I’m Levi Solomon.”

“Any relation to Roland Solomon, the real estate developer? I bought my house from Solomon Brothers.”

That company was Revelin’s baby. He had to be on the sixth or seventh incarnation of Roland Solomon by now. Levi had lost count ages ago. “Family business.”

“So you *are* one of the mysterious brothers. I wondered when we spoke on the phone. It’s not that common a surname. Come in.” She turned and held open the morgue’s door, then followed him through.

Inside the large gym-like space was a wall of freezer drawers and three autopsy tables. Juliette paused by the closest table and drew back the sheet covering the body. “You’re here about my newest addition? I’m afraid I can’t tell you much about him other than his name is Kahlil Deshaun Washington. He was a healthy, 29-year-old African-American male. His last meal consisted of pepperoni and mushroom pizza and Pepsi. He broke his left femur as a child, which, given the way it healed, I’m guessing gave him problems throughout his life. And he very recently had a vasectomy.”

Leviathan whistled. “And you call that not much?”

“Yes,” Dr. Kitts said with a frown. “It’s not as much as I’d like. Oh, and I don’t think he was ever in a gang or used drugs. He has no tattoos, no gang markings, and no signs of recreational drug use. Of course, I’ll have to wait for the tox report to be positive, but my take is this guy was not living a high-risk lifestyle.”

Leviathan stared down at the body. He could see the fang marks on Kahlil Washington’s shredded neck, but since Dr. Kitts hadn’t mentioned them, maybe they were safe. Maybe she planned on writing the cause of death as a homicide, a random act of *human* violence. But he had to be sure. “What about the stab wound? Did you get anything from that?”

Her frown turned thoughtful. “That’s the crazy thing about this case. It’s not a knife wound.”

Shit. “Sure looks it to me.”

“You see, Solomon, that’s why I’m the doctor, and you’re the detective. It’s a bite, but I can’t begin to tell you what made it. Definitely not a human, although it has human-like properties.” She paused and drew a breath.

“Between you and me, if I didn’t know any better—this is going to sound crazy, but bear with me. It looks like a... vampire killed Mr. Washington.”

Double shit. He forced a laugh. “That is crazy.”

“Is it? Because, lately, half the bodies that come through my doors are—”

“Doctor,” he interrupted and, at the same time, sent a firm command down the thread in her aura. “That’s not a bite. That’s a nasty knife wound.”

To his surprise, she acted about to protest but then stopped and stared at him for a long second. She pressed a hand to her temple and shook her head as if trying to dislodge the thought he’d planted. “Uh, I’m sorry. What were we talking about?”

“That nasty knife wound.”

She blinked down at the dead body. “Oh.” A furrow appeared between her brows. “Oh, of course. It was a...”

Serrated knife. And the killer twisted it. He forced the thought at her, more afraid than he’d ever been that it wouldn’t take. He’d never tried to mindjack a Saint before, but if he weren’t already doomed, this sure-as-shit would secure him a toasty spot in hell. It was an unwritten, unspoken rule among all Immortals—you don’t mess around with Saints unless you want to deal with the wrath of angels. And we’re not talking the white-winged, haloed, benevolent sort either.

Juliette Kitts struggled against him for a moment, but he finally felt her cave under his pushing.

“It was a serrated knife,” she repeated. “I think the killer twisted it like this”—she mimed a wrenching motion by her neck— “which is why the wound ended up so ragged.”

Good girl.

Leviathan asked more questions to ensure his suggestions stuck with her, then excused himself. As he strode through the hospital and out into the cool spring night, he searched his pockets for his cell phone.

Xanthus picked up on the first ring. “Did you talk to the M.E.?”

“Yeah. And get this. She’s a Saint.”

Silence. Then, “No kidding?”

“No fucking kidding. Envy didn’t so much as tweak her, and she fought against every mindjacking trick I threw her way. To top it off, she’s damn smart. And suspicious.”

“But were you able to redirect her?”

“For now. We need to keep an eye on her, though.”

“Yeah, okay. So far, we still got jack on Lux’s GPS. Any thoughts on why we’re not picking up his signal?”

“A couple, and none of them are good.”

“That’s what I figured.” Xan’s voice faded from the phone, and someone muttered in the background. Then he came back. “Hey, Avi wants to talk to you.”

“Put him on.” He knew before Avi spoke what his brother was going to say. “It’s a blood moon tonight, brother. You need to leave.”

“I’m sorry,” Avi said with real pain in his voice. “I want to stay and help find Lux, but—”

“Go. You can’t fight that shit better than any other shifter, and the last thing we need is for you to go wolfy in front of a bunch of humans. Some dog catcher might try to muzzle you.”

“Ha ha,” Avi said, deadpan. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Don’t worry about it. We got things handled.”

Not.

As he ended the call, he saw Juliette Kitts push through the hospital’s front doors. Arms crossed over her chest, she scanned the parking lot, presumably looking for him.

In the words of Xanthus, time to am-scray.

Leviathan jumped into the Escalade before she spotted him and burned rubber out of there.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

“You neglected to mention Kat was in league with the Deadly Seven now.”

Asa sat back in his office chair and mused at the breathlessness and disgust carrying over the phone in Dracian’s voice. “Is this your way of telling me you failed?”

“I didn’t fail. I stabbed her, but we couldn’t get close enough to her to finish the termination. Lux was with her. He protected her.”

“From you?”

A pause and there were all sorts of delicious undercurrents to it. Humiliation. Pain. Fear. It would have been better to soak them up in person, but over the phone wasn’t half bad. Besides, it left the actual events of the confrontation to his imagination.

And if nothing else, Asa had one sick, twisted imagination.

“Yes,” Dracian finally said. “He sicced his powers on us.”

Asa didn’t bother to contain the smile. “Fascinating.”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

Yes, very interesting. He silently delighted in the repulsion in Dracian’s tone. Luxuris didn’t play with his gift nearly enough. “All right. You need to find Kat and finish your assignment.”

Silence.

“Dracian.”

“Lux said we’re being set up.”

“And you trust him? Look at what he did to you and your men. He’s a demon. Evil, like the one that killed your wife. Or have you forgotten what happened to her so soon? And wasn’t it a traitor like Kat that caused your

wife's death?"

More silence. Then in a tone so cold as to freeze the innermost layer of hell, Dracian said, "I'll finish the assignment."

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Kat was dreaming.
But it wasn't just any old dream.
It was *the* dream.

The one that had haunted her for two hundred-plus years. Her mother stood at the mouth of their barn, hands on her hips, her apron dirty from a long day's work as Kat slowed her filly to a walk. They fought—she couldn't remember about what. Just another in a long and varied list of fights. Her mother always said that Kat was a problem child who suffered from “a double dose of original sin.” Her sister Ellen came out of the house with the baby on her hip and their little brother trailing her. She tried to intervene, to play peacemaker as always, and Kat yelled at her, too, until the baby began to cry. Her mother told her to leave, so she turned her horse around and bolted.

Stupid. So stupid.

She should have stayed.

If she had, she might have stopped what happened next.

Blood.

When she returned that evening, still angry, the heavy, sick scent stained the air. The house sat empty and quiet, and the first trickle of unease skittered through her bones. It was time for dinner, yet the fireplace was cold. The fire Mam always kept banked in the hearth had long since winked out, and the soup kettle was empty of even water. Kat's stomach grumbled unhappily at the sight. Because of the failure of the potato crops two years running, they had been forced to cut back to one meal a day. Dinner had been the only reason she'd come home. And, now, there was nothing.

She went back outside and scanned the yard. The barn doors were open,

and she somehow knew what she'd find even before her feet started moving in that direction.

Blood.

She wanted to run, but she wasn't a coward and forced herself to step into the cool darkness of the barn. The smell was overpowering, like ten slaughtered pigs left to rot in the sun on a hot summer day. Only by the grace of God and her empty stomach did she not bend double and vomit. The straw on the floor squelched under her boots, but she pushed deeper, blindly searching for the lantern on a hook by the front door. There. She fumbled to light the candle within; her hands shook so badly it took many tries and several matches to strike a flame. Yellow light danced over the walls, casting shadows in the deepening gloom of twilight as she picked up the lantern and turned... and dropped it.

Blood.

The walls and floor had been painted with it.

Biting back hiccuping sobs, she hurried to relight the lantern. Her sister lay pale and lifeless. Ellen's neck had been ripped open so viciously that Kat saw a ghoulish flash of bone in the gore. She steeled herself and stepped over the remains, calling out, hoping her mother was hiding somewhere with her brother and Ellen's baby...

Someone was laughing.

A child?

No.

What?

Kat came awake in a rush, the out-of-place laughter following her from her dreams to reality. She lay on a narrow bed in a barren room with a sheet tucked around her breasts. She was bare underneath, and that, plus the laughter and the lingering horror of the dream, only amped up her confusion. She sat up and took a quick assessment. She'd been injured somehow, a fresh white bandage covering her left side from her hip to the bottom of her ribs. Knife wound. She knew it without looking at it, could tell by the way it pulled when she moved. She didn't remember how she'd ended up with a knife slashed across her side, but it'd come to her once she shook off the cobwebs that always accompanied the dream. At least she wasn't sweating buckets this time. The last time she'd taken that particular unhappy trip down memory lane, she'd woken up in a sopping puddle of sheets with her heart thundering out a tune that would make a rock band proud.

More laughter.

Kat winced as she pushed herself to stand. Yes, definitely naked. Wherever she was, walking around bare wouldn't do, so she pulled the sheet off the bed and wound it around herself, tucking the loose end in under her arm. It didn't exactly make for easy movement, but she had to assume she was somewhere safe and didn't need to move fast. Lux wouldn't have taken her anyplace that would put her in danger.

Lux.

In a burst of clarity, she knew where she was. God, he'd taken her to his home, even after all the times she told him she refused to get his brothers involved in this... problem of theirs.

Except...

The laughter was still that of children, not grown men. The sound wasn't a figment of her dream but light and pure as only a child's could be. And if she wasn't mistaken, more than one child was laughing—like a whole group of them.

Frowning, she shuffled over to the one window in the tiny room. As narrow and unadorned as the rest of the place, it had an old-fashioned latch and swung open like a door. Outside smelled of trees and spring flowers and bright country air that reminded her of her childhood in Ireland. She couldn't pinpoint where they were in Seattle. Or if they were even in Seattle anymore. A well-maintained yard stretched a good acre and a half to a high stone fence that seemed more for decoration than any form of security.

Lux was down there, sitting cross-legged in the grass, his eyes closed. A crowd of ten or so kids of varying ages surrounded him, and the way they circled him tossed her back to the tunnel, to the way Dracian's men had....

Oh, God.

Those kids couldn't mean to do him harm, could they? They were children!

She opened her mouth to warn him, but before any sound made it past her lips, his eyes popped open. With a playful growl, he lunged at the kids, who scattered in all directions with squeals of delight.

Tag.

The deadly sin of lust was *playing tag*.

Kat realized her mouth was still in bug-catching mode and closed it. Below, Lux caught one little boy who was beginning to lag behind the others. But instead of simply tagging him and running away, he scooped the boy

onto his shoulder and, much to the child's delight, continued giving chase. The boy's colorful hat flew off his head, and sunlight reflected off his pale, bald scalp. He laughed and urged Lux to keep going when he stopped to retrieve the hat.

Sadness swamped her in such a strong wave that she had to grip the window sill to stay upright.

"Oh, good," a voice said from the doorway behind her. "You're awake finally."

She turned and nearly staggered again from the surprise of what she saw standing there, holding a stack of folded clothing. The woman was petite, and the black-and-white nun's habit dwarfed her. She nodded toward the window. "He's very good with them. They look forward to his visits."

"Don't you know what he is?" Kat said on a croak. In hindsight, it probably wasn't the best thing to lead with, but the nun gave a big smile that lit up her unremarkable face and made her almost pretty.

"Yes, we know."

"But— but—" It didn't make sense. One of the Deadly Seven hung out with nuns? And they *knew* what he was?

It went against everything she'd ever been taught to believe. He was the enemy. A ruthless killer. He wasn't supposed to be gentle or loving. Wasn't supposed to be kind to sick children or friends with nuns.

He. Was. The. Enemy.

Right?

"Maybe you'd better sit down," the nun said and deposited the clothing on the bed before hurrying to her side.

Yes, maybe....

She shook her head and steadied her legs as something else struck her. "You said visits, plural. He's been here more than once?"

"Oh, yes. He comes at least once a week and spends a day with the children. They don't get many visitors, so it's always a special treat for them."

"They aren't affected by...." She trailed off, unsure how to finish that sentence, given her audience. Was it okay to talk to nuns about sex? She didn't think so and struggled for something to say.

"His curse?" the nun supplied. "No, children don't experience lust. Or if they do, they don't understand it and ignore it. And before you ask, yes, some of us do, but we spend our lives resisting temptation. His curse is no different

from any other.”

A beat of silence.

“How is your wound?”

“It’s fine.” Not really. It stung like hel—lo. She shot a look at the nun and amended her thoughts. Well, it stung. A lot. And it should have completely healed by now. She couldn’t figure out why it hadn’t.

“That’s good. Lux said you heal fast.” The nun motioned to the pile of clothes she’d brought with her. “Those should fit you.”

“Thank you.”

The nun smiled again and turned to leave, but Kat blurted, “That boy down in the yard with the hat. Is he ill?”

“Yes. They all are.” The nun turned back. “Do you not know where he brought you?”

Kat shook her head. “At first, I assumed...” Well, it didn’t matter what she’d assumed because she obviously wasn’t in Lux’s home. “No, I don’t know.”

“This is Genesis House.”

Kat shut her eyes and let out a soft “Oh.” She’d heard of Genesis House, named for a doctor at Saints of Mercy Medical Center who had devoted his life to caring for orphans with medical issues. The house was a last resort, a place of hope for children who had none. “How did Lux get involved with this place?”

“That’s something you’ll have to ask him.”

The nun left, leaving Kat alone to stare out the window. Below, the game of tag became a game of king of the mountain, with Lux being the mountain. The kids squealed and laughed, the happy sounds like a balm for her shredded nerves. He was so careful with them, wrestling with them without hurting their fragile bodies. He could have killed them. All that beautiful muscle wasn’t for show. She knew the power in him, had felt it when his body had pressed against her in the alleyway below her loft, when his mouth had claimed hers...

Her knees wobbled, and she gripped the edge of the windowsill to steady herself. She slammed the door on those thoughts and threw away the key. That kiss was off limits, even in fantasy, because another was not going to happen.

Okay, back on track. She peeled away from the window and grabbed her borrowed clothes—jeans and a light green T-shirt—from the bed. The T-shirt

was baggy, the jeans a bit loose, but they'd do. Besides, the bagginess helped conceal the few weapons she had left, all of which she found stashed in the bedside table drawer.

Time to talk to Lux and figure out their next move. Obviously, she couldn't take him back to the ISRS. How strange that just twenty-four hours ago, imprisoning him was the one thing she wanted most in the world. Except to have her family back, but as far as she knew, time travel was still impossible, so imprisoning Lux had been the next best thing.

But she was starting to think she'd been duped, and didn't that sting a little? Okay, a lot. Here she was, a warrior who had spent her considerably long life training to defeat the kinds of evil most humans couldn't even dream of, and she hadn't seen the one right in front of her. The ISRS had been running her in circles for their own purposes, all the while dangling the carrot of her family's killer under her nose.

No more.

Fuck the Society's agenda, whatever that may be. From now on, she was looking out for Kat and nobody else.

She left the bedroom and found herself in a long wood-paneled hallway. Genesis House was a pretty gingerbread Victorian—she'd seen it in pictures—but inside, it rivaled any modern hospital in the country. Although the hall was empty, some of the doors stood open, and she peeked inside as she passed. None of the rooms were as barren as the one she stayed in. Colorful drawings and posters of Disney/Pixar movies decorated the walls. Every room had a TV, and some even had gaming consoles. And the toys... each room was like a new section of a toy store. The IV poles, heart monitors, oxygen tanks, wheelchairs, and other signs of illness almost completely disappeared among all the life and color here.

These kids didn't want for anything.

Except a family.

And, boy, did she know how that felt.

Kat rubbed at the blooming ache behind her ribcage as she turned the corner at the end of the hallway and came face-to-face with a little boy walking on bowed legs with the aid of braces and arm crutches. He looked up at her with irises such a startling shade of blue they rivaled a summer sky for beauty. Didn't matter that one of his eyes lolled to the left, they were still one of the most beautiful pairs she'd seen in two hundred years. Not since her brother...

Oh, God. That ache exploded into full-blown pain, and her throat seized up. She couldn't suck in a full breath. This little boy, with his red hair and thick glasses, looked like William. She sank to her knees in front of him, wanted to reach out and draw him into a hug and never let him go. It took several swallows to force words past the unforgiving lump in her throat, and even then, all she managed was a weak "Hi."

"Hi." He smiled shyly, and his freckled nose crinkled, his pale skin flushing with deep color just as William's always had when he was embarrassed or happy or when he exerted himself.

"What's your name?" She held her breath. If he said William or any variation of the name, she was done for. Would break down into a sobbing heap right there in the middle of the hallway and probably scare the kid away.

"Micah," he answered, and she exhaled.

Not William. Micah. Her mind finally separated the two, and breathing became easier. At least she wasn't in danger of passing out.

"Hi, Micah. I'm Kat." She pointed to the race car T-shirt he wore. "That's a cool shirt."

He beamed. "I'm gonna be a race car driver. Tyler says I can't cuz of my crutches, but I'll show him."

"I bet you will. I bet you'll be the fastest race car driver ever."

The tips of his ears flamed at the compliment. He opened his mouth and seemed to want to ask her something but then looked away.

"What is it?"

He bit his lower lip and, balancing on one crutch, he reached out and touched a strand of her hair. "You're a ginger, too."

"A ginger?"

"That's what Tyler calls me. He says gingers have no souls." Micah's pretty eyes glistened with moisture, and he blinked fast several times. "Is that true? Do I not have a soul?"

"That's a complete lie." She leaned down close as if to tell a secret. "And, if you ask me, this Tyler kid sounds like a bully."

Micah sniffed and swiped the back of his hand under his nose. "That's what Lux said."

"Lux is a smart guy. You should listen to him."

And just like that, the sadness disappeared. He beamed again, full of the kind of carefree hope that only a child could possess. "Wanna see my Hot Wheels?"

“Yes, Micah,” she whispered, her throat closing up again. “I’d love to see your cars.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

An hour later, Lux managed to extract himself from the kids long enough to run upstairs and check on Kat. Despite a case of the jitters he couldn't shake, his footsteps felt lighter, his smile easier. He adored these kids and loved visiting here, but had been woefully lax in doing so over the past few months. That would change. There were so few places in the world he felt safe, but this was one of them. He'd been a fool not to take advantage and visit as often as possible.

Sister Helen Frances came out of the living room just as his foot hit the bottom step of the carpeted stairs in the foyer. It always surprised him to see her out of her habit. In jeans and a plain long-sleeved T-shirt, she had a body that would make any red-blooded straight man reconsider his religious affiliation. In fact, that body of hers was probably one of the reasons they got along so well—they both knew what it was like to be viewed as nothing more than a sex object, and her past was as tragic as his. When she first came to work at Genesis House, she'd been painfully shy and terrified of any male over puberty. A high school date had stabbed her repeatedly when she refused to have sex with him and, after raping her unconscious body, had left her in a ditch at the side of the road to die. She'd survived by no small miracle. Now, at age twenty-four, the trauma had very little effect on her. Somehow, she'd found peace.

Lux wished he could do the same.

He lifted a hand in a wave. "Hey, Sis," he called, using his personal nickname for her. Because, in a way, she'd become like a little sister to him.

"Hi, Lux," she said in a distracted tone and hurried passed. But then she stopped in her tracks and spun back. "Oh, before I forget, the hot water tank

has been giving us problems again.”

He nodded and made a mental note to talk to Leviathan about getting someone in here to fix the damn thing once and for all. Or maybe they should just start shopping around for land to build a newer, bigger place. The house was a beautiful piece of architecture, but there was no denying it was old. Revelin warned him several months ago it was becoming a cash sinkhole with the way things kept breaking. Not that he minded spending his money, but there were better things to use it on than the constant repairs. Things like medical equipment, staff paychecks, and field trips for the kids.

“I’ll handle it,” he said.

“Thanks. Going up to check on your lady friend?” Sis asked with a smile.

“Yeah. How’s she doing?”

“You’d have to ask Sister Laura. She took some clothes in about an hour ago.”

“Thank you. For everything.”

She shook her head. “No need for that. Without you, this place would not exist, and these children would be in institutions not capable of handling their medical needs. You never have to thank us for anything because we are eternally in your debt.”

Reaching over the banister, he clasped her shoulder in a quick squeeze. “There’s no debt.”

Smiling, she lifted one hand to cover his. “You are a good man, Lux. One of the best.”

Well, damn. Coming from Sis, that was praise akin to knighthood. He squeezed her shoulder again, wishing for once he could tolerate more contact, like a friendly hug. But... he couldn’t. He disengaged his hand and continued up the stairs.

Wasn’t it weird that he never had a problem touching Kat or having her touch him? In fact, he craved her touch, thought constantly about her hands on his bare skin—couldn’t seem to stop even when he knew it was inappropriate. Part of him wondered—no, shit, that wasn’t the right word. He *feared* that this attraction toward her was an evolution of his curse. It had always radiated outward, affecting those around him while leaving him clearheaded to suffer the consequences. But what if it had turned on him? He’d never felt this pull toward a woman. Never felt this strange and wonderful passion, like he’d been trapped in a block of ice for eternity, and only now had it begun to thaw.

Despite the fear, he wanted to explore the feeling and see where it took him. Where it took *them*. And Kat only had to suffer an injury to make him realize that. For all his sexual experience, none of it ever took place in a healthy relationship, so he was a pathetic amateur when it came to this sort of thing. How did you... woo? Was that even the right word? Xanthus would know. Or Avi. They were the womanizers in the family. Maybe he could ask them for a quick lesson in seduction when he got home.

If it got home.

Which was something he had to talk to Kat about. She'd been adamant about not getting his brothers involved, but that was before her own people tried to burn her out of her home. They had resources she didn't and could offer a safe haven in their home that even the well-secured grounds of Genesis House couldn't offer. Besides, having her here put the kids in danger, and even as much as he wanted to protect her, that was something he could not stomach. If she came home with him, the only ones in danger were his six mean, well-trained brothers.

And, all right, some primal part of him enjoyed the thought of her sleeping in his bed, inhabiting his space.

Lux stopped in front of the door of the room she was in and smoothed his hands over his hair. The nervous gesture made him feel like an ass, so he ran his fingers through the strands to tousle them again. Kat wouldn't give a damn that his hair was a mess or that the knees of his jeans were grass strained from wrestling with the kids. She wasn't that kind of woman. Which was precisely why she was his kind of woman.

Huh. Look at that. He had a type.

He pushed open the door, and the smile tugging at the edges of his lips froze up so tight his skin screamed. The bed was empty, and for a second, his brain misfired.

The Society found her.

He'd hunt them down and drain every one of the bastards until he got her back.

She abandoned him.

He'd hunt her down and make sure she never did such a foolish thing again.

The nuns hid her and—

No.

The ridiculousness of that last thought jump-started his brain and got it

firing on all cylinders again. Okay. Overreaction. He released the metal-bending grip he had on the door handle and forced himself to breathe as he glanced up and down the hallway. Most of the doors stood open since the kids were gathering in the dining room for lunch, but he spotted one pulled halfway shut and strode toward it. Inside, he heard an odd squeaking noise—like tiny wheels rolling over the hardwood flooring. *Micah's room*, the colorful lettering on the door announced. He should've guessed as much. That kid was crazy about his cars, which reminded him he'd promised Micah a ride in Revelin's Lamborghini.

Careful not to bump the door and disturb the kid, he peeked inside, not really expecting to find Kat there but needing to look anyway.

And there she was, sitting cross-legged on the floor, running a pint-sized car back and forth in front of her while silent tears dripped down her cheeks.

Beautiful.

Even crying, she was so utterly gorgeous, he found himself dumbstruck.

She glanced up and, with a curse, lifted the edge of her T-shirt to dab at her face. Underneath, the white bandage covering her wound showed splotches of red, and his throat constricted.

He shot through the door and scooped her into his arms. "Are you in pain?"

She struggled out of his grasp, disgust carving fine lines in her forehead and around her mouth. "Stop. I'm fine."

Gods, would she ever look at him without that disdain? He dropped his arms. "Are you sure?"

"Seriously, what's up with you? Relax. I've had worse wounds than this."

That wasn't the thing to say to calm him—he wanted to track down and rip apart anyone who had ever harmed her—but seeing her usual spark return was a balm. He sucked in a breath to cool the bloodlust.

Yeah, his curse *never* affected him. Riiight.

A wayward tear gathered on her lashes and fell when she blinked.

He caught it on his thumb. "Why are you crying?"

Her gaze wandered away from his and latched onto the small bed in the corner, which sat empty. "The nun came and took Micah down for lunch."

"All right." And that had made her cry? Somehow, he doubted that and waited for the rest.

Kat sucked in a breath through her nose and touched the toy car with her fingertip, rolling it back and forth once again. "He reminds me of my

brother.”

Ah ha. And there it was, the real reason behind the uncharacteristic crying jag. “The one you claim I killed?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know anymore.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Was she finally starting to trust him?

After dropping that bombshell, Kat said nothing more for several long moments.

Lux stayed very still, not even daring to breathe, fearing he might break the tenuous connection between them.

At last, she exhaled softly and met his gaze. “For the longest time, you were my true north. The only way I could drag myself out of bed in the morning was that I knew someday, I’d have my chance at you. Someday, I’d make you pay for what you did to my family.”

“You’ve had plenty of chances, Kat.”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t stop you.”

“I know.” With a hard push, she sent the toy car rolling across the floor and watched until the opposite wall stopped its progress. Then she curled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. The position made her look so vulnerable that he wanted to reach out and comfort her, but she would hate it. Instead, he sat down across from her with his back against the wall, drew his legs up, and folded his hands between his knees.

“Tell me about them. Your brother. Your family.”

That caught her off-guard if her eye pop was any indication. “Really?”

“When were they killed?”

She cleared her throat before she spoke again. “It was... 1846.”

Lux managed to keep his face impassive. Fuck, why couldn’t she have said 1845 or even 1847? Either of those years, he could have told her without

a doubt that he had nothing to do with the murders of her family—the former, he'd still been imprisoned, and the latter, he'd been in America with his brothers, settling into their first home together in Chicago.

But he couldn't say that. Because in 1846, his brothers had found him in the tunnels under Paris, feral with bloodlust, and he'd spent much of that year massacring the European population.

He had a feeling Xanthus and Avi would both tell him to keep his yap shut about that if he wanted to win her affection, but... yeah, wasn't happening. She deserved the truth.

"I binged that year," he said, then mentally cursed at himself as Kat's head snapped up. Her mouth opened but then closed again without a sound. The color that crying had put into her cheeks now drained away, leaving her with a pallor that worried him.

Some tact would have been nice, asshole.

Still, he nodded at the question in her eyes. "When I finally left my prison, it was 1846. I was starved for blood and not in control of myself. Little more than an animal acting on my basest instincts. I don't remember much from that first year, but I know I cut a bloody swath across Europe. You saw how I was in the alley, what I did to Kahlil? This was a thousand times worse."

She curled into a tighter ball, her shoulders hunching forward. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you deserve the truth. In case something happens and... Kat, I could have been in Ireland when your family died. I could have done it. I just don't know."

Silence.

More silence.

And more silence.

Shit. Maybe he shouldn't have said anything, but keeping a secret like that seemed like carrying around a bomb ready to detonate.

Finally, she spoke, her voice vibrating with anger and sorrow. "William was five years old."

Lux exhaled hard, shut his eyes, and let the knife of those words score a direct hit to his heart.

"My mother found out she was pregnant with him barely two weeks after my father died from an aneurysm," Kat continued in a near whisper. "We all doted on him. He was adorable. Red hair—more orange than mine or even

Micah's. Blue eyes. All these freckles that popped when he spent too much time in the sun...."

She trailed off, and Lux waited, eyes still closed as he tried to jog his memory and bring an image of the little boy into focus. Thing was, even in a blood binge, he usually remembered snippets of his victims. Little horror-filled snapshots that his mind filed away in a mental dumpster and liked to drag out whenever the urge to feed arose. Those images were why he hated feeding nights, but try as he might, he could not recall the little boy she described.

"I never found his body," she said. "My mother, sister, and sister's baby were all in the barn. But William... he was just... *gone*."

Her voice cracked on the last word. Her heartbreak, still so fresh after all these years, was killing him. "I don't remember him."

"Do you remember them all?" Hope colored the question, and by the gods, how he wished he could say yes.

He opened his eyes and met her gaze. "Most, but not all."

Kat exhaled in a hard rush. "For the longest time, I held out this ridiculous hope that William escaped, and that's why there was no body. That he somehow went on to live a long, happy life with his sons and grandsons. I even found myself looking for him whenever I returned to Ireland. When enough years had passed that he couldn't possibly still be alive, I started looking for anyone who resembled him enough to be a relative. And finally, I just stopped going back. I stopped looking. It hurt too much."

"How did you get involved with the Society?" Lux asked.

She was looking at him, but she wasn't seeing him. She stared past him, through him, haunted by her memories. "After I found my family, I went insane. Or so I thought. I started seeing awful, evil monsters that couldn't exist. I ended up in an institution, which, back then, was its own kind of horror. I met another patient there, and at first, I thought he was as crazy as I was. He told me stories about supernatural creatures and you...." She finally focused on him, then quickly glanced away. "He had nothing good to say about you and convinced me it was your fault my family was dead. I latched onto that and used the anger, the hatred I felt toward you to fight my way back to sanity."

He wondered if she still hated him. He opened his mouth to ask but bit back the question at the last second. He probably didn't want to know the answer. "Who was the other patient?"

“His name is Asa Smith. He runs the Society and posed as a patient to find people like me who can see beyond the known world. He’s always said only the truly crazy would devote themselves to an eternity of policing the supernatural population.” She released a humorless laugh. “He’s probably right about that.”

“You’re not crazy.” Far from it. Intelligent, resilient, strong—those were the words he’d use to describe her. Stubborn. Reckless. Brave. Never crazy.

Kat snorted. “It’s debatable, I think, but Asa believed in me. He got me out of there and offered me eternal life for revenge. I just sometimes wish....” She trailed off.

“That you hadn’t accepted?”

“That I’d known what I was getting into.” She raised a shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “But I probably still would have accepted anyway. What did I have to lose? I’d already lost everything.”

“But immortality can be lonely.” If he’d learned nothing else in his three thousand years, it was that immutable fact.

“Yes,” she agreed. “It can, and I wish I’d known that before I joined. I had nothing before. Now I have less.”

“How does the whole immortality thing work for you?”

Kat lifted a shoulder. “Couldn’t say. Asa grants it to us during our induction. We’ve long suspected that he’s something... more than human, but there’s no lore to verify that. The ISRS encourages a culture of don’t ask, don’t tell—don’t ask for anyone’s backstory and don’t tell anyone yours.”

And wasn’t that an interesting thing for an organization such as the ISRS to advocate? Unease prickled along Lux’s scalp. Yet another thing he’d have to talk to his brothers about when he saw them again.

“What?” Kat asked.

He shifted, stretching his legs out in front of him. “We need to plan our next move. I think it’s time to call my brothers.”

“No.”

“Kat, be reasonable—”

“I *am* being reasonable.” Shooting to her feet, she spun away from him and stalked out of the room.

Lux sighed and pushed himself upright. He had to run to catch up to her. “I don’t understand why you’re so against them.”

“Which is exactly why it’s a bad idea,” she tossed over her shoulder and pushed into the room where she’d slept. She tried to shut him out, but he

barreled past the door and turned to face her, arms crossed over his chest.

“Explain that logic to me,” he said. “Because it’s going over my head.”

“They’re your brothers. You don’t see them for what they are.”

“I disagree. I know them better than anyone else on earth. I know *exactly* what they are.”

“They’re unpredictable.”

“Some more than others.”

“Dangerous. Deadly.”

“So am I. And?”

“There has to be an and?” she demanded. “I think that’s reason enough to keep them out of this.”

Lux huffed out a breath and dropped his arms to his sides. “They’re also trained to fight. I’m not.”

That brought her up short. Her mouth opened. Closed. “You’re... not?”

“Not beyond the basics,” he admitted, and never felt more ridiculous. “I’m already a killer without training. I have enough death on my conscience and refuse to give myself the skills to add to my body count.”

Her astonished expression morphed into something else, something softer, and he resisted the urge to squirm under her scrutiny. Her gaze moved over him like she was seeing him for the first time, then lingered on his hands. Thank the gods she hadn’t gone lower, or she’d definitely notice the sudden wood he was sporting.

His damn hands shook, the tremors worsening the longer she stared at them.

She reached out and caught his left hand in her right. “You’re shaking.”

No shit. “Lack of nourishment.”

Her eyes flipped up to his. “You need blood, don’t you?”

“Not just blood.” He drew her in, and she didn’t fight. “I need you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

His fangs punched out, the sharp tips slicing into flesh, forcing him to part his lips and breathe through his mouth. Which did not help his sudden hard-on because he could taste her scent on the air. It wasn't exactly arousal—he'd sensed lust enough times in enough people to know that wasn't what she was experiencing. More like curiosity, a slow awakening of urges that she'd long buried, urges she probably didn't even know she had. Even with all his experience, he sure as hell hadn't known he could feel like this.

Hot. Painfully hard. Needy.

Unlike his brothers, he'd never enjoyed sex. Too much baggage there. Too many bad memories that he couldn't shake no matter how hard he tried to replace them with something better.

But this woman was different and had been since their first meeting in the back hallway of Perversion. His body had known it then—it just took a little longer for his heart and brain to jump aboard. And maybe his brain wasn't entirely there even now, nagging him as it was with a vague sense of dread, but fuck that. He wanted inside this woman with a desperation that was utterly foreign to him. He liked it.

“Are you offering?” He crowded into her personal space, breathing her intoxicating scent deep into his lungs. Oh yeah, she was right there with him. Whatever this was between them, she liked it, too.

“W-what?” The slight tremor in her voice was beyond sexy and sent a pulse straight to his cock.

“Blood. Are you offering to feed me?”

“Well,” she said and cleared her throat when her voice cracked. “You can’t go without. You’ll binge again.”

“Yes, I will.”

“All right, then.” She held up her arm, cocking her wrist outward in offering.

Oh, fuck, yes.

He smiled, caught her hand, and raised it to his mouth. Her satin skin warmed under his lips as he kissed his way along the tawny freckles on the back of her hand. A faint trace of smoke from the fire in her loft still lingered, marring the fresh, clean summer day scent that was uniquely Kat.

Damn the ISRS for putting that ugly stink on her skin.

Kat shivered. He took that as an invitation to explore. He loved the way his breath raised goosebumps. He loved that her freckles continued up her arm and disappeared under the sleeve of her T-shirt. Did those lovely dots cover her all over? He’d find out, but for now, he skipped over the shirt and found the soft, vulnerable skin of her neck.

“Kat,” he breathed her name. “May I taste you?”

His fangs scraped over her pulse, and he smiled as she exhaled in a jagged rush. Her head dropped back, one of her hands lifting to grip his shoulder. She let him back her against the bedroom wall.

“Yes. I-I want you to.”

Yes. A more beautiful word had never been spoken in the history of mankind.

Lux straightened and tugged her T-shirt over her head. More freckles. Lighter than those on her arms, they splashed across her chest, belly, and lower—if he got her pants off, he was sure he’d find them dotting her thighs, too. He wanted to taste every single one. It might take the rest of his immortal life, but he was perfectly content with that idea. He started at her throat and kissed his way down the front of her body, stopping only to give proper attention to her breasts through the plain white cotton of her bra. Her hand lifted from his shoulder, tangled in his hair, and tugged hard enough that he had to look up or risk a bald patch.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “I thought you wanted to taste me.”

He grinned and loosened her grip on his hair before dipping his head again. “I am.”

He dropped to his knees and yanked the front of her sweatpants down. She was bare underneath the cotton pants, the thatch of red hair at the vee of

her legs beckoning his fingers to play over the springs. Perfect. As silky as the hair on her head. He dipped his fingers lower. She was already so wet that his need ratcheted from slow and savory to now-now-now. He buried his face in her, drawing her scent deep into his lungs—part hot arousal, part tentative curiosity, and acrid fear. He was happy to drown himself in it.

“Lux,” she said, breathless, and her ass wiggled in his hands. “I want—I need you to—”

If there were such a thing as a benevolent god, the next word out of her mouth wouldn't be *stop*. But he would stop if that was what she really wanted. He wouldn't take her without consent. His consent has been ignored too many times in his long life, and he'd never do that to her.

He turned his head and nuzzled the pale skin of her inner thigh, enchanted to discover more freckles. “What do you want, kitten?”

“I need you to... do something!” Her hips swiveled, and she all but sobbed, “Please!”

“I know.” When he reached out with his tongue and lapped her folds in one long stroke, the taste of her desire exploded in his mouth. She shuddered and gasped.

Yes, perfect. Like her blood, her arousal was an intoxicating mix of sweetness and spice. He replaced his mouth with his fingers and kissed her inner thigh before sinking his fangs into the vein there. She came apart for him as he drank her down, and something tightened between them, chaining them closer together.

After escaping his prison in Paris, he'd promised himself he'd never be chained again, but then this feisty little demon hunter captured him. He should hate her for it. He should put as much distance between them as possible because he felt a new chain forming link by link between them every time he touched her, locking tighter every time he tasted her blood.

And he fucking welcomed it.

Wanted it.

Needed it.

Mine.

Holy God in heaven, she'd never felt anything like that. Fireworks danced over her skin, and heat sizzled through her nerve endings. Lux may be addicted to her blood, but he didn't realize he was also a drug

for her. Every time he touched her, she craved more of him. Every time he took her vein, she was drawn deeper into the addiction. Every second she spent with him, the pull between them strengthened, slowly becoming a rip tide that was bound to drag her under if she didn't fight it.

She was so tired of fighting.

Part of her wanted to let herself drown in him. Despite everything he had done—may have done?—she felt safe with him. She could finally stop fighting and just be her.

But who was Kat O'Dwyer without the fight?

Maybe it was time to let go and find out.

The thought had panic burning through the soft, fuzzy afterglow of orgasm. What was she thinking? What was she *doing*?

She stood against the wall in a freaking children's hospital, half-dressed with her leg over Lux's shoulder.

Jesus.

He was Lust. He twisted and perverted everything he touched. That was who he was, whether he wanted to be or not... and she'd just let him give her an orgasm. Nothing good would come of this growing bond between them.

She needed to distance herself now before this thing exploded in her face.

She shoved him away and put as much space as possible between them, straightening her clothes with shaking hands. "Where are we?"

Lux growled low in his throat but let her go. "Beacon Hill."

"Good. Is there a car here we can borrow?"

"No, but I'm sure someone will drive us as long as it's not too far. Where do you want to go?"

She decided to ignore the resignation in his tone. "I have a friend nearby. She might be able to give us some insight into what's happening in both the ISRS and the Immortal realm."

"How?"

"She's a witch."

"Why would a witch work with the ISRS?"

"I never asked." She'd never asked about a lot of things, but when the Society found her in that asylum, she hadn't been in a position to ask questions. She'd needed the escape and purpose they'd given her, and, in truth, she hadn't wanted the answers. But now...

It was past time she started asking.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

As they approached a sagging strip mall in the International District, Kat waved him back. “Stay here.”

Nodding, Lux took a page out of his brother Devak’s playbook and stepped back into the shadows along the promenade. He crossed his arms over his chest and scanned the area while Kat strode toward her witch friend’s unadorned shop, which took up a narrow space between a 24-hour laundromat and a nail salon. Other than a man in a hooded sweatshirt hanging out in front of the laundromat, the parking lot was empty. Made sense, given that they’d waited until the middle of the night before leaving Genesis House. Anyone out at this hour was probably either homeless or up to no good.

Lux eyed Laundromat Man again. He didn’t much care for the way the guy oogled Kat as she passed, but he didn’t trust himself enough out in public to go after her and stake a claim. Even though the Saint’s blood in his system still dampened the effects of his curse, that bug-crawling sensation had returned, skittering over his skin and itching at the edge of his consciousness. Gods forbid, he might lose control again and the last thing he wanted was to rip into Laundromat Man’s throat.

On the other hand, ripping those lecherous eyes out of his skull might be satisfying.

Wincing, Lux scrubbed his palms over his face. Where had that thought come from? Jealousy wasn’t his usual brand of fucked-up, but the thought of another man looking at Kat, stripping her with his eyes, turned his blood volcanic.

She. Was. His.

Yeah, okay. Definitely *not* his usual brand of fucked-up. He shook his

head hard to dislodge the thought. Maybe Lilith had done more than addicting him to Kat's blood. No telling what she'd done when he was unconscious—if she had the same powers as Leviathan, she easily could've mucked around in the dark corridors of his mind. He shivered to think.

Time seemed to stretch and slow as he waited, and he tried not to focus too much on Laundromat Man. Humans may be weak both physically and mentally, but they did have the uncanny ability to always know when someone was watching them. Better to keep his eyes elsewhere so as not to put the guy on edge.

Kat finally reemerged from the shop and motioned for him to join her inside. When he stepped out of the shadows, he noticed Laundromat Man do a double take. He stiffened, the sudden shot of fear paralyzing him. What if the saint's blood had worn off enough that his curse had come back out to play?

"Lux?" Kat turned to follow his gaze. Laundromat Man ducked his head, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and strode away in the opposite direction.

She frowned. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing." He hated that she'd seen his cowardice. That he was so broken, unexpected eye contact with a stranger made him all but piss himself in terror.

Kat's frown deepened, but she didn't say more on the subject. "C'mon. We don't have a lot of time."

"Are we putting your friend in danger?" he asked as he followed her into the shop.

"Not if I play dumb," a pretty blonde answered from behind a display case full of crystals. She looked up with a welcoming smile but did a double-take, much like the guy outside had. And again, hot fear shot through Lux as she stared. He waited, bracing himself for her inevitable reaction. Any second, she'd pounce over that counter and go porn star on him.

"Wow," she whispered after what seemed like an hour of uncomfortable, tense silence. She turned to Kat. "You weren't kidding, honey. He's beautiful." Then she turned her attention back to the large book laid out on the counter.

Beautiful?

Huh?

Stunned, he blurted, "You don't want to fuck me?"

She never took her attention from the book. "Are you offering?"

“No,” he and Kat said at the same time. He glanced over at her, charmed to see her face flushed with a pink blush that even colored the tips of her ears.

“Zayra, behave,” she added, scowling at the other woman.

Zayra shrugged. “Well, he asked. But, no, even if he were offering, I’d have to pass.” She smiled at him. “No offense. You’re gorgeous, and I definitely feel a low-level sexual pull coming off you—your curse, my guess—but you’re not my type. You’re too... sweet.”

“Why do I feel like I should take offense to that?”

“Don’t. It was a compliment. I, unfortunately, just have a very unhealthy... *thing* for bad boys.”

“Then you should meet my brothers.”

She laughed, and the sound was as crisp as a bell on a winter morning. He couldn’t remember the last time he heard a genuinely happy laugh and found himself smiling at her.

“Ha. No, that’s an all-around bad idea.”

“For everyone involved,” Kat added with a nod.

“See, she knows. But enough about that. Let’s get to it.” Zayra tied her pale blond hair back with a band from her wrist and then pushed the large book across the glass countertop toward them, handling it with all the care of someone handling a newborn. “Kat said you’re looking for answers. *This* should give them to you.”

The Solomon Key.

Lux’s heart suddenly pounded. His father had been dead for thousands of years, yet he could feel Solomon’s presence radiating from the book, both comforting in its familiarity and nauseating as hell. Part of him—that bastard coward in him—wanted to run screaming in the opposite direction even as he reached out a finger to trace the crease between the pages. He braced himself for flashes of memory but got a whole lot of nothing. He flipped the page, then another, then scooped his hands under the leather cover and picked it up.

Nope. Nothing.

He set it back down and gazed up to find the two women watching him.

“Well,” Kat prompted. “Can you read it?”

He focused on the open page and recognized the mark of gluttony on the top corner. This page was about Xanthus, but the writing might as well have been ancient Greek to him. Actually, he wished it was. He could read ancient Greek. “No.”

“No?” Zayra sounded deflated.

“Your memory,” Kat realized and explained to Zayra, “When Solomon cursed him, it wiped out his past.”

He nodded. “And afterward, I was little more than a slave. I never relearned to read or write—if I even knew how to in the first place. I did learn Greek before I was imprisoned, but this...” He waved a hand at the book. “It’s as foreign to me as it is to you.”

“Not completely foreign,” Zayra corrected. She turned and picked up a small stack of paper from the shelf behind the cash register. “I’ve uncoded bits and pieces by running it through other known languages of the time period. I started on your page, Lux.”

“Did you find out anything about him or his curse?” Kat asked. “Like how to break it?”

He looked at her, unable to hide his surprise. She wanted to break his curse? Why?

“No, nothing like that,” Zayra said. “Mostly just biographical stuff. Birthday, 949 B.C. And, can I say, wow. You don’t look a day over two thousand.”

“Thanks.” He laughed and, out of the corner of his eye, noticed Kat was smiling, too, her affection for the witch clear.

“Father, Solomon,” Zayra continued. “And if I’m not mistaken, it lists your mother as a woman named *Ilithyia*.”

Ilithyia. The name tugged at something vague in his broken memory, and he closed his eyes, trying to bring a mental picture of her face into focus. Nothing there, though. Not even fragments he could piece together.

“Do you remember her?” Kat asked, setting a gentle hand on his arm.

He shook his head, but didn’t dare speak since his throat had tightened with a son’s emotion for the mother he couldn’t recall.

“I can’t translate the rest,” Zayra said. “The characters for mother and father are similar to Egyptian, and the names are written in Hebrew, which is how I figured that part out, but I haven’t found any other similarities between the languages. Or between this and any other language, for that matter. I can’t even pinpoint which way it’s supposed to be read since there are no clues in the text to indicate a direction. For all I know, it’s supposed to be read upside-down and sideways.”

Lux found his voice. “Xanthus would know.”

“Gluttony?” Zayra asked.

“Yes. We should have him look at it. He’s the only one of us who would

have learned this particular language. Pretty sure it's what his mother's people spoke."

Scowling, Kat shook her head. "I don't want your brothers involved."

"Kat, c'mon. I have to call and tell them I'm all right. They're going to rip the city apart looking for me if I don't, so we might as well get their help."

"He has a point," Zayra said.

Kat sent a scowl in her direction. "Hey, you're supposed to be on my side."

"I'm not picking sides. I'm only pointing out that he has a valid argument."

"All right. Fine. But later," Kat said. "We'll call them later. Right now, we need to leave. I don't want you on the ISRS's radar, Zay."

Closing the book with care, Zayra sighed. "This is all so crazy. Are you sure they're after *you*?"

"Yes. They couldn't have known Lux found me after his escape. They might not even be aware he's missing yet."

Zayra frowned. "Something's not adding up."

"Tell me about it," Kat muttered. Then to Lux's surprise, she grasped his hand and tugged him toward the door. "We need to keep moving."

"Keep an eye out for Xanthus," he told the witch over his shoulder. "I'll give him your address as soon as my drill sergeant lets me."

"You know, Lust, for one of the notorious Deadly Seven, you're not half bad." Zayra laughed and sent him a quick wave. "I'll let you know what, if anything, we find out."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

A huge shadow loomed outside the front door and Zayra faltered for an instant as she stepped out of the back room of her shop. Her heart thumped a hard warning behind her ribs. This wouldn't be the brother who could read. Not yet. Kat and Lux had barely been gone twenty minutes. Even if they had called Gluttony right after they left, he wouldn't have had time to get all the way across the city unless he had wings.

Maybe it was an early morning customer and she simply had not seen him approach. Some were extra cautious like that. In her line of work, she dealt with all sorts of people, from the curious to the truly crazy. It was part of the reason she kept an old Winchester rifle under the cash register. She moved toward the weapon as the door opened with a soft chime.

"Plan to shoot me, Tink?" a baritone drawled, full of humor, and she released the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Dracian." She turned to confront the hulking black man, who looked more like a linebacker than a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old former slave-turned-demon slayer.

"Tinkerbell," he said in the same scolding tone she'd used on him.

"I should shoot you on principle," she muttered and worked to calm her racing heart. "You scared me half to death appearing out of nowhere like that."

"Just testing out your security. Which is shit, by the way. I told you last time I was here to put a light over your door."

"I did."

He snorted. "Boo, that light doesn't even attract bugs. Not to mention repel shadow demons."

She huffed out a breath in exasperation. “It’s not a shadow demon I’m worried about now is it?”

“You should be,” Dracian said softly.

A fissure of unease skittered up her spine and danced over the back of her neck. She shook it off and busied herself, wiping down the counter around the cash register with a rag. As usual, it wasn’t dirty, but it gave her a task, allowing her to focus on something besides the sudden burst of terrifying knowledge that Dracian could no longer be trusted as a friend. “So is this the ISRS’s weekly check-in?”

“Something like that.” He leaned a hip against the counter and watched her with an expression that gave nothing of his thoughts away. “Have you seen Kat recently?”

“No.” The lie popped off her lips before her brain fully realized that was what she planned to say. “Not for days.”

Dracian nodded once, then gave a sigh that moved his wide shoulders. “I had a feeling you’d say that. Unfortunately, I know differently. She was here tonight with one of the Deadly Seven. Am I right?” When she refused to respond, he added, “I know I am. One of my men saw them here. Tink, you need to stay away from her. From them.”

Zayra gave up the pretense of cleaning and tossed the rag aside. “Why?”

“She’s dangerous.”

“This is *Kat* we’re talking about.”

For the first time, his expressionless mask cracked a bit. He glued the pieces back together fast, but she caught a glimpse of the inner doubt he was working desperately to hide. She reached over the counter to touch his muscular forearm.

“What’s going on?”

“Can’t say. Society business.”

Frustrated, she shoved him. She didn’t have much leverage and he didn’t budge, but it made her feel a little better. “I’m really getting sick of the Society’s cloak-and-dagger crap. First, you send Kat on a mission she’s not allowed to talk about and then you claim she’s dangerous?”

“What mission? No.” He held up a hand. “It’s not important. She defected.”

“Because she’s trying to help Lux instead of imprisoning him again?”

A muscle in his jaw jumped, but she couldn’t begin to guess what was going through his mind.

“You are not to speak to or help Kat in any way.” He bit off each word. Either he was extremely pissed at her defiance or he found the command difficult to get out. Hard to tell which.

“Give me one good reason.”

Mask back in place, Dracian crossed his arms over his chest. “The Society will revoke your protection if you do.”

If he had hauled off and punched her in the jaw, she’d have been less stunned. She actually felt all the color drain from her face and had to grip the edge of the counter to keep her knees from going jello. “You know what will happen if—”

“So I suggest you do as we say.” The unspoken *or else* was too dramatic a threat for Dracian, but although he didn’t say it out loud, it rang in the air between them, as tangible as if he had spoken. He strode to the door.

“D, please, don’t do this. She’s my friend. I thought you were, too.”

“People in our world shouldn’t make friends. You know that.” He stopped with his hand on the push bar but didn’t glance back. “I’m going to tell Asa you’ll stay away from her. Do us both a favor, and don’t make me a liar.”

Zayra forced herself to loosen her grip on the counter and follow him. “Asa is the liar. I can see his true face, and it’s not the one he shows the world.”

Dracian’s shoulders tightened, but he stayed silent. He also didn’t leave.

She touched his shoulder and felt his muscles vibrating under his skin like a plucked guitar string. She had to break Asher’s hold on him. It was a risk—the ISRS had been her only protection for a long time, but it wasn’t the force of good it once was. Exposing the truth now at least gave Kat and Lux a chance. “I can show you, too, if you’re ready to see it.”

He finally turned, his features set in stone. “Show me.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

As the first rays of morning light revealed a cloudless, pale blue sky, Lux's anxiety rose with the sun. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been out in public in daylight. Night, when most everyone in the city slept, was bad enough. Not that this downtown street could be considered "public" at the moment—it was still early enough that he'd seen only one car go by since Kat pulled him onto the sidewalk from the safety of an alleyway.

Now she walked ahead of him at a fast clip, on a mission that he was sure he would hate.

And, yep. Score one for him. He was not on board with this idea at all.

He caught her arm and yanked her to a stop as she pulled him toward the nearest light rail platform. "Uh-uh, not happening."

Already halfway up the steps, she paused and glared at him over her shoulder. "We don't have time for this."

Yeah, well, tough shit. On this, he would stubbornly hold his ground until the next ice age. "I'm *not* getting on any fucking trains."

"Okay, hot shot. So what else do you expect me to do?" she asked in exasperation. "I don't have my bike, and we need to get as far away from Zayra as we can. We can't risk going back to Genesis House. The ISRS can't be on every train in the city, so we should be able to safely ride to the airport and rent a car."

"With what money?"

Her mouth snapped shut.

"If we contact my brothers—"

"No. I'm sick of hearing about them, okay? We're not going to them. Period."

“Fuck you, then.” He started back down the sidewalk. “Good luck evading the ISRS. I’m going home.”

“Alone?” she taunted, and, dammit, she had him there. Sure, he still had the saint’s blood cocktail in his system, but for how much longer? And as much as he loathed to admit it, he was safer traveling with somebody who was immune to his curse.

“And what about your supposed addiction to my blood?” she added.

Shit. He’d forgotten about that massive wrinkle, but just the mention brought back the itchy, bugs-under-the-skin feeling he’d managed to suppress. He stopped moving and ground his back teeth together so hard his jaw cracked.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” she said. “You need me.”

He whirled around to find her standing on the steps, hands on her hips, grinning at him. It wasn’t a nice smile, not like some of the others he’d seen from her, but even under a solid layer of pissed-off, he ached for her. She’d been forged in the fires of hell just as surely as he had.

“Kat.” He said her name on an exhale, giving himself a second to cool off before he tried to reason with her. “Think about this. Do you really want to close me inside a metal tin can with an unknown number of humans? You heard Zayra. Even with the saint’s blood, she could still feel a low-level pull coming from me. Remember what Perversion looked like the other night? This will be much worse.”

After a long second, Kat muttered a curse. “I hate to say it, but you have a point. Tell you what, bear with it just long enough to get us away from here, and we’ll get off as soon as the rush hour traffic starts.”

Over their heads, the track began to clank and rumble as a train approached. She looked up and cursed again. “We’re low on options here.”

That they were. Echoing her curse with one of his own, he joined her on the stairs and hoped like hell he wasn’t going to regret this decision. “Let’s go.”

The man was jumpy. No, not just jumpy. If Kat had to guess, she’d say he was terrified and trying to hide it. He’d demanded she take the aisle seat and positioned his back against the window so that he could keep a close eye on the other riders. As she’d figured, there weren’t many this early in the morning. A homeless woman in a dirty, ankle-length red coat sat up

near the front of the car, muttering to herself as she dug through one of the many plastic bags in her possession. Another sleepy woman stood by the door in hospital scrubs, her long blond hair tied in a sloppy knot at the back of her head. A group of kids, who looked as if they'd just woken up from a long night of drinking, huddled together several rows back.

Every time someone ventured near, Lux stiffened beside her as if readying for an attack. And just watching all the tense-relax-repeat action was exhausting, so she couldn't imagine the toll it was taking on him.

"Calm down," she whispered after the train stopped and a man in a business suit climbed aboard with a rolling suitcase. He passed them with his cell phone glued to his ear, barely sparing a glance in their direction. "See, you're still safe. Nobody on this train is inordinately attracted to you."

Except for her, but she'd keep that wayward thought to herself. Because heaven knew he was the last being on earth she should feel any sort of attraction to. Especially if he'd done even half the horrible things he'd been accused of over the centuries—like murdering her family.

Though, if she was perfectly honest with herself, she was really starting to doubt he was responsible for that.

Or maybe that was a delusion brought on by her forbidden attraction. Did she no longer believe it because she didn't want it to be true? And, if so, what did that say about her? Nothing good, she was sure, and thinking about it was bound to give her a headache, so she shoved it out of her mind.

Beside her, Lux swallowed so hard she heard the gulping sound of it.

"Hey." She reached over and took his hand, surprised to feel his fingers trembling. "Relax, okay? Breathe."

"Yeah. I am."

She snorted. "No, you're not, and you're going to start turning blue, which will freak people out."

He let go of a pent-up breath, the huff sounding almost like a laugh but not quite. "Sorry I'm such a pussy."

"Nah. I wouldn't call you that."

"No?"

"Uh-uh. More like a walking phobia."

Now that sounded more like a laugh, and she loved that she'd coaxed one out of him. She squeezed his hand. "Besides, a guy's only a pussy if there's no reason behind his fear. You ask me, I think you probably have thousands of reasons behind yours. Probably one for every year you've been alive."

“Just about.”

The train stopped again, and the kids got off. A rail-thin woman in a mini-skirt tottered on in heels at least four inches high. Lux watched the woman warily, but she seemed more interested in sitting down and pulling off her heels. Not that Kat blamed her. Whoever invented those feet killers should be jailed for inflicting cruel and unusual punishment on womankind.

Lux relaxed again when the woman leaned her bottle-red head against the window and shut her mascara-smudged eyes.

“They’re probably the worst, huh?” Kat said. “The prostitutes, when your curse is at full power.”

To her surprise, he shook his head. “No. In fact, right after I was cursed, Solomon sent me to a brothel.”

“What?” Outrage exploded within her. “You’re his son, and he—?”

“I was a slave, Kat. In his eyes, I wasn’t his son. I was his property.”

A slave? Slavery had already been outlawed in Ireland for decades by the time she was born, and she’d always hated the notion. “I’m sorry.”

Lux gave a tight smile. “Don’t be. It was a very long time ago, and sending me to the brothel was actually a wise choice on his part. My presence helped the brothel’s business, but the ladies were unaffected by me. I think because most of them had lost the ability to feel lust. It was good.” A shadow flickered behind his eyes, belying the truth of that statement. “I wasn’t treated badly, and I had a roof over my head. I did odd jobs, tended to the few horses they had, and cooked meals. I didn’t remember my life before the curse, so it was the only life I knew, and it was a good one, given the time period.”

“Even so, what kind a father would expose his child to... *that*?” She couldn’t wrap her mind around it. Sure, she hadn’t gotten along with her own mother, but Mam would never have done something so horrible to her.

“Solomon was never going to win Father of the Year,” Lux admitted, “but you have to remember how different life was back then. At that point, nobody considered me a child. Well, except maybe the women in the brothel. They treated me like their little brother, but I was sixteen. If I’d been born to one of Solomon’s wives rather than a mistress, I would have already been married off and probably would’ve had several children of my own. And I most certainly wouldn’t have been cursed.”

“Are all of your brothers also children of Solomon’s mistresses?”

He stayed silent for so long that a lump of dread rose into her throat. Whatever his answer, it wasn’t going to be a happy one.

“Lux?”

“No,” he finally said. “All of my brothers are the result of rape.”

Kat sat back in her seat, stunned speechless for a solid five seconds. “Rape?”

“Solomon had it in mind to use the children of his concubines, like me, when he first decided to trap the sins. I was his test subject. He fused Lust inside me with his seal, but the curse almost killed me. He assumed, correctly, that I couldn’t handle it because I was human. That’s why I have no memory of my life before.”

“So... what? He kidnapped Immortal women and impregnated them?”

“All except Tristin’s mother. She was one of Solomon’s wives.”

“He was a legitimate son?”

“Yes. His name was Absalom back then, named for our uncle.”

“So how did he end up cursed?”

Lux’s jaw tightened. “Because he was reckless and headstrong and stupid. Just a stupid teenage prank. He tried to steal Solomon’s seal on a dare. Solomon punished him by cursing him twice over: with Sloth and the inability to touch anything living ever again.” Although his expression remained impassive, disgust rang in his voice. “He was thirteen years old.”

“My God. He was a baby.”

“You wouldn’t know it now, but he was a sweet child with a big heart. He just wanted to make everyone around him happy and would’ve grown into a good, honorable man. His curse destroyed him.”

She imagined it had destroyed all of them to some extent, but Lux most of all. She didn’t say that aloud, though. It’d give away too many of her confused feelings, and besides, she didn’t think he’d appreciate the pity. But she did pity him and his brothers, and that was something she never thought she’d feel toward the infamous Deadly Seven.

She took his hand in hers again and held it, offering comfort the only way she knew how. Several stops passed in tense silence, but Lux seemed to relax more as each new person got on the train and ignored him. Good. She couldn’t blame him for his fear—who wouldn’t be afraid in his shoes?—but she despised seeing the strong man reduced to such terror.

When Lux caught her staring at him, she lifted her gaze to the window and pretended to watch the passing city.

“We should get off at the next stop,” Lux said.

“It’s fine. We’re safe.”

Lux watched the growing crowd around them. “No, we’re not.”

“Oh, c’mon, grow a set would you?” As soon as the words left her lips, she wished she could call them back. For a second, he looked like a kicked puppy, wounded and startled by his owner’s spike of temper. But then he gripped the seat in front of him with a white knuckle hold and shoved to his feet. He loomed over her. With all of his recent timidity, she’d forgotten how large he really was.

Fury etched lines in his beautiful face as he leaned down. His fangs made a brief but undeniable appearance. “Live through everything I have, little girl, then say that to me again.”

Oh, God. Why did she not have a filter between her inner bitch and her mouth?

Inwardly, she shriveled up with shame, but she’d be damned before she’d let him see it. She hitched her chin up and met the anger in his gaze with what she hoped was cool indifference. And there they stood, locked in a staring contest.

A flash of movement, a reflection in the window over his shoulder, caught her attention. A man had boarded and slammed to a halt mere feet from them. Military short brown hair, eyes the color of deer hide. A thin scar streaked from his temple to his hairline at the center of his forehead. His name was Shawn Riley, and he’d gotten that scar in Iraq just before Asa had inducted him into the Society’s ranks.

“Kat, don’t move,” Riley said and reached for his pocket.

Shit.

Lux shoved her aside and body-slammed Riley into the train’s opposite wall. Riley’s gun arm flew upward at the impact of Lux’s tackle, and the weapon discharged into the ceiling.

The homeless woman screamed and huddled under the flaps of her coat. The hooker grabbed her shoes and high-tailed it to the opposite end of the car. The businessman said into his cell phone, “Holy shit, someone has a gun!” as the nurse in scrubs lunged over a seat to push the emergency stop button.

Kat sent the woman a silent thanks and grabbed the back of Lux’s shirt, dragging him toward the half-closed doors. She slipped out onto the platform and realized too late that he wasn’t going to fit through the opening. The people on the train were starting to rally, with Businessman leading the charge. He and the nurse had subdued Riley, who was helpless against them

because The ISRS's one steadfast rule was to leave humans out of the constantly raging supernatural war. Another two men headed for Lux. His eyes flared wide, showing too much white like a frightened animal.

"Lux, look at me. Relax. You need to calm down. We'll get you out." Gripping both sides of the door, she put all of her strength into prying them open. Nothing. Not even a half inch of give and Lux, with his fangs fully extended, was now looking feral.

The two men reached for him.

"No, don't! Don't touch him!"

The men paused and had a heated discussion that she couldn't hear over the chaos around her as people spilled out of the train and ran for the exits, but she knew the idiots had decided to ignore her.

Bloody hell, this would not go well, especially if Lux turned around and flashed his fangs. Or, God forbid, if he bit someone.

"Lux, look at me," she said again in the soft, calming voice she'd once used on a spirited stallion in her father's stable. "You keep your eyes on me. Focus only on me."

He jerked and hissed as one guy grabbed his arm.

"No!" She made the word into a whip. "Never mind them. Focus on me. You need to help me. Put your hands on the door. Do you hear me? Put your hands on the door and push."

Slowly, he raised his hands. With every muscle in his body shaking, he planted his palms on the windows and curled his fingers around the edge of the door.

"There you go. No, don't worry about those men. You worry about us. We need to leave before the police show up. We need to find a safe place."

She didn't seem to be getting through to him. He just stood there, his chest rising and falling, his arms positioned to pull the doors open. The two humans buzzed around him, about as effective as gnats, and he looked like he was contemplating ripping out their throats.

She reached through the door and cupped his face in her hands, forcing his attention to stay on her. "I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I didn't mean it. You're not a coward. I... like you. I don't want to see you hurt. Please, help me get us out of here."

Some of the savageness faded out of his eyes. He blinked, confusion replacing his rage as he took in their situation, and his fangs retracted. She would have heaved a sigh of relief if she couldn't hear the sounds of the

human authorities pounding down the stairs at one end of the platform.
“We need to go,” she said. “Right now.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

When Lux came back to himself, he found his hands curled around the train's half-open door, Kat out on the platform talking to him in the even tone usually reserved for people who'd lost their minds, and two men tugging at his arms.

What the hell?

He remembered Kat pissing him off, remembered the stubborn tilt of her chin as she tried to stare him down, but then....

Nothing.

Had he binged again? As soon as the question entered his mind, he rejected it. His skin still jittered with the need for blood, and he tasted nothing but the sourness of fear. Had his curse kicked in full force? That was much more likely, except the guys tugging on him would instead be humping him like dogs.

"Lux, focus on my voice," Kat said, still speaking in that calm, measured way. "You need to snap out of it. Right bloody now. We have to leave."

He shook off the two men and put all of his power into prying the doors open. With Kat's help, he made an opening big enough for him to fit through just as the human police swarmed the platform.

"In there!" She pointed at the train. "The man with the gun is still in there!"

The cops surged forward in a great wave of blue uniforms and Kat took his hand, drawing him away from the chaos to the stairs on the other end of the platform.

"Who had a gun?" he asked.

She threw a glance over her shoulder like he was off his rocker. And maybe he was. In all his centuries, he'd never blacked out like that unless he was on a blood binge.

They burst from the subway station at a dead run and, holy shit, they were smack dab in the middle of downtown during the morning rush hour. The sun was over-bright, blinding him. People everywhere. Cops controlling the crowd, gawkers staring from the sidewalks, suits hurrying to work. In the past, if he'd found himself in a situation like this, it was like a wearing a neon arrow on his dick that blinked "Rape me!" in eye-catching colors.

His inner coward screamed to run as far away from here as he could get. His breath hitched, his feet faltered. Unable to draw a full lung of air, he staggered to a stop and lost his grip on Kat's hand. She disappeared into the teeming masses.

Shit, now he was in trouble. Big trouble.

The cop standing closest to him, a tall man who looked like he could bench press a car, turned around like a predator catching a whiff of weak, appetizing prey. Although the guy was almost certainly heterosexual, an erection popped the front of his uniform pants, and he strode toward Lux with the single-minded intent of a man expecting to get laid. One by one, everyone else around Lux took notice and started writhing together, straining to get closer to him but taking anyone else who stood in the way. The scent of arousal assaulted his nose, and his heart kicked into a gallop.

He instinctively raised his hands to fight his way out but then—godsdammit—forced himself to lower them again. These people were innocent. They couldn't help what was happening, and he would not hurt them for it. Not again. Never again. As hands snaked out of the crowd to touch and stroke him in all the wrong places, he closed his eyes and prayed it would be over soon.

A block away, Kat slowed to a walk. "All right, I'm only going to say this once," she said between huffing breaths and braced her hands on her knees. "You were right about the light rail."

No answer. Not even a snarky, "I told you so."

Kat spun around. The alleyway she'd ducked into was empty. Just her and a cat that eyed her distrustfully from its perch on a fire escape landing.

Uh-oh.

She broke into a sprint. Had The Society recaptured him? The human authorities? The former would be bad, but the later would mean catastrophe, and all sorts of grim scenarios began reeling through her mind.

But nothing could have prepared her for the insanity she saw when she finally found him. Lux stood like a statue in the middle of the street, a mass of writhing bodies around him as people performed very illegal acts right there on the city sidewalk. And nobody seemed to give a damn. Lux's clothes hung off him in shreds as people of both sexes tried to crawl up his body, and even from half a block away, she could see that his jaw was locked so tight that beads of sweat trickled from his temple. He jerked ever so slightly at each touch, but he didn't move, didn't try to fight. Days ago, she would have assumed he wasn't trying to escape because he enjoyed the orgies he created, but she now knew otherwise.

"Lux," she called. "Fight them!"

He opened eyes full of embarrassment and misery and shook his head.

Bloody hell, did she have to do everything in this relationship?

She surged forward, knocking people out of her path, jumping over one couple in a full sexual lock. All around her, people stopped moving and looked around in confusion.

Lux's shoulders sagged in relief as she reached him and grabbed his hand. The moment they made skin-to-skin contact, the sexual trance broke like a thunderclap. Some of the women started crying as they tugged at their rumpled clothes. Some of the men, too, for that matter. At least one guy punched out another who, moments ago, he'd held in a tight liplock.

Kat dragged Lux past the confused masses and into the relative safety of the alleyway several blocks away. Letting go of his hand, she leaned against the wall and cursed. "What the hell was that?"

When he didn't answer, she glanced over at him. He stood in the center of the alley, his clothes hanging off him, his brows drawn down over his pretty eyes as if he was struggling to make sense of something.

"What?" she asked.

"You're immune."

"That shouldn't be a news flash. I've been immune since we met. Virgin, remember?"

"No. I mean, yes, I know, but when you touched me.... it all stopped. It wasn't the saint's blood dampening my curse all this time. It was *you*."

The way he was watching her, like she was the most precious jewel in the

world, not only made her uncomfortable, but it made her... want. Him. In ways she shouldn't want and couldn't have.

"Maybe we should get you back to Genesis House."

He shook his head. "We can't go back there. I won't put the kids in danger."

She would not allow those words to melt her. She was already too soft where he was concerned. "Where else can we—" She broke off. She'd been about to say "hide," but the word stuck in her throat.

God, she was turning into a coward. In the past, she'd never run from a fight. Why the hell was she starting now? Just because the fight had ripped apart her family? Well, boo hoo. She'd lived through that once before, and she could do it again. She let her anger at herself, at the unfairness of it all, swell inside her and straightened her shoulders.

"No, you know what, I'm done with this." She turned on her heel, but Lux caught her hand before she reached the mouth of the alleyway.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I said. I'm done. Done running, done hiding. If Dracian and the Society want to have it out, let's do it."

"It's suicide. You're outnumbered, outgunned, and you're mortal. Dracian will eat you alive and spit out your bones."

She just barely held back a wince at the mental image his words conjured. "Real nice. You missed your calling, loverboy. Should've gone into writing Hallmark cards."

Her snark did not have the desired effect. In fact, it bounced off him without making the slightest dent. He held her gaze, his pretty eyes more gray than blue and deadly serious. "You don't know what he is."

"What?"

"Dracian. He's a Were. He's fighting it—maybe he's been fighting it for years, suppressing his instincts to turn, but it's a full moon. Not only that, it's a blood moon. He's more dangerous than ever right now."

She scoffed at that. "No. That's crazy. Dracian's not—"

"I could smell it on him."

"You're lying."

"What do I have to gain by lying?"

"Because you want me to trust you and not my friends."

His jaw tightened. "Your *friends* tried to kill you. Multiple times."

"And you haven't?"

“Not on purpose.”

She held up both hands and backed away. “I’m going back to the ISRS. I need to talk to them. This has to be a misunderstanding.”

“If you go back with nothing more than a shitload of anger, they’ll kill you, and you know it.”

“Dracian won’t—”

“Be able to help himself. We need to regroup, plan, and—”

“We? No, this here—*us*—is a fluke of circumstance. There is no we.” She jabbed a finger at his nose even as some crazy part of her wanted to wrap her hand around the back of his stubborn neck and kiss the scowl off his lips. “I still plan on causing you as much pain as possible when this is done. I still plan on getting revenge for my family.”

She expected to see hurt in his eyes. Had planned on it, hoping it’d make him draw away. She needed distance from him.

Instead, he had to go and surprise her yet again. Those gorgeous lips of his kicked up into a half smile. “You do, huh?”

Was he mocking her? Of course he was. Even she didn’t believe what she was saying. “You’ll never be rid of me until one of us is dead.”

He laughed low in his throat. “If that’s supposed to be a threat, it’s a piss poor one, kitten. I want you with me always.” He stroked his fingers so lightly over the curve of her cheek that she barely felt the caress, and yet the tender heat of it seared her all the way to her center.

God, she wanted those fingers between her legs again. Wanted his breath caressing all of her intimate places. Wanted... him.

“Why?” she breathed and gripped his wrist. “I tried to kill you. I’m *going* to kill you. Why do you want me?”

Red flames sparked in his eyes. “Because you’re mine.”

She wasn’t sure why she did it, but as he cupped her chin in his hand, she surged up onto her toes and caught his lower lip between her teeth in a bite meant to punish. His growl echoed off the alley’s walls, and in a blur of movement, he had her ass in his hands, her legs wrapped around his waist, and her back pressed against the cool brick of one of the buildings. He ravaged her mouth, his fangs scraping her lip. His hips held her pinned in place even as he thrust against her in a savage rhythm. Heat flamed off him, searing her nerve endings and making her sweat, and still, she couldn’t get close enough. Each thrust pressed her over-sensitive breasts against his chest. She at once hated the fabric keeping them from skin-to-skin contact and

adored the chafe of it over her budded nipples, the rasp between her legs.

His thrusts slowed then stopped altogether, leaving them both panting. She dug her heels into his ass, urging him to keep going.

“Lux...”

“Gods,” he whispered and gave a little laugh. He pressed his forehead to the bricks behind her shoulder and dropped his mouth to the heated skin of her neck. “Look at what you do to me. Dry-humping in an alley like a teenager, so close to coming my balls feel like they’re going to explode.” His hips swiveled again as if he couldn’t help himself, and he groaned. “I want inside you.”

She wanted it, too. She wanted to know what penetration felt like, if it was as good as all the poems and songs and books made it sound. And she wanted her first time to be with this man—demon—whatever he was—and damn the rest of the world. She wanted him deep inside where no other man had stroked her.

Just once.

What would it hurt?

Afterward, they could still go their separate ways. She could get her revenge, and he could go back to trolling the clubs with his brothers...

No.

Hell no.

She’d cut off the hand of anyone that touched him.

The fierceness of that thought sobered her. She pushed against his shoulders until he backed up and let her feet touch the ground again. “I need to go.”

He blinked. “Where?”

“The Society.” She nodded, her mind made up. “Go home to your brothers.”

“Kat.” He caught her hand. She tried to shake him off, but he held on tight. “Look at me.”

Despite her thundering heart, she lifted her gaze to his. “Go home. You’re safer there.”

“No. You don’t have to face this alone.”

“It’s my fight.” His grip loosened enough that she was able to shake him off. But she made it only to the mouth of the alleyway before he called out.

“What happens if you die?”

She swallowed hard. Death hadn’t been a consideration for so long, but

now it was a distinct possibility. She could die now. The thought both terrified her... and left her feeling oddly lighthearted, free of some kind of an internal weight she hadn't even been aware of.

"Then I die."

"And I'll go on another blood binge. With you gone, even my brothers won't be able to stop me. They'll have to lock me up."

Shit. She stopped walking and closed her eyes. She'd made peace with the possibility of her death, but she couldn't take others out with her. If he binged because he couldn't get a fix of her blood, those deaths would be one hundred percent on her. And if his brothers locked him up, he'd go mad.

Strange how only a few days ago, she'd wanted nothing more than to see him in chains. Now, knowing him, knowing what he'd endured for centuries, the idea made her sick to her stomach.

"Please," he said softly behind her. "Let's take some time to go over our options. My brother Rev has a place here in the city. We can go there. We'll figure out what the ISRS really wants and what they're trying to accomplish. When we do, I'll help you stop them."

A reasonable enough plan. Probably even a good plan, one that would ensure she'd come out the other side unscathed. But she hated the idea of more hiding, more inaction. She wanted answers. And, if she was perfectly honest with herself, suicide didn't sound like a bad end to her long life. Did she want to come out of the other side of this unscathed? Because if she did, everything she thought she knew about the world would change. What would she do without the Society's never-ending mission? Without a purpose, she'd lose her mind again.

Kat bit her lower lip, torn between the mission she'd lived two-hundred years for and the strange, intense feelings for a man she'd vowed to kill.

"Please," he said again.

And after another long moment, she shook her head and kept walking. "I'm sorry. I'm ending this now."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Lux swore and grabbed the phone he'd lifted off a human. One good thing that came from his curse kicking in—everyone always dropped their phones. The thing hadn't even been locked and the wallpaper featured a picture of the man sitting on a yacht somewhere warm, groping two women in bikinis that covered nothing.

Douchebag.

Maybe after his brush with Lust today, he'd learn to treat women as more than sex objects.

Lux accessed the phone keyboard and dialed Leviathan, hoping his brother answered despite the unfamiliar number.

“Hello?” Levi's voice was polite but cautious.

He didn't waste time with pleasantries. “I need help.”

“Lux?” Now his brother's voice was filled with shock and relief and anger. “Where the hell have you been?”

“It's...” He stared at the mouth of the alleyway where Kat had disappeared into the morning rush hour traffic. “It's a long fucking story.”

And he didn't even know where to start. The weirdness of whatever was happening within The Immortal and Supernatural Regulation Society? Or did he start with the news that Lilith was no longer spreading her brand of chaos in Hell? Or the how saint's blood cocktail had weakened his curse? Or how Dracian, an ISRS captain, was one full moon away from going feral? Or what about the irresistible growing bond with Kat?

Faex.

Kat.

She was so hell-bent on revenge she couldn't see the danger wasn't from

him and his brothers. She was on a path of self-destruction, and he shouldn't care. But he did. The pull between them was compelling and overwhelming, and he knew she felt it too, which was exactly why she ran.

And now he had to help her.

"Where are you?" Levi asked.

"Downtown."

"Can you get to Rev's place?"

He called up a mental map of the city. Revelin's apartment on the waterfront was within walking distance from his current location, but there were too many people out and about to risk it. "No. Too many humans."

After several beats of silence, Leviathan exhaled hard. "All right. Are you safe?"

"For now. I'm in an alley."

"Share your location with me and sit tight. We'll be there as soon as we can."

It would be at least an hour before they made it to the city. Devak couldn't shadow during the day, and Revelin's helicopter would only get them as far as the landing pad on the roof of his apartment building. From there, they'd have to contend with morning traffic. By the time his brothers reached him, Kat could be dead.

He couldn't wait.

Lux started toward the mouth of the alley. "I'll meet you at Rev's."

"You said there were too many—"

"I know what I fucking said, but I don't have a fucking choice because I have to go save a stubborn redhead from getting her-fucking-self killed, so don't fucking argue with me because I've had a really fucking awful week, and I'm about to walk out into a city full of humans and make it even fucking worse."

Levi was silent for several long beats. No doubt startled because Lux was usually the last one of the seven of them to lose his temper. "Wow," he said finally. "Six fuckings in one breath. That might break Rev's record."

Lux exhaled a hard little laugh as the knots of tension in his shoulders loosened. He'd always enjoyed Leviathan's deadpan humor. "I doubt that. Rev's elevated swearing to an art form."

"Uh-huh. So who's the stubborn redhead?"

"Part of that long story."

Another beat of silence. "Fine. I'll see you at Rev's. Don't get yourself

captured.”

“Already been there, done that, brother. What are the chances of it happening twice in one week?”

Leviathan cursed as he hung up. He looked at the mouth of the alley and gave himself a second to breathe through the surge of panic.

Then he walked out onto the street.

W *hat am I doing?*

Kat made it only a handful of steps beyond the alley before she stopped walking and cursed at herself under her breath.

Was she really so terrified of Lux that she’d rather walk into the lion’s den than go with him?

Yes, because she was comfortable with that lion’s den. She understood its secrets and politics and inner workings. ISRS was the devil she knew, whereas Lux and the weird bond solidifying between them was a frightening mystery. She just couldn’t wrap her mind around the fact that her friends were now her enemy, and the demon—cursed man?—she’d thought was her enemy for two centuries was seemingly the only person she could trust.

She needed to slow down and think. She needed a plan. Despite her protestations, she was fully aware the ISRS had tried to kill her multiple times, and the pull of the stitches in her side was a stark reminder that she was now mortal. Walking into Society headquarters to face Asa with nothing but a bad mood was suicide.

And she couldn’t abandon Lux in the middle of the city like this.

She turned around just as he emerged from the alley. All around him, people stopped what they were doing and surged toward him. He ignored them, flinging them away even as they tried to climb his body like a tree. His gaze was locked on her, his eyes flaming red as he stalked toward her.

Demon or not, he was magnificent.

And he’d come after her.

She knew what that cost him. Knew the internal battle with fear he was waging as he fought through the growing crowd. He’d faced his fears to save her from doing something incredibly stupid. Maybe it was time to stop letting her fear and rage dictate her decisions and listen to her heart for once.

She held out a hand. The moment their fingers laced together, his curse once again broke, releasing the humans from its hold. At the same time, she

felt the bond between them strengthen, like an invisible chain drawing them closer together.

Lux glanced back at the trail of confused, embarrassed people, then tightened his grip on her hand and met her gaze again. "I'm not letting you go, kitten."

He was talking about more than a trip to the ISRS headquarters, and they both knew it. Fear told her to run. The simmering rage she was never without told her to fight. Her heart told her to stay.

She stayed.

"Take me home, Lux."

He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and his expression was all tender concern. "Your apartment—"

"Not there. That was never my home." Her home had disappeared two centuries ago when her family was killed. "*Your* home. It's the safest place, and you're right. Your brothers might be able to help."

"They're on their way to pick me up from Rev's apartment. If we can get there." He eyed the people flowing around them on the sidewalk. They showed no inordinate interest in him, and his suspicion shifted to amazement. "I think we can walk as long as you don't let go of me."

"Lead the way." She squeezed his hand, and his gaze turned back to her. He searched her eyes, looking for... she didn't know, but he seemed satisfied by whatever he saw. His shoulders relaxed, and he pulled her across the street at the next lull in traffic.

"Tell me about your brothers," she said when they made it to the sidewalk again and started down a steep hill toward the waterfront. If she was going to walk into their lair willingly, she wanted all the information about the Deadly Seven she could get.

He hesitated. "I already told you about Tristin."

"Sloth."

"Yeah, uh..." He rubbed his free hand around the back of his neck. "We don't call each other by our curses unless we're trying to pick a fight."

"Noted. What else should I know about them?"

He was silent for a long time, as if he was trying to decide how much to tell her. She couldn't blame him. A few days ago, she'd been his enemy.

"Revelin has a talent for making money," he said finally. "His curse is the only one that actually works for him in the business world, and of all of us, he's the one who interacts with humans the most. That's why he keeps an

apartment in the city.”

“But he’s Pride, right? Not Greed?”

“Yes. Avi is Greed. He spends most of his time with his wolfpack since they’re not affected by him like humans.”

“He’s a Were?”

“No, a born wolf shifter.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a born shifter.” They tended to relate more with their animals and usually lived in communes in the forest, far away from humans. Werereatures happened when born shapeshifters went rogue and attacked a human. If the human survived the bite, they become a Were at the next full moon. First Moon Weres were a pain in the ass, and she’d dealt with thousands of them over the years. “What’s he like?”

Lux chuckled. “Imagine a giant Golden Retriever. That’s Avi. He’ll definitely hug you. He’s touchy-feely like that—it’s the pack instinct; he can’t help it—but don’t let him fool you. He’ll rip out your throat if he thinks you’re a threat to his brothers or his pack.”

“Giant Golden Retriever with big teeth. Got it. What’s Revelin’s superpower?”

He smirked at her. “Your Society scholars didn’t tell you?”

“I, uh, was mostly focused on you.”

His hand tightened around hers. “Good. I like that. You stay focused on me. Rev’s superpower, as you called it, is fire.”

She stared at him. Her jaw might have fallen open. “I thought phoenixes were extinct.”

“The full-blooded ones are. He’s one of the only half-bloods remaining, and he’s touchy about it. Don’t piss him off, or he’ll throw a fireball at you. I can’t count the number of times he’s burned down our house.”

“Good to know.” If the mythology was to be believed, Phoenix fire was one of the most destructive elements on the planet, and she wasn’t interested in a first-person experience. “What about Glut—” She stopped herself and corrected, “Xanthus? Should I worry about sending him to Zayra? His reputation around the ISRS is, uh…” How could she put it diplomatically? “Colorful.”

Lux exhaled a half-laugh. “He’ll love to hear that.”

“So he lives up to his reputation?”

“Let’s just say some of my brothers fight their curses less than others. But if you’re worried about your friend, don’t be. Xan will be nothing but a

gentleman.”

“Where was he when you were all locked away?”

“Confined to a castle in what became France. The excesses of the 17th and 18th centuries before the French Revolution? That was Gluttony living it up after he was freed—and it was Gluttony, not Xan. His curse took over.”

“Like you with your blood binge?”

“We were imprisoned for centuries, Kitten. When we were finally set free, none of us were in control of ourselves. We *were* the Deadly Seven then. We were the demons everyone thinks we are.”

Days ago, she was so blinded by vengeance that she wouldn’t have noticed the deep regret in those words. Now it was all she could hear. “But you’re not now.”

“No. At least, we try not to be.”

“Then that’s all that matters.”

He glanced over at her. “Even if I actually was the one to kill your family?”

She missed a step and would’ve fallen if not for his strong arms winding around her waist, catching her. He pulled her in close so that every part of her pressed against him from shoulder to thigh. She looked up into his eyes. She always thought she’d instinctively know when she met her family’s killer—she’d see it in his eyes, but all she saw in Lux’s was worry.

“It wasn’t you.”

He shook his head slightly. “You can’t know that. I don’t even know.”

No, she couldn’t know for sure, but she also knew that this man—the one holding her so tenderly now—was not a killer. Yes, he’d killed. Khalil was in the morgue, drained of blood, because of him. But what was done to her family was savagery beyond words, and even while in the deepest madness of bloodlust, she didn’t think he was capable of that kind of brutality.

And even if he was, did it matter?

Lux was no longer the blood-thirsty beast that emerged from under Paris, just as she wasn’t the same girl driven mad by grief and a burning need for vengeance. Even if her family had lived long, healthy lives, they’d still have been dead for over a hundred years by now. Two hundred years was a long time to hold on to so much hate, and she was tired.

She cupped his stubbled cheeks in her palms and waited until his gaze met hers. “I don’t care anymore.”

He backed up out of her reach but realized his mistake when several

heads swung in his direction like predators scenting fresh meat. He grabbed her hand again and held on too tight as they skirted around the group of humans. “You say that now, but if we discovered it was me, could you forgive me?”

She opened her mouth but suddenly couldn’t find her voice. Could she forgive him? She wanted to say yes. She wanted to believe she wouldn’t be blinded by hate again. She opened her mouth to tell him that, but a familiar shape stepped out from an alley, blocking their path.

Dracian.

But there was something wrong with him. His dark skin had gone gray, and he was staggering toward them like a drunk. She’d known the man all her immortal life and had *never* seen him drunk.

Lux pushed her behind him, but she surged forward as Dracian took another staggering step and collapsed. He was bleeding, his black shirt damp with it. She pressed her hands to the wound, and blood seeped between her fingers. “What happened?”

He tried to speak. No sound came out.

When Lux touched her shoulder, she looked up. “Please, we have to help him.”

“He tried to kill you, Kitten.”

She shook her head. “He’s just a soldier following bad orders, but he was my friend once.”

“It could be a trap.” He didn’t believe it, though. She could see the doubt all over his face.

Dracian was still trying to speak. She leaned over him, putting her ear close to his mouth. It took him a few tries, but he finally wheezed out, “Asa.”

“Did Asa do this?”

“Don’t... trust... demon.”

Her blood froze in her veins. Was he talking about Asa? Or Lux? But Lux wasn’t a demon. She knew that for certain.

Dracian groped for her hand and gave it a light squeeze. “Asa is not... who you think.” His gaze went to Lux. “Protect her. It is a trap. They’re... following... me.”

“Fuck,” Lux said softly. “We gotta go.”

She pressed harder on the wound, but the blood just kept coming. “We can’t leave him.”

“You heard him. The ISRS could already be—”

“Lux, he knows what’s going on. We *need* him.”

“Fuck,” he said again. The word brimmed with frustration because he knew she was right. He snapped his fingers in front of Dracian’s face to get the man’s faltering attention. “How did you get here? Do you have a vehicle?”

Dracian’s eyes rolled toward the alley he’d emerged from, and then his lids closed as he faded into unconsciousness.

Lux took a few quick steps toward the alleyway, then returned. “There’s a van. We’ll have to move fast. You go first and open the back doors, then start the engine. I’ll carry him.”

“Are we taking him to Revelin’s apartment?”

“No, I can’t expose his place like that. I’ll think of something.” He slid his arms under Dracian and lifted the big man like he weighed nothing. “Now go!”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

As soon as Lux lifted Dracian into his arms, ISRS agents seemed to pour from every surrounding building. Kat didn't recognize any of them, which made things easier. She really didn't want to hurt any more friends.

But there was something slightly off about these agents. Their faces didn't quite match their bodies, and their skin looked lifeless as if they were wearing too-realistic masks.

Uncanny valley.

A chill scrapped down her spine.

These... *things* weren't human. They weren't immortal. They weren't even demons. They were something else entirely that she did not want to fight without a weapon.

She flung open the van's rear door, then jumped in the bloodstained driver's seat. Dracian had left the key dangling from the ignition. She cranked it and prayed the engine started.

It purred to life.

Lux hoisted Dracian into the back and slammed the doors shut. "Drive."

"Where?"

"Anywhere!"

She pressed the gas pedal to the floor and didn't ease up when several creatures jumped in front of her. With each impact, their masks seemed to slip away like melting wax. Underneath was still the same semi-human face, but also... not.

They didn't bleed.

She drove straight into another creature, and it crawled up the hood. It

watched them with its unnerving, not-quite-right eyes, then smiled and let go. The van's wheels thumped over it. In her side mirror, she saw it stand up in the middle of the alley and stare after them, still smiling.

"Holy fuck," Lux said and braced himself between the seats. "What *are* those?"

Okay, he couldn't have said anything more frightening at that moment if he'd tried. She tightened her trembling hands around the wheel. "You don't know?"

"I've never seen anything like them in my life."

And he had lived a *very* long life. "That's not reassuring." She pulled the van out into traffic and told herself to breathe. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know. Where do Immortals usually go when they're badly wounded?"

"The Society!"

"Of course."

A low, dog-like growl filled the back of the van.

She risked a glance over her shoulder, but couldn't see anything. "Is that *Dracian*?"

"I told you he's a Were." Lux pulled himself up into the passenger seat and shut the metal door between the front and cargo area. "That's not going to hold him if he turns, and he *will* turn because that's how they heal. He's probably been fighting the urge for so long, it'll be like his First Moon all over again. We need to get him out of the city."

"What about your brother Avi? Can he help?"

"Maybe, but I'd rather not take him home. I don't know if we can trust him, and I won't risk my brothers like that."

Another growl, louder this time, sent a fresh round of chills down her spine. "I don't think we have a choice, Lux. I'm mortal. If he turns while we're still in this van, he'll rip me to shreds. How far is your house?"

He leaned back in his seat and rubbed a hand over his stubbled jaw, then said something in a language she'd never heard before. She didn't have to understand it to know he was cursing.

"Lux!"

"Turn left up here and take the ramp before the bridge. There's a shipyard. You're looking for the building with the Solomon Brothers logo on the side."

"You guys live in a shipyard?" she asked doubtfully, but made the

lefthand turn.

“No.” Lux exhaled hard. “An island.”

Of course they lived on one of the many islands in Puget Sound. An island was isolated, and they had a shipping company at their disposal, allowing them to come and go without needing a ferry. It made so much sense she wondered why the ISRS never thought of it. They’d looked for the Deadly Seven’s lair for centuries. They’d come once when the brothers lived in Chicago, but then the Seven had gone west and disappeared. Society agents finally found them again in Seattle about seventy years ago.

Lux told her to drive right out onto a small cargo vessel docked next to the building. It looked like a smaller version of the state-run ferries that crisscrossed the sound multiple times a day.

“Stop here, but don’t park.” He opened the door and jumped out. “Turn the van around. We’re going to push it into the sound once we get going in case it’s being tracked.”

She watched in the side mirror as Lux flung open the back doors, braced for a fight. Thankfully, there was none. Dracian was still unconscious. Lux carried him around the front of the van and deeper into the ship. She did a three-point turn, pointing the van toward the cargo ramp, then shut off the engine and climbed out to wait for Lux.

“Where did you take Dracian?” she asked when he reappeared.

“Avi can get bitey when he’s been injured—actually, all of my brothers can—so we learned to build reinforced rooms everywhere.” He started up a flight of metal stairs along the back wall. “It will hold Dracian if he wakes up.”

She hesitated a beat, then followed and found him in the wheelhouse. Beyond the windows stretched the dark waters of the sound. “Do you know how to drive this thing?”

“It mostly steers itself,” he said distractedly as he checked the equipment.

A sound of distress must have slipped past her lips because he glanced over at her. “It’s okay, kitten. I know how to handle it. You’re perfectly safe.” He grinned, and, God, he was beautiful when he did that. “Not a fan of water?”

“Not a fan of boats. I still have nightmares about my Atlantic crossing.” During those six hellish days, she discovered that her new immortality didn’t make her immune to seasickness. She hadn’t set foot on a ship since.

The boat rumbled to life under her feet, and she gripped the captain’s

chair with both hands.

Lux peeled her fingers off the leather and held her hand in a comfortingly tight grip. “You’re okay.”

“Yeah. I’m okay.” She just had to remember to breathe. And focus on something else other than the movement. She studied his profile. Even disheveled with a smear of blood in the stubble on his cheek, he was perfect, like a living sculpture. No man should be so pretty.

He smirked but didn’t take his eyes off the windows, and steered the ship into open water. “What?”

She flushed and hoped he hadn’t noticed. “I, uh, was just thinking we probably crossed around the same time. But, given your curse, I suppose you didn’t travel with the general public.”

He shrugged. “Maybe? I don’t remember it. I spent the entire crossing locked in a room like Dracian. I was past the blood binge but still fucked up”—he tapped his temple—“here. I was so institutionalized I couldn’t function outside a cell.”

She knew how terrifying that was. She’d experienced it herself when Asa freed her from the mental institution—which, now that she thought of it, probably contributed to her sickness during that ocean crossing. And she’d only been trapped for a year, not thousands. “What was your prison like?”

He sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. “Imagine hell, but take away the fire and brimstone. I had guards—immortals and humans—and they tortured me in ways I hope you’ll never even dream about in your worst nightmares.”

She didn’t want to know the answer to her next question but couldn’t stop from asking it. “Rape?”

He stayed silent for a long time. “More often than not, yeah. With my curse, they couldn’t control themselves around me. Then they’d beat me for it, claiming I seduced them when the entire time I screamed for them to stop —” His voice cracked, and cleared his throat. “It was a vicious cycle, day in and day out—they raped me, beat me, starved me of food and blood until I was all but dead. It went on for centuries, so many I lost count. Then one day, they just... vanished. I found out later that Leviathan’s mother managed to release him, and he was working on releasing the rest of us. I’m guessing my guards ran away because they feared what would happen when my brothers found me. But for the longest time after my guards disappeared, I lay in those dark caverns, terrified to move, sure they’d come back as soon as I tried to

leave.”

“So you didn’t.”

“Nope. Shock a rat enough times, and he’ll learn to ignore the cheese no matter how hungry he gets. When Leviathan finally found me, I was a wild animal. There was no humanity left in me. It took a long time to find it again.” He let go of her hand to swipe impatiently at his eyes. “We should lose the van before we go any farther.”

Her heart ached for him as they silently worked together to push the van into the water. All the horrors she’d lived through in her long life he’d experienced tenfold. And yet, he was somehow a better person than most humans she knew. Certainly, a better person than she was because he hadn’t spent the last two centuries nursing hatred and anger against those that had abused him.

Lux didn’t speak for the rest of the trip. She should say something after asking him to relive his nightmares, but what was there to say? She wanted to hug him, but she wasn’t sure how wise that was, so she gave him the wheelhouse and checked on Dracian. No noise came from the room, even after she tapped on the door.

Shit, was he still immortal? As a werewolf, he should be, but what if Asa had the power to revoke it? Could he bleed out?

She knocked harder. She wasn’t dumb enough to go in and check, but she was worried. “Dracian?”

Something big slammed into the door, rattling it in its sturdy metal frame. The growl inside was definitely not human.

She pressed her hand to the metal. None of this would’ve happened if she hadn’t gone after Lux at Perversion. If she hadn’t listened to Asa whispering poisonous things in her ear for centuries.

She leaned her forehead against the door and squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m so sorry, Dracian. I’ll get you help. Just hang on.”

The door shook again, and a dent appeared in the metal beside her head. She stumbled back a step. The animal on the other side of the door wasn’t her friend right now.

God, did she even have any friends left at this point?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

A half hour later, as they approached a small hill of an island, Lux's shoulders tightened, but he still didn't speak. He steered the boat toward a cliff and she opened her mouth to ask, "What the hell?" when the rock wall slid open to reveal a dock with five open slips and two other boats docked. A boathouse cleverly hidden from the outside world using the island's natural geography.

She followed him out to the deck and watched him expertly tie the boat into one of the empty slips.

He straightened, wiping his hands on his jeans. "I want you to stay here until I talk to them."

Now that the engine was silent, the whole boat shook under her feet every time Dracian rammied the door. She glanced toward the sound, then shook her head. "I'm not staying here with him. He's already put a dent in the door. If it opens..."

"*Faex.*" Lux once again cursed in that ancient language she didn't know, but she was starting to recognize his go-to word was probably the equivalent of "fuck." At least, he seemed to use the two interchangeably.

"I'd feel safer with you." It was the truth. She'd once seen a feral Were shred a body until there was nothing but blobs of flesh left. They were at the top of the short list of things that frightened her—but, now, they'd dropped a spot since she had to add those Uncanny Valley creatures to that list.

"Fine," Lux said finally. He gripped her shoulders and waited until she met his gaze. "You can come up to the house with me, but you'll wait in the garden while I talk to them, understood?"

She nodded, but her agreement didn't seem to relax him. He held her

hand too tightly as they rode a large freight elevator up into a building that appeared to be a garage, judging by all the different cars parked there. She wondered which one was his, then decided none of them because he would never travel into human territory without his brothers as backup. From what little Lux had told her of his brothers, she guessed the vehicles belonged to Revelin since he interacted with humans the most.

When they emerged from the garage, there was so much to take in she didn't know where to look first. The house simultaneously loomed over the landscape and seemed to melt into it. No, not *house*. That was too simple a word for the work of art set among towering pines with the dark waters of the Puget Sound shimmering behind it. Given the guys who lived within its walls, she'd pictured something more along the lines of Dracula's castle. Certainly not anything this sleek and modern. As was typical of houses in the Pacific Northwest, the mansion was a mix of wood, concrete, glass, and stone. But on closer inspection, it wasn't just a singular mansion, but multiple buildings connected by a center courtyard. The sloped rooflines of each building followed the rise and fall of the landscape and were camouflaged from the air by a carpet of local fauna. Sweeping windows, gemstone-bright in the evening sun, opened to multiple levels of balconies.

As a tech hub, Seattle had some mega-rich people, but... wow. This was beyond mega-rich and into the astronomically rich territory. How much money did these guys have? Then again, even the poorest person would have wealth if they had a few thousand years to accumulate it. In just two hundred years, she'd built herself a sizable nest egg from savvy investments. She wasn't supposed to have her own money or property. It was against ISRS law—agents were meant to give everything they had to the cause—but now she was thankful she hadn't listened. She'd need that money if they couldn't stop Asa and whatever he had planned.

Lux led her into the courtyard and pulled her over to a stone bench. "Okay, stay here. I'll be right back."

She sat down to appease him, but he still looked worried. Crossing her arms, she sat back and lifted an eyebrow.

He glanced around, drew a sharp breath, and backed away, holding up both hands like he was telling a rambunctious puppy to stay. She resented that. Despite what he might think, she wasn't suicidal and fully planned to let him deal with his brothers.

"I'll be right back," he said again before turning and striding toward the

back of the garden.

She waited until he was out of sight, then popped to her feet. When he returned, she doubted she'd be allowed to wander the property without an escort, so she'd take this opportunity to scope out their security measures. After all, no ISRS agent had ever been able to find the Deadly Seven's home, not to mention have a chance to explore the grounds. Maybe when this was all over, and life got back to normal, she'd be able to use this information to get back into the Society's good graces and—

No.

The thought was so loud, echoing around in her skull like a shout, that she nearly missed a step on the stairs. She shook her head. She'd defaulted to agent mode there for a minute. It would be a hard habit to break after all this time, but she would never betray Lux by exposing his home. And, really, did she even want her life to go back to normal? The long nights of chasing monsters, the lonely days, the hatred eating away at her insides as she plotted revenge...

No, she didn't want that anymore. She hated her old normal and was ready for something new. She didn't know what else she could do—humans didn't have a lot of job opportunities for a two-hundred-year-old demon hunter—but going back to the ISRS was out of the question. Hello, they'd tried to kill her multiple times. And Asa was somehow behind it all.

God, she really didn't want to think about it anymore. It hurt her stomach, the knife of betrayal cutting too deeply.

So she focused on the beautiful courtyard instead. For a house full of bachelors, the garden was better kept than she'd have expected. Not perfect—weeds and wildflowers peek up between bushes and along the edge of the bubbling stream that wound its way throughout, but that defiant bit of wildlife added to the garden's appeal rather than detracted. Otherwise, the topiaries were well groomed, the path clear of debris, and the flowers healthy and vivid.

Metal statues of men, women, and animals lined the cobblestone path, so lifelike that she couldn't shake the feeling of eyes following her every move. They reminded her of the Uncannies, and a chill raised goosebumps on her skin. She stopped in front of one statue, a prone woman lying on a bench under a pergola. The artist took special care with this one. Half dressed in an ancient Greek or Roman robe, the statue had been cast in a pure, brilliant bronze, and the expression contorting her dainty features was either ecstasy

or torture. Maybe a little of both as her body arched to meet the invisible hand of a lover.

Yes, ecstasy and exquisite torture. She'd felt all of that when Lux's hand had teased her to the brink, when his mouth on her breasts and then on her sex had shattered her world...

Desire swamped her in such a crushing wave that her knees threatened to give out. She staggered back and gripped the nearest thing to steady herself—an ornate iron gate. Bending double, she breathed through it like she would any other blow. This was a new sensation—holy bloody hell, was this demanding need what all women felt when turned on?—but nothing she couldn't handle. Slowly, as she gulped in air, the sensation faded, but the heat still lingered in her cheeks. When she straightened, wetness pooled between her thighs.

That was... strange. And exhilarating.

God, she wanted his hands on her body again with a physical ache.

She drew another deep breath, and as she loosened her hands from their white-knuckled grip on the iron gate, it creaked open. She hadn't noticed the heavy wood door behind the gate before now. It was all but invisible, set back in an alcove of stone and covered in flowering vines.

Interesting. What would the Deadly Seven keep behind a secret garden door? Not that she was stupid enough to open it the rest of the way and find out. Okay, maybe she was that stupid because the urge to take a quick peek around the jamb was almost irresistible, but she wasn't about to be the cat that curiosity killed. No thanks.

She started to pull the door closed—and stopped, her blood running cold at the sound of frantic movement on the other side. They wouldn't keep prisoners here, would they? Given his history, she didn't think Lux would, but his other brothers? No clue. For all she knew, the rest of the Seven practiced torture techniques on innocent humans for fun.

“Hello?”

“Stay back.” The male voice was full of gravel like he wasn't used to speaking.

Oh, shit. They did keep someone locked away in here. She shoved the door open, and a square of red-gold evening light illuminated the figure standing on a stone stairway below. “It's okay. I'm going to help—”

“No!” The man threw an arm over his face, and blisters flared up on his exposed skin. He reeled backward, losing his balance on the stairs. Huge

leathery wings exploded from his back, and with a fierce hawk-like shriek, he shot from the confines of the stairwell. Confused and blinded, frantic like a wounded animal searching for an escape, his wings flapped wildly.

Kat dove for the safety of the pergola and barely missed a gutting by one of his razored talons as he wobbled in the air. For a heartbeat, she thought he would drop into a bed of hydrangeas, but then he righted himself and glared down at her with the pure black eyes of a demon.

And shadows crawled out around him, reaching for her like skeletal hands.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

Lux strode through the door that led from the courtyard into the living room and was annoyed to see nobody there playing pool or battling it out on the Xbox like they usually spent their evenings. He wanted to get this confrontation over with and get back to Kat as soon as possible, but now he had to go searching for his brothers. Their home was divided into seven individual suites all connected by bridges to a round common area in the center. The rotunda contained a shared living room, kitchen, and dining room—although each of their living spaces also had all of those things—plus a gym on the second floor and a basement that was Devak’s territory.

His brothers could be anywhere in the massive house.

He emerged into the rotunda’s foyer just as Leviathan and Xanthus came down the staircase at a dead run. Xanthus was pulling on his bomber jacket over a chest holster loaded with throwing knives. Leviathan, checking the magazine on his gun without missing a step. Moving that fast, packing all that heavy artillery, they certainly weren’t returning from a workout session in the gym. They’d been preparing for a fight in the “war room,” as Xanthus called it.

“Where’s the fire?”

At the sound of his voice, Leviathan did miss a step. Xanthus caught his shoulder to keep him from taking a header down half a flight of stairs. They both stared over the banister at Lux, who crossed his arms over his chest and tried not to take offense to their *holy shit!* expressions.

“Well?”

Leviathan recovered first. “You never showed up at Rev’s apartment, and he found the phone you were using crushed in an alleyway. We thought the

ISRS might have captured you and—doesn't matter. You're home now." Holstering the gun at his belt, he continued down the rest of the stairs. "What happened?"

Where to start? "I can't get into it all now."

"But you're okay?"

"Yeah." He realized his tone lacked conviction and added, "I'm fine. And before you ask more questions, I need to talk to you about—"

A hawk-like screech cut him short, and all three of their heads whipped toward the courtyard.

"What's Devak doing outside?" Xanthus said. "Masochistic bastard. The sun's not down yet."

Kat.

Faex, why had he left her unguarded?

With his heart threatening to pound a hole through his chest, Lux raced to the courtyard and down a flight of stone steps to the garden entrance of Devak's underground suite. Devak hovered in the air, wearing only a pair of navy blue sleep pants, his giant wings rustling the garden's flowers with every powerful downstroke. Blisters bubbled up on every exposed inch of his dark skin, and his eyes swirled black as lethal shadows spread around him. But even more dangerous than him was Tristin, who had appeared from the other side of the courtyard, his bare hands wrapped around a silver rake.

Devak listed sideways in the air, his wings too blistered to hold him aloft, and crashed into a topiary before skidding across the cobblestones. Tristin leaped forward like he wanted to help but caught himself before touching their downed brother and instead whirled toward Kat. He advanced on her, hand outstretched.

"Don't!" Lux wasn't even aware of moving until he shoved Tristin out of the way and grabbed Kat in a firm, shielding hug. Leviathan skidded to a halt behind Tristin while Xanthus grabbed a tarp from the garden shed to throw over Devak's shuddering frame.

Tristin sat up, cursing a blue streak. The cobblestone path now had two solid gold stones where he'd caught himself. "Fucking hell, Lux! Are you insane? I almost touched you."

Yes, he was. At least he felt half-insane as he searched Kat for wounds. "Did they hurt you?"

"I'm okay." She tried to wave him off. "Stop it. Lux, stop! I'm fine. See? Look at me." She held out her hands and did a quick spin, but she was lying.

She had a scrape on her palm and three claw marks on her shoulder.

Fucking Devak. He wanted to punch his brother for drawing her precious blood, but he didn't dare let her go with Tristin still bare-handed. Kat would not become another statue in Tristin's morbid garden. He folded her into his arms, locking her against his chest with his chin on the top of her head. She stiffened, then her arms wrapped around him, her palms moving in soothing strokes down his back.

"I'm okay," she whispered. "Really."

Gods, he wanted this woman. Wanted her in his bed, in his life. Wanted her safe and happy. He couldn't ignore the pull anymore.

"So this is the redhead," Leviathan said after a long beat of silence.

Lux lifted his face from her hair and barred his fangs. The commotion had drawn Revelin and Avi from their respective sections of the house, and he snarled at them when they stepped out into the courtyard. "She's *mine*."

His brothers exchanged a glance.

"Lux," someone said. Leviathan, probably, but he wasn't paying close enough attention to tell. "You've been through a lot, and I don't think now's the time—"

"Back off!"

"Hey." Kat's palm moved around from his back to rest over his heat. "Don't be mad at them. This is my fault." She extracted herself from his arms before he could stop her and stepped in front of him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your brother."

"Which one?" Tristin demanded, eyeing Lux like he'd lost his mind.

Obviously, they all thought she'd brainwashed him or something. He snarled at them, then wrapped his arms possessively around her and pulled her back against his chest.

"Both of them," she answered honestly. "You should know right up front that I'm the one who took Lux hostage at Perversion. I thought I was doing the world a service."

She tilted her head against his chest, and everything growly and possessive in him settled as her shoulders sagged with guilt. He tightened his arms in a reassuring hug. "You didn't hurt me, kitten."

"I stabbed you," she reminded.

"You did *what*?" Revelin said through a locked jaw.

"I thought he was dangerous."

Fire sparked at his fingertips. "He's the least dangerous of all of us."

“Put your fireball away, Pride,” she snapped. “I’m aware of that now. I was misled. I made a horrible mistake—” She glanced at Devak, lying still and quiet on the ground. Shadows seeped out from under the tarp but shrieked back when they touched the sunlight. “Two horrible mistakes counting just now. Will he be okay?”

“Yes,” Lux said before any of his brothers could reply. “Sunlight is painful for him, but it won’t kill him. He heals fast.”

“Good. That’s good. I really didn’t mean... I thought he was trapped and... I’m just so sorry.”

“I know.” He turned his attention back to his brothers. “Kat was an ISRS agent,” he told them, knowing their reaction to the news and figuring it was better they hear it from his lips than hers.

And... explosion. Right on cue.

Leviathan held up his hands and shouted over the noise. “Quiet! Hey, assholes! Shut the fuck up!” He pointed at Avi and Revelin. “Get Devak into the house. And, Tristin, for the love of all things living, go put gloves on before you accidentally zap somebody into scrap metal.”

The impromptu garden party broke up slowly and with a lot of grumbling. Revelin and Avi hoisted Devak to his feet and dragged him toward the shelter of the house. Tristin disappeared into his suite, leaving only Leviathan and Xanthus to stare at Lux in bewilderment.

“Guys—” he said, but broke off when he realized he didn’t know how to start.

Leviathan just shook his head and paced away a few steps, his hands on his hips. After several minutes, he released a long breath and came back. He motioned between Lux and Kat with a flick of the wrist. “What the hell happened between you two?”

Okay, that was as good a place as any to start. Lux summed up the events of the past few days. From his abduction by Kat and his addiction to her blood to the discovery of the Solomon Key and Lilith’s involvement. When he said their sister’s name, Xanthus’s eyes popped wide, and Leviathan’s complexion paled.

“She’s supposed to be in hell,” Xanthus said.

“I thought the same thing, but she’s out now and up to something. We haven’t figured it out, but whatever it is, it includes Kat. Lilith has somehow turned the Society and its leader Asa Smith against her. They’ve tried to kill her several times now.”

“And you’ve protected her,” Leviathan concluded.

He hugged her tighter. “As she has me.”

“The Solomon Key,” Xanthus said after a tense second. “You really saw it? I always thought it was a myth.”

“I saw it, held it. It’s the real deal.”

“Where is it?” Leviathan asked.

“With a witch friend of Kat’s.”

“But you couldn’t read it?”

“Nope, but Xan can.”

Kat finally spoke up. “We told Zayra to expect you. If you’ll do it.”

“Do we have another choice? We gotta know what’s in that book. Text me directions to her place.” As he walked away, he grumbled, “Just what I wanted to do tonight. Fan-fucking-tastic.”

Leviathan studied them for so long that Kat started to fidget in his arms, and his temper rose again. “You got something to say?”

“Yeah, I do,” Leviathan said and held out a hand. “Welcome, Kat. For as long as you need, our house is your house.”

She relaxed, the tension seeping out of her spine. “Thank you.”

He gave a short nod. “No problem.” Then to Lux: “We’ll deal with everything tomorrow. Go ahead and take her to your place. Get cleaned up, get some food, rest. You both look exhausted.”

“We are,” Kat said, “but we still need Avi’s help for my friend Dracian. He’s a werewolf who hasn’t shifted in a while, and he was just injured—”

Leviathan stared at her, then looked at Lux in disbelief. “You brought a *feral werewolf* here?”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

Kat waited impatiently on the dock as Lux and Avi disappeared into the boat. She thought Dracian would've calmed by now, but if anything, his growls had become more frenzied. It felt like forever before they returned.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Will he snap out of it?"

Avi opened his mouth but shut it without saying anything and jumped from the boat to the dock in one graceful, silent move. It was eerie to watch because, like all his brothers, he was a big man, yet didn't make a sound when he stepped onto the creaking wood of the dock. Lux had described him as a deadly Golden Retriever, eager to please but quick to defend his family. She realized now just how apt that description was.

Avi dragged a hand through his long silver hair. "Sorry, I was going to placate, but Lux might rip my throat out if I lie to you."

"Good call," Lux said and followed him to the dock. He was a graceful man, quick on his feet, but next to Avi's predator-silent movements, he sounded like a clumsy baby elephant when he landed. "She's tough. She can handle bad news."

She braced herself and returned her attention to Avi. "So it's bad?"

"Well, it's not good," he said. "But it's hard to say whether your friend's gone completely feral or has some humanity left in him. It's worrisome that the blood moon is over, and he's still this out of control. Do you know how long he's been fighting his instincts?"

She shook her head. "I didn't even know he was a werewolf."

He sighed and glanced back toward the boat as it rocked. Dracian must have hit the door again. "Yeah, that's what I was afraid you'd say."

“Can you help him?”

He didn't answer right away and his pale blue gaze locked over her head on Lux. She got the feeling they were communicating silently.

Were the Seven telepathic? Lux had never mentioned it, and he would've used the ability to contact his brothers when they were still enemies, and she held him captive. So, no, probably not telepathy. Was their bond just so deep that they could speak without words?

She'd never had a bond like that. In truth, she was kind of jealous.

Or maybe that envious feeling was because Leviathan emerged from the elevator and joined them. She'd felt a low-level tug of all their curses since arriving, but it wasn't bad as long as she stayed near Lux. He seemed to be a shield against his brothers like she was for him against humans.

There was so much she didn't know about these men.

It should worry her, but she trusted Lux. And he trusted his brothers, so she had to trust them by default.

She reached out and entwined her fingers though Lux's. “What is it he doesn't want to tell me?”

He broke the staring contest first and gazed down at her with a sad smile. “You should prepare for the worst, kitten,” he said gently.

“And what's the worst?”

Avi winced and backed up a step. He crossed his arms protectively over his chest and hunched his shoulders. The gesture was the human equivalent of a tucked tail.

Leviathan's lips thinned into a grim line. “What do you do when a pet gets terminally ill?”

Avi's lip curled in disgust. “The rainbow fucking bridge. Such a cutesy name for killing something.”

Kat opened her mouth but found she had no voice. She thought of all the nights she and Dracian had drunk together at the Rising Sun. All the laughs they'd shared. Tears blurred her vision and she blinked hard. “There are no other options?”

“Fuck it,” Avi said suddenly. “I'll talk to my pack. I can't promise anything, but we might be able to take him in and rehabilitate him.”

Hope flared bright and hot in her chest and the tears she'd been fighting spilled over. “Is that possible?”

“Like I said, can't promise anything, but I'll do my best. I'm Alpha, so the pack probably won't overrule me about taking him in. The rest... that will

be up to him.”

“Thank you, Avi.”

“Anything for you, Kitty.” He grinned, and there was the happy Golden Retriever again. Okay, she adored him. She could even forgive him for using the childhood nickname she’d always hated.

Wasn’t it funny how she never minded when Lux called her “kitten?”

“That’s all well and good,” Leviathan said, tipping his head toward the rocking boat, “but what are we doing with him until then? The boat’s not going to hold him.”

“The dungeon will,” Avi said. “It’s held me plenty of times, and I doubt he’s stronger.”

Kat glanced between the brothers. “Wait, you have a dungeon?”

They did, indeed, have a dungeon—a line of seven cement cells. Getting Dracian into the cell was a nearly impossible feat and they wouldn’t have been able to do it without Avi shifting to nip at Dracian’s heels the entire way.

Avi was a gorgeous silver wolf with the same arctic blue eyes he had in human form. He was much bigger than Dracian’s ink-black wolf, which also helped. At one point, Avi grabbed his tail, and he swung around, and for a split second, she saw Dracian in the wolf. She could almost hear his outraged exclamation, “So that’s how you gonna do me?”

He was still in there. This was going to work.

The two men and white wolf herded him into a cell lined with silver bars, undoubtedly there to help contain Avi when he wolfed out. Silver and werewolves didn’t mix. She imaged the other cells had similar built-in precautions for each of the other brothers and weren’t surprised when one cell glowed faintly green as Leviathan passed it and another throbbed like a heartbeat when Lux passed.

Did Lux have a weakness like silver? Or had they just enchanted his cell in some way?

“Have you ever had to stay down here?” she whispered to Lux.

“We all have. Sometimes our curses...” He trailed off and seemed to search for the right word.

Avi shifted back to human form. “Drive us crazy?”

Lux stepped between them. “*Faex*, Avi. We have company.”

He glanced down at his naked body and shrugged. “Your humanity is showing, brother.” But he took the clothes Leviathan held out for him and pulled them on. “Why are humans so weird about nudity? You were born in the Iron Age, big brother. Weren’t you all nude back then?”

“We weren’t cavemen,” Lux said with an exasperated eye roll. “And you were born in the Iron Age, too, you dumb mutt. You’re only thirteen years younger than me.”

“Yeah, but I was an adorable wolf pup back then.”

“That peed all over the house,” Leviathan muttered.

“How do you know, Envy? You weren’t even born yet.”

“I’ve heard the stories. Like when Xan decided you were his personal pony and rode you around the house.”

“Or that time you peed on Tristin’s bed,” Lux added. “I had to convince him not to neuter our baby brother by turning your not-yet-dropped balls to bronze.”

Avi went as pale as his hair and cupped a protective hand over his crotch. “Tristin is not a dog person,” he told Kat.

“He’s barely a people person,” Leviathan said.

Kat tried to hold her laugh in but failed. It burst out of her and echoed around the dungeon like a whip crack. The three brothers looked at her with varying degrees of “*what the hell?*” written on their faces. Even Dracian stopped pacing his cell and cocked his head at her. That only made her laugh harder until she couldn’t breathe and her sides hurt. God, she couldn’t stop. Their brotherly banter was funny but didn’t warrant this level of hysteria.

And then the laughter dissolved into sobs.

Lux scooped her into his arms and she buried her face in his shoulder as he carried her upstairs. She never let herself cry and she probably looked crazy to his brothers. Still, she couldn’t stop.

Lux set her down on a cloud-soft bed and stretched out beside her, brushing away her tears. He held her through the sobbing fit and only got up after it started to calm to bring her a glass of water. His concern melted her heart.

She sat up and accepted the glass. “Thank you.” Her voice was hoarse, and her eyes felt gritty. She took a long drink. The cool water helped soothe her throat. “I don’t know what that was.”

“Exhaustion.” He took the glass back after she emptied it. “How can I help?”

“You’ve already done more than enough by bringing me here, helping Dracian.” She glanced around the room. It was bright and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows and a breathtaking ocean view. Lux’s bedroom, she realized with a start. After spending centuries underground, of course he’d want as much sunlight as possible in his living space. It was tidy, which didn’t surprise her. Everything she’d seen in the house was clean—even the dungeon was cleaner than her old apartment.

He watched her with something like apprehension. “Is it okay? There are other rooms if you’re not comfortable—”

She squeezed his hand. “It’s perfect.”

His gaze dropped down the front of her body, but he quickly looked away from the gaping neckline of her shirt. “Do you want to see the rest?”

And she made a decision that would change the course of history forever.

“Later.” She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. “There’s something else I’ve wanted to do since you kissed me at Genesis House.”

He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut. “It’s probably a bad idea.”

“Oh, it definitely is. We’re enemies.”

His eyes opened. They glowed a deep red as he leaned forward and dragged his lips down the side of her neck. “Are we?”

“We’re supposed to be.”

“But *are* we?”

She threaded her fingers in his hair and held him against her neck as his fangs scraped over her skin. “No. Not anymore. Take what you need, Lux. All of what you need. I’m giving myself to you.”

The growl that rumbled from his chest would’ve done the wolves downstairs proud, and before she could draw her neck breath, he pushed her down on the bed and claimed her mouth in a kiss that made her toes curl. Heat sparked between them, seemingly raising the temperature in the room by twenty degrees. She pulled at her clothes, ignoring the pain of her stitched wound. She needed to be skin-to-skin with him, but he stilled her hands and rolled to her side.

“Lux.” His name came out on a whimper. “Please don’t stop.”

“I have no plans of stopping until you purr for me, kitten. Let’s get you undressed.” He stripped her slowly, taking time to kiss each new inch of skin he exposed. When she was naked, he sat back on his knees and stared down at her with wonder in his glowing red eyes. “Gods, you’re beautiful.”

She tugged at his shirt. “I want to see you now.”

In a lightning-fast move, he shoved off the bed and yanked off his shirt, and kicked off his pants. His cock jutted out from his body, long and hard. She remembered watching him orgasm the first time he'd tasted her blood, strapped down and helpless and yet still so powerful. She wanted to see it again now that they were both free to act on their desires. She wanted to touch and taste him when he lost control again.

That first time, she'd wanted to trace her nail down his length to see his reaction. Now she sat up on the edge of the bed and did just that, loving the way his ab muscles tightened and his thigh muscles shook. She liked that she had so much power over *him*, the one and only Lust. It was a heady feeling and she wanted more.

She leaned forward, wrapped her lips around his cock and sucked it hard into her mouth. His head dropped back and a groan rumbled in his throat as his hips thrust in jerky, almost involuntary movements.

Why wasn't he losing control? She wanted him to unleash the bloodthirsty beast she knew was in him.

She pulled back until just her tongue teased his tip. He gasped and closed a shaking hand around her shoulder like he meant to push her away.

"Please, don't." She gazed up at him. "I want you to let go, Lux. Let me see Lust."

His eyes were almost all red now, the blue-gray hidden by their bright glow. He brushed his fingertips lightly down her cheek. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

"I will. It's your first time."

She grinned up at him. "I don't mind a little pain."

Before she even finished speaking, he had her pinned on her back, his fangs fully extended. A thrilling scrape followed every kiss down the center of her body, and then he was between her legs and she lost the ability to think coherently. Just like last time he'd kissed her down there, it only took seconds before she was outside her body, screaming through the stars.

As she came back to herself, she realized he was propped over her now, her thighs cradling his hips, his tip nudging into her entrance. And suddenly she wasn't flying anymore. She was very aware of the invasion, very aware of the uncomfortable stretch of her body, and with it came a surprising burst of pain.

A strangled cry escaped her throat despite her best efforts to hold it in and

tears spilled from her eyes. She hadn't expected the sharpness of the pain.

"I'm sorry." His lips touched each cheek and kissed away her tears. "I'm so sorry. Do you want to stop?"

Stop? God, she didn't know. Did it get worse from here? No, it couldn't. People wouldn't make such a big deal if it only entailed pain. There had to be something more, something pleasurable. She just had to relax.

"No," she managed to choke out. Worry still lined his forehead, so she lifted herself to kiss him, and that...

Okay, wait. *That* felt interesting.

"Could you... um... move? Just a little. No, wait, not leave." She pulled him back as he tried to withdraw from her. "I don't want you to leave. I want you to move." Heat blasted her cheeks, but she forced herself to continue, "I mean... thrust."

His expression ran through a gauntlet of emotions until he finally swallowed hard and pressed the gentlest of kisses to her mouth. "Yes," he said, his voice full of gravel. "I can do that."

Lux started a slight rocking motion. As the pain eased, his body felt less intrusive inside her and more like—like he was right where he belonged. Her heart swelled. *This* was what everyone composed songs and wrote books about. This feeling of belonging, this deep, intimate connection. How did she ever believe him to be hard and cruel, capable of the most horrendous acts known to humanity? He was everything good and kind, sweet and gentle. He was loving.

God, he had so much love to give and she wanted it all.

She wanted—no, needed more. So, so much more.

Harder. Faster. Deeper. Closer.

She wiggled and strained against him. Lifting her legs, she hooked them around his waist, dug her heels into his delectable ass, and raised her hips to take him in as far as he'd go—and her world detonated again in a dazzling blast of color and sensation.

Nothing extinguished lust faster than a soaking with ice water, and the stunned horror in Kat's voice as she came hit Lux like an arctic ocean wave. He shoved himself up on his arms to keep his weight off her, terrified he'd hurt her more than he already had.

"Do you need to stop?"

No answer. Her eyes stayed screwed up tight, her mouth parted in a small O of pain.

“Kat? Katherine, talk to me. Shit. All right, we’re done.” He pulled out, which took little effort since he’d gone as pathetically limp as an overcooked noodle. Sitting up, he scrubbed his hands over his head. Godsdammit. He would never touch her again. Twisted, perverted fuck that he was, he never should have sullied her in the first place.

Her sky blue eyes opened slowly. “Lux?” She blinked up at him for a long moment, then her gaze shifted to his lap, at the limp thing dangling there still stained with her virgin blood. He grabbed a pillow for cover.

“Oh,” she said and something flickered in her eyes before she looked away. Disappointment? She groped around until she found the edge of the sheet and clutched it to her bare breasts. “Is it over?”

“Yeah, it’s over.”

“I thought...” A flush worked up her chest to her neck and finally filled her cheeks with pink. “I don’t know. I thought it lasted longer. I hoped... Not that you weren’t good. I mean, I don’t have anyone to compare you to but I came. Didn’t I? It felt good and... I’m babbling, aren’t I? I’ll stop now.” She folded her lips together and stayed silent for all of a half heartbeat before blurting, “Can we do it again?”

As a man only days shy of his three-thousandth birthday, he didn’t stun easily. Yet she continued to do it. Over and over again. Amazing. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“At first,” she admitted. “But then... can we start over? If it’s okay with you. I’d really, really like to do it again.”

She reached for him and pulled him down on top of her. He saw that all-too-familiar glaze in her eyes, lust working its charm, and it should have turned his stomach. But this wasn’t fake, brought on by his nastier side. That heat, that lust, all belonged to her.

Contentment washed over him in a thawing wave, like slipping into a hot bath after a long trek through a blizzard, and he lowered himself to kiss her again. Kat’s legs parted for him, cradling his hips, and the warm, wet heat of her as she surged against him hardened his cock instantly. He shifted and—

Yes. Oh, yeah. She yielded to him with a long, low moan, encasing him in silk even as her nails bit half-moons into his shoulders.

Gods, she was perfect. Soft strength. Confidence and vulnerability. Ice and fire so hot he always came away scalded. The contradictions of her

nearly had him exploding right there, but no, he wouldn't allow it. Not yet. Then it'd be over, and he wanted this to last. All night. All week.

Hell, for the next millennium.

Forever.

Yes, he wanted her forever.

As she climaxed again, he sank his fangs into her neck and let himself go. And the gossamer bond that had been forming between them since the beginning solidified into something they could both feel, locking tight.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

This was the witch's place?

Xanthus shut off his Hummer and leaned on the steering wheel to scope out the shop. A black velvet length of cloth blocked out the only window and the sign on door said "closed" even though lights glowed softly inside. Not quite what he'd pictured, but hey, the address matched the text Lux had sent. Had to be the right spot. He shrugged and climbed out.

He wasn't sure how this was supposed to work exactly. Witches were mostly human and humans were susceptible to his curse. Unless this Zayra chick had some magic anti-curse charm he and his brothers didn't know about, this was not going to be fun. He might even have to chain the old hag to a chair to keep her from eating and/or drinking herself to death.

The door opened before he got to it, and the woman that peeked out was worlds away from what he expected. More "elf" than "witch" to his thinking, she wore a black lace shirt under a white corset trimmed in gold and a full black skirt. A black and gold silk scarf held a mass of long, pale blond waves back from a pretty, dainty face. Her dark, exotically tilted eyes narrowed on him.

"Are you Gluttony?"

He managed to curb his automatic reply of "I'm whoever you want me to be," but just barely. Witchy Woman was H-O-T and he suddenly enjoyed the idea of spending an untold amount of time with her translating an ancient book. "I prefer Xanthus. Or Xan."

"I don't care." She shook her head and the gold coins dripping from her earlobes clinked a light melody. "You need to leave."

Whoa. The woman just stuck a pin in his bubble, bursting all the naughty

librarian fantasies he'd spent the last two seconds cultivating, and it took him a half second to catch up. "What?"

"I'm sorry." She started to shut the door. He moved faster, wedged his foot in the crack, and flattened a palm on the window.

"Wait, you invited me."

"So now I'm uninviting you." She shoved the door, and to his surprise, he lost a couple inches of ground. That little, curvy body of hers packed some power. Part of him reveled in that and wanted to know what other secrets her body hid. The rest of him was just annoyed as hell that she'd managed to budge him.

"Dammit!" She pushed him again, but this time he was ready for it and didn't move. "Leave!"

Like hell. He could only think of a couple reasons why she'd not want him here after inviting him, and none of them were good. He shoved back and when she stumbled, he plowed his way inside and shut the door. "What the fuck did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Did you lie to Lux about the Solomon Key?"

"No! But, please, you need to leave. You can't see it." Again, she tried to push him out. Without the door between them giving her leverage, it was like a gnat trying to herd a horse. He planted his feet and crossed his arms. He didn't have to be a genius nerd-geek like Leviathan to know something was seriously wrong here.

"Uh-uh. I'm not leaving till you tell me what's got your broomstick stuck so far up your ass."

Dark eyes sparking with frustration, she cast a frantic glance around her store. Looking for a weapon? No, he decided. She was afraid, no doubt about it, but not of him.

"You can't be here," she whispered. "I don't know if they're watching."

"They, who?"

She shook her head.

"Who are you afraid of?"

The pigheaded woman pressed her lips together and remained silent.

Hands on his hips, Xanthus exhaled in exasperation and looked at the ceiling. Not that he thought the gods would offer any guidance—ha ha—but it gave him a moment to think through this. When he returned his gaze to her, she was chewing on her thumbnail. "Look, I need to read the Key, and then

I'll be gone. Promise.”

She dropped her hand, and for an instant, he saw more than stark fear and frustration in her eyes. He saw interest, which made him want to preen like a peacock.

“Can you actually read it?” she asked.

And the urge to preen disappeared. He sighed. Figures he'd get stuck with a female version of Leviathan. He should get them together so they could discuss neuroscience or some shit while they repopulated the nerd-geek species.

Yeah. Not. The thought of another man's hands on her had an uncharacteristic growl rumbling up from his chest. What the hell was up with that?

“Yes,” he said through gritted teeth. “I can read it.”

“I'm surprised.”

“That I can read? Yeah, imagine that. There's actually a brain inside the man candy's skull.”

Her mouth parted in an O of surprise. A perfect, ruby-painted O that would feel damn good wrapped around his cock.

Ah, fuck. Where did that come from? He looked away from her as his body reacted violently to the wayward thought. “Where's the Key?”

She seemed to gather herself and hurried through a curtained doorway into a back room. He followed right on her heels, unwilling to leave her unsupervised for even a millisecond, and she almost slammed into his chest when she turned with the book in her hands.

“Oh.” She fumbled the book. He caught it, wrapping his much bigger hand over hers. Lightning zigged between their fingertips, sizzling across the air like a Fourth of July sparkler. Her eyes widened, lifted to meet his.

“It's the book,” he lied. In fact, he had no fucking clue what caused that light show and pretty much had no desire to find out.

He drew The Solomon Key out of her hands. Power thrummed behind the leather cover, lighting him up like a damn candle, which didn't do a thing to help his sudden hard on. Inside his chest, his curse seemed to unfurl its insatiable claws, ready to dig into Zayra.

Shit. He couldn't let that happen. “You might not want to stay for this.”

“Are you kidding?” she demanded, full of sexy female outrage. “I'm putting my ass, broomstick and all, on the line. Of course I'm staying!”

Xanthus grinned. Couldn't help it. Damn, but he liked her. “I mean, my

curse—it's amplified by the book. I don't want you..." He trailed off, struck by a sudden, disturbing thought. "Why *aren't* you trying to eat your way through the kitchen?" He'd been in her presence for at least ten minutes. By all calculations, she should be ravenous right now.

She shrugged. "I'm not hungry. Now will you get on with it? I want you out of here."

His curse didn't affect her? Uh-oh. This could mean trouble. Big trouble. Maybe getting out of here as fast as possible was a good idea.

Xanthus flipped the book open. Despite having not seen it in thousands of years, the writing blasted him with a sick, twisted sense of dread and nostalgia as he ran a hand over the words. His father's words.

"Gods," he whispered.

Zayra peered over his arm at the page. "What does it say?"

He drew a breath and focused on the text. It took a moment for the rusty gears of memory to start turning, but once they did, long-forgotten words of his old language jumped off the page at him. "This part is a memoir of Solomon's life. Waxing poetic about his kingdom, his temple, his harem." He snorted. "Six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold in tribute a year? Yeah, right. Who was he trying to kid? The entire city-state had only a couple hundred people and barely enough cash to keep it afloat."

Zayra glanced up from the page. "How fascinating."

Something about those dark, endless peepers of hers looking at him all lit up from the inside like that, nailed him square in the gut and made his jeans even more uncomfortably tight. He was hungry for *any* female contact. Yeah, that was it. He hadn't gotten laid since that night at Perversion. He didn't want *her* specifically.

"Not so fascinating when you lived it."

Some of the shine went out of her eyes. "I suppose not."

Okay, now he felt like a jerk. Pissed at himself, he clenched his teeth, forced his attention back to the book, and spotted his mother's name. He turned the fragile page so fast he was surprised it didn't tear. Given the circumstances, he had no choice but to keep reading about his father, but he didn't care to learn more about the bitch that gave him life, only to take it away by allowing him to be cursed at the innocent age of five.

"Careful!" Zayra all but screeched the word and reached for the book like a protective mother would reach for an injured child.

Xanthus grunted, batted her hands away, and continued reading. But

pages later, he found nothing more than endless pontificating on the majesty of Solomon's kingdom.

He shook his head. "Shit, and I thought Revelin's ego was big. At least now we know he comes by it naturally."

Zayra touched his arm. He pretended not to notice the resulting crackle of miniature lightning. She either didn't notice or was trying to ignore it too. "Is this going to take long?"

On the pretense of finding a place to sit, he shifted out of her reach and put a table between them. He laid the book out, flipped until he found the page marked with the seal of Lust in the top corner. "Hold on to your panties, Witchy Woman. Reading a dead language you haven't heard or spoken in millennia isn't exactly easy."

Nerves poured off her in waves. He could feel them like they were his own and raised a brow at her. "Wanna tell me who's got you so hyped up?"

"No." She glanced toward the front of her shop. "But you really can't stay."

"Do you want to know what this baby says or not?"

She rolled her sexy lower lip between her teeth. "Yes. Dammit. All right," she said and held up a finger. "One hour. I won't risk more. I can't."

"One hour should do it." He leaned back in his seat and began reading.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

Lux stayed awake for a long time after Kat curled up beside him and relented to the pull of sleep with a soft sigh. Her breath played over his nipple, her silky hair fanned his chest and tickled his nose. He liked the light weight of her hand resting possessively over his heart and didn't want to move. Okay, that wasn't true. He wanted to roll her over and worship her entire body with his mouth, starting at her toes and working his way up.

But he had to take care of a few things before he could allow himself that pleasure. One of those things had been eating at him like a parasite, marring his newfound happiness.

He slid out from under Kat and grinned when she rolled to her belly and hugged his pillow to her face. Mumbling, she snuggled in, but thankfully didn't wake.

Lux grabbed his sweats from the floor, but couldn't find his T-shirt. Bumbling around in the dark for several minutes, he stubbed his toe on his dresser and bit his lip to keep from swearing. All right, forget the T-shirt. The night air was chilly but he was only going over to see Leviathan. He'd be back in bed, cozy and warm in Kat's embrace, in just a few minutes.

At the door, he glanced back. Still sound asleep, the curve of her butt luscious and inviting under the sheet. He almost closed the door and crawled back into bed with her. His business with Leviathan could wait another couple hours...

Groaning, he shut his eyes to the temptation of her. He had to get this done now. Had to relieve the guilt burning deep inside him that wouldn't let him fully enjoy anything.

As usual, the door to Xanthus's suite next door sat propped open. He was

the only one of them to prefer company to privacy and almost never shut his door. Farther down, Rev's door was closed. The rotunda below was dark and silent since everyone had retreated to their own spaces for the night.

Xan sprawled on his leather couch in nothing but a pair of silk boxers, and the bluish glow of the TV flickered over his long, muscular body. He glanced over as Lux headed for the bridge that connected their side of the house to Leviathan's, Tristin's, and Avi's suites. "Everything good?"

"Yeah. She's okay now."

"Good. I like her. She's right for you." Xan crossed his arms behind his head and returned his attention to the TV.

Right for you.

Huh. Only a short time ago, Lux would have argued that he didn't want anybody to be right for him. He would have claimed he was fine on his own, that he only wanted solitude. And how wrong he would have been. Now that he'd had a taste of Kat, he couldn't imagine his life without her. He'd cured his blood addiction, but he still needed her more than he needed his next breath.

Was there even a cure for what he had now?

Probably not, he decided and padded barefoot down the curving staircase. And that was just fine by him.

Leviathan, Tristin, and Avi shared the right side of the house, and Leviathan's suite took up the northeast corner. As Lux approached, he heard muffled music thumping from Tristin's suite. Exactly why, when they built this house, he hadn't wanted his suite anywhere near Tristin's. He actually *enjoyed* sleeping at night.

He knocked on the door and wondered if Leviathan would even hear it over the drums. When he got no answer, he poked his head inside. The suite mirrored his in every way except the decor. Levi loved tinkering, and technological gadgets in various forms of disrepair packed every available inch of space in the living area. This place would be a living nightmare to Kat, technophobe that she was.

Lux smiled to himself and walked toward the bedroom, where he heard the murmur of his brother's voice. "Leviathan?"

A pause. Scrambling. Crash. More scrambling. Leviathan appeared in the doorway, his hair loose around his shoulders, his cheeks flushed as he pulled on a pair of sweat pants. Lux almost expected a woman to come rushing out behind him, but that was impossible. None of the brothers ever brought their

one-nighters home. Kat was the first woman they had ever allowed into this house.

“I’m not even going to ask.”

Leviathan scowled. “I was on the phone.”

“Oh, little brother. We have plenty of money. You don’t need to work as a phone sex operator anymore.”

“Ha ha. Look at you cracking jokes.” Leviathan punched his shoulder before making a beeline toward the kitchen. “Not everyone is as lucky as you when it comes to women. I haven’t gotten laid in so long I don’t even remember what sex feels like.”

Lux followed and hooked a stool from the island counter. Leviathan grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge, held it out in offering.

“Yeah, why not?”

Leviathan slid the beer across the counter and retrieved another for himself, gulping half of it down on the spot.

“I am feeling pretty damn lucky,” Lux admitted after a swig from his bottle. “But there’s a part of me that keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“C’mon, man, don’t put that shit out into the universe. Ever hear of a self-fulfilling prophecy?” Leviathan leaned his forearms on the island counter and gazed steadily at him. “You have a good thing going. Enjoy it.”

The youngest of his brothers was always the solidest voice of reason. “You’re right.”

“Of course. When am I ever wrong?”

“It really is one of your more annoying qualities.”

“So.” Leviathan straightened and scratched at the swirled mark of Envy on his arm where Solomon had pressed his ring so long ago. “Tell me you didn’t drop by just to insult me when you have a gorgeous woman in your bed.”

“Nah.” Remembering his mission, his lighthearted mood began to dissolve. He swirled the neck of his beer around with his fingers, watching the amber liquid slosh inside. “I need a favor.”

“Anything.”

The answer came without hesitation and Lux’s throat closed up with an unexpected surge of love at the trust and sincerity in that one word. Gods, he was turning into a pussy. His brothers would rag on him for eternity if he showed how soft he’d gone. He gulped his beer, hoping the act of swallowing

would ease the ball of emotion from his throat, back into the lock box in his chest were it belonged.

Leviathan watched him patiently, waiting for him to continue. He set down his beer and finally met his little brother's gaze.

"After Lilith released me, I was out of control. I don't know who all I hurt, but I need to do something to make it up to them. I know throwing money at them isn't much of a consolation, but it's all I can think to do and I have to do something."

"Okay," Leviathan said. "If that's what you want, I can handle it, engineer a couple windfalls. No problemo."

"It is, but there's one family in particular I want set up for life. The victim's name was Kahlil. I don't know a last name, but Kat might. He was trying to help me and I... attacked him like a wild animal."

Leviathan sipped his beer in silence for a long while, then set it down with a hard thunk. "Okay, brother, listen up. Pay attention to what I'm about to say. You. Are. Not. To. Blame. You never would've attacked that man if not for my bitch of a sister—"

"Our sister."

"Yeah. Technically. But my twin. And I know you, man. You wouldn't have hurt anyone if not for Lilith. Get that into your thick skull right now."

"I know. Believe me, I've told myself that. I wasn't me. My brain kept shouting to stop, but I couldn't. I—" He had to take a long swig of his beer to clear the sudden block in his throat. "Kahlil had a wife. Some kids. I want to make sure they never struggle for anything again. Can you backdate a life insurance policy or something?"

"His death really got to you."

"He didn't deserve what I did to him. His kids didn't deserve to lose their father. If there was any possible way I could bring him back, I would. No matter the cost."

After another moment of silence, Leviathan nodded. "All right. It will take a little more time, but I can fix it."

"Thanks. I owe you."

"Promises, promises."

Lux chuckled and flipped him the bird.

"Back atcha," Leviathan said. "Now, as much as I love seeing your ugly mug, go back to your woman. I'm sure she's getting lonely in that big bed of yours."

Yes, she probably was. All soft, warm, and sleepy under the white duvet. And his. It made him grin like a maniac. “I like that she’s there.”

“I know you do, brother. Go.”

He made it halfway to the door before Leviathan called his name. He turned back in time to see sparks of green shooting off like fireworks in his little brother’s irises. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say Envy was jealous. “You okay?”

Leviathan dipped his head, and pressed his fingers to his eyes. “Yeah. I was just wondering... you said Lilith found a way to counteract your curse, and it lasted a while, right? So... what’d she give you?”

Lux studied his brother for a second. It wasn’t a completely unreasonable question to ask, but something about its oh-so-casual delivery had warning bells tolling in a distant corner of his mind. “Why do you want to know?”

“Curiosity.”

Again, not unusual. Leviathan’s overactive mind did need constant stimulation, but his curiosity had gotten the better of him more than once. “If I tell you, promise not to recreate it in some freak-ass science experiment?”

“Aw, c’mon. You know I’m not happy unless I’m trying to blow up the house.” Even as Leviathan gave a teasing smile, the slightest of strains showed around the edges of his lips. Like he was in pain. Or worried. Or scared. “But I promise. Cross my sinful little heart. No science experiments.”

Okay, maybe he was being paranoid, reading too much into something that didn’t actually mean shit. He had the social skills of a cactus, and his experience reading social cues was next to nil. And Leviathan did need to know this information in case something like his abduction ever happened again.

“It was a nasty cocktail of saint’s blood and the ingredients of a banishing potion for Incubi,” he said. “She gave it to me in an IV.”

Leviathan rubbed his jaw. “Shit. That’s—”

“Serious black magic. I know.”

“Where did she find it? I was under the impression that saint’s blood has to be fresh to work.”

“I really hate to guess. See you in the morning.” As he crossed the distance to the door, he tried to tell himself the last person he needed to worry about was Leviathan, the most levelheaded of all his brothers. But then he glanced back and saw Leviathan, still at the kitchen island, elbows propped on the counter, head cradled in his hands.

And he looked... defeated. What the hell was up with that?

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Kat woke to a burst of heat and groaned. She ached. Oh, God, did she ache. Where was Lux? She needed him between her legs again, needed him pounding into her. She scissored her legs on the bed, seeking relief. The sheet was too much on her sensitized skin, and she kicked it off.

Still too hot.

Too... needy.

She dragged a tentative hand down her belly and touched herself for the first time in her life. She'd always been told masturbation was a sin, but she'd just committed the ultimate sin by sleeping with Lust himself, so what did it matter?

The flesh between her legs was hot and wet, plumped and desperately ready for Lux's body again. She could almost feel him surging over her, the deep, delicious thrusts shoving her toward climax.

Yes.

Yes!

That was what she wanted. She inhaled, drawing the dark spice of his scent deep into her lungs and holding it there while she imaged his hand on her, his thumb circling against her clitoris.

The climax shook her legs and made her bow off the bed. But it ended too soon and left her feeling even more empty than before.

It wasn't enough.

Wasn't nearly enough.

She needed male hands on her. She needed a male body to surge deep and ease the ache inside.

She needed sex again.

Right. Now.

Why was there never anything good on TV at night? Xan had already watched his way through all of the streaming services, and now he was surfing the satellite channels, but all he'd found so far was corny infomercials about the newest chop-o-matic and sexy ladies whispering to call their ridiculously overpriced phone sex service. Yeah, he'd get right on that 'cuz nothing made a guy hornier than watching a seven-blade chopping nightmare of a kitchen appliance shred phallic-like veggies.

Talk about bad product placement.

Xanthus yawned, switched off the TV and tossed the remote on the coffee table. He stood and prowled his living room. He couldn't go annoy Lux—that'd be just plain cruel when the guy had a sexy woman in his bed for once—and he was cutting a wide berth around Revelin, who was still pissed off about what happened at Perversion. Like it had been *his* fault the DJ had a boyfriend the size of an Abrams tank?

Sheesh.

Leviathan had been acting weirdly reclusive, shutting himself in his rooms every night right after dinner.

Avi had left to go talk to his pack about the feral werewolf in their basement.

Devak and Tristin were never any fun to hang with.

So what the hell was he supposed to do with himself?

Boredom made him antsy, and he fleetingly considered hitting up his favorite clubs for some action. Except it was a Monday night. Perversion wasn't open, and Aftermath would be as dead as a vampire's heart.

Then again, he mused, thanks to his curse, he kicked up a party no matter the day of the week. Americans were naturally indulgent creatures who embraced his curse of excess with open arms and a smile. Just look at the obesity epidemic, the rampant pollution, the alcoholism, the materialism. It was why he loved the whole hedonistic lot of them, and he'd certainly had more fun in his two-hundred-odd years here in the United States than he ever had over in Europe.

But, no.

As appealing as it sounded, it wasn't a good idea to go out trolling for

trouble tonight. Because, knowing his bitch of a sister, Lilith would make sure he found the sort of trouble he didn't want.

He hated knowing she was roaming around out there, spreading Chaos. It might not be a deadly sin, but it was her curse the same as Gluttony was his.

He supposed he could go to bed like a normal guy. Or he could call Witchy Woman and do some more brainstorming on The Solomon Key. Somehow, he knew she'd still be awake.

Yeah, now there was a good idea.

More excited to hear her sultry voice than he probably should be, Xanthus turned on his heel and hot-footed it toward the bedroom to retrieve his cell phone, but a sound from across the hall stopped him. He glanced over as the door to Lux's suite opened, and Kat stepped out. His jaw dropped in shock, all but hit the ground cartoon-style.

"Um... Hi, Kat?" he said slowly when he found use of his tongue again. "Uh, what are you doing?"

More importantly, why the *fuck* was she doing it naked?

She looked at him and smiled, a small upward curl of lips that were made for sin.

Or to suck off a Sin.

Like, say, Gluttony.

Shit, no.

Bad, Xanthus.

Not the thoughts that should be running through his head about his brother's woman.

But to his utter shock, she crossed the hall to his suite. "I'm looking for you."

"Me?" Gods, did that squeak really just come out of his piehole? He tried hard to play the gentleman, to keep his gaze on her face. Maybe it dipped down once or twice, but who could blame him? The woman had legs for miles, and the intriguing springs of red curls at the vee made his fingers itch to touch. What red-blooded male wouldn't fantasize a bit? Her breasts were a perfect, creamy handful with peaked peach-bud nipples and the start of a hickey on—

No!

Feux, this was his brother's woman. His. Brother's. Basically his sister-in-law. He shouldn't be looking at her like this, shouldn't feel the first stirrings of a hard-on. Hell, she shouldn't be running around naked in a house

full of less-than-virtuous bachelors to begin with, and he cast a desperate glance around his living room for something to cover her. Unfortunately, he wasn't the type to wear robes or have quilts laying around, so he did the next best thing. Squeezed his eyes shut.

"You should, uh, get dressed."

"I don't want to." Her voice, a sexy purr, sounded closer.

He would not look. Would *not* look. Would. Not. Look.

A door clicked shut, and his eyes popped open in surprise. Holy shit, she'd shut them in together. Leaning against the door, blocking the exit, she looked for all the world like a predator with her sights on the weakest prey.

Gods, was this some sort of trap? Kat had been ISRS agent. But this wasn't the Society's usual brand of fucked up.

Did she work for Lilith?

No. No, he couldn't believe that. He'd seen the way she'd looked at his brother, and as a guy who spent most of his time pretending to feel things he didn't, he knew that level of emotion couldn't be faked. Kat loved Lux. She may not even be aware of it yet, but he'd seen it in her, clear as a sunrise on a cloudless day.

Maybe she was sleepwalking. She did have a glassy, far away look in her eyes.

He gave her his back. But, dammit, she was so close behind him, he felt her body throwing off heat like a raging fire. "You need to leave."

"Aw, we both know that's not what you want."

"I'm not hurting my brother and—" When her touch feathered over his shoulder, his voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "And I'm not letting you hurt him."

"Nobody has to know." Her breath hissed in his ear before her lips grazed the back of his neck and worked down his spine. "I want you."

Shit, shit, shit. He was in so much trouble. His self-control had always been a crapshoot at best, and right now, he was revved from spending the better part of his night fantasizing about a certain blond witch. As Kat's mouth sucked lightly on the mark of Gluttony on his lower back, he knew he wouldn't hold out. When her hand slipped around his waist to cup his aching cock through his shorts, he groaned.

Just once. What would it hurt? One time. She obviously wanted him. Nobody had to know.

But Lux needed to know.

But maybe he could have her as proof of what a liar she was.

Witchy Woman popped to mind in that instant, the image so clear it rattled him back to his senses. He could almost see her watching him with a disapproving arch to her pale brows, ruby lips pursed, hands fisted on her lush hips. Could almost hear her scolding him for being a selfish bastard.

But he wasn't. Not always. And not now.

He jerked away from Kat's roaming hands, and reached out blindly for the intercom on the end table.

"Lux!" His voice blasted through the house's speakers. "Get up here. Now!"

Kat laughed and yanked the phone from his hand. She soved him onto the couch with surprising strength and straddled his lap. "So that's how you want it? The more, the merrier? Kinky."

She kissed him, plunging her tongue so deep into his mouth he gagged. No tenderness. No heat. An empty kiss, full of hunger but no passion.

The first stirrings of realization punched through the lust and deflated what was left of his erection even as she reached inside his shorts and wrapped her soft fingers around him. She didn't actually want him. Why didn't he recognize the signs before? He'd seen this hundreds of times. From the DJ at Perversion, the two bartenders, and pretty green-haired Sabrina. He saw it every time he accompanied Lux to a club on a feeding night.

Holy shit.

Lust had come out to play.

This was going to kill his brother.

Xanthus caught her shoulders and tried to push her away. "Honey, listen to me. What you're feeling is not you. What you're feeling—*umph*."

She cut him off with a teeth-rattling kiss just as the door burst open. Lux took two steps and froze, all color draining from his complexion. Leviathan and Revelin were so close on his heels that they slammed into his back.

"Xanthus!" Revelin said in that self-important, autocratic way he had, somehow turning his name into a curse and a scold. "What. The. *Fuck*?"

Xanthus bit back his automatic reply, "It wasn't me." He knew he used the excuse too often, and nobody would believe him if he let it pop out this time. Instead, he ducked Kat's seeking mouth and said, "Help!"

Leviathan moved first. He caught Kat around the waist and dragged her away. She didn't fight. Just turned, looped her arms around his neck, her legs around his hips, and ground herself against him. Biting down on his lower

lip, she drew it out hard from his teeth.

Leviathan gave a startled yelp and staggered backward, tripping over the coffee table. They both tumbled to the floor, but the fall didn't affect her. She straddled his stomach and worked furiously at yanking his shirt over his head.

Xanthus leaped over the broken coffee table, snagged one of her legs, and tried to pull her off. She kicked back like a riled stallion with her free leg, but he ducked and got a hold of that one, too. Revelin caught her flailing arms, and together, they wrestled her to the floor. Tears seeped from her eyes as she twisted and tried to catch Revelin's mouth in a kiss.

"*Faex*," Revelin said, panting, and backed up as far as he could while still holding her down.

"Yeah." Xanthus shot him a scowl. "Wanna apologize now?"

"Not particularly. You're still a fuck-up. Just 'cuz you did the right thing this once doesn't mean—"

"Guys, stop!" Leviathan regained his feet. His T-shirt had torn from collar to armpit, and he struggled with the shreds for a second before finally ripping the thing off. "What the fuck happened here?"

"I was getting ready for bed, heard the door open, and she stepped out buck ass." Xanthus glanced at Lux, who looked like he wanted to vomit, and decided nobody needed to know the nitty gritty. "She tried to jump me. I called you guys. Nothing happened." Enunciating each word, he ensured Lux held his gaze when he repeated, "Nothing. Happened."

"I know," Lux whispered. "I should have realized... She's not a virgin anymore. She's no longer immune to me."

Leviathan swore. "We need to get her away from you, man."

"No. We can't let her go like this. She'll—with the first man she—" Lux paused and drew a shaky breath. "Not to mention ISRS is still hunting her. And Lilith."

"What about the cages?" Xanthus suggested. They'd constructed the cages in the basement when they built the house as a precaution against one of them going darkside. The little bit of mythology that existed about their curses hinted that losing their humanity was a distinct threat, and once that happened—well, hello, End Times. It was something they had all feared since being released from their prisons.

Mostly, though, the cages sat empty. Except for the feral werewolf in Avi's cage now. And for the three months in 1895 when his brothers locked him down there to help him kick his Laudanum habit. To this day, he still

couldn't go to the basement without feeling vaguely nauseated.

"No," Lux said. "Hell no. We are not putting her down there."

"Why not? You locked me down there."

"You're seriously still pissed at that?" Leviathan asked. "It was for your own good, Xan."

"And it isn't for hers?" He motioned to the writhing, sobbing woman he and Revelin still held pinned to the floor. "Look at her. She's suffering. She might find relief in Lux's cage."

Silence.

"It's a good idea," Revelin finally said, which surprised the shit out of him. Rev never agreed with him about anything.

"Yeah, it is. Believe it or not, I do get them now and again."

"Stop being a jackass." Revelin glanced over at Lux. "We'll make sure she's comfortable. Keep her there only long enough for the effects to wear off, then we'll release her."

Emotions battled over Lux's features. He turned away, but not before Xanthus noticed the sheen of moisture he tried to wipe away with his hand. Xanthus jerked his head, indicating Leviathan should take over holding Kat down, and then got to his feet. His brother was in pain, which was something he knew a little about...

Yeah, not going there.

He crossed his arms and, knowing Lux didn't like to be touched, leaned a shoulder against his brother's in a solid, wordless show of support. But that small amount of contact did more than comfort. It opened the door for something else, something his brothers didn't even know he could do. Lux's pain—way more than he'd expected—hit him like a tornado, figuratively picking him up and rattling him around until he didn't know which way was up. It was by force of will alone that he remained standing. That, and the fact his brother was breathing easier, tears drying, shoulders straightening.

After a moment, Lux glanced his way. He forced his features to stay calm, to give nothing away. Forced his voice to sound normal as he murmured, "It's your call. What do you want us to do?"

"Yeah." Lux sucked in a breath and nodded. "Take her downstairs."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Kat's screams echoed through the entire house for two days. She wasn't getting better. They finally had to move Dracian, because her banshee-like screams were even too much for a feral werewolf. Luckily, Avi's pack had agreed to take him in.

Lux sat at the top of the stairs every day and listened to her descent into madness and with each scream, he felt a little more hollow. The bond between them that had seemed so solid was breaking, dissolving, and there was nothing he could do to keep it in place. He should've known better than to touch her.

The door behind him creaked. He didn't bother glancing back. He didn't care which of his brothers had come to pry him away this time.

"C'mon, Lux," Leviathan said softly. "Let's go upstairs. You're driving her insane by staying down here."

"It was supposed to be different with her."

Leviathan sighed and sat down beside him on the step. "Her immunity only worked if she remained pure. As soon as you, um, broke that seal, she became just as susceptible to Lust as everyone else."

Gods, he should have known that, but it had never once crossed his mind.

Down below, Kat slammed into the bars of her cell with a tortured shriek. "Get away from him, Leviathan! You can't have him. He's mine. Mine. Mine. *Mine!*"

Leviathan grimaced. "And, apparently, she's now susceptible to Envy, too."

Lux cradled his head in his hands. "Why isn't it wearing off?"

"I don't know."

“We can’t keep her like this forever.”

“We’ll figure something out. But for now, you need to stay away from her.”

Lux knew he was right, but leaving her in the dungeon was like leaving his bleeding heart in that cage.

Back in his suite, he paced, looping through the kitchen and living area, but avoiding the bedroom. The scent of Kat still clung to his bed sheets and he couldn’t bear to face it. Not when her cries and agonized moans echoed through the entire house. More than once tonight, he’d found himself half way down the rotunda stairs, desperate to help her. Xanthus stopped him the first time and wrestled him back to his suite. He managed to stop himself the second time, but swung by Tristin’s room on the way back to borrow some CDs. He blasted Black Sabbath and Avenged Sevenfold until his head pounded in beat with the music and he was sure his eardrums would start bleeding, then decided he needed a cold shower because the music couldn’t drown out his memories. And even knowing how bad of an idea it was, he still wanted her.

He leaned against the shower stall’s wall, let the icy water beat down his chest, and shut his eyes. She didn’t belong in that dank cellar, locked inside an iron cage. She belonged in his bed, in his arms. She was his, godsdammit, and he couldn’t do anything to help her.

Except stay away from her.

Rage bubbled up from a spot inside him he didn’t even know existed. He slammed his fist into the wall, cracking the tile. Another punch had the tiles shattering, marble shards dropping to the drain. His fist throbbed and blood dripped to mix with the water at his feet, but he kept at it, pummeling the wall, screaming out his anger and frustration until there was nothing left inside him but broken sobs. His legs shook, threatening to give out as he dragged himself from the shower, still soaking wet, to the couch in the living room. He gave fleeting thought to bandaging his ragged knuckles, but another scream rent the air from the basement.

“Lux!”

No, he wouldn’t bandage his hands. His woman was in pain because of him. He deserved to bleed and more.

Flopping down on the couch, Lux studied his hands, prodded the deepest cut across his palm with his thumb. He felt something there, a splinter from the shower tiles shifting around inside his skin, and winced.

These hands never should have touched her.
And, he vowed, would never touch her again.

Too hot.

Kat sprawled on her back on the cold floor, pressing as much of her bare skin against the stone as she could manage, but it did nothing to assuage the fever raging through her body. And she ached. God, how she ached. Her sex throbbed, her nipples puckered into tight, over-sensitized buds. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel Lux's mouth all over her, driving her to the brink of insanity so sweet and slow.

Her back arched off the floor and a moan tore from her throat. Oh, she wanted to feel his mouth again. His hands. Needed his hard body surrounding hers, invading hers. Where was he? Why wasn't he here, easing her torment? He promised to always be here for her. He promised never to let anything harm her again. Had all those sweet whispered promises been nothing but lies?

Stupid. As the wave of sexual need crested and eased for the moment, anger took its place. Stupid, stupid, stupid to believe anything he said. She knew better than to trust anyone but herself. To trust a Sin. Not just any sin, but the monster who killed her family.

God, she hated him with every fiber in her being.

Kat rolled over and pulled herself to her feet. Hair fell in sweaty strands over her eyes. She swiped it back with one hand and, propelled by rage, threw herself at the bars of her cell. Her shrieks bounced off the stone walls, piercing even to her own ears, but she didn't stop.

"Lux!"

Silence answered. The bastard was probably upstairs in his massive bed right now fucking some other hapless woman. She wouldn't put it past him, Lust incarnate, to keep her locked away down here like a crazy wife while he screwed around behind her back.

She'd kill him. No, she'd cut off everything that made him male first. Then she'd kill him and the unfortunate woman he'd conned into his bed to take her place.

A distant part of her mind screamed that she was not thinking clearly, that her judgment had been clouded by thoughts and ideas that were not her own. But a mental picture of Lux's naked ass thrusting between some whore's split

thighs invaded her brain, and her blood went volcanic. She'd kill them both. She'd make them suffer. She just had to get free, and Lux would pay dearly for his betrayal.

She slammed up against the bars so hard her bones rattled. Again and again, until the skin on her knuckles bruised, then split open. For hours or maybe days.

She backed up, ready to charge the door again, and the padlock clicked open. She watched as the lock spun and dropped to the floor with a dull clunk. The shadows beyond her cell seemed to shift, but when she blinked and looked again—nothing. She reached out and pushed on the door. It swung open on surprisingly quiet hinges, and she grinned.

Oh, yes. Lux would pay for breaking his promises to her.

A soft female hand sifted through his hair and Lux smiled sleepily as Kat's face swam into focus, inches from his. She sat astride him, all naked and soft woman, her heat rubbing his pelvis. He slid his hand down her ribs, the curve of her waist, to cup her hip and guide her to where he really wanted her. She parted for him, her head dropping back as she took him all the way inside. She came instantly, so hard she almost dragged him over the edge with her, but he managed to hang on to a gossamer thread of control. He gripped her hips and thrust into her, enjoying every shudder, every moan. She was wild and desperate, her nails digging bloody half-moons into his shoulders. He loved it. He loved her, but he wanted to tell her in a quiet moment, without the haze of lust that colored everything else in his life, so he put everything he felt into pleasuring her with his body and his mouth. When he took her nipple between his teeth and bit lightly on the nub, she came again just as hard as the first time, her body bowing back so that he had an excellent view of where they were joined, and it was too much. His hips jerked, his muscles locking up as he spilled into her.

She collapsed on top of him, their sweat-soaked bodies sticking together chest to chest, belly to belly, and he decided it was the perfect way to wake up. As their breathing settled, he ran a hand over her hair, then trailed his fingers along the length of her spine to her beautiful ass.

"Mm. Good morning, kitten."

She lifted her head and smiled back, but it was all edges, dark with nothing sweet or loving in the expression. Her eyes were empty, devoid of

everything that made Kat the woman he loved.

He started to sit up, but she shoved him back with surprising strength. “Where do you think you’re going, lover boy?”

Full awareness seeped in, icing his veins with a sick dread. She wasn’t supposed to be here. She was supposed to be downstairs, locked in the cage.

“Kat...” He set his hands on her shoulders, gave a little push. She didn’t move. He could push her harder, but Gods, he didn’t want to hurt her.

“Shut up.” She leaned over and reached for something on the floor beside the couch.

He saw the flash of a knife a second before he felt the prick of its tip under his Adam’s apple. He swallowed. “Sweetheart—”

“You forfeited the right to call me that when you let your bastard brothers lock me up.” She petted his chest with her free hand and ground her hips against him. “But, God, I want you. You’re going to fuck me until I tell you to stop or I’ll start cutting off body parts.”

Lux’s heart dropped into his stomach. She was lost, completely possessed by his curse and possibly his brothers’ as well. Even so, her petting had aroused him again and he hated his body for it. He didn’t want this. Didn’t want the beauty they had shared to be tainted by this evil. He cast his eyes around the room, desperate for some kind of escape. The lamp on the end table behind his head was solid iron. If he knocked her unconscious, he could —

No way. Even as the idea formed, he rejected it. He couldn’t do that to her. Yes, she wasn’t in her right mind, but the real Kat, the spunky, sassy, kick-ass woman he loved, was still inside there somewhere. Anything he did to this semblance of her would hurt her too and the thought of hurting her had bile surging into his throat.

“Kat, listen to me. This isn’t you. C’mon, sweetheart. Come back to me. You can fight it. If anyone can fight it, it’s you.” He knew reasoning wasn’t going to work, but he had to try something and kept up the soft, cajoling litany as she continued to stroke him to full arousal.

“Shut up! You’re not allowed to talk. Use your mouth on me.”

She leaned over him and all but dropped her breast on his face. He turned his head to the side and she let out a frustrated shriek that echoed off the ceiling. Her open palm connected so hard with his cheek his fangs elongated instinctively against the threat and cut into his lip. But he wouldn’t use them. He wouldn’t defend himself. He was hers to do with what she will. It would

ruin him and forever destroy the beauty they'd had together before his curse took over but—who was he kidding? It was already destroyed. And he'd been ruined for thousands of years.

Lux shut his eyes and prayed it would be over soon.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

The shriek of tortured pain woke Leviathan from a deep sleep and he sat upright in bed with a curse. Kat had stopped screaming about an hour ago and he'd gratefully sunk into bed, asleep almost before his face hit the pillow. But now she was at it again.

This wasn't working. She wasn't getting any better while trapped in the cages. In fact, she seemed to get worse as the days passed, absorbing the other sins one by one until the woman down there barely resembled the one who had originally entered this house. Even her aura had changed, shifting from a healthy mix of colors to a red as dark as blood, slashed through with jagged black lines. He hadn't mentioned the change to Lux yet, but it might be time.

Leviathan climbed out of bed and pulled on his sweats. He grabbed a couple beers on his way through the kitchen before heading up to Lux's suite—he knew his brother would still be awake, tormenting himself with every cry, so they might as well use this time productively. They had to figure out another plan to keep Kat safe, because she couldn't stay here any longer. Not only was she putting their brothers on edge—which was never a good thing—but she was dying. Plain and simple. He'd seen it happen before. She'd descend into madness as more of that inky blackness oozed into her aura, and when there was nothing left of what made her Kat, her aura would blink out completely.

He found Devak at the bottom of the rotunda staircase, paused with his foot hovering above the first step, his hand resting on the banister. He cocked his head to one side in a bird-like gesture, as if listening for something up above.

“What are you doing?”

Devak didn't exactly jump, but his wings flared out as if he was going to take flight. His ten-foot wingspan was the main reason they'd built the house with an open floor plan. Any smaller, he'd knock shit over or put holes in the walls with the hooked talons on the tips of his wings.

Devak turned and his lips tightened. “Kat.”

Leviathan nodded. “I know. I heard her, too.” Although, he realized now, she'd only screamed that one time that woke him. He hadn't heard her do it again since. “I'm going up to talk to Lux about her if you want to come.”

Devak shook his head.

Leviathan shrugged and started up the stairs. He hadn't really expected his antisocial brother to accept the offer, but then a black shadow zoomed up the middle of the rotunda. He leaned over the banister and looked up in time to see Devak settle on the bridge between Lux and Xanthus's rooms. Okay, then. He picked up his pace, taking the steps two at a time.

When he reached the landing, Devak pointed to the door of Lux's rooms, which stood half open.

Huffing a little from the three-story climb, Leviathan rolled his eyes. “Okay, Ghost of Christmas Future.”

He ducked under Devak's wing and raised a hand to knock. Across the hall, he sensed Xanthus's door opening, heard his brother ask groggily, “What's up?”, but then the door to Lux's suite swung wide and his heart took a sickening free fall into his gut. Kat straddled Lux on the couch, a knife in her hand pressed under his chin. Blood everywhere, staining her naked body, the knife, dripping off the edge of the couch to pool on the floor at his feet.

Leviathan lost the ability to think rationally. Something dark rose up in him and he even beat Devak inside the suite. Kat turned toward them, her expression feral, her eyes tortured. Even as tears streamed down her cheeks, she spat vile curses at them. Her aura absorbed Envy and Wrath, multiplied and reflected them back times ten. Leviathan's knees buckled under the crashing wave of jealousy he'd spent the last several days trying to ignore. It wasn't fair that Lux had found love when that was all Leviathan had ever wanted. It wasn't fair that Lux got to keep Kat and he couldn't have the one woman he wanted more than anything. Gods, but he *hated* Lux for getting it all while he was left to wallow in the lonely existence they'd shared together for so long.

Behind him, he was vaguely aware of Devak's wings flapping, of

Xanthus and his other brothers shouting from the hallway.

“Levi!” Someone’s voice cut through the din in his mind. Xanthus. “Touch her!”

Touch her? He forced his head up and what he saw knocked him back to his senses. Kat stood in front of Lux, her aura a black and red tornado whipping around her. Lux, bleeding and unmoving, lay on the couch. He looked behind him and saw that Devak had turned his back to the room, forming a barrier with his wings between what was happening and their other brothers out in the hallway.

“Touch her!” Xanthus shouted again.

Why? Leviathan returned his attention to Kat. He didn’t want to go near her, but Lux was starting to look awful pale. He surged forward, reaching for her ankle, but she whirled out of the way and kicked him in the ribs when he sprawled on the floor at her feet. The shock of heat coming off her aura nearly blistered him as he rolled away from another kick and swept her legs out from under her with his own leg. Caught off guard, she didn’t protect herself from the fall and her head bounced off the wood floor. Dazed and bleeding, she lumbered to her hands and knees. Leviathan took the opportunity presented by the momentary lapse and tackled her. He shackled her wrists in one hand and used one leg to keep her from kicking out and hitting a sensitive body part. She bucked and twisted underneath him and the amplified jealousy slammed into him again. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to think past the gnawing need to take away the only thing that had ever made his brother happy.

“Now what?” he shouted to Xanthus, but if he got a response, he couldn’t hear it past the roaring wind of Kat’s aura or her outraged shrieks.

Okay, plan B. He had to get her out of there so that Xanthus and the others could tend to Lux’s wounds. He twisted her around with the intention of scooping her into a fireman’s carry and taking her back downstairs to the cages, but something happened when he placed his hand on her chest to hold her down while he got a better grip—something like a rubber band snapping taut, a bond locking in place between them. Her eyes widened, her mouth opened, but no noise came out. In the next heartbeat, the tornado stilled and the colors of her aura evened out.

Gods, her aura was beautiful, a dance of breathtaking colors that didn’t exist anywhere but on the aural plane. Beautiful and special, just like that doctor he’d met at the morgue. He hadn’t realized it when he first looked at

her, because even then, she'd already been buckling under the influence of Lux's curse. But underneath all that darkness, she was vibrant and strong. Determined, proud, stubborn. And her aura radiated love for Lux.

The tension left her on a soft exhale and she blinked up with tears in her eyes. She turned her head to look at the couch. His brothers had banded together to form a protective circle around Lux, just as they always had for him at Perversion on a feeding night.

"I hurt him." Her voice was hoarse from screaming.

"Yes, but he'll be okay."

Her gaze shifted back to his, intense blue in the paleness of her face. "I'll just keep hurting him. You have to help me. Please."

"I will." Leviathan noticed his hand started to warm and suddenly, he knew with startling clarity what he had to do. She'd be lost to them again as soon as he lifted his hand, but if he didn't...

"It's all right," she whispered. "I'm tired."

"He'll never forgive me." Even as he said the words, his hand lost substance and began sinking into her chest.

She looked at Lux once more and tears ran rivers from the corners of her eyes. "Tell him I made you do it."

Deep in her core, he felt it—her soul. Hot with pain, it had all the same colors as her aura, a surprising mix of light and dark. It was heavier than he expected it to be, burdened with a lifetime of guilt and sadness, and his eyes burned for all she had endured as he drew it up and out. "I'm sorry."

Kat shuddered once, then gave him a sad smile before the light extinguished in her blue eyes. A second later, the ball of vibrant energy seething in his palm winked out, leaving nothing but residual heat in its place. He slowly folded his fingers into his palm and stared down at the lifeless body of his brother's soulmate.

Gods, what had he done?

Grief bent him double over her body, his sobs so hard that his ribs ached with every wrenching breath. A hand landed on his shoulder, and some of the grief instantly vanished as if absorbed through the contact. After a moment of catching his breath, he gazed through blurry eyes at Xanthus.

"How did you know?" He himself hadn't known he could rip a soul out of a body until it was happening.

"Solomon mentioned it in the Key."

He sucked in another breath and accepted the hand Xanthus offered to

pull him to his feet. He started toward the couch. “Is he okay?”

“He’s going to be out for a day at least. She cut him up good.”

Leviathan stopped and looked down at Lux’s pale face. “He’s going to kill me.”

“We won’t tell him exactly how it went down.”

“No. He deserves to know.” Exhausted, he ran a hand over his face. The same hand he’d killed Kat with. Oh shit, he was going to be sick. “I need ... a shower.” Or something. “Call me when Lux wakes up.”

He barely made it to his suite before he dropped to his hands and knees and puked all over his living room floor.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

Zayra paused midway through counting bills at the register as the bell over the door chimed, announcing Lux's presence.

"Oh God," she gasped and gripped the counter with white knuckles. He knew what she was feeling, knew now that he no longer had saint's blood in his system, she'd be fighting the urge to jump his bones and sate the lust heating her veins.

And he didn't give a flying fuck.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, her voice more breathless than usual. "You can't—" She bit her lip and fine beads of sweat broke out on her brow. "Shit. Lux, you can't be here. Not only for obvious reasons, but —"

"Kat's dead."

"What?" That sobered her up fast. She hurried around the counter, but stopped short two feet from him, her hand lifted to touch him. He flinched away and she dropped her arm back to her side. "What are you talking about?"

"She's dead."

Her face went white. "No. What? No, that's not possible. She's immortal. All Society agents..." She must have realized by his expression that he was telling her the truth because she trailed off. "What did you bastards do to her?"

"My brothers did it," he said through his teeth, the anger all but choking him.

"Xanthus?"

"Partly."

Something like betrayal flashed in her eyes before she hid it. “When?”

“Three days ago.” For three whole fucking days he’d been swimming in unconsciousness, and Kat had been dead. Killed by his own brothers. And the betrayal of that still cut so deep that sometimes it hurt to draw a full breath. They shouldn’t have interfered. She wouldn’t have killed him, and eventually she would have worn herself out. They could’ve locked her in the cages again until they found a better solution to keeping her safe.

“*Three* days?” Zayra looked like he’d walked in and bitch-slapped her without a word of warning. Which he kind of had. He probably should have been more tactful about it, but screw it. He was on a mission.

“Zayra,” he snapped.

She looked up at him, mascara smeared around her eyes.

“Can you bring her back?”

She blinked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“No! What the... why would you even think of doing that? Especially after three days! If she’s dead, she’s dead. Even if I could bring her back—and I *can’t*—it’s not a good idea on so many levels. You’re insane for even wanting to try it.”

“I did my homework. I know exactly what you are.”

He didn’t think it was possible, but her face went even whiter. “You... do?”

“I know you’re a reformed black magic witch hiding from your old coven. I know you can bring her back.”

“Oh.” She closed her eyes and let out a breath that sounded a lot like relief. When she opened her lids again, some color had returned to her complexion. “Okay, fine. Technically, it’s possible, but I won’t. It’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong is living the rest of my miserable existence without her!” He didn’t realize he’d shouted until the last word echoed back at him in the silence that followed. “Please,” he added and his voice broke. He didn’t care if it made him look like a weakling.

“You’re right. That is wrong for the both of you. Shit.” She slapped at her tears, and nodded. “All right, I’ll try, but no promises it will work. I’m not at full strength.” She motioned him toward the back room, but then stopped short and held up a hand. “And, please, keep your distance. It’s hard enough resisting your... pull... when I’m in the same room as you and I don’t want to do anything embarrassing.”

Lux took a step backward and nodded. “Understood.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

Kat blinked and tried to bring her vision into focus. She hurt all over, the muscles in her arms straining, her legs tingling like they'd fallen asleep. Something wasn't right about this. She was dead. She knew that, remembered the feel of Leviathan's hand reaching inside her body and plucking the essence of her free. She remembered feeling weightless, floating. Then—nothing. As if she'd ceased to exist. God, she liked that thought. Disappearing into oblivion was so much easier than living the insubstantial life of a ghost who had all the same feelings and thoughts as before death.

Lux.

No, she wouldn't think of him. She couldn't for the sake of her sanity. Already a vise clenched in her chest with just that fleeting thought.

She didn't really feel like a ghost. She felt solid, real, except for the fact no heart thumped behind her ribs and she was pretty sure the whole inhale-exhale thing was more out of reflex than necessity. Yes, that was just a little strange.

Focusing her eyes seemed to take more effort too, but once she did, she saw a glossy black ceiling with some kind of white tube snaking over its surface. A memory niggled, but she couldn't focus enough to bring it to the forefront of her brain. Instead, she glanced around. Glossy black walls, floor. Except one of the walls looked transparent, like gossamer fabric that muffled the image of whatever was on the other side. She was laying flat on her back, arms and legs caught in binds that felt almost like leather. She craned her neck to see them. Symbols she couldn't begin to guess the meanings of had been burned into the material.

A binding spell. Someone did not want her poofing out of this room when she came to.

Was this how Lux had felt when she'd served him up to Lilith strapped to a table? No, she realized. Given his past, it had probably been worst for him. God, she'd caused him so much pain. No matter what he'd done in a fit of bloodlust, he did not deserve all the misery she'd brought him. Stupid of her to take this long to realize it. Her family was gone. Pursuing their killer with single-minded stubbornness had done nothing for them and had only made her hurt more as the years dragged on. She never grieved for them as was proper. She offered herself up to the first person who promised her vengeance and never looked back. She hadn't even buried them, had just left them to rot where they lay.

And yet she'd claimed all these years that everything she'd done was for them.

The gossamer wall opened up, and two people stepped through. She recognized Lilith's laugh immediately and had the impression the demoness hung onto the arm of a broad man dressed in a three-piece suit, but she couldn't crane her neck enough to see his face.

"Where am I?"

"Oh, look," Lilith cooed. "Our visitor is awake."

The man walked around the top of the table, and Kat struggled to follow his movements.

Lilith leaned over and studied her like one would a particularly interesting science experiment. "I can't believe she's awake and aware."

"What did you do to me?"

Her question went unanswered.

"Talking, too," Lilith added and gave an amazed whistle. She looked up at her companion. "You're right. She's stronger than the others."

"I cultivated her to be," a familiar voice said, and Kat jerked as if he had prodded her with a live electric wire. Her vision blurred with tears when he leaned over her with a smirk on his classically handsome face. "Isn't that right, Katherine?"

Asa Smith. The Society's leader was here—wherever *here* was—and flirting with Lilith.

For one ridiculous second, hope bloomed inside Kat's silent chest. Maybe he was undercover, here to find and free her spirit? No. She rejected the desperate thought as soon as it formed. Too many of the puzzle pieces were

finally falling into place. The assignment to capture Lux and Dracian's mistaken belief that she had defected. The way Asa had fed her stories about Lux all these years, stoking her hatred, and she'd stupidly gobbled it up, swallowing every bit of his bullshit with a smile and a thank you.

Her mind raced, connecting two hundred years of pieces. "Why?"

He pulled off his coat and passed it to Lilith, then unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. "The Yawning, of course."

She stared at him in disbelief. He needed her to usher in the apocalypse?

"Are you insane?" Even before the words left her lips, she knew their redundancy. No shit, he was insane. In her two hundred years of life, two others had tried to jump-start the Yawning. One was a disgruntled priest. The other, an occultist. They both had failed and met nightmarish ends. She had to believe Asa—God, *Asa?*—would fail, too. "It won't work."

"I beg to differ."

"You can't make me believe you don't remember what happened to the last two—"

"The others were test runs. This is the real deal, the culmination of two hundred years of planning. My *pièce de résistance*, if you will. The recipe is very specific, calling for an old, pure soul perverted by vengeance and taken by Lust. Which, dear Kat, is *you*."

She jerked on her binds. If she could just get her hands free, she would go vengeful spirit on his ass and—

"Yes." He sucked in a breath through his nose. "Yes, keep it up. So much hatred. If it doesn't fire up the ole end-of-the-world machine, I don't know what will."

Oh God, she couldn't get free. The binds seemed to tighten with every pull. But she had to... to think of something. She couldn't let him go through with his plans. Had to stall...

"Who are you?" Without a doubt, he was something more than an immortal demon slayer named Asa Smith.

"Oh, how rude of me. Allow me to introduce myself."

He moved, still at the edge of her vision, and there was a splashing sound like a bucket of watery mud hitting a concrete floor. The creature that stepped forward was no longer classically handsome. His eyes were sunken black holes, two rows of tiny black teeth lined his lipless mouth. Twisted horns protruded from just above his tiny ears and the lower half of his body was that of a hairless goat. Bits of blood and flesh clung his hooves as he stepped

forward.

Even Lilith seemed taken aback by his ugliness.

“That body was getting rancid anyway,” he said. It was disconcerting to hear the same cultured voice that she knew so well come out of the beast’s mouth.

He swept into a mocking bow. “I’m Ashmedai. I was the feared keeper of Lust, before that bastard Solomon enslaved me, took Lust and gave it to a human slave boy. A *human*! It’s a disgrace to the underworld. Truly, all seven of them are, but that will change soon. Lilith?”

Lilith was looking at the toes of her Louboutins, her curly hair falling in a curtain over her face.

“Lilith!” Ashmedai shouted, and she jerked upright.

“Yes?”

“We’re ready.”

Lilith nodded and disappeared from Kat’s view. If she’d still had a heart, she was sure it would be pounding out of her chest.

Then a horrible thought struck. “*You* killed my family.”

“Yes,” he said as if she’d asked him if the sky was blue. He connected a tube to each of the straps at her wrists and ankles, and a low-level hum filled the room. “I told you I needed an old, pure soul, and the only way I was going to get one was if I made it.” He fiddled with something just out of her visual field, and that hum vibrated down to her bones. She tried to focus her mind on the situation rather than the vibration that was fast becoming painful.

Something ripped inside her, and then she was flying through space, pulled somewhere unknown by forces she couldn’t name. She didn’t care to stay with Ashmedai, who looked shocked as hell as she lifted off the table and floated over his head toward the ceiling, but she wasn’t all that interested in seeing where she ended up. For all she knew, she’d be dumped on Lucifer’s lap. This whole ghost thing was going to be a real pain in the ass if she constantly got jerked from place to place like this.

When she landed, she couldn’t get her bearings for three long seconds. Then she saw him. Lux. Staring through the gossamer curtain at her like he’d seen a ghost.

Well, duh, he had if he could see her. She reached out and touched the barrier separating them. It looked so thin, like mist, but felt as solid as a steel wall. She couldn’t even feel the heat of his hand as he raised his palm to hers. His lips moved, but she couldn’t hear anything he said and shook her head as

tears dribbled down her cheeks. Impatient, she wiped them away. Who knew ghosts could cry?

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be,” he said, and his hand suddenly pushed through the wall and found hers, as solid as ever. She gasped at the contact and a tingle worked up her arm with a healthy pink flush. Lux laughed and entwined their fingers, holding on so tight it hurt, but she didn’t care. She gripped his hand just as tightly.

“It’s working,” he told someone behind him that she couldn’t quite make out. Then he gave her the gentlest smile she’d ever seen from him. “Hi, sweetheart.”

She opened her mouth to say, “I love you,” but nothing came out. The warmth of his hand disappeared, replaced with the cold wall. His lips moved, and he pounded on the wall, his palms swiping over the barrier. Kat felt that strange tugging, then she was flying again and landed hard on the table in front of Ashmedai and Lilith. They sprang into action, refastening the binds around her wrists and ankles. They wasted no time talking and hooked her to the tubes again.

The first jolt of pain ripped the breath from her lungs. The second came with searing heat, and made her scream.

“It’s not working,” Lilith said. “Dammit, she must have seen him when she disappeared. She’s not angry anymore.”

“I’ll make it work.” Ashmedai leered over her, his lipless mouth pulled into a smile that looked more like a grimace. “You know what I did to them, Kat? Your family? I started with the baby first. I tore open his stomach and played with his entrails while your mother and sister watched him bleed out.”

Kat saw her nephew’s tiny, broken body in her mind’s eye, and remembered stepping over his intestines, his blood coating her riding boots as she searched the barn with the futile hope her mother, brother, and sister were still alive. How could she have ever believed Lux capable of such atrocities? One more thing to add to the list of reasons she would rip out Ashmedai’s throat as soon as she got free.

“Yes,” he hissed. “You hate me, don’t you? I can smell your bloodlust. Your sister and brother were next. Gulped him up whole. He was a tasty little morsel, but not as sweet as your sister. She came for me right before I slit her throat.”

Kat strained against her binds. “I’ll slaughter you!”

He crooked a finger. “Try it. I saved your mother for last, which was a regrettable mistake. She had so much fire at first, but when the light went out in your sister’s eyes, she gave up. She didn’t want to live any longer. Her perfect daughter was dead, and she didn’t care enough about you to fight for her life.”

His words plucked at a buried emotional scab that she hadn’t even remembered existed. Bridget had been the perfect one, the one who married into a good, wealthy family, who’d had the perfect baby son, who was happy with her lot in life and never yearned for anything more. Kat had been the wild child, the permanent thorn in her mother’s side. Was it any wonder her mother hadn’t fought after Bridget and William died? But it hurt. Oh, God, did it hurt! The pain wound through her rage and intensified her hatred. She felt her incorporeal form distorting and twisting as the binds around her wrists and ankles glowed so brightly, Ashmedai backed up a step and raised an arm to shield his beady eyes.

The ground began to shake.

It didn’t work.

Lux stared at the empty wall in front of him, still searching for Kat in the chipped plaster. “We have to try again.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry,” Zayra said, tears choking her voice. “I’m not powerful enough anymore.”

“There has to be something!”

“I’m sorry.” She touched his shoulder. He flinched and turned away, striding out of the shop without another word or a glance back. Outside, rain poured from the sky, and the city was so oddly silent that he could hear the splash of each drop hitting the ground, as well as the over-loud echo of his footsteps. As if he was the only living being left on earth.

He climbed into the Escalade and sat there for so long he lost track of time. Rain drizzled down the windshield like the tears he wanted to cry, but found he couldn’t.

He felt... empty. Hollow. Like his heart had been ripped out of his chest and replaced with a ball of lead.

Kat was gone, and she was never coming back.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

As the morgue's doors burst open, Dr. Juliette Kitts glanced up from her examination of a ten-year-old boy who appeared to have been either extremely clumsy or horribly abused during his short life. She leaned toward the latter, seeing as his cause of death was looking more and more like antifreeze poisoning. The tox screen would be the final determination, but poor little James showed all the signs, and Juliette ached for his mother, who, according to police reports, had done everything in her power to get her children away from their abusive father. Unfortunately for little James, it wasn't enough.

Rick Suen burst into the room, his slanted eyes impossibly wide in a face as white as the sheet covering James' lower body. "Jules, holy shit! You have to come upstairs!"

She set down her scalpel, tucked the sheet around James' shoulders, and peeled off her gloves. She didn't pause to ask questions and hurried after her technician—only something serious would make the perpetually laid-back Suen freak out like this. By the time they hit the stairwell at the end of the hall, Suen was at a full run and almost skidded into the metal fire door.

She steadied him, then pushed through the door. "What's wrong?"

"You won't—I don't know how to—" He shook his head as they raced up the stairs side-by-side. "You have to see it for yourself."

Tons of horrible possibilities careened through her mind as she picked up the pace and took the stairs two at a time. A gunman in the hospital? But then Suen would be locking them into the morgue, not leading her upstairs. A school bus accident or gruesome multi-car pile-up that left the dead lining the E.R.'s hallways? It wouldn't be the first time since she began working at

Saints of Mercy Medical Center, but in cases like that, the E.R. would call her with a forewarning. Or—God, please, no—a 9/11-type event here in Chicago?

Her heart pounded in her temples by the time she reached the door to the hospital's front lobby. She shoved through, expecting to find chaos on the other side....

Silence.

Thick and heavy, it smacked her in the face like a tangible object. She skidded to a halt, stunned. Two dozen people stood completely still, staring out the glass front of the hospital at the parking lot beyond. Juliette shouldered by several nurses and a man who was bleeding profusely through a kitchen towel from a wound on his hand. She grabbed a clean towel from an aide's cart and shoved it at him as she passed. He didn't notice, the towel dropping unused to the floor at his feet.

Juliette made it to the front of the lobby and scanned the parking lot. At first, she didn't see what had everyone so stunned. It was raining, but this was Seattle. Nothing unusual about that. Then a flaming ball of hail streaked through the dark sky and broke apart on the pavement. Then another. And another until the sky looked on fire. The crowd gasped, and the chaos she'd expected erupted when the trees lining the sidewalk burst into flames. She pushed forward in the tide of people, trying to see what was happening outside while everyone else scrambled deeper into the building. Sirens screamed all over the city, which had gone oddly silent except for the sound of rain sizzling in the flames.

Juliette wrapped her arms around herself, horrified and yet too stunned to take her eyes off the flames until she felt a presence move next to her in the empty foyer.

"It has begun."

She looked over at Father Art Harmath, the hospital's only full-time clergy. "Father?"

He crossed himself, then took off the heavy crucifix he always wore and looped it over her neck. "Keep this with you."

"Father," she protested and started to take it off, but he stayed her hands. "Oh, no. I can't take this. Art, you know I'm not religious—"

"For me." He enfolded her hands in his and gave them a gentle squeeze. "Please, Juliette. Every bit of protection helps." With that and a whispered prayer, he left her standing in the empty lobby.

The hail fire had already returned to normal rain, but flames consumed several trees and at least one car. She looked down at the cross still in her hand. Father Art was an intelligent man who had been a doctor himself before he went into the seminary. How could he believe a piece of gold-plated metal offered any sort of protection? She took the necklace off and stuffed it into the pocket of her lab coat. She couldn't begin to guess what that storm had been, but she sure as hell knew it was nothing of a divine making.

CHAPTER
FORTY

“Where is he?” Leviathan scanned the mass of writhing, sweating bodies on Aftermath’s dance floor, but it wasn’t the thumping techno music that had them grinding like that. Lux was definitely here somewhere.

The club’s owner pointed toward the ceiling, indicating the V.I.P. section on the second floor. He was Aemohi—a cerebral race of Immortals who were unaffected by the curses of the Deadly Seven. And he was pissed. Or at least as pissed as an emotionless Aemohi could get.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” the owner said. “He’s ruining my business. Everybody’s too busy fucking to buy anything. I want him gone.”

Leviathan nodded and took the steps two at a time. Upstairs, Lux sat on one of the plum-colored chaise lounges, his face devoid of expression as he let the horde of horny V.I.P.s pet him. At least he still had his clothes on. Every time one of the humans got a little too zealous and went for a button or zipper, he sent them sailing across the room with a flick of his wrist.

Shock coursed through Leviathan as he watched one man slam into the wall and come limping back like an abused puppy seeking his master’s favor. Although Lux had always had the power, he’d never before used it against the humans that fell under his curse. He’d always said they were innocent, couldn’t help themselves, and he wasn’t going to punish them for something that was beyond their control just to save himself. They would hurt enough when they snapped out of it and realized what all— or more like, *who* all—they had done while under his curse’s influence.

Now, Lux ignored the injured man's pleas for attention and took another swig from a three-hundred-dollar bottle of whiskey that he'd already put a good dent in. Three other equally expensive dead soldiers formed a line on the floor next to his seat. Gods. Good thing Revelin's multiple business ventures kept them in the black because it looked as if Lux was trying to drink his way through their bank accounts.

Leviathan stopped in front of him. "Where the fuck have you been?"

He lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug and raised the bottle again. Took him several tries, but he finally got it to his lips without spilling any. "Around."

Furious, Leviathan shoved aside the mewling idiot who was still trying to kiss his way up Lux's body. "You have any idea how worried we were?"

"Not like I can die. Believe me," he muttered, "I tried my damndest. Did you know we can survive decapitation?"

Leviathan's blood ran cold. "What?"

"Yup, it's a new one for me too. It hurts like a bitch, but it doesn't kill us. We just knit ourselves back together." He snorted and took another long drink. "We really are the freaks of the underworld."

Leviathan noticed the faint red line ringing his brother's neck and tasted bile on his tongue. "Lux, man, don't do this. You think this is what Kat would've wanted for you? Laying yourself out for these humans like a bourbon-marinated steak?"

Leviathan's back hit the wall with enough force to crack the plaster, and his breath huffed out as Lux's fist landed a hard blow to his gut.

"Don't you come in here acting all high and mighty, talking about what she would have wanted. You're the reason she's dead!"

All right, if this was how it had to be, they'd have it out. But not here.

Leviathan ducked another blow aimed at his jaw, and Lux's fist crashed through the wall. The humans in the room paid no attention to the sound. It would have been easier if they'd scattered once the fight broke out, but with Lux in the room, they had painfully one-track minds.

Leviathan dodged naked bodies as he ran toward the stairs with his brother hot on his heels. Damn. Even completely shitfaced, Lux could *move*. He barely made it to the parking lot before Lux caught him around the waist and tackled him. His chin bounced off the pavement and he tasted blood as Lux rolled him over and started pummeling him like a workout bag. He was surprised to see his brother's fangs extended to their full length. He'd figured

Lux would take out his frustrations on him, but it never occurred to him that Lux might drain him. This was going to suck—but it was less than he deserved. After so many years of trying to protect his brother, he'd been the one to inflict the worst pain imaginable.

Only right that Lux should give some of that pain back.

Lux was vaguely aware of his brother's face swelling under his knuckles. It registered somewhere under his drunken haze that Levi could take him out with just a thought—the guy was a demigod, after all. And it registered that he'd quit fighting back and now lay on the dirty pavement outside Aftermath, letting Lux beat the hell out of him.

But it didn't matter. All he could see, feel, taste was the rage. At his brothers. At his curse. At the whole fucking world.

So he swung, again and again, until his fists screamed every time they made contact, and he felt the face of his opponent collapse under his blows.

"Shit!" someone said behind him.

Two sets of hands gripped his biceps, and he found himself airborne. For a second, the weightlessness felt magical, like it had lifted all of his burdens. Then he landed with a jarring thump on the hood of a car that dented under his weight. He lay there, hands throbbing, head thundering, the taste of his own blood hot on his tongue from where his fangs had sliced into his lip. He stared up at the sky. No stars. This deep into the city, the light pollution blotted them out. But the moon....

He blinked.

Holy hell.

Was it *red*?

No, couldn't be. The blood moon was over, and it was the wrong color for another one—scarlet instead of the usual rusty orange-red of a blood moon. He was bleeding into his eyes or something. The tang of blood hung thick in the air, both his own and someone else's. He turned his head gingerly, his gaze following the scent across the parking lot. Two figures—Xanthus and Avi—stood over a third, and Xanthus's hands glowed amber as he passed them over the prone man's body. After several long heartbeats, the guy on the ground stirred, then sat up.

Leviathan.

He'd been hurt?

Pain knifed through Lux's ribs as he drew in a breath to call out. Had they been in a fight? The past... he didn't know how long. Day? Week? It was all such a blur, a jumbled mix of images like an old VHS tape that had been cut up and hastily resembled.

The only thing he recalled clearly was Kat. Snarling at him. Smiling at him. Making love with him. Calling out for him.

His eyes stung and the pain in his ribs became a distant memory, replaced with a heavy ache that swelled with every beat of his heart: Grief.

Tears blurred his vision as he watched his three brothers approach him like one would a rabid animal. He didn't bother holding the tears back, letting them seep from the creases of his eyes.

"Think he's losing his humanity?" Xanthus asked.

"No," Leviathan said without a shred of doubt, even though he was still bleeding from one ear. "I think he has too much."

"We need to get him out of here before the human authorities show up," Avi said.

The last thing Lux saw before fading into unconsciousness was Avi's angular face leaning over, his blond hair loose and brushing the tops of his shoulders, as the barely full, blood-red moon haloed his head like a nasty omen.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

A wreck. All of it. The whole week, everything screwed all to hell and back. For the second time.

Zayra paced the length of her shop, from the front velvet-covered window, through the stockroom, to her apartment in back, and then looped around to do it again. But the constant one foot in front of the other action did nothing to slow her racing thoughts as she'd hoped when she started this little marathon.... when was it? Two days, a week ago? She'd lost track, but she'd started the pacing after Lux left with his heartbreak written all over his face, and it had become her routine. Get up. Drink her morning tea. Pace. Help her occasional customer. Pace. Close up shop. Pace. Shower. Pace. Go to bed. And repeat it all the next day.

If only she had the power to time travel. She'd pop back and make sure Kat never met Lux, and all would be right with the world. Or kind of right, anyways. Better yet, she could pop back two hundred-odd years and make sure Kat *did* meet Lux. Then everything would be one hundred percent right.

If only.

There had to be a way to fix this. Had to. Except she kept coming up blank, her mind grinding out all sorts of possibilities, all of them a no-go. As much as she hated to concede the fact, the situation was out of her hands. Maybe it had never been in her hands to begin with.

The front door chimed as someone stepped inside. Halfway through her stockroom, Zayra stopped and did an abrupt about-face, grateful for the distraction. She hurried out into the store to greet—

Gluttony.

Yes, he was a distraction, all right. Just not one she wanted. So that he

wouldn't see the sudden tremble in her fingers, she closed them around the nearest object: a table featuring candles of all different makes for all different purposes. The table, she decided, needed to be moved. Right now.

Of course, Xanthus was johnny on the spot, gripping the other side and helping her lift it.

She scowled. "You can't—"

"Be here," he finished and took the table out of her grasp. "Yeah, I remember the whole spiel from last time. Where do you want this?"

Dammit, she didn't know. She looked around and pointed to a spot where two glass sculptures used to sit. She'd sold them the day before the shit hit the fan and hadn't had a chance to replace them. The table was as good as anything, so she pointed him in the right direction and followed as he effortlessly carted the table and its candle load to the empty space. He set it down, and even under the brown leather of his jacket, she saw his muscles flex. And that butt, in those dark jeans when he bent over...

Oh, baby.

Every drop of saliva evaporated from her mouth. No, she would not picture this sin incarnate jacketless. Shirtless. Naked.

Oh, shit. Too late.

Zayra shut out that unbearably hot mental image and made sure her expression was set in annoyed lines when he turned around. "Seriously, you need to leave. I don't want you here."

"I know." His wide shoulders sagged a little, as if the weight of the universe was slowly crushing him. And didn't that just take the wind right out of her sails of the good ship Umbrage.

She sighed. "Then why did you come?"

"I.... Shit, I don't know. Wanted to talk?" He ran a hand over his face and let out a self-deprecating laugh. "Ah, yeah. Stupid idea. According to my brothers, I'm full of them. Sorry for bothering you. I'll just ... let myself out."

As he turned to leave, his fists stuffed in the pockets of his bomber jacket, he looked so... lonely. Zayra truly ached for him, deep down in her belly. She wanted to soothe him, which definitely was a stupid idea given what he was and what *she* was. But, yeah, like him, she'd been accused of having more than her fair share of stupid impulses, and she was not going to let him just walk away. Not when he looked like a stagger-on cast member of *The Walking Dead*.

She sent a curse heavenward. As if anyone there would be listening to her anymore. “Wait.”

Halfway out the door, Xanthus stopped. When he glanced over his shoulder, she waved him inside. “Hurry.”

“Thank you.” He stepped back in and waited while she locked the door, flipped the sign to closed, and pulled the blind over the window. She half expected him to make some sarcastic remark along the lines of “Paranoid, much?” but he just stood there, silent as a ghost. A very big, very masculine ghost that took up waaay too much room in her tiny space.

Um, okay. Now what was she supposed to do with him? Filled with nervous energy, she edged around him and hurried to the kitchen of her tiny apartment. He followed.

“Uh, would you like something to drink?”

Duh, of course he would. He was Gluttony.

“I don’t drink alcohol,” she added and knew she was babbling but couldn’t seem to stop. “So it’d have to be like... tea. Or milk.” She reached into the fridge for the milk, but thought better of it when she saw it had become a solid sometime in the past week. She really should pay better attention to expiration dates. “Or, um, tea since that’s all I have. Sorry about the no alcohol thing.”

His smile was only a quarter of the wattage she was used to seeing from him. Not only did he look lonely standing there in the middle of her kitchen, but his expression was so damn sad, and sleepless bruises colored the hollows under his baby blues. “I’m trying to cut back, believe it or not. Tea’s fine.”

“Great.” Zayra rolled her eyes at herself as she turned toward the cupboards and hunted up a clean glass for him. Look at them being so achingly polite to each other. Given the literal fireworks of their last encounter, she’d expected something more... she didn’t know. Intimate maybe? More like old friends rather than strangers forced to share an elevator. Next they’d start discussing the weather.

Oh, wait. That was something they actually had to discuss. But how to broach the topic without giving too much of herself away? She filled the mug with hot water from the kettle she always kept on the stove, then dropped a tea bag in and handed it to him, careful to avoid skin-to-skin contact.

“Did you find Lux?” Yes, that was a good place to start, and she gave herself a mental pat on the back.

“Yeah.”

“Well?” she prompted when he offered nothing more. “Is he okay?”

“He beat the living hell outta Leviathan when we found him, if that gives you a clue.”

“So that’s a big no.” She dropped into a chair at her kitchen table with a heavy sigh. “Dang it. This is not how it was supposed to be.”

“Tell that to the Fates. Vindictive bitches,” he muttered. “Pretty sure they live to screw us over.”

The Fates. Right. She should defend them. Wasn’t their fault Kat was dead, Lux might as well be, and The Yawning had been wrought upon humankind. Then again, if the Fates hadn’t created her to be such a monumental fuck-up, all would be right with the world now. So, yeah, blaming them worked for her. “They have a talent for screwing people.”

“Cheers to that.” Xanthus took a polite sip of his tea and set it aside. And then he just stood there, silent and preternaturally still. Minutes trickled by until she couldn’t take it anymore.

“Something on your mind, Gluttony?”

He blew out a breath. “Is there any way—”

“No.” She didn’t need him to finish the thought to know what he was asking. He wanted her to try and bring Kat back again, and it just wasn’t possible. Whatever or, more likely, *whoever* bound Kat to the netherworld had too strong a hold on her. And after rising the dead attempt number one, Zayra’s mojo was tapped out. She’d be lucky to conjure enough power to light a candle right now.

“Fuck, I have to do something.” His stillness vanished in a burst of energy, and he began to pace, dragging his hands through his blond waves. “Lux is so fucking sad, it’s dragging everyone down. The house is like a tomb. Nobody talks, nobody plays Xbox. For fuck’s sake, Tristin doesn’t even beat the hell outta his drums anymore. We can’t stand it.”

She arched a brow at that. Something in the way he said... “We?”

“Okay. Me, all right?” He stopped moving and rubbed a hand in a circle over his heart. “I have no clue about my brothers, but *I* can’t stand it anymore. Can’t eat. Can’t sleep. Can’t fuck...”

She decided to ignore that last one. Because, yeah, she just didn’t want to think about it.

He continued pacing. “It’s like my own heart is a train wreck of tiny pieces, and I can’t find the crazy glue to stick it back together. I have to fix this before I lose my mind.”

He *felt* his brother's pain? Whoa. Wasn't that a revelation and a half?

Zayra shoved to her feet and put herself in his path so that he had to stop or bowl her over. For a second, she thought he might do just that. Then he slammed to a halt directly in front of her, so up in her personal space that her breasts nearly brushed his chest, and she could smell the leather of his coat and a dark, woody spice of an expensive aftershave. So close, she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze.

"You're an empath." She couldn't help the wonder that came out in her tone.

"No," he said with such finality that she would've believed it had he not contradicted himself from one breath to the next.

"Yes, you are. You're... empathic. Wow."

Xanthus's jaw cracked from the force of his grinding teeth. "Okay, yeah. Maybe I am. So?"

So she wondered if her former bosses knew it. A sin and an empath. The combination was unheard of as far as she knew. Then again, Xanthus and his brothers were one in a—er, well, seven in a zillion. Their lives were completely uncharted territory, which was one of the reasons so many groups feared them.

And just like that, she understood so much about him.

"Xanthus..." There were hundreds of questions she wanted to ask, so much she wanted to say, but all of it fled the moment she opened her mouth. She reached up and cupped the hard line of his jaw in her palm. Just as the first time they'd touched, lightning sizzled between them at the contact, charging the air until the hairs on the back of her neck lifted. Her hair wasn't the only thing to rise to attention, and she became achingly aware of the bulge growing behind his fly.

Gods, all this time, he'd probably felt every forbidden thing that she had experienced in his presence. How embarrassing. And yet, not.

His features softened, and his lids lowered to sexy half-mast, the blue of his irises seeming to glow in the shadow of his long lashes. For a heartbeat, she'd have sworn he was going to lean down and press those full lips to hers... Even wanted it. Yearned for it more than she had for anything in a long, long time. Would he taste as sinfully delicious as he smelled? Would he growl deep in his throat and cup her butt, dragging her closer to the evidence of his insatiable hunger?

Yes. Oh, yes. She wanted that from him and much, much more.

He had to know the depth of her desire. As an empath, he felt others' emotions and could even absorb them as his own. Which made it hurt all the more when he jerked upright and backed out of her reach. She dropped her hand to her side and stared at him. How could you be in the same room as somebody and still feel miles away?

Xanthus cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. If he wasn't known throughout both the human and the supernatural realms for his debauchery, she'd think he was embarrassed. Shit, maybe he was. For her. Because why would someone like him want someone like her when he could have any woman of his choosing?

Zayra swallowed down her own surge of mortification and pretended that intimate moment had never happened. "Do your brothers know about your abilities?" The question came out all business. She couldn't hear even an ember of her banked desire in it. Yes, good. They'd just put the last few minutes behind them and move on like the more-than-grown immortal adults that they were.

Xanthus said nothing in response, and she risked a glance at him when the silence got to be too heavy for her ears. The darkness in his expression sent shivers through her, but he was completely unreadable.

"I don't want to talk about it." A whole lot of end-of-discussion rang in his tone.

Ha, did he not know her very well or what? Dog with a bone didn't begin to describe her when she sank her teeth into something. But she would drop it for now. While she may be as stubborn as her kind came, she also knew how to pick her battles. Usually. This was one to fight and win another day.

"What about *The Solomon Key*?" he asked abruptly and turned away from her.

Yep, all business on his end now too. She refused to let his sudden coldness hurt. "What about it?"

"Anything in there to help Lux?"

"I don't know. I can't read it, remember?"

"But *I* can. Where is it? I wanna read that fucker cover to cover. There has to be something in there about Lux, Kat, the firestorm..."

And topic broached. That wasn't so hard. Not.

Zayra slipped passed him and headed for the safe in her shop, where she'd started keeping *The Key* after Xanthus's first visit. "Well, uh, about that storm? You don't need the book. I know what it was."

He caught her arm, his grip bruising as he jerked her around. “Next time, lead with a big news flash like that.”

She tried to yank her arm free and only got a shock of pain in her shoulder for the trouble. “Let go of me.”

The candles on the table he’d helped her move flared to life like miniature torches. He glanced over at them, eyes narrowed, then dropped his gaze to his hand on her bicep as if just noticing it. He released his grip, and sure enough, she was going to have a hand-shaped bruise.

“Shit. Zayra, I’m sorry.”

“Whatever.” With a thought, she extinguished the candles and continued toward the safe. “The storm,” she said, speaking over his next apology, “is the beginning of The Yawning.”

Even from across the room, she heard the frown in his voice. “I’ve never heard of it, and I’ve been around a long time.”

“It’s a well-guarded secret, so closely kept that it’s considered a myth. Or, it was, but that firestorm the other night was the green light, so anyone and everything that knows about it knows it’s happening now.”

“What is it?”

“Apocalypse might ring a bell. Basically, a very bad time to be human.”

“Good thing we’re not.”

She gave him a wry look over her shoulder as she punched in the code for the safe. “Worse time to be you. The Yawning opens a portal between all the realms. Demons from the innermost depths of hell will be able to claw their way free, and they will seek out you and your brothers as threats to their newfound freedom. Not to mention the original keepers of your sins, who will definitely want their powers back.”

“Fucker can have Gluttony back if he really wants it,” he muttered. “If I could dig it out of myself, I’d hand it over on a silver platter.”

“Believe me, the last thing we need is Beelzebub walking the earth again with the power of gluttony.”

He was silent for a beat. “Well, that sounds ominous.” He exhaled hard. “Okay, so who has the power to rip open the realms? And how are we supposed to close them?”

“That, I don’t know.” Zayra turned with The Key in her arms and thumped the ancient book down on the counter in front of her. “Hopefully, this will tell you.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO

“He’s still at it?”

Lux gritted his teeth at Leviathan’s quiet voice behind him.

“Yeah,” Avi said just as softly, as if using his inside voice would keep Lux from overhearing when they were in the same freaking room. “I’m waiting for him to drop any minute now.”

Fuckers. Shows what they know. He kicked up the treadmill’s pace a notch and threw himself into the run, his eyes glued on the white painted wall in front of him. He felt his brothers’ stares on his back, felt their pity, and wanted to kill them for it.

Even the sound of his own footfalls thundering a steady rhythm pricked at his nerves, but damned if he would stop. The only sleep he’d gotten since Leviathan dragged him out of Aftermath two nights ago came when he ran himself into the ground. This exercise shit was better than ten bottles of alcohol.

It worked as a kind of punishment too, when his knees wanted to give out, and his lungs screamed for oxygen, and his ribs ached, and he keep pounding out miles anyway. He was at that point now, straddling the line between a grueling workout and self-abuse, and jabbed the button on the console to increase the pace and incline yet again. His calves started to burn, and he welcomed the pain with a smile. Better. So much better than the unforgiving ache in his heart.

“Go get some food,” Leviathan finally said to Avi. “I’ll stay with him for a while.”

He wanted to tell them both to fuck off, that he didn’t need a babysitter,

but at the moment, his mouth only worked to draw oxygen into his lungs in giant fish gasps.

The door shut behind Avi, and Leviathan took up residence on the weight bench next to the treadmill. He let out a heavy sigh. “This isn’t going to work.”

What did he know? It was working just fine.

Click. Click.

“I know you miss her,” Leviathan continued. *Click.* “Believe me, I know what it’s like to want what’s impossible to have.” *Click.*

Lux pretended his brother wasn’t there, pretended he wasn’t somehow making that annoying clicking sound. Just run. Run. Tune everything else out and run.

Click, click, click.

Godsdammit, what the hell was that sound? Lux glanced over. The slight shift was enough to throw him completely off balance in his exhausted state, and he would have gotten up close and personal with the treadmill’s belt if he hadn’t flung out his arms in time to catch himself on the rails. No facial road rash, but he was going to have one hell of a skinned knee. He braced his feet on the edges of the still-whirring belt and shut the machine off before glaring over at his brother.

That clickity-click came from the keyboard of Leviathan’s phone sliding out, then sliding back, and it wasn’t helping his already volatile mood. “If you’re going to text someone, do it already, for fuck’s sake.”

Leviathan clicked the keyboard closed one last time and slid the phone into the back pocket of his jeans. “Later. I want to talk to you now.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“You never are, and that’s part of your problem. You’re such a tight-lipped bastard, keeping everything locked down like Fort Knox, and it’s gonna—”

“Yeah, fuck you. Hypocritical jackass. How about we talk about what has you all tied up in knots? Who have you been cozying up with on the phone every night, huh?”

Leviathan’s fists tightened at his sides. “Strike at me all you want, but leave her out of this.”

“Her? Yeah, that’s what I thought. Real kinky, little brother.” Lux jumped off the treadmill and stalked over to the shelves that held a supply of clean towels, only to find a stack of solid gold rather than soft cotton. Godsdamn

Tristin. After how many thousands of years, ya think he'd know better than to touch anything with his bare hands?

Gods, he was sick of it all. His brothers. Their problems. His curse. The need for blood that he kept trying to deny, but that was rising ever higher ... With a roar, Lux gripped the shelf, ripped it off its wall support, and hurled it, gold towels and all, across the gym. It crashed into a rack of handheld weights, splintering wood.

Footsteps pounded through the hallway outside, and the gym's doors burst open. As he sank to his knees on the workout mats covering the floor, he shut his eyes, closing out the image of Leviathan waving their worried brothers back.

"Shit," Revelin said.

"What happened?" Tristin.

"You set him off." Leviathan, accusing.

"What'd the fuck I do?"

"Solid gold towels ring any bells?"

Silence. Then, "Fuck this. I'm outta here. Do your own laundry from now on."

The door slamming behind Tristin ushered in another silence. Longer, tenser.

Finally, Avi said, "Lux, bro, please talk to us. What can we do to help?"

Lux opened his eyes and looked at the three of his brothers still in the room. Leviathan appeared a little green, and not from his curse. Avi, shirtless with his long sliver-blond hair hanging loose over his shoulders, gripped a towel around his lean hips as if he'd been about to shower. Revelin wore black sweatpants and was also shirtless, showing off a canvas of colorful tattoos, but that was his usual around-the-house garb. The spots of blood soaking through the new white bandage on his right forearm said that he'd recently given himself more ink.

"You're gonna run out of skin soon, Pride," Lux said.

Revelin blinked in surprise. With a crooked half-smile, he palmed the bandage. "Then I'll have to start on you."

Lux thought about the only mark on his body, the symbol of lust on his hip that had cursed him all those eons ago, and winced. "No thanks."

Avi held out a hand to help him up. "Feel better now?"

Not even close, but he accepted the offer and climbed to his feet. His knees shook at the effort of holding himself upright and the sweet pain of

knots forming in his muscles made him want to jump back on the treadmill and run his legs into stumps.

Avi slung an arm over his shoulders. Like all wolf shifters, the guy's inborn pack mentality left him with zero concept of personal space. "We'll get you through his, bro."

He didn't want to get through it. He'd gotten through enough in his life. Didn't he deserve a little respite from getting through, maybe even a little happiness? He wanted his woman back, safe and whole. Even if it meant he'd never be able to see her again, knowing she was alive out there somewhere would bring him a small measure of... if not happiness, then at least peace.

Gods knew he could really use some peace.

"I'm okay," he assured and ducked out from under Avi's arm.

All three of his brothers gave him identical looks that said, *Yeah, right*. If there had ever been a question about their paternity, that look right there proved they were related, and he suddenly wished he had a camera to capture Hear, See, and Speak No Evil on film. A laugh tried to bubble out of him but got caught somewhere in his throat. He was losing his goddamn mind.

"Let's go upstairs," Revelin suggested. "Get you some food, beer... and the other thing you need."

"No. I'm not leaving the house."

"I figured as much, which is why—"

"I got it!"

Revelin scowled and turned as Xanthus burst into the room. "You got what, Gluttony? Syphilis?"

Xanthus flipped him the bird but didn't break stride as he crossed to Lux and held out a stack of papers. "Here."

"What's this?"

"Your biography. A complete history."

His hand trembled as he took the stack and his mouth went bone dry. A strange mix of excitement and terror surged through him. "W-Where did you...?"

"I translated it from *The Key and Witchy Woman*—ah, I mean, *Zayra*. She typed it up. It's all in there, Lux. Everything you can't remember and most definitely some shit you never knew. We all have a biography in that book, and I'll say one thing about *Daddy Dearest*. That man could keep secrets from the devil himself." He produced three similar stacks from under his jacket and handed one to Avi and another to Revelin. He stopped in front

of Leviathan and held out the last. “You’re the key, Levi.”

“To what?” Leviathan asked, making no move to take the papers.

Xanthus grinned. “To getting our brother’s woman back.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE

It was like reading someone else's life story. Lux recognized places and names, but only because he'd been there or met that person after his curse. Some part of him had hoped reading about his life before would jog something loose inside his memory, but he got nothing. Still a blank slate.

His mother, Ilithyia. A slave girl of such beauty that Solomon adopted her into his harem and then promptly abandoned her when she became pregnant. His earliest life had been spent in a sling on his mother's back as she toiled away in the same palace where she'd once been treated like a queen. His later years were spent working right alongside her until her death at the oh-so-young age of twenty-seven.

Gods, he wished he could recall her face, her voice. He couldn't even remember if their relationship had been a loving one or one fraught with strife. He wouldn't blame her if it had been the latter. His birth had ruined her life.

After her death, there was a six-year gap in his biography. Solomon apparently had no use for him as a son and largely ignored him until the king's attempt to bind Lust to his bidding failed. Then the slave boy, the son Solomon never wanted, had made for a perfect test subject.

Reading about the morning of his curse, seeing his first solid memories through his father's clinical eyes, was almost as surreal as reading about his life before. He remembered waking up that morning with dawn barely on the horizon and four other slaves that he'd counted as friends holding down his arms and legs. The pain had been unbearable, his insides all but boiling. He could feel Lust, at that time a separate entity, trying to claw its way out of his chest. Blood erupted from his mouth, and all the while, Solomon stood back

at a safe distance and watched with a mild sense of curiosity. Would his plan work? Was this the answer to curtailing those horrid apparitions that wreaked havoc on his kingdom? If so, he had more than enough sons to sacrifice for the greater good of his people.

At some point, Lux blacked out, and when he woke, it was to find the slaves that had been holding him down were now doing so for very different reasons. Stroking, fondling, kissing. And his father had watched from the sidelines, wanting from him exactly what the slaves were taking—

Okay, yeah, he was done with this.

Lux shoved the papers away and locked stares with Xanthus across the dining room table. Xan—who had translated this account of his rebirth in all its gory detail—didn't look away in embarrassment. Nor was there any pity in his eyes, thank fuck. If anything, there was admiration, but Lux didn't particularly care for that either, and in the end, he was the one to lower his gaze.

“So...” Avi said, dragging the word out as he finished reading and shuffled his stack of papers together in a neat pile. “Our curse... *fused*... us with spirit beings. No big reveal there. We already knew that, just not the specifics of it. And frankly, I don't know about you guys, but I could've gone without.”

“Nothing surprising here either,” Revelin said and looked up. “But we need to get The Key and make sure it stays safe. Information is power, and if Xan's witchy girlfriend is—”

“Whoa, she's not my—”

“Rev's right.” Leviathan spoke up before an argument broke out. Even as shell-shocked as he looked at the moment, he still had to play peacekeeper. Typical. “If that freak firestorm the other night was the start of what amounts to a demonic war, we need to keep our secrets close.”

Lux caught the subtext in the words as clearly as if Levi had spoken it out loud. Not so much *their* secrets, but *Leviathan's*. “What does yours say?” He was almost too afraid to hope and hadn't allowed himself when Xanthus dropped his bombshell about Leviathan down in the gym. But still, hope, sneaky bastard that it was, seeped through his defenses.

Please, please let Xanthus be right for once in his life.

Leviathan sat back in his chair and wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. “According to The Key, I received more of my mother's powers than I ever imagined. I pulled the soul out of a minor god when I was two and...” He

shot a quick glance at Lux. “Because of me, we were deemed too dangerous to remain among humans, and Solomon’s last act as king before his death was to separate and imprison us.”

So that was the why of it. Even as the oldest in the group, Lux had never known the reason behind their imprisonment. One day, they’d lived quietly in a heavily guarded fortress on the outskirts of the kingdom, largely ignored by their sire—and the next, Solomon’s Aemohi guards stormed their home. Leviathan, as the youngest, had been abducted first. A day later, they came for Avi, and he would always remember his brother’s terrified screams as the guards ripped the five-year-old from his arms. One by one, each of his brothers disappeared until only he and Xanthus, a teenager at the time, remained. When the guards came for Xan, they’d fought valiantly—and failed. It had been one of the only times in his life he’d ever willed his curse to work, but the Aemohi, a cerebral race unaffected by emotion, were completely immune.

“I’m so sorry,” Leviathan whispered.

“Why are you apologizing?” Lux demanded.

“Because you were locked in those tunnels in Paris—”

“Not because of you.” Conviction turned his tone to steel. “You were a baby. You should have been trained to handle those powers, and you weren’t. It’s not your fault.”

“But—”

Avi reached across the table and gripped Leviathan’s forearm. “It’s not your fault, Levi, and nobody here blames you.”

Okay, maybe Avi’s touchy-feely pack instinct wasn’t such a bad trait because the contact seemed to soothe Leviathan.

“No blame from me.” Tristin.

A grunt of agreement from Devak.

“You couldn’t have known what you were doing.” Revelin.

“If it was your fault, I’ll cut off my favorite appendage.” That last remark came from Xan and received a ripple of laughter.

“See?” Lux said. “And, hey, Tristin, Devak, and Revelin all agree on something for once.”

“Definitely another sign of the apocalypse,” Leviathan muttered and earned another round of chuckles. He relaxed and even sat back in his seat with a hint of a smile.

“Now tell them the rest,” Xanthus said after several beats of silence.

Leviathan exhaled a long and slow breath. “Not only do I have the power to kill anything, but Solomon theorized that I’m also capable of walking in the netherworld like my mother. Theoretically, I should be able to take you to Kat. And... bring her back.”

Lux shut his eyes against the enormous surge of emotion, afraid he might burst into tears in front of his brothers. “How?” Okay, screw it. There was no hiding his feelings behind a shield of manliness when his voice came out sounding choked.

Nobody said a word.

He popped his lids to glare at them. “Well? How do we find her?”

Devak, who had stood silently in the corner of the room throughout most of the conversation, finally spoke up in his gravel-laden voice. “Find the demon who took her soul.”

“What?” Oh Gods, Kat was in the hands of a demon? That possibility had never once crossed his mind. He’d just assumed.... Well, he didn’t know. But he’d hoped, somehow, she was somewhere.... better. “Why would a demon have her?”

Devak tilted his head to one side in a very bird-like gesture. “What is it do you think Sombrae do?”

“Besides eat small children?” Xanthus asked.

A growl pumped out of Devak’s throat, and his taloned wings stretched to their full length. “The only children we eat are the ones who annoy us, brother.” He spat the last word like a curse.

Xanthus made a gagging sound. “If he’s ever in the kitchen on Thanksgiving, I’m not touching dinner.”

“Do you have a death wish, or are you just that stupid?”

“Enough,” Lux said. “Can you do it? Can you find Kat?”

Devak shook out his wings, and the dark expression that crossed his face was far more demon than not. “Can try.”

Great. Just fucking great. His hope of ever seeing Kat again rested on the shoulders of his most unpredictable brother. “No offense, Dev,” he said and faced the group again, “but is there another way?”

Silence.

“C’mon, guys. There has to be—”

In a surge, Leviathan sat forward, his eyes bright with a plan. “There is. We start where she began.”

“Ireland?”

“No. The ISRS.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR

“You sure this is the area?” Leviathan asked when Devak dropped them on the rooftop of an abandoned hotel.

Lux studied the street below a second time. He’d been so out of it with bloodlust when Lilith released him that he didn’t remember the specifics of street names, but when he and Devak did a flyover, he’d recognized the little playground in the lot next door. He also remembered staggering by that Starbucks across the street. It had been closed at the time, but now it was still early enough that the scent of coffee wafted on the chilly night air every time the door opened, reminding him that he hadn’t put anything but alcohol and water in his system for almost a week.

Along with the hope of seeing his woman again—touching her, kissing her—had come the hunger that he’d suppressed for too long. The bloodlust, too, but he squashed that and told his body to simmer the fuck down. With all the blood he’d taken during his last binge, he should be sated for a month. But just the thought of having Kat on his tongue while he was inside her again had his fangs punching out of his mouth. Maybe Zayra was wrong. He sure as hell still felt addicted. Only difference now was that he didn’t feel like ripping through the human population in a mindless bloodbath. This time, he knew exactly who he needed, and he would search heaven, earth, and the deepest reaches of hell to find her.

He turned to Leviathan, who was still waiting for his answer. “Yeah, this is the place.”

“Very populated area,” Leviathan said and curled his fingers around the roof’s ledge as he also studied the street. “Risky.”

“Not so much. Lilith worked some kind of shielding magic. The room she

kept me in looked like something out of a hospital morgue, everything solid to the touch, but when she dropped the spell, it was just a gutted space. I originally thought it was an office, but... no, this is the place.”

Leviathan glanced down at the neon hotel sign protruding from the side of the building, which probably hadn't worked in ages. He frowned, dark brows drawing together in a line of concentration.

“What is it?” Lux asked, following his gaze.

“I sense something.” He shook his head. “Can't put my finger on it, but it's almost ... familiar. And not in a good way.”

Devak returned with Xanthus and dumped him none too gently on his ass.

“What the hell kind of landing was that?” Xan complained.

Devak said nothing and disappeared again.

Xanthus muttered a curse and stood, brushing himself off. “Sure that winged asshole's not adopted?”

Lux opened his mouth to respond, “Absolutely,” but closed it again without uttering a sound when the winged asshole in question rematerialized on the roof's ledge in a crouch.

“Ambush,” Devak announced without preamble and pulled his katana swords from the sheath between his wings with a long, slow *shhh* of steel sliding against leather. “Three Sombrae at the hotel's entrance. Two inside. They must sense me but have made no move to stop me. Also saw not-human humans.”

“The Uncanny,” Lux said and his heart twisted. “That's what Kat called them.”

Devak shook out his wings. “Whatever. Lots of them.”

“You think they're waiting for us.” Not a question but a statement, and his heart kicked with nervous excitement. No way demons would be guarding this place if it was truly abandoned.

“Know so,” Devak said.

And with the excitement came an overwhelming wave of dread. *Feax*. What was he dragging his brothers into? “I should go in alone.”

“Hell no.” Xanthus drew two short daggers from under his bomber jacket and wagged his brows. “Fighting is my second favorite f-word.”

“And you need me,” Leviathan pointed out, reasonable as always. He grabbed his cell phone and fired off a quick text message. “I'll warn Avi about the Sombrae and Uncanny at the door.” His phone beeped almost before he finished the sentence, and he nodded, sliding the thing into his back

pocket. “He says they got it handled. Devak, you want the honor of taking down the two inside?”

Devak’s lips twisted. “Does Xanthus whine like a girl?”

“Hey!” Xanthus said and took a fast step toward Devak, who vanished. He tossed one of his daggers at the empty space.

“Easy,” Leviathan said. “Save it for the demons we’re not related to.”

“Yeah, well.” He stalked over and yanked the dagger out of the roof, where it had landed point down in the gravel. “Brother or not, I really can’t stand that guy.”

Watching the familiar interplay between his brothers gave Lux another case of the oh-shit-what-am-I-getting-them-intos. Yeah, they were just as immortal as he was, but they could be wounded, and he hated the thought of causing them more pain. He’d done enough of that in the past few weeks.

“Guys, this is my fight. You really shouldn’t—”

“Shut up,” Leviathan and Xanthus said at the same time. Then Leviathan added, “Did you even bring a weapon to this fight?”

Uh, no. No, he hadn’t. Honestly, dipshit that he was, it hadn’t even crossed his mind.

His brothers shared an exasperated glance, then both dug into the veritable arsenals they somehow managed to conceal on their bodies. Xanthus produced another dagger from his boot and some throwing stars. Leviathan handed over a Smith and Wesson and two extra magazines. It all felt clumsy and ridiculous in Lux’s hands, but he hadn’t had the luxury of honing his fighting skills during his imprisonment like his brothers had. Sure, he’d occasionally sparred with them in the years since, and he could hold his own well enough, but he was still a rank amateur.

Aw, screw it.

Hissing in exasperation, he dropped everything. He didn’t need any of it, had his own built-in weapons that never dulled or ran out of ammo. He willed his fangs to extend until he could barely close his mouth and allowed the bloodlust to raise its ugly head within him.

“Riiight,” Xanthus said and scooped up his knife and stars. “Forgot about those babies.”

From inside the hotel, a screech of pain rent the air. The peculiar bird-like sound meant one of two things. Either Devak was injured, or he’d just dished out a world of hurt to his full-blooded Sombra friends. Lux bet on the latter and broke into a run across the rooftop.

“Incoming!” Leviathan shouted behind him a split-second before cold, damp shadows dropped over him like a curtain. Blinded, he stumbled to a halt. The shadows snaked out, wrapping around his limbs like manacles.

Okay, small miscalculation. That Sombra’s cry hadn’t been one of pain but a call for reinforcements.

Laughter echoed all around him, deep, evil, and with even more grit to it than Devak’s voice, but he couldn’t see the fucker that held him hostage.

“I know what you want, Lust.” The words rasped in his ear even though he felt no breath, no presence behind him, and he realized suddenly that he was no longer on the roof. The demon was taking him somewhere. He jerked his arms, but his invisible binds only tightened.

More laughter. “It won’t work. You will never get your woman back. Our master will not allow it.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, no, no. Fuck *you*. I plan to when our master releases you to me. And he will. He will be so pleased with me, he’ll let me have you when he’s through. Do you know what I plan to do to you?”

As the demon began listing a litany of sexual acts that included everything from kinky to the downright grotesque, Lux fought the urge to roll his eyes, the threats of rape rolling off him like rain off an oil slick. He didn’t have time to wonder what had changed, why the threats no longer bothered him when they used to leave him frozen with fear, but all he heard from the demon was a whole lot of blah, blah, blah. Been there, done that, have both the T-shirt and the koozie.

Sheesh, did this guy ever shut up?

Figures he’d end up trapped by the only chatterbox Sombra in history. But ... maybe he could use that to his advantage.

“Who is your master?” he interrupted.

The Sombra hissed. “The one who owned Lust before you. The one who will own Lust again after I taste your entrails and...”

And on and on and on.

Lux tuned out the demon and thought back to his biography from the pages of *The Key*. No mention that the aerial spirit of Lust had a keeper before they became one and the same, but...

He thought back to the night Kat had nabbed him from *Perversion*, to her vehement insistence that he was a demon. Why would she think that unless a text labeled Lust as such? He struggled to recall everything he’d ever read

about himself and his brothers. Some of it was true, most of it ridiculous, but he did seem to remember mention of—

Ashmedai.

As if conjured by the memory, the shadows swirling around Lux parted, and there Ashmedai stood in all his unholy glory. No longer on the roof, they were in the same gutted room where Lux had spent some non-quality time with his sister. The sounds of battle echoed all around the empty building.

Oh yes, he remembered this asshole now. A fallen seraphim, Ashmedai had been bound by Solomon's infamous ring long before Lux's first clear memory and probably even before Lux had drawn his first breath. Even as a slave, Ashmedai had been cocky and bitter and as ugly as all get out. Nice to know that after thousands of years, some things never changed.

Ashmedai spread his clawed hands, and a wide smile turned his lipless puss into something not even a mother could love. "Welcome to my humble abode, old friend."

Right. If this guy thought he'd play along with this whole long-lost reunited pals bit, he was delusional.

"Where's Kat?" Lux asked as the Sombra released its murky hold on him.

"Does it matter? She served her purpose," Ashmedai said and dismissed the Sombra. "Come, look around you. Have you ever seen so many demons in this realm, gathered in one place?"

No, as a matter of fact, he hadn't. In all the years of his life, he'd seen a Sombra pop up here and there, but nothing like this current infestation. And those demonic roach-like things scuttling up the wall behind Ashmedai? Yeah, he didn't even know what to call them. Except disgusting. And then the Uncanny with their not-right eyes and blank smiles.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? *Kat* did this," Ashmedai continued, sounding like a proud father. "She sacrificed herself so that we may take what is rightfully ours. She'll go down in history as the harbinger of this new era."

"Where. Is. She?"

"She's gone."

"No." His mouth went bone-dry even as he told himself it wasn't true. He wouldn't let it be true. "She's coming home with me tonight"

"You do know she's dead, right? Killed by your own brother's hand?" Ashmedai opened a portal in the air between them, and there swam an image of Leviathan nailing one horned demon between the eyes with a well-placed bullet while another creature with wings and a spiked tail closed in on him

from behind. Lux opened his mouth to shout an automatic warning, but Levi spun and performed an impressive *Matrix*-worthy slide under the hovering demon, then came up behind the thing and shoved his hand through its chest. He yanked out a black ball of energy that looked like a handful of writhing snakes, and the demon dropped to the floor in a lifeless heap like its cord had been pulled.

Holy shit. That was some talent little bro possessed.

And he'd *used it on Kat*, putting her directly in Ashmedai's claws. Might as well have gift-wrapped her and—

No.

Lux ground his teeth and forced that mental runaway train to derail before it exploded. He was over being angry at Leviathan. His brother had done what he needed to do. Having had some time to think about it, Lux couldn't say with one hundred percent certainty that if their roles had been reversed, he wouldn't have done the exact same thing.

Family looked out for each other. End of story.

Ashmedai closed the portal with a careless flick of his wrist and grinned. "Tell me, how did it make you feel to learn your brother killed your lover out of jealousy?"

"It wasn't jealousy."

"You honestly believe Envy doesn't suffer from his own curse?" Another wave of the hand. Another portal opened, showing a human woman surrounded by animals. The phone rang, and she all but jumped over a desk to get to it, excited expectation written all over her pretty face. But whoever was at the other end of the line wasn't who she'd been expecting, and her smile vanished.

This was the woman Leviathan had been talking to every night.

After a short conversation, she hung up the phone and glanced at her watch. "He's really not going to call, is he?" she asked the brilliantly colored parrot perched on her desk. "I got stood up for a phone date. God, how pathetic is that?"

The portal blinked out.

"See?" Ashmedai drawled. "He can't have the woman he wants, so he made sure you couldn't have yours. He killed Kat because he didn't want you to be happy, and now she's gone forever."

No, it was a lie. Demons lied. It's what they did.

Still, as Lux tried to convince himself of it, part of him recognized it as at

least a semi-truth. His jaw cracked from the force it took to unclench his teeth and speak. “Gone forever is not possible in our world.”

“Please. As old as you are, I expected you to know better than that.” Ashmedai clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth like he was scolding a toddler. “But let me give you a brush-up lesson in demon physics. Opening the hellgates took a lot of energy. From her, not me, of course. She was all used up, and like anything past its expiration date, she had to be discarded. Sorry.”

Discarded. Like trash.

Another semi-truth and Lux shook with rage. His muscles strained, contracting into knots of steel under his skin, making him ache all over, and the pain of it almost eclipsed the one in his chest, where his heart had become a pounding back hole. A tingling sensation started in his stomach, rose up his throat, and punched his fangs from his gums, the bloodlust darker and hotter than any he’d ever experienced before.

Kill.

Definitely. He was going to make this bastard bleed. For trying to fuck with his head and turn him against his brothers. For using Kat’s soul like an expendable resource. And for every damn thing that was wrong in the world right now. Ashmedai would bleed, and then he would spill his guts, figuratively, right before he did so literally.

Kill.

Lux lunged, going in low, and—surprise!—took Ashmedai’s hoofed feet out from under him. The demon hit the concrete floor with a forced exhale that stank of cinnamon and brimstone. Lux went for his throat, and the rotten taste of demon blood exploded on his tongue, drained down the back of his throat, and made him seriously consider revisiting every ounce of scotch he’d drank over the past week. But he held on. Ashmedai’s buck and twist self-defense strategy was about as effective as a bull’s frantic attempts at escaping a rodeo ring. Problem was, sometimes the bull got lucky and busted through the fences. Especially when the bull had wings.

Tissue paper-thin wings tipped with barbed talons burst from Ashmedai’s back, and despite their fragile appearance, they packed a punch like a champion boxer on steroids. Lux sailed across the empty room until the opposite wall put an abrupt stop to his flight. Ashmedai caught him, a talon ripping through each shoulder, pinning him to the plaster several feet off the floor. His vision wavered, and the rich dark spice of his own blood mixed

with the demon's on the air.

"I'm tired of you," Ashmedai hissed. "Now I want what your father took from me."

Lust. He wanted Lust. Fine. Lux would give it to him.

For the first time in his life, Lux focused all of his energy on his curse, stoking the embers of it that constantly burned behind his ribcage. He let it build, higher and higher, until he could no longer stand the heat. His head tilted back on a scream as the wave of power tore out of him with such force that it knocked Ashmedai halfway across the room. Without the talons pinning him, Lux slid down the wall and landed hard on his ass.

Throughout the building, weapons clanged to the floor, and just like that, the battle ceased, the sounds of fighting replaced with moans that were more about unfulfilled agony than pleasure. Lux had only a second to hope that fuck-me tidal wave hadn't affected his brothers too before he staggered to his feet. He had to find a way to bind Ashmedai, but there was absolutely nothing of use in the—

The room shifted before his eyes, the change so swift it shot his equilibrium all to hell, and he almost ended up on his ass again. He blinked and tried to orient himself in the new space, fighting down a surge of motion sickness.

A modern-day torture chamber, he realized as he glanced around. Lilith's Little Chamber of Horrors was back.

Behind him, chains scraped against the concrete floor. He whipped around, ready to defend himself. Expecting the worst and finding...

Lilith clamped iron manacles around a moaning Ashmedai's wrists and another set around his legs. She then crossed to the wall where the chains were anchored with a thick steel loop and hoisted the demon into the air.

"Why?" Lux said. It wasn't the most intelligent response, but the disconnect between what his eyes saw and what his logic knew had turned his brain to slush.

His sister hated him. Why would she help him?

Lilith secured the chains and turned around with a *well, duh* look on her face. "Because I hate *him*"—she gave Ashmedai's suspended body a solid kick that sent him swinging like a piñata— "more. You know, enemy of my enemy and all that."

"Why aren't you—" He stopped, already knowing the answer to the question he'd planned on asking. She wasn't writhing on the floor in the grip

of extreme sexual need because, like the whores in the brothel he'd once lived in, she was incapable of feeling lust. And for a heartbeat, a breath of time, he let himself hurt for his little sister.

Then she stalked over and slapped more chains in his open palm hard enough to sting. "Remember, iron and water. Now you owe me a biggie, and I always collect my IOUs."

She vanished before he could reply, and dread curled through him as he gazed up at Ashmedai. He'd gotten what he wanted, but at what cost?

Shit.

CHAPTER 45

Water and iron.

Such simple things, but they proved to be Kryptonite to Ashmedai. Iron chains assured that he stayed put. Add in a little water torture and that was all it took.

Ashmedai had lied. Kat wasn't gone. Not yet, but if they did not get to her soon, she would be.

After that, snuffing out Ashmedai's life had been a breeze thanks to Leviathan's newfound gift.

"Whodathunk it?" Xanthus said as he kept pace behind Lux through the maze of Perversion's hallways. "All the times we've partied here, and I never knew it was a portal to the netherworld."

Lux stopped in the middle of the nightclub's empty dance floor and looked around. The place was dark, silent, and shut down for the night. It even smelled clean—well, if you overlooked the stench of demon blood from the horde they'd fought through to get in here.

"Where is it?" he asked. "I don't see a portal."

"I... don't know." Leviathan did a lap around the floor. Then another, slower. He circled behind the bar, glanced down the back hallway toward the bathrooms, and then came back to stand beside Lux on the dance floor. "Sorry, bro. Not sure what I'm looking for here."

"That's cuz I got all the brains in the family," Lilith said behind them, and Lux groaned as every one of his brothers whirled around, weapons drawn. Raising an eyebrow at the show of force, she snapped her fingers at him like a spoiled princess calling her manservant. "Lux."

Damn that woman. Any soft feeling he might have had for her vanished

in an instant, crushed like the tender first bloom of spring under an avalanche of icy rage. She just *had to* put in an appearance and rub it all in. The bitch.

Grinding his teeth, he stepped in front of her and faced his brothers, who all looked at him like he'd just pulled a Benedict Arnold. But, well, duh. That's exactly what he'd just done, and they had all the right in the world to their feelings of betrayal. Because as much as he hated it, Lilith had him by the short hairs until he found Kat.

Lilith clapped her hands. "Aw, isn't this just the sweetest family reunion ever?"

They all ignored her.

"Give us one good reason why we shouldn't take you down and send her back to hell," Revelin growled, his golden eyes flaming as only the son of a phoenix could.

"I only have one reason," Lux replied. "Kat. She's my reason for everything."

"Don't tell me you made a deal with this bitch," Xanthus said.

"Aww," Lilith said and set a hand over her heart. "My feelings are hurt, Xany. Really."

Again, they ignored her.

"Lilith helped me subdue Ashmedai," Lux explained. "So now I owe her."

Someone cursed.

"Right." Lilith's sly smile would make the Cheshire Cat proud. "Which means my big brothers are no longer allowed to pick on me."

"Only until my debt is paid, then you're fair game again. So where is it?" Lux demanded. "Where is the portal?"

She snorted. "It's not a portal, dumbass. It's the Veil." She sent Leviathan a scathing look over her shoulder. "How can you be the only son of Hecate and not know this shit?"

"Maybe because I've never had the opportunity to meet our mother," Leviathan said dryly.

"Believe me, you're not missing out."

"The Veil," Lux prompted between his teeth. Impatience ate at him and, deal or not, he was inches away from throttling Lilith.

"Oh." She waved a hand, and one of the walls shimmered like heat rising off the pavement on a hot day. "It's right there."

Lux started for it, but she blocked his path.

“Whoa, now, partner. You can’t go charging in there. That’s just a wall to you, and as much as I’d like to see you knock yourself unconscious, I’m feeling generous tonight. Plus, I like your woman. She’s got spunk, and I’d hate to see her die. Again. So here’s the deal. Leviathan has to yank your soul out.”

“No fucking way.” Leviathan’s hands bunched into fists at his sides. “I’m not killing him. Lux, c’mon, you know we can’t trust her. She’s trying to trick you.”

Maybe. Probably. After all, demons lied. But what other choice did he have? “Then what?” he asked Lilith.

“Then Leviathan walks you through the Veil, you find your woman, and everyone goes home happy. Including me, because I now have a shiny IOU. So don’t say I never did anything nice for you. Now, brothers, I hate to sound like an eighties action flick, but I’ll be back.”

A whole minute ticked by in silence after she vanished. Then another. And another. Finally, since nobody else seemed inclined to take action any time soon, Lux stripped off his jacket. He tossed it aside and hoisted himself up to sit on one of the black glass tables.

“No.” Leviathan lifted his hands and started backing away. “We’re not doing this.”

“Yes, we are.”

“Lux—”

“Yes. We. Are.”

“I can’t. No, fuck that, I won’t. I don’t know the extent of my powers, and don’t know how to control them. Hell, we don’t even know if I’ll be able to put you back in your body at the end of this. It’s all theoretical right now. I need time to—”

“I need to find her.” He let every emotion inside him roil to the surface, and finally let the tears in his eyes spill over. “Please, Levi. I know about the woman at the pet store. Do this for me, and I’ll help you any way I can.” Before anyone could stop him, he grabbed Xanthus’s dagger and sliced it across his palm. Blood bloomed along the wound, little droplets that soon became a stream. He held his hand and the dagger out to Leviathan. “Please.”

“Goddamn it, bro. First Lilith, and now me? You can’t go around offering up deals like that. It never ends well.”

“Too late. The deal’s offered.” And maybe it was underhanded and manipulative of him to do it this way, but he knew that as the son of Hecate,

the goddess of witchcraft, spirits, and the crossroads, Leviathan was compelled to accept. “So let’s do this.”

With a muttered curse, Leviathan took the dagger and sliced open his own palm, then clasped their wounds together. “I accept, but you owe me nothing in return.”

“That’s not what I offered—”

Leviathan’s hand tightened on his. “Nothing.”

“No, I—” He felt the bond form between them and snap taut, sealing their deal. Too late to change the terms.

Leviathan held his hand a second longer. “You better not die on me, bro, or I’m gonna find a way to resurrect you so I can kick your ass.”

Lux swallowed down a lump of emotion. His brother was willing to risk a lifetime of guilt for nothing, and the selflessness of the act was humbling. He had spent his entire life in hiding, looking out for number one and nobody else, but if he came out the other side of this experiment whole, that was going to change. Leviathan didn’t want his help, but somehow he’d find a way to give the guy what he wanted most.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me until I bring you back alive.” Leviathan turned away to study the Veil.

“Know how it works?” Xan asked.

“Guess we’ll find out.” He lifted a hand. Slowly, ever so slowly, he reached out to the shimmering curtain, and... his hand went through like it was no more solid than a waterfall. He stumbled a little as if he’d braced himself for resistance.

“Whoa,” Xan said. “What’s it feel like?”

“Cold.” Leviathan moved forward, and his arm disappeared up to the elbow. Then his shoulder. Without glancing back, he stepped through, completely disappearing from the room. A second later, the Veil shimmered, and he walked out again.

“What does it look like over there?” Avi asked.

Leviathan shrugged. “Pretty much the same. It’s quieter, and there’s a stillness in the air that’s fucking weird. I could see you guys on this side through the Veil.”

“Did you see Kat?” Lux asked.

“No.”

All right, then. Show time. Lux lay back on the table and tried not to

flinch when Leviathan leaned over him and placed a hand on his chest.

“Ready?”

“No, but do it. And if you tell me ‘this might sting,’ I’ll have to punch you, so—”

Heat.

No, not just heat. That was too soft a word for the pain. Holy shit, it felt like a supernova had just exploded inside his chest. He bit back a scream as he felt something rip, and the weight of his body fell away. He materialized beside Leviathan, who held a ball of energy that radiated red, blue, and gold light. “Is that... me?”

Leviathan nodded and carefully put the ball in a small leather pouch, then tucked the pouch into the pocket of his jacket. “Yeah. It’s how you look when I turn on my x-ray vision.”

“How who looks?” Avi asked.

Levi exhaled hard. “Lux. He can see his own aura.”

Avi looked down at his body, still and silent on the table. “You’re talking to him? Right now? And he’s talking back?”

“He’s right next to you.”

Lux reached out to touch his brother and assure him everything was okay, but his hand passed through Avi’s shoulder.

Avi shivered and took a step sideways, eyeing Lux like he was a ghost. Which, yeah, he supposed he was.

“Did he just touch me?”

“He did.”

“This fucking weird,” Lux said at the same time Avi said, “Tell him not to do that again. It’s like he dumped ice water on me, and it pissed off my wolf.”

“He *can* hear you,” Leviathan said with a note of bone-deep weariness in his voice. “And, yes, it’s fucking weird.”

Well, shit. Lux had never considered how much his brothers’ other abilities must weigh on them. Dealing with his one curse was hard enough. He couldn’t imagine having to wrangle other supernatural powers. For the first time ever, he was glad he’d been born human. No aural X-ray vision or wolf for him, thank the Fates.

“All right, let’s do this,” Leviathan said. “Hang on to me, and don’t let go on the other side.”

When he laid his hand on Leviathan’s shoulder, it felt real, unlike Avi’s.

He felt the flex of Levi's muscles under the soft leather of his jacket, just as he would were he not a spirit. "Got it."

Lux couldn't begin to describe the feeling of stepping through The Veil into the netherworld. It was at once heat and ice, agony and ecstasy. He wondered if this was the same thing Kat had felt, or was it different for the dead than it was for the semi-living? He hoped so because this oxymoronic mix of sensations was not pleasant.

"Do not let go of me," Leviathan warned again.

"What will happen?"

"I don't know, but let's not temp the Fates more than we already are."

Yeah, probably a good idea, and he tightened his grip on his brother's shoulder. The room they emerged into was the mirror opposite of the VIP section of Perversion, except for a table in the center of the dance floor. Red splotches stained the wood, and even on this side, Lux scented the sweet and spicy tang of Kat's blood.

So much of it.

What had they done to her?

He lurched a step forward, but Leviathan grabbed his arm. "Steady, bro."

"Gods," he breathed. "They hurt her. I can smell—how can spirits bleed?"

"Because the dead are just as solid on this side as the living are in the human realm. Look at your hand. You're a ghost on this side, too, because your soul is still attached to your body." Leviathan led him past the table and into the hallway beyond. Again, it looked the same as the one in the world of the living—black painted walls, ropes of neon white light snaking across the ceiling that flickered like something out of a bad horror movie—except this one wasn't littered with bodies of Ashmedai's demon minions. The hallway opened up to a bigger section of the club meant for the general population.

"There she is." Leviathan pointed to one of five cages hanging from the ceiling over the dance floor. On the otherside, scantily clad dancers shook what their mamas gave them inside those iron cages. On this side, the cages were bone, and only the demons knew what kind of slimy rope suspended them from the ceiling. If Lux had to hazard a guess, he'd say it was a length of intestine. Not that he particularly wanted to hazard a guess.

A wisp of faded red hair peeked out from between the bars of the center cage.

"Kat!"

No answer. Lux wanted to run to her, but he couldn't let go of Leviathan, and they first had to lower her with the pulley system behind the bar. They worked together, and with a rattle and a clank, the cage swung to the floor.

"Wait." Leviathan caught his arm when he would have rushed forward. "Bro, you have to be prepared. With what they've done to her, she might not be the Kat you're used to."

"I don't care."

Leviathan studied his expression for a long second. Searching for what Lux hadn't the faintest.

"I don't care," he repeated.

"You really love her, don't you? No matter what."

"No matter what," he agreed, and for the first time all night, Leviathan grinned.

"That's good. Hang on to that love. We're going to need it." With that, he let Lux take the lead.

But now that he was free to go to her, his feet wouldn't move. He didn't know what to expect and was terrified at what he'd find, but he hadn't come this far to let his inner coward take over. He quashed the dread rising in his chest and forced himself to take that first step. And the second.

No matter what. He repeated it over and over in his mind, a mantra he wasn't going to let himself forget. No matter what. She was his Kat. His love. No matter what.

A figure lay crumpled in the center of the cage, her hair a tangled, dull red mess that obscured her face. But her body.... A shudder shook him to his core, and he felt his brother's hand tighten reassuringly on his shoulder. That twisted, wilted husk looked nothing like his Kat's lean, sleekly muscled body. But he knew without a shred of doubt it was her, and the pain of trying to swallow back the sudden lump of sorrow in his throat was almost too much.

"Kitten?"

CHAPTER 46

Kat didn't bother lifting her head. Wasn't the first time her mind had conjured up Lux's soft voice and she was sure it wouldn't be the last. But she couldn't let it distract her. She had to rest and heal as much as she could before Ashmedai hooked her up to his end of the world machine and sucked her dry of everything that made her Kat O'Dwyer. She knew she was almost used up, a hideous skeleton of her former self, but fuck it. She wasn't going to let him snuff her out so easily. She'd fight until he squeezed out every last drop of resistance.

The bastard. He took everything from her. Her family and any semblance of a normal life that she could have had. Lux. Her soul.

If she ever got free... oh, she'd make him suffer as she had suffered. She'd take away everything that made his demonic existence worth living. She'd destroy him, bathe in his putrid blood and laugh while doing it.

"Kitten?"

Tears pricked her eyes. No, she wouldn't give in to the hope that he'd come for her. After what she'd done, Lux wouldn't come. Ashmedai had said as much after he'd used a semblance of Lux's voice to trick her. He'd even shown her a glimpse of the living world, of Lux drinking in a club and letting a group of humans rub against him like cats in heat.

"Bullshit!" she'd shouted even as she watched a woman yank Lux's head to the side and kiss him. He didn't fight it. Just took another long swallow of whiskey after she broke away.

"He doesn't care about you," Ashmedai had taunted. "He never did. He's Lust, Katherine. You've lived long enough to know lust doesn't equal love."

She'd denied it until Ashmedai had finished torturing her for the time

being and had shoved her back into her cage. But, now, in private, as Lux's voice whispered through her fracturing mind, she couldn't deny it. Lux really didn't care about her. She'd been a fool to believe he might.

Ashmedai would pay for that, too.

"Kat, can you hear me?"

Not just a voice now. She felt his presence outside her cage, warm and familiar, radiating love and sorrow and concern. Which was ridiculous. He'd only be on this side if he was dead, and he couldn't die.

She wrapped her shriveled arms around her head and curled into herself. "Stop it! Shut up! You're not real!"

"Kat." Imaginary Lux's voice cracked so very convincingly, and the door of her cage squealed as it opened. "It's me. I'm real. Please, look at me. See that I'm here, I'm real."

What if...?

No. No what ifs. Lux wasn't here, period, and the imaginary version of him wasn't going to convince her to look. She couldn't let herself hope again and clenched her teeth against the urge. Oh yes, she was going to find a way to make Ashmedai pay for this newest cruelty. No doubt he was behind the convincing ploy. She grabbed onto her anger with both hands and held tight. It was easier than hope. Easier than love.

"Gods, what have they done to you?"

"Don't touch her," another male voice said sharply.

Leviathan.

What was he doing here? He'd never before appeared in any of her rescue fantasies. Of course, it made perfect sense that he'd come with Lux since the brothers never let him go out by himself—but it only made sense if this were real.

That old hope took root inside her, and despite her feeble attempts to uproot it, it bloomed with terrible desperation. She *had to* look this time and lifted her head. Lux was on his knees beside her, one hand outstretched as if to touch her. There was something strange about him, a figment of her imagination that was more real than any of the others but not quite solid. Like a ghost. Tears tracked down his beautiful face as her gaze met his briefly before lifting to Leviathan. He stood behind Lux, a hand on his brother's shoulder, and he was as solid as ever.

"Are you real?" she asked him because she knew what imaginary Lux's answer would be—"Yes," the same as it always was—but she didn't think

even an imaginary Leviathan would lie to her.

He nodded. "We're real, Kat."

"You're... real." She stared at them both and still couldn't bring herself to fully believe it.

"Hi, sweetheart." Lux smiled and reached to hold her.

"No!" Leviathan jerked him to a stop, and she shied away from them as Lux's vaporous form flickered like a candle on the verge of extinguishing. Leviathan cursed and placed his free hand on Lux's other shoulder. Lux groaned and bent double as if whatever just happened to him had made him nauseous.

"Is he dead?" she asked Leviathan.

"Uh..." His expression was sheepish. "Kinda?"

What the hell? The anger rose up again, and she clung to it, thankful for the familiar blistering heat. "How can someone be 'kinda' dead? What did you do to him?"

"I can walk between the two worlds. He can't, so I took his soul and... I think it's a bit like astral projection. Sort of. Hard to explain, and we don't have the time now."

Lux straightened but still looked a little green from the on-off flicker. "C'mon, Kat. We're getting you out of here." He reached for her, but again Leviathan yanked him back with an exasperated exhale.

"Seriously, brother, are you *trying* to get lost in the netherworld?"

"How else are we supposed to get her out of here?" Lux snapped. "You have to hang onto me, so I'll hang onto her, and you can poof us back."

"Yeah..." Leviathan dragged the word out, and when he looked at her, a deep sadness filled his eyes. "Uh, it's not that simple. She's dead. Her body is gone. If I take her back to the other side, she'll be a ghost like you are on this side."

"What?" Lux stood and, without breaking contact with his brother, he whipped around to face off with Leviathan. "You failed to mention *that* earlier. So how the fuck are we supposed to get her back?"

"You're not," Kat whispered, and the despair on Lux's face almost killed her a second time. Sure felt like a knife twisting through her soundless heart. "I'm dead. I can't go back."

"Yes, you can."

Now they both turned to stare at Leviathan.

He shrugged. "Technically. I think. I'm going on instinct here."

“Stop talking in fucking circles,” Lux said through his teeth. “Can she or can’t she go home? Alive and whole,” he added after a pause.

“She can.”

That dreaded hope again. She beat it down but couldn’t stop herself from asking, “How?”

He looked at her with such pity. “First, you have to let it go.”

“Let go of what?” Lux asked.

She gazed down at the gnarled hands attached to her wrists, the hands that no longer looked like her own. And she knew. She had to let go of everything. The hatred, the rage—everything that had kept her going over the past two hundred years of her life.

“Kat?” Lux’s voice was almost a croak. “Let go of what?”

She sensed movement and saw Leviathan’s boots and the edge of his leather duster as he knelt down in front of her. “There’s something special between you and my brother, Kat. I felt it when I held your soul in my hands. I feel it now in his, and my gut tells me that’s the solution. You’re meant to be. You fit. Two halves of a whole, but all that baggage you’re carrying is blocking the connection. You have to let it go.”

“I can’t.” But even as she said the words, she wasn’t sure they were true. She’d already started to let go before she died, but Ashmedai had rekindled her hatred, and now it burned brighter than ever. Tears stinging her eyes, she met Leviathan’s gaze and held up her ugly hands. “This is my fault, isn’t it? What Ashmedai did to me didn’t make me look like this.”

“What he did accelerated the process, but for the most part, no. Clinging to all that negative emotion, you would have ended up like this eventually.”

“If I let go, will I look like I did before?”

His lips thinned. “Your soul is pure. I can see it underneath, but Ashmedai abused you horribly, twisted you into something you were never meant to be.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He winced. “You’re right, it’s not. And, honestly, I don’t have one for you. I’ve never done anything like this before—didn’t even know I had this ability until recently. But there’s no guarantee with this kind of shit. You may never look the same again.”

She stared at Lux, and the tears she’d been trying to blink back spilled over. “You can’t love me like this.”

“The hell I can’t.” And to prove it, he let go of Leviathan, strode forward,

and yanked her into his arms.

“Shit!” Leviathan reached for him, but his hand went right through. “Lux!”

Despite his flickering form, Lux’s embrace felt as solid and warm as ever. His soft lips claimed hers in a kiss that lit her up from the inside. If she still had a heartbeat, it would have kicked with excitement.

“I love you,” Lux whispered against her lips. “Gods, sweetheart, I don’t care what you look like. It doesn’t matter. The way you look has nothing to do with how I feel.” He clasped her head between his big hands and angled her face up to take the kiss deeper. Within her, something cracked and then began to crumble, startling at first, but then so very right it brought a fresh round of tears to her eyes. Warmth seeped from her chest into her extremities.

“I love you,” he said again and again, every time they broke apart for air. And he truly did. She sensed it, the certainty of it, the rightness of it, in every kiss. He loved her. Completely. No hesitation, no conditions.

He. Loved. Her.

And, oh God, did she love him.

She gripped his shoulders, digging her nails into his leather coat, and kissed him back with everything she felt until the warmth started to burn. Pain seared her chest where her heart once beat, and she thought, for a split second, she felt a flutter. But, no, couldn’t be. The dead didn’t have heartbeats. Then another flutter turned into a ragged *ba-bum. Ba-bum. Ba-bum.*

“Oh,” she gasped, breaking away from the kiss.

“Shh. I feel it too.” His arms stayed locked tight around her. “But I got you.” He brushed a kiss along her hairline. “I got you, sweetheart. Whatever happens, I won’t let you go. Ever.”

Despite Kat’s every learned instinct, she hung on to him and did something she’d never done before in her entire life—she gave him her complete trust as the world exploded around them.

What. The. Fuck?

Leviathan shut his mouth and scanned the now empty room. A moment ago, Lux and Kat had been standing there in the cage, hanging on tight to each other. Now, they were gone, disappeared in a flash of bright multi-colored light.

Just ... gone.

Cursing in every language he knew, he turned on his heel and ran through the twisting halls of Netherworld Perversion, his leather duster flapping out behind him like wings. He tore through The Veil at full throttle and stumbled into Xanthus, who was pacing back and forth on the other side.

“Where’s Lux?” they asked each other at the same time. Then Xanthus added, “What?”

“He didn’t come out with Kat?” Leviathan looked toward the table where his brother’s corporal form had been laying before their foray into the netherworld. “Where’s his body?”

Blue eyes wide, Xanthus shook his head. “Poof.”

“What the hell do you mean by ‘poof’?”

“Exactly what you think I mean. He was here one minute, then—poof—flash of light and bye-bye Lux.” He scanned The Veil expectantly. “Where’s his other half?”

Oh Gods, what had he done?

Leviathan swallowed a surge of bile and met each of his brothers’ worried gazes. “Poof.”

CHAPTER 47

One minute they were flying, and the next, falling. They landed in a heap on a tiled floor, Kat half on top of Lux, and lay there for a solid minute in stunned agony. Then Lux started to laugh. Or maybe he was crying? Whatever it was, it sounded half-hysterical even to his own ears. But he could *feel* Kat—actually feel her weight, her warmth. Her breath fanned his neck and tickled his ear. Her heart thundered against his arm in a fast, healthy rhythm.

She was alive.

He wrapped her up tight in his arms and hugged her as hard as he could.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “Lux, can’t breathe.”

Just the fact she was breathing was enough to take his breath away. He loosened his grip, but covered her mouth with his in a long, slow, and thorough kiss. She made a sound in the back of her throat close to a purr and entangled her fingers in his hair. One of her legs wrapped around his hip and he smiled into the kiss because she was still gloriously naked. Just the way he liked her best. Her skin, ridged with scars, smoothed out under his hand as he trailed his fingers from her ribs to her thigh. Not only was she healthy and whole, but she was healing too, the scars on her papery flesh smoothing back into milk and silk.

He palmed her ass and scooped her up so that her core pressed against the erection straining the front of his pants.

“Yes,” she sighed as he ground his hips into her. “Oh, I’ve missed you. I want you.”

Those words...

Lux froze, ice spilling through his veins at those words, the same she’d

spoken to him while under the influence of his curse, and his erection all but shriveled in his pants. No. No, no, and triple fucking no. He wasn't going through that again.

Kat lifted her head to look at him. "Lux?"

Desperate to put as much space between them as possible, he sprang away from her at the same moment the fabric covered door of the room they were in burst open.

Zayra strolled in, took one look at Kat, still laying naked on the floor, and Lux's awkward scramble to get to his feet, then grinned at them. "There you two are. Sorry to interrupt, but we have some things to discuss."

"You didn't interrupt anything," Lux said. He backed away until half the room separated him and Kat and made sure to keep his eyes on the floor. Because, Gods, even knowing what would happen if he lost control, her naked body still enticed him. He still want to explore her with his mouth and hands, wanted to sink deep and...

No. He ground his back teeth and put even more of the room between them. If she was immune to him, then her new body had to be a virgin and he had to stay away. He wasn't going to ruin her this time, refused to risk her life again for a roll in the hay. Just wasn't going to happen.

"What things?" Catching the dress Zayra tossed her way, Kat tugged it on over her head before standing. The dress hugged her breasts and swirled in a multitude of wild colors around her ankles. So not Kat's normal kicking-ass-and-taking-names style, and yet Lux found he couldn't take his eyes off her. Beautiful. Her loose hair brushed the tops of her shoulders, and as he watched, it regained its vibrant red hue and normal shine. As if she were aging in reverse in front of him.

Kat continued to watch him with a faint frown but addressed Zayra. "What happened? Did you voodoo us here?"

Zayra laughed. "No, hon. I don't practice voodoo."

Kat rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched with a smile. "You know what I mean. We were in the netherworld. I was dead." She pressed a hand to her chest as if she couldn't believe her heartbeat. "Leviathan said I couldn't come back..."

"As much as Leviathan likes to think so, he doesn't know everything." Zayra wrapped her in a hug and held out a hand, inviting Lux to join them.

Nope.

As much as he craved it, he wouldn't touch her again. Wouldn't put her

in that kind of danger. He shook his head and backed up another step to prove it.

With an exasperated sound, Zayra waved her hand, and his feet left the floor. Suddenly weightless, floating across the room toward them, he let out a startled yelp that was about as macho as a pink tutu.

Snickering, Zayra twirled a finger in the air, flipping him upside down. Right side up. Upside down. Like a carnival ride without the seat belt.

“Z, that’s enough,” Kat said, but the laugh she tried to hide behind her hand ruined the effectiveness of the command. Zayra loop-de-looped him once more before letting his feet hit the floor. He glared at her—all three-ish of her—while the room continued to spin around him, and he worked hard at convincing his stomach to stay put.

She shrugged. “Hey, I could’ve dropped you on your head. In fact, I probably should’ve. Maybe it would’ve knocked some sense into you.”

“You have a real sick sense of humor, you know that?”

“It’s been mentioned.”

Kat caught him as he listed to one side, wrapped her arms around his waist, and pressed her face into his chest. “Please, don’t leave me,” she whispered. “You said you wouldn’t.”

Oh, shit. He couldn’t not touch her. The vulnerability in her words undid him and his arms closed around her. He had promised that. And besides, even knowing that he should, he didn’t want to let go of her ever again.

They were both so screwed.

Hands on her hips, Zayra stepped back and nodded in approval. “There. Much better. This is how it was meant to be.”

Lux kissed the top of Kat’s head, luxuriating in her scent and the very real feel of her in his arms, then looked at Zayra. The witch may have a sense of humor that rivaled Xan’s for most twisted, but without a doubt, she also had some answers. “Mind explaining what the hell’s going on?”

“I’m not a witch,” she said, and he had the uncomfortable feeling she’d read his mind. Her smile faded a bit. “The whole thing about being a reformed black witch was just a cover to keep me off the radar. It’s—well, it’s a very long, very convoluted story, but basically…” She pointed at Lux with her right hand. “You, Lust.” Then at Kat with her left. “She, Chasity.” Then she linked her two fingers together. “At one time, you were the same being, an aerial spirit that kept the world in balance, but Ashmedai found a way to break you into two halves, the light, and the dark. Yin and Yang. And

now you're reunited, your souls connected on the deepest level."

"How?"

"When Kat let go of all the hatred Ashmedai instilled in her and opened herself up to love and trust, the connection between you was able to reform. And she came back to the land of the living because as long as you are alive, Lux, she can't die. Your hearts now beat as one." She sighed. "It's all so romantic."

Lux set Kat away from him enough to stare down into her face. She looked just as confused as he felt. With a tentative move, she pressed one palm to his chest and raised her other to her own. Her eyes widened in surprise, and he tuned his ears to their heartbeats. Sure enough, the two sounds merged into one strong beat, and holy shit, the thought of being connected to her on such a deep, intimate level made him achingly hard. Kat lifted her eyes to his, and he saw his desire reflected back in those gorgeous baby blues. He leaned down, intending to kiss, but someone cleared their throat nearby. He felt like snarling. Zayra. Godsdamn that witch or whatever the hell she was.

Kat smiled and patted his chest before turning back to Zayra. "So what are you exactly?"

Oh, yeah, she was as pissed off at her friend as he was, but not because Zayra was an epic cockblock. No, her anger stemmed from betrayal. Even a deaf man would have heard the hard edge of it in her tone.

"That's the convoluted part," Zayra said. "You're special, Kat. You're a saint."

Kat huffed out a laugh. "Hardly."

"No, you are."

"But I—"

"Just hear me out, okay? Saints are more than what any one religion believes—you're beings that are immune to all supernatural forces. Unlike humans who can be influenced by good or evil, you are free to make your own choices, which makes you valuable beyond belief in the upcoming war. But although you can't be influenced, you can be corrupted in extreme circumstances, which is why Ashmedai choose you for his plans. It was my job to protect you until you were old enough to find Lux... and I failed. Like everyone else, I was misled by the stories of Lux and his brothers. I couldn't bear the thought of handing you over to him when I'd watched over you since birth—you were like my own child—so I engineered to keep you apart in

1846 when you should have met. But my meddling allowed Ashmedai the time he needed to kill your family.”

Lux gazed down at Kat. She was watching Zayra with tears in her eyes. “You’re my guardian angel. You came to me in my dreams when I was in the mental institution.”

“Yes. I’m your angel. Or I was until I failed you. I’m so sorry, Kat. I thought I was keeping you safe, but... that’s no excuse. If you blame anyone for all the pain you’ve endured, it should be me.”

Kat shook her head. “I’m done with the blaming. It feels good not to hate anymore.”

“I imagine so. It wasn’t natural for you.” She smiled at them a moment longer, then clapped her hands and said, “Well, I guess my work is done. Time to face the music.”

“What do you mean?” Lux asked and hugged Kat tighter.

“I kind of went AWOL after Kat’s family died. With Dracian’s help, I’ve been in hiding from my superiors ever since. I wanted to set things right before I reported back for... punishment.”

“What will they do to you?” Kat asked.

She smiled, but there was nothing happy in her expression. “You don’t need to concern yourselves about it. I can handle whatever they dish out. But first... Kat, do you love him? Do you want to be with him for as long as he lives?”

Lux caught his breath as she hesitated. Until she looked up at him and smiled brilliantly. “Yes. Absolutely.”

“And Lux, do you?”

He couldn’t tear his gaze away from her. He’d always thought she was beautiful—from that very first moment he’d seen her in the back hallway of Perversion—but something had changed in her. Now she *shined*. “Yes. I do.”

“I figured, but I had to ask.” Zayra clasped their left hands together between both of hers and murmured a long string of words in a language Lux had never heard before. A pale red glow emanated from under Zayra’s palms, and his fingers started to tingle as if they’d fallen asleep. From Kat’s startled jerk, he knew she felt the same thing. The mark of Lust on his hip began to sting, and he pulled the waistband of his jeans down enough to see it. Still there, but another swirl and flourish had twined around it and burned into his flesh. All these centuries, it never dawned on him that the mark was only half complete, but now, with the other half settling into his skin, it was so

obvious.

Zayra grinned at them and finally let go of their hands. “I hereby sanction this union. Congratulations. For all intents and purposes, you are now married.”

Kat blinked up at him, then lifted the skirt of her dress to her own hip. Sure enough, she had the same brand. “Married?”

“Is that okay?” Lux asked, suddenly full of apprehension.

She laughed and threw her arms around his neck. As she kissed him, he decided he’d never heard any sound so beautiful in his long life.

“Your brothers are probably frantic.”

Lux parked the rental boat in an empty slip and shut off the engine. He leaned back in his seat and shut his eyes. “Yeah, probably.” Heaving out a huge sigh, he rolled his head in her direction and gave her what she could only describe as puppy dog eyes. “Are you sure you don’t wanna keep sailing to Hawaii?”

Kat grinned and leaned to kiss him. “I hate boats, remember? I’d rather go back to hell than sail to Hawaii.”

He scowled. “That’s really not funny, Katherine.”

The sound of her given name on his lips sent hot shivers cascading down her spine. She’d never liked her name, but, wow, did it turn her on when he said it. Of course, most anything he said turned her on. Hmm. Maybe they’d have to test that theory later when they had the opportunity to explore all the sensual side effects in full. She couldn’t wait and kissed him again, longer, harder. He sat up and wrapped one hand around the back of her neck, his thumb caressing the line of her jaw and angling her head to take the kiss even deeper.

“Oh God,” she said when they finally broke apart for air. “Let’s get this over with so we can move on to the second half of our marriage ceremony.”

His eyes darkened to storm clouds. “Let’s keep going. Just leave and never look back.”

Was it ever tempting to give in. But, no. She hadn’t been a part of a family for a very long time, but she remembered the mechanics. “Your brothers will kill us both if we keep them in limbo. I’d really rather not start our marriage by pissing off my six very powerful brothers-in-law.” She extracted himself from his embrace and pushed at his chest. “Besides, I want to make love in your bed tonight. To replace the other memories.”

“Our bed,” he corrected, and after one last kiss, he climbed out of the boat and held out a hand to help her. “And those other memories are pretty damn good up to a point.”

She got out of the car and grinned at him over the hood. “So we’ll make them better. I saw that big tub in the bathroom. I want to test it out.”

“Aw, man.” He paused and did that funny little shift-jiggle men do to adjust themselves. “Now you’re just being mean.”

“You love me for it.”

Smiling, he laced their fingers together and raised the back of her hand to his lips. “Yes, I do.”

CHAPTER 48

The reunion went about like Kat figured it would. After a whole bunch of “Holy shit, you’re alive!” followed by a bombardment of questions like, “What happened?” and the incredulous, “You’re *married?*” the Deadly Seven did what any other family does on such an occasion.

They threw a party.

Admittedly, she had been a little nervous about her welcome after the events that led to her death, but they accepted her into their fold as if she’d always belonged. Leviathan and Revelin greeted her with smiles and well wishes. And, as promised, Avi hugged her. Tristin kept his distance, but Lux said that had nothing to do with her and everything to do with all those statues in the courtyard. He didn’t want to inadvertently make another one, so he kept his distance from everyone.

Of all of them, she was the most nervous about seeing Xanthus again, but he picked her up in a rib-crunching hug and spun her around until Lux gave a low, possessive growl. Only then did he set her back on her feet. Of course, that wasn’t the end of it. He had to prod his brother further by planting a smacking kiss square on her lips.

“No hard feelings, okay?” he said. “Today, we start fresh.”

She felt herself blush to her hairline but nodded. “Agreed.”

Even the ever-reclusive Devak welcomed her in his own quiet way. He brought her a glass of champagne when she took a break from the chaos in the game room, where Xanthus had talked Avi, Leviathan, and Lux into a rowdy game of foosball.

“Thank you,” she said and sipped from the glass.

He inclined his head before turning away.

Oh, no. She wasn't letting him off the hook that easy. And, yes, she wanted to know more about him. Call it curiosity—or maybe “suicidal” was a better fit—but she wanted to crack open that hard outer shell of his and peek inside. She already knew he wasn't as bad as his brothers believed him to be.

“I won't tell them,” she added and just as she'd calculated, he froze. Except for a quick twitch of his leathery wings, nothing else gave away his sudden unease, but she recognized it for what it was. “In case you're worried about it. I don't plan to tell them you're the one who let me out of the cage.”

Slowly, he turned back around. “You saw me?” His voice was like the crunch of gravel under a boot, rough from disuse.

“No, but I felt you. Wrath.” She smiled reassuringly at Lux, who had noticed which of his brothers she was speaking to, and started to move away from the foosball table. She waved him back, then returned her full attention to Devak. “Right before the lock popped open, I got so damn angry. I wanted to kill everyone.”

His expression didn't change, but something—a flicker in his eyes or shift in his posture, maybe? Whatever the tiny gesture was that caught her notice betrayed his embarrassment. She touched his arm, half expecting him to flinch away. He didn't, but nor did he return her smile.

“I'm sorry,” he said in a near monotone. “I did not mean for either you or Lux to get hurt. I just didn't think it was right to keep you down there.”

“It all worked out okay in the end.”

That blank mask of his cracked and he raised one dark brow in a doubtful arch.

She shrugged. “Okay, you're right. If things could have happened differently, I would have absolutely gone that route. Starting an apocalypse with my hatred isn't one of my shining moments. But I also believe that if things had happened differently, I wouldn't have Lux right now. So your apology is not accepted. In fact...” She raised her glass in a salute. “Thank you.”

Lux watched Kat from across the room, unsure whether he should intervene. She'd wanted him to stay away, but Devak was just so... unpredictable.

And what the guy did next stunned the hell out of everyone in the room.

“Fuck me,” Xanthus said in awe. “Was that...? No way. I have to be hallucinating.” He made a show of rubbing his eyes and then blinked comically. “Did Devak *smile*?”

It wasn't pretty, but yes, their antisocial brother had just smiled at Kat. Gods, she was wonderful.

"I don't think he's ever done that before," Avi said and took advantage of everyone's distraction to zing the ball past Xanthus's goalie.

"Hey!" Xanthus said.

"And I believe that's the game." Grinning, Lux slapped Avi a high-five before picking up his beer. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do than play games with my little brothers. Like take my beautiful, amazing *wife* upstairs."

"Yeah, rub it in," Leviathan said.

"Ugh." Xanthus plucked the ball from the slot on the side of the table. "If the shit that's been coming out of his mouth gets any sweeter, his fangs are gonna rot."

Lux decided not to dignify that with a response. He sidled up behind Kat and looped his arms around her waist. "Hey," he said to Devak.

"Congratulations." Devak nodded once, then spread his wings and took flight, landing in a crouch on the second-story bridge overhead. He straightened and walked toward his suite without another glance in their direction.

"He's such a charmer," Lux muttered and nuzzled Kat's ear.

She laughed and swatted at him. "You frightened him."

"Yeah, right. You do know what he *is*, right? Sombras don't get scared. They do the scaring."

"He's only half. And going all macho, this-is-my-women like that, you did frighten him."

"*That* wasn't macho. If you want macho, I'll show you macho."

"Oh, no. Lux, if you pick me up I'll—" She gave a surprisingly girlish squeak as he scooped his arm behind her knees and lifted her.

And, ignoring his brothers' immature cat calls—seriously, how old were they? Thirteen?— he carried his bride upstairs.

CHAPTER 49

“They’re never going to let me live this down, you know that, right?” Kat’s face still flamed when he dropped her on their bed. She couldn’t believe that stupid, girly shriek had come out of her mouth and part of her wanted to throttle Lux for embarrassing her like that. But then he straightened and stripped off his shirt, and she didn’t care. God, he was beautiful. The sight of all that hard, golden muscle ignited her body. She wanted to stroke his pecs, trace her tongue over the indents between the muscles in his abs. She wanted to follow that oh so intriguing line of hair from his belly button to where it disappeared under the waistband of his low-slung black jeans. Wanted to take that bulge behind his fly in her hand and stroke him hard and fast until his body strained for release.

His eyes flared with heat as if he knew exactly where her thoughts had gone, but he shook his head. “No.” His voice rasped over her nerve endings, as intimate as a caress. “We go slow this time.”

“I don’t want slow.”

He leaned over the bed when she tried to sit up, trapping her in the cage created by his arms. “I do.”

And he tortured her with that slowness, until she was panting and writing under him.

“You’re killing me. Oh, God, I want you. Please. I want you inside me.” As soon as the words left her lips, she knew it was the wrong thing to say and spit vile mental curses at herself. Just like back in Zayra’s store, Lux froze. His breath hitched and he jumped away from her as if she had caught fire and he didn’t want to get burned.

“Lux...” He looked so terrified that her heart broke for him. Funny how

even knowing the reality of all he'd been through in his long life, it never truly sank in for her until this moment. Her strong, funny, sweet husband had been so used and abused that even now, on this happy occasion, he suffered.

"No." He scrambled backwards until his back hit the opposite wall. "No, we can't—I don't want to do this."

She sat up and eyed the erection he was fumbling to hide behind his fly again. "Yes, honey, you do."

"Yeah," he admitted as if he hated himself for it. "Shit, I do, but... let's not. I'll be content to spend the rest of my life with you without sex. We don't need it."

"I want children," she said softly. It was her closest-kept secret, one that she hadn't even admitted to herself until now. "I want a little you and me."

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head in denial, even though she knew damn well he wanted children and had wanted them for a very long time. As gentle and sweet as he was with the children in Genesis House, he would make an excellent father, too.

"Lux, relax. Look at me."

He opened his eyes. "What if Leviathan and Zayra are wrong? What if we do this, and you go sex demon on me again? I can't—" His voice broke, and he strode over to the balcony doors, braced his arm on the frame, and pressed his forehead to the glass. "I should've walked away before Zayra—I should still walk away. I love you too much to condemn you to that pain again."

"Lux," she whispered, her heart in her throat.

When he didn't turn, she climbed off the bed and straightened her dress. She wouldn't touch him. Not yet. He needed the distance. And some sense talked into him. "Tell me something, when has Leviathan ever been wrong?"

She saw a muscle jump in his jaw. "Never," he said after a stubborn moment and pushed away from the window. "It's one of his more annoying traits."

"All right. And the same goes for Zayra. It's okay now," she soothed. "I wasn't affected by any of your brothers downstairs." Including Devak, whose curse of Wrath she'd been especially susceptible to. But she'd spoken to him for a good five minutes and had felt nothing but pity for the guy. "Plus, we're married, and an angel blessed our union, so—"

"Fallen angel."

"Technicality. Your curse is null."

"I— I want to believe that, but—" He sucked in a breath, and his

shoulders shuddered as if he was trying and failing to hold back tears. All right, screw giving him distance. She had to hold him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He turned in the circle of her arms and held her tight, burying his face in her hair.

“I can’t lose you again, Kat. I went insane the first time.”

“I know. I saw.”

He jerked like she’d kicked him. “You—”

“Ashmedai showed me.” She reached up and cupped his cheek, brushing aside a wayward tear with her thumb. “He tried to convince me you were acting that way because you didn’t care about me. But even under all the layers of hatred, I knew it wasn’t true. Even then, I knew you loved me. I felt it, and it gave me strength.” She dropped her hand to his chest and felt his heartbeat kick under her palm. Behind her ribs, hers did too. “I put my trust in you. Now I ask you to do the same for me.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard and raised a shaking hand to cover hers. “I’m... terrified.”

“And you have every right to be. But, Lux, not all lust is bad. Especially when it’s combined with love. Without a lust for life, nobody would ever live. Without lust between couples, there would be no babies. Please, honey, let me show you what good lust feels like.” She tugged on his hand and he relented, following her toward the bed after only a moment’s hesitation.

And then she showed him. Over and over again, until they were both sweat-slicked and panting and sated.

Later, as they lay sleeping in each other’s arms, the ground shook and the night sky rained with thousands of falling stars.

CHAPTER 50

“I see you finally set it right.”

Zayra stiffened at the deep voice behind her. She really shouldn't be surprised he'd found her. As soon as she'd tapped into her angelic powers to sanction Kat and Lux's joining, she'd known he'd be able to track her. Still, she had expected to have a few more hours to gather herself before he showed up.

She didn't want to turn around, didn't want to face him.

“Zarachiel,” he said, full of command.

“It's just Zayra now.” *Coward*, she thought and forced herself to turn. “Nice seeing you again, Micheal. You haven't changed a bit.” Still wore his black hair knotted in an intricate braid down his back and ancient armor that shone like it was new. Still had those perfect features that had inspired more than one statue over the millennia. Still had those pale, cold blue eyes that had contempt down to a fine art.

Xanthus had the same color eyes, but his were fire encased in ice, full of life and laughter even when he was sad or tired. For all of Micheal's ethereal beauty, he didn't hold a candle to that sin.

And where the hell had *that* thought come from?

“And neither have you, Zarachiel,” Micheal sneered, stressing her given name. “Still breaking the rules, as always.”

Despite the thundering of her pulse in her temples, she lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. “Rules wouldn't exist in the first place if nobody ever broke them.”

“You should not have joined them without consulting the Empyrean first. What if their destinies had changed?”

“They haven’t, and we both know it. They were meant to be. I broke your precious rules for their own good.”

“Because that worked out so well for you the first time.”

“Direct hit,” she conceded. “I screwed up, and I was a coward for too long, but I’m done running from you. Do what you will to me, but leave their union intact. They both deserve some happiness.”

To her complete surprise, Micheal nodded. “Agreed.” He lifted a hand, and she thought for sure this was her end. He would draw his flaming blue sword and smite her into oblivion, wiping her and her memory from the face of the earth. But instead, a scroll appeared in his open palm. “Your new charge.”

“What?” She recoiled as if he had offered her a venomous hellsnake. “I never said I want—”

“The Empyrean doesn’t care what you want.”

She stared at the scroll. This had to be a joke. How could they want her watching over another saint when she fucked it up so massively the first time?

“I can’t.” She was not going to have another ruined life on her conscience. She straightened her shoulders and met his gaze directly. “No. I won’t take it.”

“Is either this or the alternative,” Micheal said.

“What’s the alternative?”

“Death.”

“Oh, of course.” Why’d she even ask? Micheal, like most sanctimonious archangels, had a one-track mind. She sighed and took the scroll. “I don’t have much choice then.”

“No, you do not. And this time, I’ll be watching you.” With that, he vanished in a flash of pale golden wings.

“I’ll be watching you,” she mocked in over-dramatic *soto voce* and started to toss the scroll aside, but—well, damn, maybe this was her chance to redeem herself and get her wings back. For once, she might do something right, something good, something worthwhile. Breaking the wax seal of the High Council, she unrolled the fine silk-like parchment that had no equivalent on earth. At the top, in the ornate lettering of Enochian, the language of angels, was her new charge’s name.

Juliette Reece Kitts.

A doctor, according to her biography. The chief medical examiner at

Saints of Mercy Medical Center. Gross. Still, Zayra supposed, it could be worse. At least Juliette didn't actively put herself in harm's way every day as Kat had. Already this job sounded easier—

Until she got to the final line of her assignment.

Micheal, that vindictive jackass! He had to know her deepest fantasies—he knew everything. And yet, he'd given her *this* woman. No, this wasn't a second chance. This was her punishment for failing Kat, and it was worse than she could have imagined.

“Dammit!” She threw the scroll across the room, and it smashed into a display of handmade glass vases that a young artist brought her every week to sell for him. But as satisfying as it would have been to watch the glass shatter, she couldn't do that to the kid, knowing how much effort and love he put into each piece. She flung out a hand and used her powers to stop the topple mid-air, carefully righting each vase before calling the scroll back to her.

She was too freaking nice. Cared way too much. That was her problem, had always been her problem.

Zayra opened the scroll and reread the line that, for reasons she didn't want to name and had worked to suppress, made her want to vomit. Juliette Kitts, like all saints, had a destiny to fulfill.

And Juliette's destiny was a certain sin with fire and ice blue eyes, a wicked smile, and a taste for excess.