

# FALLEN ACADEMY

— YEAR  FOUR —



LEIA STONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# FALLEN ACADEMY: YEAR FOUR

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*To my readers, thank you for all your support. Lincoln and  
Brielle have thrived because of you.*

# ONE



Lincoln's back leaned against the campus building, while he looked at me wide-eyed. "You're going to take training lessons from a fifteen-year-old?" He raised a skeptical eyebrow.

We'd been married two weeks now, and already he wasn't happy with my training. He wanted Archangel Michael and himself to teach me to defeat the Devil, but I knew there was something special about Emberly. I wanted to work with her, especially since Michael had said she could mimic Lucifer's mind control.

"Did you even meet her while I was gone? She's super powerful." We tried not to talk about our time apart, but some things needed to be asked.

He shrugged. "Briefly. She's badass, I get it, but she's still learning. I don't think she's the best one to train you."

The door to the gym opened suddenly, and Emberly peeked her head out, glaring at us. "I can totally hear you, and a deal's a deal. Your woman already agreed, so get your asses inside. I only have an hour."

Lincoln seemed shocked at her attitude, but I just grinned. I liked her more and more each time I saw her.

Lincoln and I had a mini honeymoon of lazing around the trailer, while I settled into the last month of my third-year classes. Raphael had signed a special permission slip, saying I could skip most of year three, as I'd learned enough skills in Hell to pass the testing. It was probably a crock of shit that

Lincoln begged him to do, but I was grateful. I wanted to be in classes with Shea, Chloe, Luke and even Tiffany's annoying ass.

It made me feel normal.

When you accidentally made a pact with the Devil, to break open the gates of Heaven for him, normal was a welcome relief. I was waiting for the right time to talk to Lincoln about getting Sera back and breaking Raksha out, but I figured if I mastered mental control, that would convince him I could go back down there with a team of Fallen Army soldiers.

As I walked into the gymnasium, Emberly spun around and faced me. "So, what was San Francisco like? Still a shithole? I can't believe you bailed your man out. That's so cool."

Lincoln tensed a little at the whole 'bailed your man out' thing, but I just chuckled.

"It was... dark and scary, but we all made it out."

She nodded, but then a serious look crossed over her features. "I heard you brought back a bunch of... slaves," she said the word like it was painful.

It was.

It killed me to think about how many had been left behind—in a different kind of hell. "Yeah. As many as we could, anyway."

Emberly's eyes focused on Lincoln, who was standing there with his arms crossed, and a stoic expression on his face. "You're a captain! You could amass the Fallen Army and storm the city, take it back for our side, and free everyone."

The fire in her eyes reminded me of my own passions, but her ideas, although noble, were too far-fetched. San Francisco had been way too dangerous. Even if we wanted to—which we did, of course—there was no way we had the numbers to pull off something like that.

Lincoln scoffed. “Pull the army that guards these walls, and put them all at risk on a whim that we could overtake San Francisco? Angel City could fall in the process!”

Swallowing hard, Emberly crossed her arms to match his stance. “Great risks can reap great rewards. If I were captain, I’d pull half the army and storm in there, guns blazing. If the demons didn’t cooperate, I’d kill them all, and set the city on fire after evacuating the innocent.”

A grin took over my lips at the little spitfire. She was adorable, like a mini temperamental Michael.

Lincoln just shook his head. “One day, *if* you make captain, you’ll see that we don’t have the resources for that, and that great risks can also reap great death.”

She frowned, but chose not to reply.

In her silence, I found myself staring at the metal and leather cage straps on Emberly’s wings. They were like medieval braces you would put on someone’s legs. Lincoln followed my gaze, and I wondered if he had the same questions I did. Did they retract like mine? Or remain out like her father’s?

When Emberly caught us both looking, she rolled her eyes. “Wondering about my wing braces?”

Oh, shit. I blanched, looking at the floor. “No, just checking out your cool glowing hair,” I lied.

She chuckled. “When my dad fell for my human mother, right after the Fallen War, I don’t think he knew his offspring had the potential to be deformed.”

*Deformed.* It was an awful word, and I didn’t know what to say in response.

“Do they hurt?” Lincoln asked, with more compassion in his voice than I expected.

Something dark crossed her face. “Every moment of every day.”

*Shit.*



“Do the braces help?” While she was on the topic of her wings, I figured I’d ask the burning questions I had, for as long as she’d let me.

Sighing, she slightly shrugged. “Sort of. My angelic form keeps repairing itself every second, but the wings are too heavy for my frail human half, so the bones keep fracturing. The braces keep some of the weight off. Kind of like a bra.”

*Oh God.* I couldn’t imagine how she managed to go through each day in that kind of pain, and still have a smile on her face most of the time.

“Can you fly?” Lincoln stepped closer. I knew the “fixer” in him wanted to aid her now, maybe even try to heal her.

She stiffened at his sudden movement. “With a handful of painkillers, yeah.”

Oh my God. An angel who couldn’t really fly? That was the most awful thing I’d ever heard.

Silence descended on our little group. Lincoln scuffed the toe of his shoe along the floor, as I brushed imaginary lint off my clothes.

“Done feeling sorry for me?” Emberly asked after a few moments, uncrossing her arms, and standing with one hip cocked out, a hand propped on it.

Unsure of what to say, we just nodded.

“Good, because I have a shitload of cool powers too, and my mom told me to never feel sorry for myself. There’s always someone worse off,” she stated sagely.

That girl was wise beyond her years, that was for sure.

“How should we begin?” I asked. Was she going to go inside my mind? She’d said something before about making me bark like a dog, but I sincerely hoped she was kidding.

As she stood there, the tattoos on her arms moved up and down, swirling in random patterns. They glowed as if they were actually made of light. “You want to learn to withstand mind control, right?” she queried.

I nodded.

Something flashed in her eyes, a purplish silver. It was only for a split second, but I'd definitely seen it.

"Kneel," she commanded, and my knees suddenly gave out, forcing me to splay my hands out to catch myself from falling on my face. I went down on all fours, heart pounding. It felt exactly like what Lucifer did, but he never spoke; he would just think it and I'd be crossing the room toward him, against my will.

"Holy shit. Did you just force her to do that?" Lincoln walked a circle around Emberly, looking her up and down as if it would reveal some great secret.

The teenager nodded. "My dad says it's like the cardinal rule of being an angel to never ever use it against a human, to never take their free will. So, I've only practiced it a few times with my best friend, Mel—when she was willing."

*Holy shit. A little fifteen-year-old with a major attitude just made me fall to my knees. And she made it look easy.*

I was so screwed.

Standing, I grit my teeth. If I succumbed so easily to her, I couldn't imagine what I could do for the Dark Prince when he asked me to open the gates of Heaven.

"Again," I ordered, locking my knees. Step one of my plan to free Sera and Raksha was to learn to withstand the Dark Prince's power over me. I *had* to do this.

That flash of purple in her eyes was back. "Kneel."

My legs buckled and I went down with a groan. Beating the ground with a fist, I stood quickly.

"Again!"

We tried it twenty more times before Lincoln intervened. "Try using your powers. Bring forth your Raphael healing power and... I don't know, try to push the command away."

That didn't really make sense, but I knew what he was trying to say. Just locking my knees and physically trying to

withstand it obviously wasn't going to work, so it was about time I relied on another tactic.

Lincoln turned to Emberly, who looked bored out of her mind. "And can you do something different, so she isn't anticipating it? Can you make her do things without speaking out loud?"

The teenager squirmed a little under Lincoln's direction. "I can try."

Great. Something was about to happen, and I didn't know what. *Thanks, hubby.*

I called forth my light magic and let it rest in my palms, unsure what to do with it, when her eyes flashed purple again. Out of nowhere, my right palm opened and smacked me in the forehead, splashing my face with light magic, which tickled.

*Oof.*

Emberly giggled a little, and I cut her with a glare.

"Again."

I wouldn't give up, no matter what. It wasn't in me to quit. Sera would never give up on me, and I owed her the same courtesy.

## TWO



Being married was cool, but Lincoln had some serious PTSD about my kidnapping. It had been a month now since our wedding, and he would *not* leave my side. I was surprised he even let me go to the bathroom alone. Classes, Emberly's training, girl time with Shea, time with my mom? He. Was. There. If I thought it was just because he wanted to hang out with me, I wouldn't mind, but I knew it was because he was afraid of me being taken again.

Today was his first day back at work. He was going out into the war zones for a night shift, and Shea was staying over at the trailer with me. Blake and Darren had been assigned to help command the army outside the walls, and were frequently away from campus, doing night shifts in the war zone. Tonight, Lincoln would meet up with them, to help with the effort.

"Maybe I should ask for more time off." He paced our trailer, raking his hands through his hair.

"Babe." I never used pet names with him, but I would if it would get his attention and make him stop for a moment. "I'll be fine, I promise."

It wasn't like Lincoln could do much if Lucifer showed up here. Lucy felt all powerful at times, and I wasn't sure Lincoln could take him down like he thought he could.

"I just wonder if I should maybe take a year off. Until this whole thing is over."

I could see the stress in his body, in the way his shoulders bunched up, arms always slightly flexed. Padding over to him, I wrapped my arms around him.

“We need the money. I have my heart set on buying an actual house one day for all our kids to live in.” Not to mention he paid for my mom to live in Angel City as well. Something I told him he didn’t need to continue to do, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. My checks were a lot smaller than his, and I wasn’t even sure I *would* be paid since I was banned from going into the war zones until Lucy was dead.

A huge grin lit up Lincoln’s face. “All our kids?”

I chuckled. “Like one or two of them.”

He shook his head. “Nope, you said ‘all.’ That’s at least four.”

Laughter pealed out of me. Standing on my tiptoes, I pressed my lips to his, claiming his mouth in a deep, passionate kiss. Pulling back, I ran my fingers along the scruff at his jawline, and then leaned forward once more, my mouth on his as his hand came up around my neck, bringing me closer.

When I finally pulled away for good, I was a bit breathless. “I think we’ll do better if life settles back to normal, ya know?” I couldn’t live in fear. I refused to do it.

A resigned sigh left his chest. “Okay, but you know it’s only ‘normal’ right now because you drank that stuff, which means he can’t track you anymore.”

Yes, drinking the protection spell Raphael had made was some sort of safety net for the time being, but Lucy knew I was here. I was sure of it. Where else would I seek shelter? Lincoln had also taken the protection spell, and was hidden from Lucifer’s prying gaze, so I managed to take comfort in that.

“You have my cell number. Call me any time to check in.”

He sighed again. “I’m only agreeing to this because Shea is going to be over here with you, and I know she’s as protective as I am.”

“If not more.” I nodded. “She said she was bringing rope to tie our ankles together in case I got taken in the night.”

Lincoln looked impressed. “That’s a good idea.”

I snorted. “She was kidding.”

*I hope.*

A loud banging rattled the trailer door. “Knock knock, bitch!” Shea’s voice called out, and both Lincoln and I grinned.

“Go!” I told him, pushing him lightly.

He fought against me, and instead of moving toward the door, he pivoted, reaching out to cradle my face in his hands. When his lips claimed mine, in a knee-weakening kiss, I moaned into his mouth. Desire pooled between my legs, and I was half tempted to send Shea away and ask him to call in sick to work.

“I love you, Brielle Atwater-Grey.”

A grin pulled at my lips. I thought he might think that my desire to hyphenate my name was silly—we had Mikey to carry on the male line or whatever—but part of me just couldn’t let go of my dad.

“I love you too.”

“It’s dark out here!” Shea griped through the door, and Lincoln smiled.

“Yeah, and it’s a full moon, so let us in,” Luke called out too.

Cocking his head to the side at the sound of Luke’s voice, Lincoln opened the door. Chloe, Shea and Luke were standing there with a box of Cloud Nine donuts.

“So, it’s a party?” Lincoln asked, as my friends shoved past him and into the trailer.

“You bet your sweet ass it is. Third years only.” Luke blew Lincoln a kiss.

With a grin, my husband met my eyes, holding them for a long moment before waving goodbye.

After the door closed, Luke popped open the box of donuts, and grabbed a purple one with lime green stripes. I had no idea what emotion it induced, but I was sure it was yummy.

“Did you see Tiffany’s face when Delacourt announced Brielle would be back in classes tomorrow?” He gossiped, taking a bite. The moment it hit his tongue, he moaned, and collapsed onto the sofa.

I chuckled, taking a seat next to him.

“But... but... shouldn’t she be a second year? She missed everything!” Chloe whined in a fake Tiffany voice, which caused us all to crack up even harder.

“I’m so over Tiffany,” I declared, picking up a bliss donut. “How did you guys pay for these? I know your salary can’t afford a whole box.”

Shea grinned. “Noah got a promotion. He’s a captain now too.”

I chuckled. “So, you celebrated by spending his raise?”

Snatching a green melancholy donut, she nodded. “Pretty much.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Y’all are crazy for being married, and engaged, this young. I’m not even entertaining the idea until I’m thirty. At least.”

Luke nodded. “You go, girl.”

I had missed my tribe, so much that it squeezed my chest to think about it, but something was still missing.

*Sera.*

“What’s wrong, Bri? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Shea asked, hand at her mouth ready to eat a donut. I hadn’t yet tasted mine.

Not wanting to ruin this moment of normalcy I so craved, I shook my head, and plastered on a fake smile. “Nothing. Did I tell you guys there are other Fallen Academies?”

There were also Legions, the spawn of a demon and a human or even two demons, but I wasn't sure I wanted to get into that with my friends just yet. Lincoln had encountered one when he'd been looking for me in Demon City, while I was stuck in hell. He'd told me all about them. Technically Emberly was one, being that she was born of a human and a supernatural creature AKA Archangel Michael.

Luke bolted upright on his seat. "What! Like other campuses?"

I had already told Shea and sworn her to secrecy, but Chloe and Luke had no idea.

Chloe sat down, leaning forward. "Tell!"

A grin pulled at my lips. "Okay, so there's this chick Catia who helped Lincoln while he was in San Francisco."

Chloe gasped. "He was with another woman while you were apart?"

Waving away her concern, I rolled my eyes. "No. She's not into guys. They became besties and, like, emotionally supported each other. Anyway, she smuggled out this teenage girl and got her to safety at the Paris Fallen Academy, where she now works as a professor."

"Paris!" Luke squealed like a tween. "Ohmygod, tell me we can go there."

Laughter bubbled out of me. "Maybe one day."

"How many are there? Paris, LA, and...?" Chloe looked enamored.

"There is also New York, Toronto, and Zurich," I answered, leaning forward, and enjoying the gossip fest a little too much.

Luke gasped. "What! Like... what? I heard New York was the first to fall, that it's all a shelled-out war zone."

My ponytail swayed as I shook my head. I'd asked Lincoln about a thousand questions the night he told me about the other Fallen Academy campuses. "It's smaller, underground, but they still operate to help students who are angel blessed in



the area. Gabriel heads New York and Toronto. Uriel heads Paris and Zurich, and Michael tries to help out whenever he isn't here."

Luke's chest heaved up and down as he registered the news, while Chloe looked dumbfounded. "Why don't they tell us?" Luke asked.

Lincoln had made me promise I would only tell those I trusted with my life, those who were loyal to the Fallen Army. "Because if it was widely known and the demons found out..."

"Oh." Luke frowned. "But... Paris!"

A grin tugged at my lips. "He said Catia, the girl he knows there, might come visit on a supply run. Maybe you guys can meet her and ask her all about it."

Reaching out, Luke grasped my arm, gripping it tightly. "Yes! She can teach us French!"

We all laughed at that, and I chose that moment to bite into my bliss donut. I'd had so few of them in my lifetime, that I could count them all on one hand. Yet, one thing always remained the same—Shea was there every time. The second the sugary center of the donut spilled into my mouth, ecstasy bloomed in my gut, causing me to break out in ridiculous laughter.

I rolled over onto Luke's shoulder, giggling incessantly as he went for his second donut.

"I missed this. I missed you guys," I confessed as oxytocin, and God knew what else, flooded my system.

The bear shifter reached up and patted my head. "You have no idea how much we missed you. How long we looked for you. How hard it was to let you go."

A somber feeling settled across the trailer, and Shea snickered. "Luke ate a melancholy donut."

That caused us all to cackle in laughter, and I'd truly never felt happier, and at home than in that moment. Maybe some of

it was a side effect of the fading bliss donut, but most of it was being home with my friends and family.

THE NIGHT PROGRESSED as we talked, laughed, and ate donuts until we all felt sick. After everyone left, Shea and I snuggled up in Lincoln's and my bed. We lay there, in silence, just staring at each other for a few long moments.

“What are you going to do when he comes for you?” Shea finally spoke, and her voice shook a little, showing her vulnerability. I could see now that she was as terrified as Lincoln that I would get taken again.

Holding her hand, I squeezed. I didn't want to lie to my best friend.

“I don't know.”

I was going to try my hardest to resist him... and pray for a miracle.

It was a long time before I could fall asleep, though it might have been the rope tied around my ankle.

Apparently, Shea hadn't been kidding.

## THREE



The last few weeks of my third year passed quickly. I was exempt from the testing, which Tiffany bitched about to no end, and was automatically entered into the fourth year. Emberly had gone on a short staycation with her parents, but assured me our lessons would resume over the summer.

It was now the first week of summer vacation, and the entire Fallen Army had been bumped to full-time duty. Even me. Raph was having me train first years who had failed the gauntlet. For the first time in history, he was going to give them a second chance after my summer course. We needed numbers that badly.

Shea was my teaching assistant. Ready to help with any Mage-related issues, as we stood on the field behind the school, to start my first lesson.

I could play this two ways. Mean “drill sergeant teacher” like Lincoln, and tough-love the shit out of them, or be a softy and try to get to know each one individually, helping them where they needed it, while supporting them.

“I’m really sorry you all failed the gauntlet,” I began my speech, having decided to be a nice teacher. The world had enough assholes.

“But you better sack up if you want to survive year two!” Shea roared from her place at my side.

I growled. So much for having a nice first impression. “I got this. No need to bring the heat,” I whispered to my bestie.

She just glared at the poor group of eleven students with a gleam in her eye that said, 'I might kill you.'

"Shea is right," I continued. "You will need to toughen up. Demons kill the weak." At my words, one little blonde girl looked like she might faint. "But that's what I'm here for," I added.

"Yeah!" Shea shouted. "By the end of this summer course, you will be kicking ass and taking names."

A grin pulled at the corners of my mouth. Shea and I were teachers. What the hell was Raph thinking when he made that happen?

"Is it true you've killed like a thousand demons?" a girl with short brown hair asked me. Her expression looked tough, but she was scrawny as hell, and the shortest person in the class. I'd have to get her lifting weights.

My gaze flicked to her name tag—Tiny.

I chuckled. "Not even close. No."

"But you have killed some?" an eighteen-year-old male model looking guy asked. His outfit and hair looked way too pristine for the battlefield. I was going to have to teach him to get dirty and lose the hair gel. There was only room for one Noah in this school.

"Yes, I've killed a lot," I replied awkwardly.

"Is it also true that you made a pact with the Devil? To, like, go to Heaven and kill God and all the angels there?" a new girl asked, eyes wide.

*What the hell? Is that what the rumor mill is churning out these days?*

"Geez! Where are your manners, you little shits? This is your professor! Of course, she didn't agree to that! Drop and give me ten push-ups. *Now!*" Shea roared and charged the group with an animalistic growl in her throat.

The students paled, dropping their notebooks and pens, and falling to the ground to do Shea's bidding.

I schooled my features, trying not to let the girl's comment get to me, but it was clear the rumor mill was in full effect. How the hell did they even hear about it? My mom had a saying: 'Tell more than three people a secret, and it becomes a widespread rumor.' I guess too many people knew. All I could do now was try to control it.

The students were face-down, doing push-ups when I decided to let the rumor go. Nothing I said right now would change anything. They would believe what they wanted, and I didn't really care either way.

"I spent a year in Hell!" I shouted, deciding to switch to a mix of nice teacher, mean teacher. Technically it was only a few months in Hell from my point of view, but a year sounded more badass. "I am going to teach you what I learned down there about demons, and how to kill them. If you fail the gauntlet a second time, I will take it as a personal attack on my teaching. So, listen the hell up, and do as you're told," I boomed.

Shea gave me a grin from where she stood, looming over a first year who was struggling with her push-ups. Now I understood why Lincoln was hard on all of us. It made us better fighters. If I wanted these kids to pass, I was going to have to be their teacher, not their friend.

AFTER MAKING the students do jumping jacks, running sprints, and some random sixty-second planks—where Shea tried to hold in her laughter at how many of them fell over—I stopped the lesson.

"Today was a physical fitness assessment," I informed them, writing notes next to each name.

"You all pretty much failed by the way. You need to strengthen your muscles," Shea added, and I cut a glare her way.

"Tomorrow will be a magical assessment, where I will take a look at your gifts, and see how you can use them to fight in the Fallen Army. Class dismissed," I commanded.

The eleven students, sweaty and panting, sulked off toward the dorms as Shea turned to me. “Oh my God, there is no way they can serve in the Fallen Army. No wonder they failed the gauntlet. That tiny girl couldn’t even do one push-up. *One.*”

I groaned. “Tiny just needs weight training. She’s got a fighting spirit.”

Shea laughed, hooking her arm with mine as we walked back toward campus. “A fighting spirit won’t do shit against an Abrus demon.”

A frown pulled at the corners of my lips, and I looked at my best friend. She’d matured since we started here. Her body was leaner and packed with more muscle, but there was a sadness to her eyes that wasn’t there before, a sadness that said she’d lived through some shit. I imagined I had the same. And on her finger—both of our fingers, actually—were rings. We’d grown up.

“Raph believes in them, and I do too. I can get them in fighting shape. They just need extra attention,” I informed her.

Shea grinned. “You will never change. Always believing the best in people.”

I would get these eleven students in fighting shape in the next eight weeks, even if it killed me. Raph thought I had what it took, and I was going to prove him right.

“I’ve got to drop off my training notes with Raph, and then I have my Emberly lesson,” I reminded, detaching from Shea, and beginning to make my way toward Raphael’s office.

“I’ll have Lincoln, or someone meet you outside the gym after your lesson!” she called out, heading in the opposite direction.

I swear Shea and Lincoln had some unspoken rule. If I wasn’t with someone powerful like Raph, Emberly, or a professor, they made sure one of the two of them was there to escort me places. It was maddening, but I understood it made them feel calm and in control, so I allowed it without complaint.

I had just reached Raph's door when I heard a low female voice. She sounded angry.

"Humans aren't as weak as you think they are, Raphael. It's time we prepared them for the legacy we're leaving them," the female argued.

There was silence.

"I don't think they're weak, but I'd rather the Fallen Academy students protect humans, and fight the demons like we have for years."

She scoffed. "And what about when there aren't any more Fallen students? What then? You have a few more graduating classes, and then all the angel blessed who survived the Fallen War will be grown. Everyone under eighteen will be human. It's time to pass the torch!" She sounded furious, and I was dying to know who she was.

"Come in, Brielle," Raphael called out, and I stiffened.

*Shit. Freaking mind reader!*

Swallowing hard, I opened the door and took in the scene.

Raph was sitting behind his desk, wings fanned out as he pinched the bridge of his nose. In front of him, was some badass female with knee-high, black leather boots, a sword on one hip, and a gun on the other. She loomed over Raphael, and looked to be in her late thirties. The moment she spun to face me, I knew who she was, because she looked exactly like Emberly. Her stern face softened when she saw me, and a radiant smile lit up her features.

"Brielle! I've been dying to meet you. I'm Emberly's mom, Grace."

My eyebrows popped up in surprise a little at her name. It was so delicate and fitting for the wife of an angel.

"Hello," I offered shyly.

Grace stepped closer to me. "May I walk you to your lesson?" Her hair was like a long sheet of white silk. It didn't glow because she was human, but it almost did. She was absolutely stunning, and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Raphael looked relieved that she was offering to leave his office, so I nodded to her, finally gathering my wits and set the notes about my students on his desk.

“We aren’t even close to being done with this conversation, Raphael. See you at dinner this Saturday?” She looked over her shoulder.

Raph groaned. “Yes. I’ll be there.”

Grace nodded. “Good. Bring a lady friend, or I’m inviting one of mine to keep you company. You need to get out more.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheeks to keep from grinning at Raphael’s shocked expression, then left the office with Grace.

As we walked to the gym, I glanced at her gear. This lady was totally ready for battle.

“Are you in the army?” I asked her. She looked ready to throw down.

“God, no!” she scoffed. “They wouldn’t dare recruit a weak human.” The sarcasm dripped from her words as she walked in long, confident strides, and I found myself grinning at her sarcastic personality.

“I think it’s a great idea,” I told her. “That you want to train humans to fight the demons, I mean.”

She gave me a quizzical side glance. “Thank you. Raphael was open to the idea too, but the more we get into logistics, I can see he’s afraid they’ll get hurt. He treats us as if we’re so fragile.”

Humans *were* the most fragile among all of Earth’s inhabitants, but I didn’t think she wanted to hear that. “With the right weapons and training, I think humans would be valuable members of the Fallen Army,” I offered instead.

She stopped and faced me, a seriousness coming over her expression. “Next year is the last year of Awakening ceremonies, the last year of first year candidates. Everyone who was small during the Fallen War will be grown up, and I



think this school could be put to better use as a Demon Hunter Academy. Humans only.”

Her words sent a thrill through me, though I couldn't say why. It was shocking to hear that the next year would be the last of the first years. The generations to come after us would be mere humans. Yet, there would still be demons for them to fight, and no new students to replenish the numbers we lost in the war.

“You're right.”

The door opened behind me suddenly, and I jumped slightly before turning.

Emberly poked her head out then. “Oh my God, Mom, don't be so embarrassing. Brielle doesn't care about your Demon Hunter Academy idea.”

Did she have super hearing or something? This was the second time she'd done something like this.

Grace raised one eyebrow at her daughter. “Well, I hope she cares, because I hope to convince her to become a teacher after she graduates.”

My heart knocked against my chest. *A teacher? For humans?* Something clicked inside of me, a knowing, like I'd been waiting my whole life to figure out what I wanted to do with it. Was I a healer because I had Raphael powers, or a fighter because of Michael? Should I slay demons or heal the wounded? How could I make the most impact in the war with the demons?

There had always been this confliction in me, but now... now joy spread through my limbs at the thought of teaching others. Like I did today.

“I'd love to,” I answered immediately.

Grace poked her tongue out at her daughter. “See?”

Emberly just groaned in response, but I couldn't wipe the grin off my face.

A teacher. I wanted to be a teacher.

Maybe Raphael had seen this coming and was preparing me for my future. I wouldn't put it past him.

## FOUR



“**W**hat happened?” I screamed at Lincoln, who’d just walked into our trailer, cradling a bloodied and bandaged arm.

He was sweating, probably from the pain. “The war zone has intensified. Lucifer is putting out a new breed of demon every week. Today I got mauled by some animalistic-looking thing. Like a zebra and a Brimstone demon had a baby.”

I cringed. Lincoln had only been back at work for two months, and already he’d been injured three times. He came to sit at the dining table and just like that I had a flashback—being in Hell, helping Lucy create a demon. That cold sterile table, all of his jars. It was the same office where Sera was being held.

Before I realized it, a sob formed in my throat and my hands started to shake. Adrenaline rushed through my body, making me feel dizzy as nausea rolled into me.

I was having a panic attack.

“Oh shit, Bri. I’m sorry.” Lincoln shot up from the table and came around to comfort me, pulling me to him with his good arm.

The moment he tucked me into his side, I felt the symptoms subside a little. My heart slowed, and I tried to control my breathing. I felt so stupid for reacting that way; it was always the little things that brought my time down there rushing back—a smell of sulfur, talk about Lucy. I’d been

okay with it when I first got back, but the attacks were starting to get worse.

Lincoln's warm lips pressed to my forehead. "Maybe you should talk to someone. Maybe keeping it in is doing something to you, making it worse."

I swallowed hard. It wasn't that I had PTSD, or that I was holding anything back. It was that each time I was reminded of Sera and Raksha down there, I had a physical response. My fight-or-flight system kicked in, and I just couldn't comprehend why I hadn't gone down there to search for them yet. Yet, the answer was right in front of me.

*Lincoln.*

He still had nightmares every now and then where he would toss and turn, whimpering my name. My leaving had nearly broken him, and I couldn't risk that again.

Sera would understand. Wouldn't she? But Raksha... there was no excuse for leaving her behind down there. She had a child waiting for her to come home.

"Brielle?"

Crap. Lincoln was talking to me and I'd totally spaced. His deep blue eyes bored into mine and my heart picked up again.

"You can tell me anything," he declared.

*I need to go after Sera! I need to break Raksha out, and reunite her with her wife and son!* I wanted to scream.

"I'll be fine. Let me look at your shoulder." Averting my eyes from his intense gaze, I started to pull the bandage back.

He watched me for a few minutes, and I thought he would bring it up again, but thankfully, he didn't. Lincoln was good like that; he didn't press me when he knew I was on the edge. The wound on his shoulder had been nicely stitched together, but it didn't look like a healer had looked at it yet.

"Have Noah or Raph worked on this?" I asked, forcing him back to the table to sit.

He waved me off as he took a seat. “There were too many injured. I figured I would work on it when I got home. Or have my wifey do it for me.”

I grinned. I was so stupid in love with this man that when he called me “wifey”, my knees went weak. “Your wifey will work on it if you do her a favor.” The caramel light ignited the second I called forth my healing powers, letting it leak from my palms, and drip onto his wound.

“Hey, isn’t that blackmail or something?” Lincoln raised an eyebrow.

Shaking my head, I chuckled. “My pathetic little summer class isn’t so pathetic anymore, but I only have four more weeks to prep them for the gauntlet.”

Lincoln nodded. “And you want my help. Of course.”

I recoiled a bit. “Not exactly. Shea and I got this, but I need access to a demon. It can be something low-grade though, like a Yew demon or a Snakeroot.”

Lincoln raised an eyebrow. “I can’t bring a demon on campus. It’ll set off the alarm.”

“I’ve thought about that.” I nodded. “We could go to the apartment parking lot, where my mom lives. Raphael spelled it to be safe from Lucy’s eye, but there’s no alarm.”

I’d been over to my mom’s a handful of times with Lincoln for dinner, so I knew he was okay with me going there.

Lincoln was silent a moment, staring at the table salt like it might sprout wings and fly.

“Come on, please? I want them to pass, and they can’t do that by sparing with each other. They need to fight the real thing,” I pressed him. Overprotective didn’t cover what Lincoln was; he was the next-level shit, and I knew this was asking a lot of him. Even a lower-level demon being in my presence would set him on edge. The fact that I could kill them with one hand tied behind my back, wouldn’t matter to him in the slightest.

“I’ll clear it with Michael,” Lincoln answered, sighing resignedly.

I squealed, leaning forward and placing a kiss on his cheek.

“*But.*” He stopped and caught my gaze. “I want you to speak to someone about the panic attacks.”

Dammit. He’d trapped me. The panic attacks were random, and I didn’t think they were a big deal, but I also trusted Lincoln and that he wanted what was best for me.

“Fine,” I growled. I wasn’t really sure there was a shrink on Earth who would know what the hell I was dealing with, but it was worth a shot.

“Tell me about the war.” I continued to heal his shoulder, letting the golden light wrap around his arm, bringing healing where it was most needed. I felt so helpless here inside the safety of Angel City, while my friends were doing shifts in the war zones, pushing the demons back to keep us all safe.

Lincoln sighed, pushing his fingers through his hair, which had started to grow back out. Instead of speaking, he pulled me into his lap and rested his face on my back. I shifted my position so I could still heal his shoulder.

“Come on, Linc, I’m not fragile. Tell me what’s going on out there, or Luke and Chloe will.” Luke and Chloe had been assigned to Lincoln’s team, and Shea was working directly with Archangel Michael—when she wasn’t helping me train my summer class. My friends would spill the beans eventually.

“It’s bad,” he spoke against my back, his breath tickling my spine. “Every week there seems to be a hundred more demons. I don’t know how he’s making them so fast, but we won’t last at this rate.”

My heart hammered inside my chest at his words. Had things really become so dire in the past month? I’d heard they closed the border to and from Demon City. You now needed special security clearance to get through, and even then, it was only at certain times of the day that they opened it. How the hell was Lucy creating a hundred new demons a week?

Probably with magic, that bastard. He was trying to overtake Angel City, weaken our defenses, and then what? Would we fall? Would we flee? Would we—

I shook my head against the defeating thoughts. “What do the archangels say? What are we going to do about it?” Perk of being married to a captain was that I got all the good high-level clearance gossip.

Lincoln shifted me to face him, wincing when he tried to use his bad arm. “They’re thinking of putting out a call to the sister schools, pulling in everyone who’s willing and able to fight.” His eyes held worry, but there was also something else darkening there, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on right then.

Wow. Putting out a call to the sister schools meant things were bad. Or on the verge of being bad, at least. A realization hit me then. Los Angeles was the only large city left standing. If we fell, the demons would rule the world.

“Linc, we have to stop them. Stop *him*.” Lucifer was cranking out demons on a factory line, and it took us four years to train a hundred Fallen Army soldiers. The math would never add up in our favor.

Lincoln peppered my shoulder with kisses. “No one knows what to do. We’re all surviving day to day out there. The archangels are having a meeting tomorrow with all the captains. I’ll try to help come up with—”

“I want to be there!” The words flew from my mouth before he even finished.

Lincoln gave me a look that said, ‘You are *not* a captain in the Fallen Army.’

“I’m going,” I declared. “I saw Lucifer create those things. I know his process. I can be of value,” I urged.

With a resigned sigh, he nodded. I could sense that he was torn between my safety and the safety of this city, but in reality, if one fell, the other wouldn’t survive.

I needed to kill Lucifer. Like yesterday. It was my destiny.

I knew that now. There was no other way around it.

THE NIGHT PASSED TORTUROUSLY SLOW, with each toss and turn, leaving me restless, and then I had to leave early the next morning for my training with Emberly. I'd had to move our session to eight, in order to be able to make the nine o'clock archangel meeting with Lincoln and the captains after, which didn't make me any happier about what I was about to endure.

"Hey, girl. It's early as hell. I should up your price," Emberly called out as I walked into our training gym.

A grin tugged at the corners of my mouth. I loved this chick, and she'd fast become like a little sister to me. "No way, you'll bankrupt me. What does a fifteen-year-old need with four hundred a month, anyway?"

The teenager cocked a hand on her hip, giving me a playful scowl. Her hair was in a messy top knot, and she wore baggy sweats and a loose T-shirt. She'd literally rolled out of bed and come here.

"I'll be sixteen in a month, and I'm saving for an old Mustang. My dad's going to help me restore it."

A pang of jealousy pinched my heart for the slightest moment, before it turned into happiness for Emberly. I missed my dad, missed working on projects with him. I'd never have that again.

"Won't he buy one for you?" The archangels were rich. The heavy taxes the Angel City citizens paid all went into their banks to use for the war, of course, but I was sure they took some type of salary.

"Hah!" she barked. "Any extra money we have goes to buying slaves from San Francisco. If I want a car, I need to buy it myself."

The situation with San Francisco wasn't right. It made me sick to think about it. And of course, Michael put all his extra



money there; he was an angel, after all, not tempted by mortal materialism, I guessed. I should have known.

“Well, I’m glad my hard-earned money is going into getting you a car. Just promise me a ride when it’s up and running.”

Emberly grinned. “You got it.”

I was about to get into my training stance when she spoke again.

“Oh, and your mom is so cool. Man, that apple crumble thingy she cooks is yum.”

The color drained from my face as I processed her words. “What? When did you meet my mom?”

Emberly hesitated, the look on her face said maybe she wasn’t sure she should have told me anything.

“Emberly.”

“Raph has been bringing her to weekly dinners to our house.” She chewed a nail. “I thought you knew.”

*What the hell did she just say?*

“Like, as friends?” Why wouldn’t my mom tell me about that? Or Raphael? *Oh my God, are they... dating?* A warm feeling spread throughout my limbs at the thought. I loved Raph, so that might be kind of awesome, but also *very* weird.

“Umm, I dunno. They look friendly... when they’re holding hands and stuff.”

“Holding hands!” I jumped into the air to release the energy building in my body. “For how long?”

Emberly busted up laughing. “Dude, you’re totally freaking out over this. What’s the big deal? It’s been like maybe three weeks.”

Three weeks! What *was* the big deal? I didn’t know. My father had been gone almost ten years now, and obviously I wanted my mom to be happy, but... it was Raph. I just couldn’t see them together romantically. It was too weird.

Emberly checked her phone. “Didn’t you drag me out of bed at the ass crack of dawn because you were on a time crunch?”

*Oh shit!*

Shaking my head, to clear it of all thoughts of my mom and Raphael, I nodded. “You’re right. Okay, so I’ve been working on this shield thingy.”

Emberly raised an eyebrow. “Shield thingy?”

I nodded. I’d done some weird-ass magic juju in San Francisco when the Succubus came at Lincoln and me, shooting out some kind of plasma that cemented the demons in place. I’d also erected a shield when the men in the tunnel were shooting at Noah and me, so I’d been working to sort of combine the two. The idea was to create a thin plasma-type dome over myself, to protect me from a physical attack, but I needed to know if it would guard me from thought intrusion too.

“Step back,” I warned her.

She took two steps away, looking impressed. “Let’s see what you got.”

I could tell she was having a good day, her wings seemed relaxed, as though they weren’t bothering her as much, and she wasn’t wearing what I now recognized as her “pain face”.

Nodding, I took a deep, focusing breath, before calling up my magic. Lincoln had taught me not to think of it as Celestial magic or dark magic, or Michael/Raphael magic, and all of that separately. Instead, I should just think of it as my magic. That had been a key turning point in my training. I called forth the silvery mixture of all of my inherited abilities. Yes, I had Lucifer’s powers inside of me, there was no doubt about that, but I also had the power of four archangels running through my veins.

It was time I found a way to put it all to good use.

“Whoa,” Emberly gasped, when the pearlescent mist flowed from my palms and started to surround me.

I beamed. I'd been practicing in the trailer for hours each day, but it was still nice to see it working. Lincoln had thrown an apple at my shield last week to test it, and it bounced right off the shield, falling to the floor. However, we still weren't sure about the mind control thing. It hadn't been ready to test until now.

"It's totally like a little bubble!" Emberly started to walk around me as the shield erected itself, thin enough that I could see and hear what was going on outside of it, but thick enough that it was visible.

"Touch it," I urged her.

Without hesitation she reached out and flicked it, then popped her mouth open in surprise. "It's solid. That's legit!"

A grin pulled at my lips. "Now, try to make me do something."

My almost-sixteen-year-old mentor nodded, standing before me. "All right."

Suddenly, I felt my right arm moving against my will, toward my face. It was slow, like it was moving through quicksand, but moving, nonetheless.

"No!" I cried out, as it eventually came up to smack my forehead.

"I'm sorry, girl. I totally thought that would work," Emberly shared. "Didn't you, Dad?"

I gasped and spun to follow her line of sight. My shield popped.

Michael was standing in the doorway, looking like a freaking Adonis with low-slung jeans and a silver armor chest plate. I shook my head to force my thoughts away from where they were going. I loved Lincoln, but damn, Michael was nice to look at and drool over.

"Sorry, I didn't want to break your concentration. Nice shield. It'll serve you well in battle against physical forces, but not mental ones." His voice boomed as if it were everywhere at once, yet he held no microphone.

“Oh, bummer.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. Michael and I had worked together before—he’d taught me how to call Sera to me from across the room—but I still felt super self-conscious in his presence.

“I would offer to train you, Brielle, but as an angel, I’m forbidden to use my mind control over humans, celestials included, even to practice,” he confessed.

I’d kind of been wondering why he hadn’t offered. That made sense.

“But Emberly can?” I asked.

Emberly shrugged beside me. “I can do anything because I’m half human.”

Michael gave his daughter a pointed look. “You can, but I hope you’ll always make the best moral decision.”

Emberly just gave him a little eye roll.

“I can still advise you,” Michael looked at me. “And I have some time before the meeting, so I thought I would offer my two cents.”

*Yes!* I needed all the advice I could get.

I nodded enthusiastically.

Michael approached us and Emberly crossed her arms, cocking one eyebrow at her father as if annoyed that he was jumping in on her job.

“Brielle, I imagine it took a lot of mental fortitude to get through your time in Hell,” Michael sympathized.

I tried not to remember those mornings where Raksha fed me drugged oatmeal, and I was wheeled around the place like a zombie. Left to think that everyone had given up on me, and taken me for dead.

“It did.” My voice cracked.

Michael’s gaze filled with compassion. “That mental fortitude is what can make your mind impenetrable to outside commands. It’s the resilience you have from surviving the loss of your father, watching your mother become a demon slave,

and then becoming one yourself. Most people wouldn't fare so well, my dear. Their spirits would have broken long ago, leaving them cynical about the world. Your heart is still soft toward love, and you have a generally positive outlook on life. That's what you need to use in order to fight the mental commands from Lucifer. It's something a human could do."

Shock ripped through me at his declaration that a human could do this. I'd been trying for weeks! I didn't know at what point the tears started to fall down my face, but it must have been a while, because Emberly slipped her hand into mine and squeezed. What he'd said was basically a mini review of how hard my life had been, and the emotion overwhelmed me.

"Geez, Dad. Did you have to be so hardcore?" Emberly glared at her father.

Michael lifted both hands in surrender. "I'm sorry, just trying to help. I want Brielle to know she's had this ability inside of her all along."

Giving Emberly's hand a squeeze before releasing it, I wiped away my tears. "How? How do I withstand the mental commands?"

A pensive look entered Michael's eyes and he nodded, starting to walk in a circle around us both. "Let go of the Fear. It's like candy to Lucifer. It weakens the mind, and allows mental commands to flow right in."

My brows gathered in a deep frown. "Fear itself? Or of Lucy?"

My feminine nickname for the Devil, made Emberly grin.

Michael shook his head. "Of anything. Him, dying, cancer, the dark, losing a loved one, not getting a job, not having enough money. Being scared creates an energetic cord into your soul, and it's like a vacuum, sucking the energy out of your body and giving it away. Lucifer hooks into those 'vacuums' and gets control of people."

*Holy shit!*

"That's freaky." Emberly hugged her chest.

Michael nodded. “It can be intimidating, but if you work on those emotions and realize that you have more control over your life than you think, you can eliminate fear.”

Emberly’s expression said she wasn’t buying it. “Obviously I’m not afraid of death. But public embarrassment? Succubus demon coming at me in my sleep? Not getting asked to prom? That’s terrifying.”

Her father chuckled. “Fleeting worries are normal, but being frightened about a Succubus demon coming for you in your sleep, on a nightly basis, creates a perfect energy vacuum.”

I swallowed hard. There was so much I was terrified of—getting cancer like my dad, losing my mom, Lincoln, or Shea in this war, not being able to live up to the prophecy and defeat Lucifer. Hell, I was even anxious of this training with Emberly not working, and that Lucifer would control my mind again! But I wasn’t actually scared of the Prince of Darkness himself. At first, I was. I was downright terrified, if I was being honest, but spending time with him down there, had humanized him to me.

I hated him, yes, but did I fear him? Not really.

A grin swept across Michael’s lips, and I knew he was reading my thoughts. “Brielle, you have been placed in a unique situation, and therefore, you have unique fears, but Lucifer isn’t one of them. That’s your greatest asset against him. Now, work on calming your other anxieties, and no one can control your mind.”

A chill worked up my arms. “How?”

Michael stepped closer to me, and the brightness he normally dimmed in my presence intensified, causing me to squint. Reaching out, he cupped both sides of my face with glowing blue hands. The moment his palms touched my skin, a pure feeling of love and exhilaration swept through my entire body. Ideas started to flash through my mind, bringing with them information, and clear knowing. Nobody really died; we all went into the afterlife, so fearing death of yourself or a loved one was pointless.

We were all reunited in the end.

Dreading things happening in life was pointless too, because it only served to weaken your body and mind, actually attracting what you didn't want to happen, on an energetic level. Being terrified of a Succubus demon on a nightly basis, increased the likelihood of a Succubus attack.

Fear was the opposite of love, and it was making humans and the planet sick. I could see that now, felt it, knew it. Michael was gifting me with information that was overwhelming, but powerful. If I lost Lincoln or my mom in this war, I would see them again in the afterlife. We could reincarnate together again, so there was no need to be frightful of that. If I failed at my mission to live up to the prophecy, and rid the Earth of Lucifer, it would be okay. My only true goal on Earth was to love—love Lincoln, love Shea, even love Tiffany.

We just needed to remember to love each other, to stop spreading fear and hate.

When Michael pulled his hands away from my head, I realized I was sobbing.

He gave my shoulders a light squeeze. “May God be with you in the days to come, child.” His voice held a reverence that engulfed me in its warmth. Then he walked away, leaving me feeling pulled in a hundred different directions.

*What the hell just happened?*

Emberly swept into my side and lowered me to the floor, before sitting across from me.

“He did that to me once. The glowy hand thing,” Emberly shared as I worked to calm my breathing. “I was in a bad place mentally, questioning my existence, and he just grabbed my face and downloaded all that ‘love is the answer’ stuff. It’s overwhelming, right?”

I just nodded. I felt like something inside of me had shifted. This entire war felt pointless; we were going backward when we were supposed to be going forward. If I could kill Lucifer, and we could rid the Earth of his demons, then the

humans would be left to their main task of learning to love each other regardless of their differences.

*That's why we all came here, to Earth, to learn and practice that one simple, yet powerful lesson.*

Unconditional love.

“Makes you feel kinda shitty for how you’ve treated people, huh?” Emberly asked.

I nodded again. “Having an archangel for a father must be so...” I couldn’t find the right word to describe it.

“It’s maddening at times,” Emberly finished for me. “But also, awesome.”

Offering her a weak smile, I tried to push away that intense... whatever it was. Love everyone, don’t be afraid, was the takeaway, and pretty much the hardest thing ever to actually do.

Determination settled over me, and I stood, clenching my fists. “Let’s try this one more time.”

Fuck fear. I wasn’t going to let it weaken my mind. I was strong, loving, and kind, and I was going to make *that* my shield.

Emberly stood also, facing off with me, a determination in her gaze. She wanted me to succeed as much as I did. She was tough on the exterior but a complete softie at heart; I could see that now, after all these trainings with her.

I would kill Lucifer.

I would help rid this Earth of his Hellspawn.

I would love more and hate less.

I would not let fear rob me of my power.

I was a badass female, with endless capabilities.

Bring it.

Staring Emberly down, I waited, anticipating for her to make me smack my face or something.



“Hit me with it!” I shouted, fists clenched as adrenaline coursed through my veins.

Emberly gave me a lopsided grin, her eyes flashing purple. “I did. You didn’t move.”

Shock and relief ripped through me.

“What? Try again.”

Her eyes flashed again, and again, but nothing happened. The teenager grinned at me, showing me her brilliant smile.

Whatever her dad had done to me, had worked.

When Lucifer finally came for me, I would be ready.

## FIVE



“At this rate, Angel City will fall in three months’ time,” Michael announced, standing before Uriel, Gabriel, and Raphael.

We were in one of the lecture rooms with the archangels sitting in chairs at the front, and a smattering of Fallen Army captains sitting in the student desks, watching them keenly. I sat beside Lincoln, my eyes flicking from Michael to his wife, Grace. She was wearing full battle armor, hair tied into a tight topknot, and a grim determination on her face.

Gabriel’s eyes filled with sadness as he looked at his brother. “Ever since the falling, we’ve tried to protect the humans so they could get back to some semblance of normal. The normal we stole from them when we fell to war with Lucifer. But now...” His voice broke and he couldn’t finish.

“Now, we may lose the fight altogether,” Michael added grimly.

“How many Fallen Army members do we have at the other academies? Can you spare them to join us in protecting the city?” Raphael pleaded with Gabriel and Uriel.

The two angels nodded simultaneously. “Absolutely, but our numbers pale in comparison to yours. We have maybe two to three hundred in all of the academies combined who are trained for this sort of scenario.” Gabriel informed him.

What scenario? The end of the world?

I cleared my throat and all eyes flicked to me. Swallowing hard, I stood, letting my wings slowly unfurl from my back.

One by one the captains' eyes widened. Even with wings that were white at the tips, I knew the rumors had spread.

"Hi. I'm sure you all know who I am," I started. "I just wanted to say that I plan to put a stop to all of this. If you can buy me a little time, I plan to end this war."

Raphael beamed at me with pride, nodding. "We'll do our best, Brielle. Our numbers are low, but our faith is strong."

Grace growled from where she stood, leaning against the wall, and all eyes moved from me to land on her.

"Grace, is there something you would like to share?" Michael smirked at his wife.

Pushing off the wall, Grace charged at the council of angels like she might cut off their heads. Anger lined her features as she stood tall next to her husband.

"You say you don't have the numbers to buy Brielle time, and we all know why," she declared, addressing the other angels. "Three times I've requested that you allow me to start a Demon Hunting Academy. Three times! I could have trained thousands by now! Don't you see that the solution to your problem, with the growing demon population, isn't to protect the poor frail humans, it's to arm them? Let me train them to fight for themselves, so Angel City doesn't become a page in a history book that no one reads!" She finished her sentence with a growl, and my gaze flicked to Michael.

Nothing in his face said he was embarrassed by his wife's outburst. Yet, nothing indicated he disagreed with her either. If anything, he looked madly in love with the woman.

Raphael sighed.

"All in favor of a Demon Hunter Academy, led by Grace, in which humans will be trained to kill demons, say aye," Michael declared.

"Aye." Gabriel raised his hand.

"Aye." Uriel nodded.

Michael grinned. "Aye."

Every single set of eyes fell on Raphael. I didn't know what the protocol was here, but it looked like it needed to be unanimous.

The archangel swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Grace, but I cannot allow the humans to be put in harm's way deliberately. My job is to protect them."

Grace screamed out in frustration. "Why, because we're weak? Because we don't have special abilities like your beloved angel blessed?"

Raphael's features tightened. He was clearly annoyed with Grace's outburst, but something else shown there too—he respected her. "Yes, humans are fragile. They don't regenerate and heal like we do. As a healer, I feel it is my moral duty to do no harm, and I don't feel right sending them out into battle."

Reaching for her belt, Grace pulled out a long glistening sword. The blade ripped from its sheath with a menacing sound, and a few of the captains gasped, clearly unsure of her intentions.

"Raphael, I challenge you to a sparring match. If I can hold my own against you, then you give me my school." She was dead serious.

Amusement danced behind the other archangels' eyes.

"That sounds fair, Brother. I've trained her myself. If anyone can show us what the humans are capable of, it's Grace," Michael added in support of his wife.

Raphael stared at her a long moment, then finally nodded. "Okay, Grace. If you show me that I won't be sending humans out to be slaughtered, I will give you Fallen Academy to be turned into a school for humans to learn demon hunting."

My heart was racing in my ears. Seeing Grace's passionate plight for the humans brought tears to my eyes. Since the Fallen War, we'd always seen humans as weak, but that needed to change, and Grace was proof.

Raphael looked to one of the captains who sat in the front row. "Please fetch my sword, and meet us on the field. "

*Holy shit. Archangel Michael's wife is going to fight Raphael.*

Lincoln gave me a look of shock, and then we all stood and filed out of the meeting room in eager anticipation. If Grace won, this could change the face of the war. Maybe not this year, or the next, but as students graduated from the Demon Hunter Academy, it would bolster our numbers against the Hellspawn.

I hoped like hell that she won.

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WE ALL STOOD on the field. It was midday, and the sun shining brightly in the sky, reflected on the swords readying for a fight, making them almost glow. Raphael held his sword tightly, decked out in full plate armor with a shield, as was Grace. I'd fetched Emberly—sure she wouldn't want to miss this—and now we stood with rapt attention, along with the captains of the army, and the other fallen angels in a semicircle.

“Kick his ass, Mom!” Emberly shouted, causing a grin to pull at the corner of Grace's lips.

Raphael just stood like a sentinel, no emotion on his face. “I have a healer standing by in case you're seriously injured,” he told Grace, then nodded to Noah, who was waiting off to the side.

“No. If I'm injured, I'll heal naturally. Let's do this, Raph. No more postponing the inevitable. You know this Demon Hunter Academy is the future.”

Raphael sighed and then waved her forward. “I'll be the judge of that. Show me your best.”

Grinning, Grace began to stalk forward, waving her sword in a figure eight motion before her. While she was making a spectacle with her sword hand, I saw her free hand dip into a thigh holster at her side and pluck out a silver throwing knife. Before I could even register what she was doing, she threw it at the half-inch gap in Raphael's armor, right near his collarbone. It sank into the meat of his shoulder, causing the

angel to gasp in shock. That's when Grace sprang from her spot, hurtling at him, sword raised.

Raphael yanked the throwing knife out of his shoulder, and tossed it to the ground, throwing up his shield just as Grace's sword crashed into it. He blocked her blows, lashing out with his own sword, which she seemed ready for each time. It was like watching a dance—Raphael would push her back, cutting out her advance with his sword, and she would block before pushing him back once more.

“Don't go easy on her!” Michael yelled. Not something you would expect a man to say to another man who was attacking his wife.

At his words, Raphael reached out with his giant foot and planted a boot into Grace's chest, sending her flying ten feet up into the air with his superhuman kick. Grace must have practiced this, because she seemed ready for the fall and rolled into it as she landed, before springing up quickly into a crouch.

Charging forward, Raphael lifted himself into the air with his wings, and she tracked the motion across the space until he started to descend, fast and hard. She held her crouched position, sword out before her, until he was right on top of her. In that moment, she sprang from her spot on the ground and threw a handful of dirt into his face.

It was like watching a ninja.

Raphael coughed and sputtered as he landed, caught completely off guard, while Emberly cheered. Grace collided with the angel, sending her sword right through one of his wings, slicing into the meat. Raphael roared in pain or anger—I couldn't tell—and lashed out with his sword, catching a piece of Grace's exposed arm and drawing blood.

I held my breath, totally forgetting that breathing was essential to life. I was riveted to the spot.

Still, Grace barely winced at the large gash he'd made in her arm—blood now flowing freely down to her elbow. She just stood there, strong and steadfast, holding her sword up before her.

Raphael had stopped his advance, brow creasing. “Doesn’t it hurt?” he asked, his concerned gaze on the cut he’d made on her arm.

She shrugged. “Not as bad as childbirth, and humans have been doing that for thousands of years. I’m not going to forfeit at the first sight of blood, Raphael. I’m stronger than that.”

The healer angel sighed. “Yes, I suppose you are.” With that, he lowered his sword to the side, before letting it fall to the ground. “I guess I’ve misjudged what the human spirit is capable of.”

His wing was bleeding, and there was dirt on his face, but he looked... relieved, like maybe he’d wanted this demon hunter school all along, but didn’t want to put a bunch of weak humans in harm’s way.

“Does this mean...?” Grace eyed his sword on the ground, probably unsure if it was a trick, or if Raphael had given up the fight.

“It means you get your school, Grace. You can be headmaster, and I’ll advise you when you need it. I think it’s high time we empowered the humans to protect themselves.”

A triumphant grin lit up Grace’s face as she dropped her sword, and threw herself into Raphael’s arms, to embrace him. His hands came around her, squeezing her back, and you could clearly see there was no love lost between these old friends.

When she pulled back, Raphael rubbed his eyes. “You threw dirt in my face.”

Grace shrugged as if to say, ‘I had to do what I had to do.’

Michael stepped toward them with a slight grin. “I taught her that.” He winked at Raph.

Raphael chuckled, clapping Michael on the back. “Of course, you did.”

At that moment, Emberly crossed the space to give her mom a hug, and the two were quickly smiling, and talking in hushed tones.

“A Demon Hunting Academy for humans. Crazy, but it just might work,” Lincoln whispered, slipping his hand into mine.

Glancing at my husband, I nodded. “Damn right it will, and I want to teach there when it’s ready. Grace has already asked me.”

Lincoln reached out, tucking a lock of stray hair behind my ear. “I think that would be wonderful.”

What he didn’t say was, ‘if we can survive until then.’ We only had a few months to bolster Angel City, or no future academies would exist at all.



## SIX



**M**ichael had approved my need for a couple Snakeroot demons, and today was the day I was going to train my small summer crew how to fight them. We were just two weeks from the date of the second gauntlet, so it was now or never. Tonight, the other soldiers from our sister academies would start showing up, and the cat would be out of the bag. Everyone would finally know there were other schools, but the risk was worth the reward. Saving Angel City had become a top priority. Catia, Lincoln's friend from his time in San Francisco, was also slated to arrive tonight, and I was super excited to meet her.

"All right, listen up!" I called to my class. "Captain Grey will be here shortly, to bring a couple of Snakeroot demons for us to train with. If you cannot trap, or kill, a miniscule Snakeroot demon, you do not belong in the Fallen Army."

Silence descended among my eleven students. People started to come out from their apartment buildings, to watch the spectacle; I'd put notices on their doors last night, that the parking lot would be used for training purposes today. Looking up, I saw my mom and Mikey, and both gave me a little wave.

"Now, what do you know about Snakeroots?" Shea asked the group.

Shea and I had fallen into an easy form of co-teaching. I was the sane one who did things by the book, and she was the psycho, breaking the rules to try and toughen up the students. Together, we made a pretty good team.

The smallest girl, nicknamed Tiny, raised her hand. “They spit acid and they like candy.”

I nodded. “So, who came prepared?”

One by one, my students pulled packets of gum and candy out of their pockets.

Good. The little shits were listening when I spoke.

*They just might pass this test after all.*

Lincoln pulled up in his Fallen Army-issued SUV at that moment, and I nodded to my students. “Showtime. Split into your groups, pick a team leader, and prove to me that I should recommend you to Raphael to be in the second gauntlet test.”

A grim determination settled on each and every one of their faces, as they started to split up into their assigned groups.

Lincoln stepped out of the car, Noah opening the passenger door at the same time, and both boys came to greet us.

“Think they’re ready? I could only find one Snakeroot, so I grabbed a Yew demon as well. Little shit nearly set the car on fire,” my husband confessed.

Good. Switching it up on them would be perfect training for real life. “That’s fine. They better be ready, because if they don’t pass today, then they have no hope of passing the gauntlet a second time.”

Lincoln nodded. “It’s hard when you want them to succeed so badly, but you can’t do the work for them.”

He was right. I’d forgotten that he had been my mentor—still was, technically—for so much of my journey at Fallen Academy. He knew exactly how I felt, and how invested I was in this group.

I’d set up three little areas in the parking lot with stacked boxes and crates, broken pieces of wood and hay bales, so each group could try to contain their demon within the allotted space.

Lincoln called Shea and me over to the SUV, to help him unload the demons. “We’ve got some stainless-steel carriers, but I’m not sure how long they’ll hold up to the acid spitters.”

Not long at all, if memory served me right. I could almost feel a phantom tingle on my foot where I’d been scorched by the buggers.

When Lincoln opened the door to the car, a puff of smoke trickled out instantly.

“Stop that!” Noah kicked one of the steel cages, where the Yew demon must have been. There were a few air holes on the side, and a red little eye zeroed in on me.

*I hope my students are ready for this.*

We grappled with the cages, careful not to line up with the air holes. Peering inside, I noticed Lincoln had taped the Snakeroot demons’ mouths shut.

“Get ready!” I called out to the students, then began to open the cage. I was sure they’d get the tape off themselves, so I wasn’t going to mess with it and get burned.

The moment I opened the door, a Snakeroot demon shot out and up into the air. With quick hands, he pulled the tape off and then jerked his head in my direction.

“I’m coming for you, Brielle,” his tiny voice declared, sending chills up my arms.

The fact that this demon knew my name had my students pausing. They just stood there in shock, probably never having heard one speak.

“Soon you will make good on your promise to me,” the demon declared with a glassy-eyed look.

*What the fuck?*

Lincoln stormed over to my area and withdrew his gun, pointing it at the demon’s chest. “What the hell did you just say?” His eyes were wide, and he looked as shocked as I felt.

*Did Lucifer just talk to me through a demon?*

“You won’t be able to save her,” the snakeroot threatened before tipping his head back and cackling with laughter. The sound coming from the small creature was shrill and high-pitched, to the point that my ears started to ache.

Lincoln threw the car keys to Noah, and without a word, the healing Celestial started pulling me toward the SUV.

“Get her back to campus!” Lincoln roared.

Everything slowed down for me in that moment. My mom and brother were watching with worried eyes, and my students were frozen when they should have been fighting their demons.

I’d become complacent. I’d forgotten the deal I’d made with the Devil. I’d focused on other things, more important things, like my class and the new Demon Hunter Academy. Yet, Lucy was still waiting for me.

And just like that, the hole in my chest that I’d worked to fill with Lincoln’s love drained into a gaping cavern.

*Sera... Raksha.*

I was here playing house while my friends were literally living through Hell.

“Take me to Elodie’s,” I told Noah, getting into the car.

Raksha’s wife and son had been given permanent housing on campus, for fear of retaliation against them from Lucifer. I had checked in on them now and then, but it was hard for me to see them when they reminded me of Raksha, and her sacrifice to save me. Did Lucifer kill her? I didn’t even know if he bought our fight, and the story that I’d overpowered her and escaped.

Noah just nodded, careening the SUV onto the side road just inside the academy gates. It was a Saturday, so they should be home. Sure enough, as we pulled up, I noticed Elodie outside the small dorm building, reading a book in a chair as her son played in the grass nearby.

“Thanks. I’ll walk back,” I told Noah and opened the door.

“I can wait,” he offered.

I shook my head. “No, I need time to clear my head.” I was safe inside the academy walls with the demon alarm, so I knew he wouldn’t fight me.

“Hey, Bri? You’re not alone.” Reaching out, he gave my hand a squeeze.

A small fake smile pulled at my lips before I yanked my hand away, and shut the door.

He was wrong. I *was* alone. I was all alone. No one knew what it felt like to carry this burden.

Elodie looked up and put her book down, standing to greet me. “Hey, Brielle. I didn’t expect it to be you.”

She looked okay. Not brimming over with happiness, but not dying of depression either. But just because a person looked okay didn’t mean they were on the inside. Each day she lived without her wife felt like it was my fault.

As Noah pulled the SUV out onto the road, I walked closer, giving her a small wave and then nervously clasping my hands behind my back.

“Hey. It’s been a while, so I thought I would see how you two are doing.”

Elodie and I faced her son, watching him play in the grass a few yards away.

“We’re great. I love my job at the library, and our apartment here is much nicer than the one in Demon City.”

I nodded, watching the small boy, the hole in my chest cracking open wider and wider. Suddenly I turned, facing Elodie. “But are you really okay?” Tears streamed down my cheeks as I was unable to hold them in any longer. “Because I just left her there. She told me to leave her and I did, but now I wonder if I could have found another way, or—”

Elodie pulled me into a bone-crushing hug. “Don’t do that. There was no way. My wife is Lucifer’s slave. The only way to release her is in death.”

She leaned away to face me, and I saw such compassion in her eyes that it made my heart squeeze tighter in my chest.

“You’ve given us a new life here, and that’s what Raksha wanted. You fulfilled her one wish for our son.”

The tears flowed harder as I swallowed the lump in my throat. “But maybe I should gather the army and go looking for her. Maybe—”

She shook her head. “Maybe you and the army would die down there, and it would have been a waste. We can’t live our life with maybes.”

She’d given up hope. I guess I should too, but it just wasn’t within me to give up. Still, I didn’t want to upset her any more than I already had. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m going to head back now. It was good to see you both.”

Turning from her, I tried to keep my emotions contained, tried to keep the tears from turning to sobs.

“Wait, Brielle!” she shouted at my retreating back.

“I’ll catch you later.” I just waved behind me and then took off running. I needed to run, to move, or I might explode.

*Sera.* There was no one to talk to about her. My dagger and I were connected on a level that no one else understood. I could feel a tiny bit better about Elodie’s words regarding Raksha, but what excuse did I have for leaving Sera? When Lucy came for me, would I be able to withstand his mental commands? I’d been working on my fear, working on closing the energy vacuums, or whatever Michael called them, but Sera was my weakness. I loved her like she was a person, because to me, she was. She had a soul, and it was deeply entwined with my own. I missed her sarcastic remarks. I missed her crush on Archangel Michael. I missed everything about her.

I’d run so fast and hard that I hadn’t even realized I’d reached the trailer until I looked up to see my mother standing there.

Her face was lined with worry, but something else looked different about her. She looked... younger? Refreshed? I couldn’t put my finger on it, until I remembered what Emberly

told me about my mom and Raphael secretly dating. Something I had yet to talk about with her.

She looked happy. Less tired. More content. Not a look I remembered seeing on her for many years.

“Honey, what happened? Are you okay?” She took in my disheveled appearance, hair wild from my run, and chest still heaving.

Catching my breath, I nodded, and opened the trailer door to invite her in with me. “Just a precaution.” I didn’t want to worry her unnecessarily.

She frowned. “It didn’t look like a precaution.”

I waved her off dismissively. “Mom, I made a pact with the Devil and he’s coming for me. What more do you want me to say?” She knew the deep shit I was in; I didn’t want to rehash it every time something slightly dangerous happened.

She was quiet for a moment, as we both stepped into the trailer and took a seat at the dining nook. I felt bad that I’d snapped at her.

“So, are you dating Raph?” I blurted out, partly to change the subject, and partly because I was dying to know.

Her head whipped up, and she looked at me with wide eyes.

*Guilty.*

“How did you know?”

I chuckled. “Busted.”

My mom grinned then, and it lit up her whole face. “It was Emberly, wasn’t it? I didn’t want you to find out that way. I’m sorry, hon. We’re just taking it slow, getting to know each other. He’s fully acknowledged that your father is my soul mate. We both just want companionship while we’re here.”

My throat tightened at the mention of my father. All he ever wanted was for my mom to be happy. If Raph made her happy for this short time on Earth, then I supported it wholeheartedly.

“I think it’s great, Mom. I think Dad would too. He’d want you to be happy.”

Her eyes welled with tears as she reached out to squeeze my hand. “Oh, honey, thank you for saying that. You know, when your dad’s cancer was really bad, and we weren’t sure if we could find a healer, he told me the same thing. To move on and be happy, because he wouldn’t stand for a sad Kate on his behalf.”

I laughed, tears spilling out onto my cheeks. “That’s such a Dad thing to say.”

She wiped my tears and smoothed my hair.

“So, you and Raph, huh?” I asked again, getting used to the idea.

She beamed at me, full megawatt. “He’s never dated a human, so it’s awkward, silly, and fun.”

They sounded like teenagers. “Good, just don’t give me details.” I plugged my ears, causing my mom’s grin to widen.

She pulled my hands down, and a seriousness crossed over her face. “What else is bothering you, honey? You can tell me anything.”

My heart slowed to a crawl. “No, I’m fine, Mom.”

My mom gave me that look, the ‘I call bullshit’ look, and I sighed. Lincoln said I needed to talk to someone about my problems. Who better to talk to than my mom? Most moms were secret therapists anyway, weren’t they? Always listening to our problems.

So I unloaded. I told her about Sera and Raksha, and how it killed me to just be living my life up here while they were down there. I let out each repressed thing I hadn’t realized I was carrying, and she just sat there for over an hour, kind and patient, and listened.

*Sometimes all one needs is a good listener.*

I felt better already.



## SEVEN



**A**fter I'd had my therapy session with my mom and sent her home, Lincoln came back. His uniform was dirty, and a few pieces of hay were sticking out of his collar.

Immediately, I leapt up from where I was sitting at the table—with a cup of tea and my lesson plans.

“How'd they do? Did Tiny kick ass, because she's like a shaken bottle of soda, ready to explode. Oh, did Ray do that thing with his bow and arrow? I wonder if—”

His hand came up over my mouth to quiet me, and then he pulled out his phone, plopping it in my hand. “I expect two of the three groups to pass. You're an amazing teacher, and Tiny totally kicked ass. She reminds me of you.”

My attention dropped to his phone, to see a video cued up and ready to watch. “You recorded it for me!” I shrieked, jumping up and down, causing the trailer to wobble.

Lincoln chuckled, gently shoving me over, so we could sit next to each other. “Let's watch it together. Tell me if you can think of a way that all three teams could pass.”

This was a test. Dammit. He was always trying to help me be better, which was an awesome, yet annoying trait.

We tucked into the table and I hit Play. It was captured mid-action. Tiny was standing on top of the highest hay bale, her group down below coaxing the demon with candy. The Snakeroot was too smart, not going for it; instead, it stayed fluttering in the air, spitting acid on the team below him.

That's when Tiny leapt.

"Holy shit!" I shouted as Tiny tore off the top of the hay bale, and collided midair with the Snakeroot, taking it to the ground, and landing hard on her shoulder. Her teammates jumped in immediately, to finish the demon off, and help Tiny to safety. Damn, it was one of the coolest takedowns I'd seen all year. They were a strong team with advanced skills.

The next group did awful—worse than awful, actually. The Yew demon almost set the apartment building on fire, and Mikey and Lincoln had to take it out, failing the team. They were all weak links, I could see that now. I'd paired them up based on skill level, but in doing that, I'd grouped all the kids who were slower and insecure.

After quickly watching the next group, and seeing that Nick was clearly the leader of that team, having knocked the Snakeroot demon out fearlessly, I looked up at Lincoln. I knew what I needed to do to pass all three groups.

"I need to rearrange the teams. Tiny and Nick can afford to have a few weak members on their teams, because the stronger leaders will pick up their slack."

Lincoln grinned. "Exactly. Tiny and Nick should each lead a team of four, with one other strong student and then two weak students. Your team of three can have one weak student and two strong. That way, you give all eleven students a chance to pass."

Happiness bubbled up inside of me, chasing away my earlier depression. I was going to get each student through the damn gauntlet and into the army.

Yet, that bubble burst as a thought occurred. "What if the weaker ones don't do well in the Fallen Army and get killed? Then it will be my fault."

The pressure I felt when in charge of someone's education was immense, but Lincoln shook his head. "They're just slow learners. They'll pick it up on the field, and their sergeant will pair them knowing they still have some kinks to work out. It'll

be okay. The important thing is, after failing the gauntlet the first time, they didn't give up."

I sighed in relief.

"Police! Open up!" a strange female voice shouted.

Lincoln and I both jumped at the loud banging that followed on his trailer door. But just as quickly as he'd looked alarmed, Lincoln grinned, bolting from where we sat and ripping open the door.

*What the hell?*

As soon as the door opened, I knew this was Catia based on his description of her. Short-cropped dark hair and a lean build, and she had a pretty but strong face. The Paris Fallen Academy plane must have just landed. They embraced, both laughing, and I noticed there was a twenty-something female standing just behind Catia.

"Bonjour. I'm the girlfriend, Scarlet." She waved, her long curly hair bobbing as she moved.

"I'm the wife, Brielle." I smiled, stepping out of the trailer.

"Brielle!" Catia shouted enthusiastically. "I'm so pleased to finally meet you. I'm glad you're okay." The genuineness in her words was unmistakable, and her hug was firm and without reservation. We'd spoken a few times on the phone, but meeting in person was the icing on the cake.

"Scarlet, welcome to our home on wheels." Lincoln gestured to the trailer and we all laughed.

Scarlet smiled. "We couldn't exactly turn down a heartfelt plea from all four archangels."

"And we need Angel City to stay standing just as much as you do. They fund our schools, and give us our supplies. Without Fallen Academy, the sister schools are nothing." Catia added.

"How many came from Paris?" My husband asked.

"Forty-six. Everyone over eighteen who we could spare. Are you doing drills tonight? I'm anxious to get back into

action,” Catia answered, her fingers twitching over her gun.

Lincoln chuckled. “Yes, Michael and I have planned some raids to flush out the demon clusters in the war zone. You’re on my team.”

“You’re coming too?” Catia turned to me.

I frowned, “I can’t.”

“Lucifer spoke to her through a demon today,” Lincoln explained, clearing his throat. “Brielle has to stay on campus.”

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry.” Catia looked down at her feet.

Scarlet stepped closer to me. “I’m just a human cook at the school, so I’ll be staying with you here, where it’s safe.”

A grin tugged at my lips. I didn’t feel so left out, now. “Perfect. I’d love some company.”

And just like that, I’d made a new friend. While everyone was out on the raid tonight—including Shea and Chloe—pushing the demons back and away from the city, I’d be getting to know Scarlet.

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CATIA AND LINCOLN had left about an hour ago, to take part in the biggest raid in Fallen Army history. Luke, Noah, Shea, Chloe, Mikey, and everyone else, had left too. I’d even seen the archangels suit up, and leave with the busloads of soldiers. This was an ‘all hands on deck’ operation. A few staff members, Elodie and her son, the healing clinic’s injured, my eleven students, and I, were the only ones staying on campus, so the dozen warriors Raph left behind to protect it was plenty. My mom was safe in her apartment, watching a movie with her neighbor, who was a civilian spouse to an army soldier. I just hoped like hell that tonight turned the odds in our favor.

“Oh my God, it smells like I’m in a restaurant.” I drooled as Scarlet made quick work of cooking dinner in our tiny kitchen. She’d claimed the kitchen was no smaller than most in France, but I figured she was just being nice. Lincoln’s and

my favorite dinner to cook in the tiny trailer kitchen was cereal.

She flattened her knife, laying it over the garlic, and then came down on it hard, smashing it. “You’re going to love my coq au vin dish.”

“If the smell is any indication, then yes, I will.”

She smiled, reaching for some cooking wine, when the shrill sound of the school’s demon alarm rang through campus.

Chills ran up my entire body.

“Shit!” I bolted into a standing position, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Scarlet froze. “Is that...?”

I nodded, bursting into action. “Demon alarm. Come on.”

Did one of the demons get pushed back in the raid and sneak onto campus? Surely the dozen gate guards could handle it, but in case it was more than one demon... in case it was a full-on attack, we needed to follow protocol.

The trailer wasn’t safe. We were sitting ducks, and I also had eleven students to worry about, as well as Elodie and her son. Reaching under the bed, I took out my gun and holstered it, then grabbed my sword—on loan from Raphael until I was reunited with Sera.

“Can you shoot a gun?” I asked Scarlet, who’d already shut off the stove, and was now holding her meat cleaver like a weapon.

“No, but I’ve killed a demon before with this.” She indicated the large knife. Paris was a war zone, and Lincoln had told me the school there operated in secrecy, so Scarlet must have had her fair share of action.

“All right. The school has a contingency for this sort of thing. We’re going to go to the main gym, where we can band together and fight as a team. Can you run?”

She looked nervous but competent, and I knew Catia wouldn’t bring someone who couldn’t hold their own. My

students would be making their way to the gym right now, and hopefully, Elodie and her son would be too, but we needed to get there quickly to help them.

She nodded and I sent a quick group text to Lincoln, Shea and Noah saying the academy was under demon attack. Hopefully they could send backup soon.

Stepping forward, I inched the trailer door open as the siren blared full force into the small space. The last time that siren went off, Lucifer had come and taken me to Hell, but I refused to let the fear take me. That wasn't going to happen again.

A quick scan told me there was a massive fight at the front gates. A burst of gunfire, and red glowing magic lit up the Fallen Academy entrance. This was a full-scale attack, not the single demon I'd hoped for a second ago.

*Shit.*

"This way," I whispered to Scarlet, ducking low and away from the front gates. We ran, headed deeper onto campus toward the gym, which was our meeting point for demon alarm emergencies.

We were just cutting through two buildings when I smelled it. Sulfur and oil. Nausea rolled into me and I spun, coming face-to-face with a Larkspur demon. The seven-foot-tall, pug-faced asshole was grinning as bile crept into my throat. Larkspurs were fast and strong, so I needed the element of surprise.

Just as I was about to explode from where I stood and slice him up with my sword, Scarlet's meat cleaver spun through the air and stuck into the side of his face.

*Holy shit!*

"I panicked," she screeched from behind me.

I wanted to refrain from using my gun, because the sound could bring more demons, and I didn't want to lose the element of surprise on the others, so I burst forward just as a hideous roar left the Larkspur demon's mouth. He reached up

to try and pull the meat cleaver out, and I went into full-on attack mode.

Most of the demon's skin was leathery and thick, but he was vulnerable just under the neck. With a burst of power, my large sword sunk into his body as I stabbed him, just under his chin, taking him down quickly before the nausea and flu-like symptoms could incapacitate me. Within two minutes, he was dead at my feet.

Chest heaving, I spun to see Scarlet with her back to me, watching the alleyway as she protected my back.

"Let's go," I whispered, handing her the bloodied meat cleaver back, as I wiped demon blood off of my hands and onto the leg of my pants.

If demons were raiding the academy, I needed to protect my summer school students, and the vulnerable staff members.

We made the quick dash across campus in record time, and slipped into the gymnasium quietly. The lights were off, but the emergency exit lights cast shadows on a group of students and staff at the back of the room, as well as another person I didn't expect to see. Emberly was standing in the middle of the room with a gun pointed right at me.

"It's Brielle!" I whisper-screamed, and she lowered the Glock. "What are you doing here?" I asked, as Scarlet and I rushed over to meet her.

"Bad pain day. My dad wouldn't let me go to the raid."

She was in her Pj's, looked sweaty, and her features were drawn in a slight scowl. Something I'd come to learn was the look of a ruthless day with her pain management. I felt bad that she'd had to stay behind because her wings were hurting her, but I was also glad she was here; I couldn't protect everyone alone, and she'd be a huge help—even in pain.

I peered past Emberly and nearly sagged in relief as I counted heads, noting Elodie and her son, all eleven of my students, Mrs. Greely and a few of her patients from the healing clinic, as well as the librarian, Rose, were here.

Everyone was accounted for, but I was the most senior officer in the room, which meant I was in charge.

I turned to Scarlet. “I want you to hide in the back with the rest.”

She nodded, and I swooped down to grab a two-pound dumbbell that had been left on the floor, tossing it up into the emergency light. It shattered, plunging us into total darkness.

Plan A was to hide.

Plan B was to fight.

Without a word, Emberly strode with me to the back of the room, and I pulled my cell phone out, to give us a little light that I could control if I heard the main doors opening.

Elodie’s son was whimpering, and a few of the injured Fallen Army soldiers from the clinic looked worse for wear. One was hooked up to what appeared to be a transfusion of blood, and another was in a wheelchair with a bandage around his abdomen that was soaked with blood. She’d gotten them out in a hurry, no doubt.

“We’re going to try and hide in here until we can get some backup, but on the off chance we’re attacked, Emberly and I will be on the front line.”

The fifteen-year-old beside me nodded without hesitation. She had skills that no one in this room could rival, and I needed her to help me.

“I want my students in a line behind Emberly and me, and the injured and others are to hide behind them. Got it?” I called out to our small group.

Everyone nodded, and my students slowly stepped out of the cowering crowd. Most of them had thought to bring weapons, thank God. Tiny was clutching a sword, she looked feral and ready to kill. Nick and Ray both had weapons as well and stood on either side of Tiny, forming a line at our backs. If Emberly and I fell, my eleven students would be the only thing protecting the weak and injured.



“Tiny, you’re in charge of the group. I won’t be able to give you direction. You need to just go on instinct.”

She nodded. Her small frame, and mousy brown hair was unsuspecting, but she was a fearless badass , and that went a long way when fighting demons.

I met each of their eyes with confidence. “Your job is to protect the weak and injured,” I confirm in a low voice. “If you do that, I’ll make sure Raphael passes you into year two without going through the gauntlet again. Tonight, is your gauntlet. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tiny nodded as the others echoed their agreement. They fanned out in a wide arc, standing like sentinels before the patients and staff behind them.

My attention shifted to Emberly, and something passed between us. We would do whatever we had to do to win this fight tonight.

Turning my phone light off, I plunged us into darkness, and tucked it into my back pocket.

Five strides and we were on the front line, the first defense if the demons found us.

All we could do was wait, and pray that they weren’t here looking for bloodshed.

## EIGHT



Emberly and I stood there, wings touching, swords and guns at the ready as the demon alarm blared outside. Was it just a raid for weapons? Was it a raid to kill students? Or something far more sinister? Was Lucifer here?

It felt like an hour had passed, but it was probably only ten minutes, when the metal doors screeched open, letting the moonlight flood the entrance of the gymnasium, lighting up a tall Abrus demon and two Hellhounds.

*Frick.*

The Hellhounds would sniff us out, no problem.

Plan B.

“Put up your shield,” Emberly whispered.

Oh yeah, my shield. Could I use it to protect the others? I’d never attempted something on such a large scale.

“Use your mind control,” I whispered back. The demon alarm was so damn loud that I was hoping it covered our voices.

I could barely see her standing in the dark, but her whole body went rigid. “It’s against the rules,” Emberly hissed.

I rolled my eyes. “Screw the rules. It’s an Abrus demon, not another human,” I told her as I pulled my power forward and tried to create a bubble-like shield over me, then extended it to Emberly.

In that moment, the hounds howled long and deep, and the Abrus demon grinned. Reaching over, he flicked on the lights, and all hell broke loose.

I should have turned off the power to the building, but I didn't, and now two Hellhounds were gunning right for me. Hellhounds were categorized by the Fallen Army as upper-level demons, because they could eat an entire carcass, bones and all, in under an hour. They also couldn't be killed unless you beheaded them, making it difficult to end their life.

"You have to behead them to kill them!" I shouted behind me to Tiny and her team.

"Roger that!" she called back with confidence.

Okay, we could do this. No one would die today. I could take one Hellhound, Tiny and my students could take the other, and Emberly could hopefully control the Abrus demon's mind.

*We can do this.*

The Hellhounds had reached us. I stepped forward, sword raised, as one of them leapt into the air.

"Go back to Demon City!" Emberly boomed at the Abrus demon, just as my sword gored the Hellhound in the chest. The weight of the beast on my blade caused me to topple forward, losing my grip on the weapon. Both the Hellhound and my sword fell forward, collapsing onto the gymnasium floor while I stumbled to regain my balance.

Everything was happening so fast.

In my peripheral vision, I could see the next Hellhound trying to come at my side, but I didn't have time to pull my sword out of the fallen hound's chest. Whipping out my gun, I unloaded it into the beast, only slowing his approach.

"Let's finish him off!" Tiny screamed behind me, and her team advanced, weapons at the ready.

As I was reaching forward to lift my sword out of the two-headed Hellhound before me, the Abrus demon let loose with his dark magic. Black bees swarmed into the space like a

freaking tornado, and the funnel was heading right for Emberly.

“Did you think that would work on me?” the demon asked her, wings snapping out behind him.

*Shit!*

The Hellhound I'd gored was standing again, sword sticking out of its chest, and it came at me, both jaws snapping.

This was mayhem.

I had no time to reload, so, cocking my arm back, I pistol-whipped one of the Hellhound's faces with my emptied gun. It was just enough to stun him, so he fell backward a bit. Wasting no time, I yanked my sword free from his chest and, in one big arc, came down on one of the heads, severing it.

The fricking black bees had started to swarm around me now, and I couldn't properly see Emberly. Luckily, my shield was keeping them at bay so they couldn't sting me. Was the Abrus demon attacking her? I knew she was well trained, and her dad was Archangel Michael, but she was still a first-year student here, and only fifteen years old. Now, I was doubting my choice to put her on the front lines with me. Was she in too much pain to fight?

With a roar, I sliced off the other Hellhound's head and then broke through the wall of bees to find Emberly locked in battle with the Abrus demon.

Anger ripped through me when I saw him grab onto her fragile wing and pull. A cry of pure agony left her lips as her knees collapsed beneath her.

*How dare he!*

Red-hot rage flooded my system and I called my magic forward, letting the dark side of my energy pulse through my veins, and then drip from my palms like oily tar.

“Let go of her!” I commanded, with barely contained fury in my voice.

His head snapped in my direction, and he grinned. “Brielle.”

I’d never met this Abrus demon before, that meant Lucy had sent him. Without time to waste, I thrust my hands out toward him. The inky-black force I’d conjured, flung from my palms, and wrapped around his face, cutting off his ability to breathe or see us. His fists fell away from Emberly’s wings, and immediately went to his face, trying in vain to rip off the black goo. The bees were swarming me now, but I strengthened my shield, and warded them off as Emberly and I attacked the Abrus demon in unison. She dropped to the ground, picking up her sword and shoving it right between his legs, nearly cutting off his man bits.

As the demon collapsed onto the ground, I came down hard on the back of his neck, cutting off his head clean.

“Are you okay?” I asked Emberly, panting with my hands on my knees.

She was sweating, most likely from the pain, but her face had a grim look of determination. “Fine,” she growled, and I knew she wasn’t fine. She was in agony, but she would push through it.

“We’ve got company,” Tiny yelled from behind me, where I could see the hound dead at my students’ feet.

Whipping my head to the front door, my stomach fell when I saw the dozen or so assorted demons making their way inside, grins on their faces.

This was a bloodbath, except I knew they wouldn’t kill me. No, they would kill everyone I loved, and take me to fulfill my promise to Lucifer.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Elodie pulling her son into her arms. She knew this wouldn’t end well.

“Take the others and run. We’ll hold them off,” I told her.

Mrs. Greely looked conflicted. She was a teacher and battle trained, but she had patients to protect.

“Go!” I roared at her, and then faced forward.

If I had Sera, I would incinerate these fuckers out of existence until they were all just ash at my feet. Yet, without my soul weapon, I wasn't as powerful. The demons were fanning out in one big line. Brimstone, Monkshood, Yew demon. They were all here, like Lucifer sent a little collection of them to taunt us.

I couldn't bear to see any harm come to my students. I had faith that they could handle the Hellhound, but this was another story. They would fall. Every single one of them.

Turning to Emberly, I grasped her arms tightly. "Get my students out of here. It's me they want, and they won't kill me. Lucifer needs me."

Emberly looked like I'd made her smell dog crap. "No way, psycho. We stay and fight."

I groaned. "You don't understand. They'll kill you all and take me back to Hell. Better to let them take me so you guys can walk away with your lives."

Emberly ripped her arms from my hands, clenching her teeth. "I am a descendent of the Archangel Michael himself. I don't leave people behind. Ever. And I don't run from demons."

Chills broke out on my arms at her declaration. I didn't even have an ounce of the courage Emberly had when I was fifteen. Or now, for that matter.

Ripping her sword free, she held it out before taking a deep breath, and the light tattoos on her skin swirled like crazy as they danced up and down her body. Suddenly her sword started to glow blue, a blinding Celestial blue, and shards of light began to grow off the sides.

*Whoa.*

"Build your shield as big as you can and protect the others. I'm going to slice and dice these bitches," Emberly declared, marching forward.

I wasn't sure if she was being overly cocky, or if she was in fact capable of doing that. Maybe a little of both. Peering behind me, I saw all eleven of my students had stayed, as well

as Scarlet. She stood next to them with her meat cleaver in her hand, nodding at me when I made eye contact. Elodie and her son had left out the back door with the teacher and the injured.

*God, please don't let a single one of these people die tonight.*

“If you're staying, then at least bar the back door!” I told my summer crew.

I had no idea if my text had been received by Lincoln and the crew, or if they even had their phones on them while out on the raid, but that didn't matter. It was just us now, and more demons were filing in through the open double doors every second.

This was planned. Freaking Lucy planned this! He knew I was hiding here.

I dropped to one knee and held my hands out before me, allowing that silverish mixture of both sides of my power to stream out of my palms, and form a translucent shield. Emberly stood just in front of it, her sword building up more and more blue streaks of light, like a disco ball with shards on it.

“I command you to step back, or meet your death!” Emberly roared. I could imagine her eyes flashing purple as she pushed her control, and a few of the lower-level demons fell backward, away from the advancing line to cower in the corner.

Interesting. Her mind control worked on lower-level demons. Still, that left over a dozen upper-level demons, grinning like psychotic fools and coming right for us.

Raising her sword, Emberly cried out and then brought it down into the gymnasium floor. Shards of blue light shot out of her blade, seeking the nearest demons, and sunk into their flesh like knives.

Pandemonium crashed down onto the gym then. The injured demons roared as the blue light seared their flesh, and the others began to run at my shield like linebackers preparing to tackle.

“Emberly, get behind my shield!” I shouted to the crazy teenager.

She looked like she didn’t want to for a second, then finally slipped behind my shimmering layer of protection, as I worked to thin out just that part and allow her through it.

I had a problem. I could hold and strengthen the shield, or I could hurl my magic at them all and try to kill them. Not both.

My gut instinct was saying to stay with the shield, that if I dropped it and tried to fight, someone would die. I wasn’t going to let anyone perish, so I held firm, pushing everything I had into the wall of protection I’d erected. It spanned the entire width of the room, kissing the walls so no one could pass.

When a Brimstone demon came right up to my face, spewing black smoke from his horns, I had to close my eyes to keep from losing my concentration. The slew of demons slammed into the shield and waves of pressure rippled through my energy, forcing my body to shake with it. But I held.

“You got this.” Emberly stood next to me, and my eyelids snapped open as she placed a hand on my outstretched arm. Blue light seeped from her palm and surrounded my hand, causing an electrical current to rip through me, strengthening my shield.

*She’s feeding my power.*

“Kill them and bring her to me!” the Brimstone demon called out, just as a gigantic smack rippled against my shield, making it flicker for a brief second.

Tiny. Jones. Marek. Jenkins. Nick. Ray. Every single one of my students’ names flickered through my head in that moment, and I knew if this shield dropped, they were dead. They had done great as a group against one Hellhound, but this? This was a massacre waiting to happen.

Emberly too. She was strong and badass, but I wasn’t sure she could withstand the demon army waiting to devour our small group.



A frustrated cry burst from my lips when my arms started to quiver.

No. I wasn't letting this happen!

With a groan, I pulled deep inside of me, and brought up everything I had. That jellylike plasma substance I used to protect Lincoln and myself from the Succubus in San Francisco made its appearance again. It flowed from my palms and spread out onto the wall I'd created, reinforcing it, making it thicker and stronger.

*Take that, you demon motherfuc—*

My thought died out as a Snakeroot demon spat acid right at my face, and the fluid began to slowly eat away at my shield.

*Oh shit.*

"No!" Emberly cried. More blue light erupted from her palms and coated my arm, and the hole from the Snakeroot's acid started to patch itself together with her help.

Turning, I faced Emberly. "Please take the others and run. I can't hold this much longer."

Her eyes were alight, reminding me of the full moon. It was like she was made of light. She shook her head. "They'll come after us. You just need to push through this. Hold on a little longer. Help is on the way."

My brow furrowed. *It is? How could she—never mind.* Tremors shook my arms from the straining pressure of trying to hold up the damn wall. If I weren't already on one knee, I would have been by now. A deep throbbing pain was working its way into my limbs as exhaustion pulled at me.

"Everything hurts," I groaned.

"I know pain. We're friends, pain and I." The teenager fed more and more blue light into my arms. "It will pass. Just beyond the place where you think you can't take any more, there is a numbness. You'll get there, and the pain will be manageable," she told me sagely.

A whimper caught in my throat as my hands started to involuntarily lower with fatigue.

Emberly's hands latched onto mine with a viselike grip. "Brielle." Her voice was low and controlled. "I don't want to scare you, but there are over a hundred demons on this campus, and they are all headed this way. If you drop the shield, we're all dead. I can't fly in this pain, and I can't fight off that many. You are our only hope."

Oh God. She had some kind of telepathic ability or something.

Over a hundred?

Mrs. Greely, the injured....

"They got away," Emberly informed me, but I knew she might lie to keep me sane right now.

Wait. She could read my mind this entire time and didn't tell me?

"It's not polite," she explained.

I was about to retort when, beyond the translucent wall I'd built, I saw blobs of people walking slowly our way. As they neared and their figures became clearer, my stomach dropped.

"What. The hell. Is that?" I gasped.

It was... a pack of three-headed Hellhounds.

Emberly sighed. "New demons. Lucifer is really cranking them out."

Without a word, one of the Hellhounds slammed into the wall, and it shook. The other demons, encouraged now, began to batter the wall in unison, and my shield flickered. Burning pain laced up my arms and my knee started to wobble, causing me to fall to the side.

Keeping my hands up, I cried out as I slumped down to sit on my heels. A gap formed on the side of my shield, and a Monkshood demon slipped right through before I could close it again.

Emberly jerked in the direction of the Monkshood demon, who was beelining for my students.

“Don’t make eye contact! He can control your mind,” I shouted behind me, trying my best to hold this damn shield. I wanted to give up—my arms were on fire, and my energy was depleted—but I found that space Emberly spoke of, just beyond the pain. It was a numbness, like she’d said, and it spread through my limbs, momentarily giving me a small measure of relief.

There were sounds of fighting behind me, but it was the blue glow that had just walked through the door that had me transfixed.

“Brielle!” Lincoln wailed. Each and every demon ceased its battering on the wall, and spun to look at the small army that had just arrived. It was hard to tell from so far away, but it looked like Michael was with them.

“Emberly!” the Archangel cried out, confirming my assumption as blue shards shot from his weapon, goring some of the demons in attendance.

Thank God, backup had arrived.

“I’m here!” she grunted, followed by the sound of knife hitting flesh. Peering back, I saw that the Monkshood demon was dead.

“Brielle, don’t drop your shield!” Lincoln rumbled, as clangs and growls rang throughout the space.

*Easier said than done, husband!*

“Die, you demon douchebags!” Shea’s Demon City accent roared from somewhere in the room, bringing a slight smile to my face.

*She’s okay.*

I couldn’t see much unless someone was really close to the shield or had glowing magic, but I could pick out voices when they yelled around me.

“Whoa, this shield is weird.” Chloe’s voice joined the group.

“Super weird Brielle magic,” Luke agreed, and it brought tears to my eyes to know that when I’d reached out, all of my friends had come back for me.

I was loved. I never wanted to forget that.

“I can’t hold it much longer!” I shouted when my arms shook yet again.

Dizziness threatened to overtake me. I was tired as hell, in pain, anxious, and damn near passing out. How much time had passed already? It felt like hours.

“You have to!” Lincoln shouted, and I peered through the shield to see a streak of dark hair had just entered the room.

“Scarlet?” Catia shouted.

“I’m okay!” Scarlet called out from behind our little pocket of safety.

My arms were quaking like they were holding a jackhammer, and the shield started to flicker.

“Chloe, look out!” Shea cried.

Luke let out a blood-curdling scream. The kind of scream you give when a beloved friend sustains a mortal wound. Under that type of stress, I could no longer hold the shield. The protection crashed to the floor like liquid jelly, leaving a physical mess behind and unveiling the full extent of the war before me.

My eyes scanned the room, horrified to see so much blood, but they only grazed the fight, stopping on Chloe’s limp form.

“No!” I cried, picking up my sword only to have it fall from my fatigued fingers. I was useless. Instead, I burst from the ground and let my wings carry me across the room to where Luke was holding Chloe’s lifeless body, wailing in misery as he rocked back and forth.

Her gut had been ripped half open; there was so much blood, I couldn’t even process what I was seeing. Yet, the blank way her eyes fixated on the corner of the room told me she was dead. I’d seen enough death in my life to know when a soul had left a body.

“Noah!” I roared, calling over the healing Celestial as he battled with a Yew demon. He killed the demon quickly, running to my side where I was already calling up my healing magic. An orange buttery glow left my fatigued hands and coated Chloe’s open guts, only to pass right through her and disappear.

Luke looked up at me in horror. “What does that mean?”

I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to guess. Noah was beside me now, working his own healing magic, brighter and stronger than mine. All around us, demons fought Catia, Shea, Michael and Lincoln to the death. A quick glance at the back of the room showed Emberly was protecting my students.

I’d messed up. I’d dropped the shield.

Noah’s light surrounded Chloe like a cocoon before dissolving. His hands shook as he set them on his thighs.

“Noah, why are you stopping?” I shook him. “Heal her!”

Noah turned to me with tears lining his eyes. “Bri, I can heal some pretty horrific injuries, but I can’t bring back the dead.”

*No.*

Luke’s wails twisted the knife in my heart even further.

“Raph?” I asked hopefully. Where the hell was the Archangel of Healing? If anyone could reverse this, he could. Right?

Noah shook his head. “Even he isn’t capable of that.”

“*I can’t bring back the dead...*” His words formed a crazy idea in my head.

“Luke, can you run with her?” I asked.

The bear shifter swallowed his sob and nodded. “Why?”

“I know someone who *can* bring back the dead.”

## NINE



**W**e burst from the gymnasium, Noah, Shea, and Luke with Chloe in his arms behind me. Noah had wrapped a hoodie around her abdomen to secure her wound.

“Brielle, this is insane!” Noah shouted, following us out into the moon lit night. There were still a few demons on campus, the sirens blaring, but I also made out the shadowy figures of Fallen Army soldiers fighting them. We’d been totally ambushed, but it looked like things were getting under control now.

“If it brings back Chloe, then I’m insane. I don’t care!” I shouted, cutting down a drunken Mugwort demon who lunged from the shadows. Lincoln, Emberly, Catia and Michael were still fighting the demons in the gym, but at better odds now. When I’d shouted to Linc that I was going to see my mom to bring back Chloe, he’d just looked at me like I’d grown two heads, then barked for Noah and Shea to escort me.

We raced across campus, time ticking away as Chloe’s soul detached more and more from her body.

“Chloe, stay here! Stay with us!” I shouted to the night like a madwoman. “We’re going to bring you back.”

Noah and Shea exchanged a look, one that said they might be planning to sedate me. Yet, Luke looked determined, brow furrowed, lips pressed into a thin line, and I knew he would be my partner in crime.

The second we reached my car, I was relieved to see the parking lot was crawling with Fallen Army. They’d just come

back from the raid to find their home was also raided. Now they could rid the campus of demons. We gingerly helped Luke in the back, his limp redheaded best friend in his arms.

“Let me close her up quickly, or she’ll lose all her blood,” Noah instructed, pulling a little surgical stapler from his pants pocket—all of the healers and medics carried them in the war zones.

Noah lifted the hoodie to reveal an open abdominal cavity, and both Luke and I looked to the side, unable to see our friend in that condition. The snapping sound of staple after staple set in place, made Luke wince as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Noah was right to do this. If my mom reanimated Chloe without all of her major organs inside of her, she wouldn’t survive. Still, that didn’t make it any easier to see, or hear.

“All right,” Noah announced, chucking the bloodied stapler into the back of the car. We all climbed inside, Noah driving, Shea in the middle row, and me in the passenger seat.

“Drive like hell to my mom’s apartment,” I told Noah, and he obliged, even burning rubber.

I dialed my mom, who picked up on the first ring.

“Tell me you’re safe,” she answered.

“I’m safe, but Chloe’s not. I need you to prepare to reanimate her. You still have your supplies, right?”

My mom gasped. “Chloe? Oh, honey.”

My throat tightened at my mom’s emotional voice. When I’d been taken to Hell, she had started weekly dinners with all my friends. Chloe had become part of the family.

“Mom, do you have your supplies or not!” I snapped.

“Honey, I can’t reanimate her. It’s against Angel City rules.”

*Is she serious right now?* She’d been dating Raph for all of a month and now she was Miss Rule Follower.

“Mom, it’s only been like seven minutes, eight tops. We can do a soul infusion and—”

“A soul infusion! Where did you learn about that?” she questioned me.

*So it is real.*

“I overheard Master Burdock saying it when I worked with you at the clinic.”

He’d been talking to a woman on the phone, telling her if they could get the deceased to the clinic within twenty minutes of death, she could undergo a process called a soul infusion, where you called them back from Heaven, Hell, or wherever, and it was like being alive again. I remembered wondering why we hadn’t done that with my dad, but he also mentioned the body needed to be in good shape. Getting hit by a bus did not leave my father in any sort of good shape, and he’d been dead too long when we’d received the call, so I’d never even brought it up to my mom.

I sure as hell was bringing it up now.

“Honey... that’s a taboo process. You’re talking about cheating death here, and you’re asking me to play God.”

Yeah, I was, and I would expect her to do the same for me.

“Mom. It’s Chloe. She looked for me with Shea when Lincoln and Noah couldn’t go into Hell. Would you really deny her this chance at life again?”

Okay, I was being shitty, and totally planned on making her feel bad about it until she said yes. She’d ‘played God’ and reanimated thousands of bodies for Demon City, so how was this different?

She sighed. “I’ll need family consent, and I won’t do it unless I could fully bring her back. Reanimation isn’t—”

“I know, Mom. We’re downstairs. Get ready!” I hung up just as we pulled into the parking space. I knew what reanimation was and wasn’t. I didn’t want a robot Chloe who spaced out every five minutes, and didn’t have the same



personality. I wouldn't do that to her. But if this soul infusion thing was real, then we had to try.

“Luke.” I swallowed hard, hating what I had to ask of him next.

He looked over at me, and the desperation in his gaze gutted me.

“I need you to call Donnie and get him over here. He needs to give consent.”

Luke had to call his own boyfriend and tell him that his beloved sister was dead, and then have Donnie give permission to reanimate her. It was shitty, but I knew Donnie wouldn't be as receptive to anyone else.

He just nodded.

Jumping out of the car, I opened the back, and lifted my arms for Luke to deposit Chloe into them. I wasn't certain my arms could take any more trauma after holding that shield for what seemed like hours, but the moment he set Chloe's body into them, strength pumped through my body as adrenaline flooded my system.

She was so light.

So tiny.

Tiny Chloe with red hair and a vivacious personality. I'd never forget the first day I met her. She'd invited me to her birthday party when I'd had no friends, and she hated Tiffany just as much as I did.

Shea filed in right beside me, hand on my shoulder, running with me. Whether she thought I was crazy or not, didn't matter. She was in it with me no matter what. My ride or die.

“Hang on, Chloe!” I shouted again, willing her soul to stay earthbound just a little longer.

We took the stairs two at a time, Shea propping me up so I could manage the weight. I was running on pure adrenaline and panic, but it was working so far.

My mom was waiting out in the hallway, the scent of sage wafting out through the open door. The moment her eyes landed on Chloe, she frowned. No one had seen more death than my mother. She'd worked at the reanimation clinic for almost ten years, sometimes reanimating as many as ten bodies a day. Still, nothing prepared you for seeing a dead loved one.

"I've run the bath. You know the drill. Is a member of the family coming?" My mom was curt, all business.

I nodded. "Donnie, her older brother."

My mom nodded. "How many minutes have passed exactly?"

Shit. Maybe ten? Possibly twelve. "Uhh."

"Roughly eleven minutes." Luke came up behind me with his phone in hand. "Donnie's coming."

My mom pushed me forward. "We have no time to waste. Wash her well, or you know the consequences."

I did. If even one strand of Shea or an Abrus demon's hair was on Chloe's body when my mom started the reanimation process, it could bind that person's soul to her. Shea and I ran into the bathroom, where we quickly stripped her clothes, careful not to touch her hastily stapled wound. We dunked her into the water, and I started to scrub.

"This water's hot!" Shea hissed, grabbing a wash cloth and helping me scrub Chloe's feet.

I nodded. "Any DNA that's not Chloe's could ruin the whole process," I told my bestie. Growing up she hadn't exactly asked my mom about her work. This shit freaked her out.

Shea just bobbed her head and kept scrubbing. I took the most care with washing her hair; I was hurried, yet, I wanted to make sure we did this right. Once we were done, my mom brought freshly bleached towels from her reanimation kit, and we wrapped Chloe like a mummy, only allowing her face to be exposed. As we carried her to the kitchen table, I whimpered

when blood started to soak through the white towels. Her wound had opened.

“We’ll worry about it later,” my mom called out as we set her on the table that I knew had been bleached as well. My mother was the best reanimator Demon City had ever seen. It was a shame to see her unemployed like this or working odd-end jobs.

She glanced at her watch. “I need to get started, but I can’t do it without consent.”

Shea frowned. “I’m sure her brother won’t care, just start!”

My mom shook her head. “Shea, you know I have a certain ethical code.” My mom, the only one in Demon City who had morals!

I was about to insist when the apartment door burst open, the faint siren still wailing at Fallen Academy a mile away.

“I’m here!” Donnie was covered in demon blood, still holding his sword. The moment his eyes fell on Chloe, he swayed in place, and Luke had to reach out to steady him.

“Donnie, I am a reanimator. There is a unique process called soul infusion where I might be able to fully bring Chloe back, if she hasn’t crossed over yet. But I need consent from a family member in order to—”

“Do it,” he croaked.

My mom swallowed hard. “It might not work. She might not be the same. She might not want to have come back. She might have periods of forgetfulness and—”

“Kate, please! Just do it!” he screamed.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “All right, then. Please guard the door,” my mother instructed Shea. “It’s forbidden to raise the dead in Angel City, and I’m doing it in a housing facility that holds the military and their families. If one of them walks in, I’ll be arrested.”

*Shit.* The gravity of the situation hit me then. This new life I’d given my mom, that I’d fought so hard to bring her to, I

was potentially taking it away by asking this of her. Still, I couldn't bear to tell her to stop. I couldn't bear to lose Chloe.

The orange and purple kaleidoscope of Necromancer magic that I was so used to seeing as a child, lit up the kitchen like a disco ball. My mother was powerful, and a small burst of pride ripped through me to see her use her ability. Her hands glowed with the magic I knew would tether my friend's soul back to her body.

"I see her. She hasn't left yet," my mom said dreamily, staring at the corner of the room. She could see souls and auras, and all that weird shit that I didn't understand—something only a Necromancer could do.

"Chloe!" Donnie sobbed.

Just then the front door opened, and Shea allowed Lincoln and Angela to walk inside. I hadn't seen Luke's sister in a while, but she looked bloodied from fighting as well. I scanned my husband's body quickly, relieved to see no big injuries, but it was hard to tell whose blood was whose.

"I thought you could use some help, Kate," Lincoln told my mom as he pushed Angela forward.

Of course! Angela was a Necromancer. She'd hardly had the training for something like this, considering they didn't teach it at Fallen Academy, but my mom simply nodded.

"Wash your hands and anchor her feet for me please."

Angela went right to it as if she knew what anchoring was. I sure as hell didn't.

The rest of us paced the living room, wearing tracks in the freshly vacuumed carpet.

Lincoln made his way over to me, reaching out to grab my hand. "Are you okay?" he whispered. He must have freaked when he received my text that we were under attack.

I nodded. "Did Mrs. Greely and the patients make it out okay?"

"They hid until we could purge the campus of all the demons. They're safe now, but they could really use healers.

You and Noah, Raph and me. We need all hands on deck after tonight,” he told me.

I’d missed an entire year of healing training. I was still a baby second year when it came to that, but when you were given this power, it came with a certain responsibility.

Looking over at Chloe’s cold, mummified form, I couldn’t bear leaving her, or my mom, like this. “You and Noah go. I’ll meet you the second I know Chloe will be okay.”

Lincoln frowned. “I don’t want to go without you.”

Despite the demon blood splashed on his uniform, I pulled him in for a tight hug. Our year apart had left its mark on the both of us, neither one willing to be without the other for very long, especially in times of crisis.

“I’ll be right behind you,” I promised, then popped up on my tiptoes to kiss him.

Relenting, Lincoln gave me a curt nod. “Is it true? Angela said Chloe could actually be fully brought back, not like those zombies roaming Demon City.”

“It’s true. I never would have settled for a Chloe zombie,” I told him.

“All right. Meet us at the healing clinic the second you’re done here. The only people who know about Chloe dying were in that room, and I’ve sworn them all to secrecy, so your mom won’t get in trouble.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Even Michael?”

A slight grin pulled at his lips. “Michael’s the biggest rule breaker of them all.”

That was true. Human wife. Legion child. Michael broke all the rules.

“Thank you.” I squeezed his hand.

With one last look at me, Lincoln grabbed Noah, and they sprinted away.

Luke and Donnie gasped at the same time, and I spun on my heels to see my mother holding a sage smoke bundle about

three feet from Chloe's body. There, standing in the middle of the kitchen, was a smoky spectral outline of Chloe's form.

*Her soul.*

"Chloe!" Donnie ran forward, but my mother held up a hand.

"Stay back, or you could contaminate the process," she told him in an iron voice.

He skidded to a stop.

I'd seen my mom reanimate hundreds of bodies, maybe thousands. Never, *ever*, had I seen this. The soul was always long gone, the body demonically reanimated to look and feel like the family's lost loved one in a vain attempt to give them that person back, but it wasn't really them. Not like this.

This was incredible.

"Hey, sweetie." My mom spoke softly to the smoky apparition of Chloe, who stood in the kitchen looking around the room and then at her body. When she saw the form on the table wrapped in white towels, her hands flew to her mouth.

"It's okay, hon. We're going to help you back," my mother told her calmly.

Chloe looked at me wide-eyed, and then Donnie. Startled, she took a step back, away from her body, and then glanced over her shoulder, where a small white light began to glow.

"She's leaving!" my mom called out and flung her right wrist, sending a whip of braided purple and orange light to wrap around Chloe's soul's abdomen.

The Nightblood grasped at the rope traumatically, trying to yank it off, pulling with everything she had, while looking over her shoulder at the white light that was growing brighter. Suddenly this felt wrong. I was reminded of the enlightening moment I'd had with Michael. Death was a natural part of life, and we all deserved to return to the white light, take a rest between lives.

"Chloe, please!" Donnie choked. "I need you. Mom and Dad need you."

She stopped fighting and let her hands go limp, looking up at her brother. She took one last glance over her shoulder, and the brightness intensified. For a crazy moment, I thought I saw Bernie, like a flash of a figure walking past the light. Before I could say anything, it was gone.

“Attagirl. Come on.” My mom pulled the rope, and Chloe’s spirit form floated closer to her body with ease.

“Get those feet ready. We’re going to have to stitch her in inch by inch,” Mom told Angela, who had created her own lasso of orange and purple magic that was tied around Chloe’s ankles.

Chloe’s soul allowed herself to be pulled by my mom, but she kept looking over her shoulder longingly at the now diminishing light.

“That’s it, baby. Come back to your body,” Mom coaxed her, the muscles in her forearms flexing as she pulled on the energy rope around Chloe’s soul.

Fanning more sage smoke, my mom finally got the apparition close enough to Chloe’s body for Angela to reach out and grab her feet.

Chloe froze, looking back at the light, which was barely glowing now.

“You need to talk her into this, Donnie,” my mom warned Chloe’s brother.

*Oh God.*

*What have I done?*

“Chlo.” Donnie’s voice shook. “I can’t imagine life without you. Mom and Dad don’t even know what happened. It would kill them. You’re the reason they live. You have to come back. I need you. I can’t stand seeing you like this,” he told her in shaky tones.

Finally, she nodded, then fell onto the table and back into her body, overlaying perfectly.

Every single person in the room took in a giant breath and held it.

“Quick! We’re almost out of time. At this point, she’ll be a lost soul, so it’s important we do this right.” My mom turned to Angela and instructed her in terms I didn’t understand.

Lost soul. I didn’t want that for Chloe. Whatever it was, it sounded bad.

We watched in a mixture of fascination and horror, while they wove magic around Chloe’s body like they were stitching her soul to her human form. It was like watching two people sew the stuffing inside of a pillowcase.

“Brielle, fetch my frankincense.” My mother pointed to the expensive bottle of the essential oil on the counter.

I’d been so enthralled with watching the process that her voice startled me a little . I was familiar with this part. Stepping into the kitchen, I quickly washed my hands and grabbed the oil, spinning off the cap.

“How many drops?” I asked.

She thought for a moment. “Ten should do. Seven for me, and three for Angela to anoint Chloe’s feet.”

Although the practice of Necromancy was demonic in nature, I found it ironic that they used an oil from the Bible. Frankincense was needed to awaken the body again. Coupled with my mother’s magic, Chloe would reanimate. Without the oil, it didn’t work, though I’d never questioned why.

I dropped seven drops into my mother’s palm and then three in Angela’s. The smell hit my nose instantly, and I couldn’t help but smile. The scent of sage and frankincense was my childhood. It had a sharp yet sweet smell, and it reminded me so much of Demon City.

Beginning to unwrap Chloe, I positioned parts of the towel to cover her modesty—her brother was watching, after all. Once she was free of the binds, my mother started to massage the oil on Chloe’s temples while Angela massaged the balls of Chloe’s feet. Orange and purple magic wove her into a colorful cocoon of light.

Luke walked a bit closer with Donnie, one hand intertwined with his boyfriend’s as he slipped the other in



mine.

We waited as one, holding our breaths.

Shea was at the front door standing guard, but she kept sneaking anxious glances in our direction.

We waited some more.

Finally, just when I thought it wasn't going to work, Chloe took in a huge gasping breath. My knees gave out, and I yanked Luke and Donnie down with me. We all burst into tears. I didn't have the strength to stand—I barely had the strength to be awake right now—but none of that mattered. Chloe was alive!

Her eyelids popped open, and my mom peeked over her, smiling. “Hey, sweetie. Welcome back.”

This was the test. If she talked like a robot or paused too long, and didn't know who my mom was, then I'd officially created a zombie.

“The light,” Chloe said in a dreamy voice. “It was so... Donnie?” She searched the room.

Donnie shot up off the floor and went to her, grasping her face. “Tell me you're okay. Tell me you're you,” he begged her.

She grinned. “I'm me, but I died, didn't I? I remember everything.”

My mom's gaze met mine, and I mouthed, “Thank you.”

“You did,” Donnie told her the truth.

She looked up at my mom. “Kate?”

Mom leaned over her. “Yes, dear?”

“Can you make me some of your yummy waffles? I'm starved.”

The collective burst of laughter that filled the room reached down into my very soul.

Chloe was going to be just fine.

## TEN



“Hey. How can I help?” I asked Lincoln as he stood over a male patient in the healing clinic.

He turned back to face me, looking tired but alert. “How’s Chloe?”

I nodded. “She’s back. Like fully back.”

The look of relief that crossed his face pinched my heart. I loved that he never questioned me; he always just went along with my crazy plans.

“Catia is in room three, with a broken collarbone, and in a lot of pain. You could help her,” he instructed.

“Of course.” I nodded and left the room. Could I fix a broken collarbone? Hell no. But I could take the pain until Noah could heal her.

For some reason, Sera popped into my head in that moment. It was the perfect timing for one of her ill-placed comments. My heart ached without her, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could go on without her with me.

“Knock-knock.” I peeked into the room, pushing thoughts of Sera away.

Scarlet was at Catia’s side, who lay in bed moaning and sweaty. “Brielle, don’t worry about me. Tend to the others first. This isn’t life threatening.”

Pulling up a chair, I sat before her. “I know, that’s why they sent me in here. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

That caused the Light Mage to smile. “Great, so they’re letting you train on me?” she joked.

I nodded, firing up the buttery orange glow that always seemed to flow in endless supply, even when I was dead tired. “You’re screwed,” I confirmed, giving her a wink.

She laughed, instantly wincing.

Scarlet was smiling too. “Glad to see you’re all right.”

A heavy sigh left me. “You too, girl. Thanks for all your help.”

What would I have done without her meat cleaver? I honestly had no idea. She nodded and something passed between us. We were no longer random acquaintances; we’d gone through war together, which made us lifelong friends.

“Thanks for keeping her safe,” Catia huffed between ragged breaths.

“Ha! Is that what she told you? *She saved me.*” I placed my hands on Catia’s neck, and let the healing go where it needed.

The relief in her face was immediate, her cheeks slackening as the sweat stopped dripping.

“I seem to remember hiding behind your shield,” Scarlet offered.

We talked easily for the next twenty or so minutes, until Lincoln came to pull me into another room. Room after room I moved through the clinic, staunching blood, and taking pain where I could.

For the first time ever, I worked alongside Raphael. It was incredible to see the Archangel of Healing at work. The entire room lit up when he healed someone, and just being near him gave me more energy.

When I was finally done for the night, Lincoln and I made our way out of the clinic, tired as hell and dragging our feet. The moment we stepped outside, I heard Grace’s angry voice off to the side, in the atrium, as she argued with Raphael. Lincoln pulled me into the shadows so we could listen and watch without being seen.

“The time is now! After tonight, it’s become abundantly clear that we can’t wait,” Grace told the archangel.

Raphael sighed. “I’m inclined to agree with you, but—”

“But nothing. When the new school year starts in a few weeks, I’m going to bring in human recruits, and start training them. We can work alongside each other. Angel blessed and demon gifted students working with human demon hunters. It’s the way of the future.”

Raphael rubbed his temples. “You can’t just start up a school in two weeks. There are rules, parental consent, funding and teaching staff to take care of first. So many things to figure out. In a year’s time would be better.”

Grace shrugged. “Watch me.”

Raphael smiled. “You are the most passionate woman I have ever met.”

Grace’s lips stretched into a perfect grin. “‘Passionate’ is a kind way of calling me stubborn.”

He nodded. “Indeed, it is.”

“So, two weeks? I’ll start tomorrow. Got room in your office for a desk for me?” she asked.

Raphael belly laughed, a genuine chuckle I had never heard from him before. “Oh, Grace. I’ll always make room for you. See you tomorrow.”

After a warm embrace, they went in separate directions, Raph back to his office and Grace to the dorms, presumably to check on Emberly. When they were gone, Lincoln pulled me out of the shadows, and we walked hand in hand.

“Humans learning to fight demons alongside us next year?” I frowned. I mean, I was all for the idea, but what if they got hurt? I couldn’t imagine having a human in my battle class. It would be better in a couple year’s time, like Raphael said, when the last cohort of the first years had gone through the program. Then we could focus solely on training the humans with no powers, and not worry about them being hit by friendly fire in the process.

Lincoln shrugged. “Grace seems to know what she’s doing, and I can’t deny that we need them. Tonight, was an ambush through and through.”

His tone was clipped, eyes red-ringed and tired, but I wanted to hear more.

“What happened on your side of things?” I asked, crossing the parking lot to our trailer.

With a shake of his head, Lincoln sighed. “It worked at first. We were killing demons left and right, but they seemed to catch on quickly, and news of our raid spread throughout the war zone. There are so many more of them than there are of us, and I think they put two and two together that the school was unguarded.”

He stopped in the middle of the parking lot, and looked down at me with searing blue eyes. “I’m so sorry I left you here all alone. That will *never* happen again. From now on, you go where I go.”

*Oh no.* Stage-five-clinger Lincoln was back. I feared I’d never use the bathroom alone again.

Reaching up, I ran my fingers through his dark hair. “Linc, he’s going to come for me. I made a pact with the Devil. Do you think he’ll just let that go?” I needed to be real here. The time would come when I wouldn’t be able to escape Lucifer again. Tonight was a test, but the real day was coming.

Lincoln looked determined, jaw clenched and menacing scowl in place. “Let him come. I’m ready for him.”

“Lincoln...”

He was all puffed up and looked ready to kill someone. I didn’t have the heart to tell him he couldn’t fight for me, that it would be pointless. Instead, I rested my forehead against his chest, and sighed.

His hands made their way to my face, cupping my cheeks and tilting my face toward his. “Brielle, I took a vow as your husband to protect you, and I meant it.”

“I know,” I murmured.

That's what I was afraid of more than anything. If Lucifer killed Lincoln... No. I couldn't even conceive of it. That would be my worst nightmare come to life.

“Lincoln, you know what the prophecy says. I'm the one who—”

“Fuck the prophecy. I'm going to kill that bastard the next time I see him, and then we won't need to worry about anything anymore.”

## ELEVEN



**I**t had been two weeks since the attack, and the school was still on high alert. All Fallen Army personnel not enrolled in classes were on duty for twelve hours a day. Today was the first day back at school, and last night had been the Awakening ceremony. Next year would be the very last Awakening ever. The fact that almost every single angel blessed, or demon gifted child had already grown up and awoken blew my mind. All that would be left to protect humanity from the demons was... humanity.

Grace had moved into Raphael's office, and was starting the Demon Hunter Academy today as well. She had rounded up a whopping fourteen students who'd volunteered to learn how to fight demons. A slow and humble start.

Raphael had also agreed that all eleven of my students fought bravely, and would be passed into their second year without having to repeat the gauntlet. I was so damn proud. They'd all earned their place in year two.

Now, I had to start year four like I wasn't a ticking time bomb, waiting to be kidnapped by the Devil, and taken to the gates of Hell.

"Nervous?" Lincoln asked as he poured me a cup of coffee.

I shrugged. "Feel a bit better now that you've agreed not to sit in my classes with me."

He grinned. "Only because I've got Shea, Chloe, *and* Luke on your ass at all times."

I nodded. “And you’re tracking my phone.”

Lincoln clinked my mug with his own. “And that.” He winked.

I grinned. My psycho stalker hubby was sexy. “You know, you’re kinda hot when you’re stalking me.”

Leaning forward, he claimed my mouth in a deep kiss, pulling my bottom lip into his.

*Yum.*

When he moved back and met my gaze, my stomach did flip-flops. “Remember, I’m stationed at the front gate, so if your phone alerts me that you’ve left campus, or if you call in distress, I can be there in seconds.”

He was trying to hide it, but it was clear he was still genuinely worried, and I didn’t want to lie to him and say I would be fine. I wasn’t fine. Lucifer would be here any day now; it was a reality for which we all needed to prepare.

“Okay,” I replied simply.

A hard knock rapped at the trailer door. “Let’s go! First day. Tiffany is wearing a shirt so low she’s bound to suffer a nip slip,” Shea called through the door.

Lincoln and I both grinned.

“Love you,” I told him.

“I love you too, Bri,” he answered, more seriously than I had.

I left him in the trailer and met Shea outside. She was rocking her engagement ring today, freshly polished. “Hoping to shove that in Tiffany’s face some more?” I asked her.

She nodded. “You know it. Now that Lincoln is locked down, she’s on the hunt for another man, and you know only a Celestial will do.”

Chloe was waiting for us up ahead, looking at some flowers that were in bloom.

“Is she still...?” I asked Shea.



Shea nodded. “She’s different. I mean, she’s Chloe, but she’s like a fifty-year-old Buddhist monk now.”

I winced. The near-death experience had changed the Nightblood. She was no longer interested in bashing Tiffany or talking about cute clothes. She’d gone deep and introspective, which just made me love her more. Whatever she’d seen or experienced had obviously influenced her completely.

“Hey, girl.” I came up and gave her a hug.

She embraced me fully, holding on for longer than would be normal in a casual friend hug. This was a Chloe 2.0 hug.

“You look lovely, Brielle. I’m so honored to be finishing the year with you girls.” Her voice was soft, not timid but not aggressive either.

Shea and I shared a quick look, but then Chloe linked arms with us, and we headed into school together.

We walked in silence for a while, until we reached the courtyard where Grace was standing before a newly set sign that read ‘Demon Hunter Academy.’ The sign hung over the small gym, where I normally trained with Emberly. They would have all their classes in that one room until Fallen Academy students had fully graduated, at which point, Grace hoped to fill the entire school with humans who wanted to hunt demons.

“I think it’s wonderful that Grace is empowering the humans to look after themselves,” Chloe shared.

“I think it’s great too,” I agreed. Grace had already offered me a full-time position next year, once I graduated, and I had accepted it immediately. I would teach combat strategies and demon weaknesses, and I was so freaking excited. Assuming I lived until next year, of course. It was hard to think that far ahead with so much doom and gloom going on here on campus.

“I think it’s a good idea, but I hope they don’t get hurt.” Shea shrugged.

I felt a little bad that we treated humans like such fragile creatures. Look at Grace, after all. Half the time I forgot she

was human.

“Well, well... if it isn’t the little demon lover trio.” Tiffany’s voice dripped with sarcasm as my gaze flicked over to where she stood.

*Who wears that to a school where we have battle class?* Shea was right, her boobs were nearly about to fall out of her low-cut silk shirt. She was definitely going to flash someone over the course of the day.

Shea ignored Tiffany and turned to me. “You and Lincoln should have quieter sex. I walked past the trailer last night, and could hear you two across the entire parking lot,” she informed loudly.

I busted out laughing as Tiffany’s face fell. Lincoln and I didn’t have sex last night, but my bestie was savage, that was for sure.

Without warning, Chloe unlinked from our arms and walked toward Tiffany with her arms outstretched like she was going to hug her.

“It’s so clear to me now that you just want to be loved. You need attention and want to feel special.” Chloe drew closer, and Tiffany just looked at her with a horrified, yet slightly vulnerable expression.

“Don’t touch me, you undead freak!” Tiffany roared. Her voice carried so far that every head in the quad whipped in our direction, including Grace’s.

Tiffany turned tail, running as Shea and I grabbed Chloe and pulled her back. “Okay, Dali Lama, save that for someone who isn’t a total psycho,” Shea told Chloe.

*Undead freak? Yikes.*

The rumor mill had started, had someone else seen us that night? Luckily Raphael hadn’t asked about what happened that night, and Michael didn’t say anything either. My mom was in the clear.

Chloe frowned. “She just wants to be loved.”

“Someone else can love her,” I told the Nightblood, leading her to the south end of school, where our advanced angel history class was.

The near-death experience had certainly changed our wild Chloe, but I was just glad and grateful she was alive.

As we passed Grace, I saw her signing in a new student, a scrawny-looking girl with no muscle. Was that how we looked when we first started? Probably.

We were just stepping into the class, comparing our schedules, when the demon alarm went off around us. Everything within me clenched as we bolted inside, barring the door. If school was in session, demon alarm protocol was to barricade inside the nearest classroom.

*Seriously? On the first day of school?*

Lincoln was at the front gates on duty, and I prayed he was okay. These demon attacks were getting too frequent.

“All right, fourth years, this is not a drill. Let’s stay calm, but prepare for a possible attack. Please bring out your weapons if you have any.” Mrs. Delacourt, a centaur, galloped to the front of the classroom and stood before the entrance.

Shea clapped her hands together and a green magical fire erupted from her palms, just waiting to throw it at a demon, no doubt.

There was a frantic bang on the door.

“Let me in! There’s a Castor demon out here!” Tiffany’s high-pitched voice shrieked.

Shea groaned. “For Heaven’s sake. Let it eat her.”

Mrs. Delacourt shushed Shea, and looked to me with uncertainty in her eyes.

On a small level, I really did want to let it eat her, but on some other more mature level, my conscience couldn’t allow that. Maybe it was that thing Michael had done, or maybe it was Chloe’s new influence. I wasn’t entirely sure what caused it, but pulling my sword free, I sidestepped Mrs. Delacourt.

“Brielle!” Shea hissed. “It’s against protocol. It could be a trap.”

*It’s who I am, dammit.* Even though she was a bitch to me, the frantic pounding on the door made my heart pinch. It wasn’t a trap, and Shea knew it. Tiffany was great with strategy, but she wasn’t the best at battle. If she was unarmed...

Unlocking the door, I ripped it open, coming face-to-face with a new type of demon. Shock tore through me at the somewhat humanoid-looking man, who grinned before me. His face was gaunt, and where there should have been a nose were just two slits. His teeth were more like tusks, protruding out of his misshapen lips.

*Shea was right. It was a trap.*

“Let me in!” Tiffany’s voice came from his mouth, and before I could react to the shock of his ability to mimic people, he burst forward, knocking me backward and flat on my ass.

“Stay down!” Delacourt screamed as she leapt over me.

Looking up, I saw the underside of her half-horse belly, and flattened myself to the ground. She landed hard on the new demon, and trampled him until he rolled backward, and away from the room where we hid.

Immediately, I stood, and pulled my sword.

“Brielle! I’m coming for you, dear.” The Dark Prince’s voice slipped from the demon’s lips, where he was rocking on his knees in front of Mrs. Delacourt, and chills broke out across my arms.

Our angel history teacher must have known whose voice that was, because she froze in shock as well.

“I’m coming for you,” he said again.

Stepping out into the hallway, I whipped my head in the direction of a blur of blue light.

*Lincoln.*

My husband burst out of nowhere and leapt into the air behind the demon. Bringing his sword down on the demon's neck, he cut off his head clean. The second the demon died, the alarm stopped roaring.

Lincoln was breathing hard, chest heaving up and down, and when he met my gaze, I knew he was totally freaked out. "Was that whose voice I think it was?" he asked me.

I could lie, but what was the use? "Yes."

A few of the students gasped behind me at my confirmation.

"He mimicked Tiffany too." Mrs. Delacourt stared at the headless demon, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

"Another new one," Lincoln grumbled through gritted teeth. "I guess we'll call them Mimics. Soon, we'll be running out of names."

A stone sank in my stomach. I was sitting up here topside, living my life, while psycho Lucy was down there, making new demons to taunt us. To taunt *me*. I wanted to go down there and kill him, like the prophecy foretold, but I wasn't sure if I was ready yet. And I definitely couldn't do it without Sera.

"Mrs. Delacourt, can you excuse Brielle for the period?" Lincoln asked her as he reached out to pull me near him.

She nodded. "Of course, dear."

"I'll send a team to clean this up and write a report," he told her.

Everyone had come out into the hallway now and was staring at the headless demon that lay on the floor. This used to be a safe place. Now demon attacks were becoming a regular occurrence. It made me sick.

Lincoln held my hand, leading me out to the open area, where all four archangels were waiting, swords drawn.

"I've neutralized the threat. A new demon that mimics the voices of humans. He also took on the Devil's voice, and taunted Brielle."

Michael's brow furrowed as the veins in his neck bulged. Raphael simply sighed, looking resigned.

"Where are you with her training? Emberly says she's doing quite well with resisting mental commands," Michael asked him.

Lincoln side-glanced me. "That's what I wanted to talk to you both about. I'd like it if all four of you could do a few sessions with her. She needs to really feel the power of a full angel, and I can't do that. Only you can..."

He let the suggestion hang out in the air, and already my body hurt just thinking about training with all four of the archangels. It was wild seeing them all together on campus. Normally, Uriel and Gabriel were at the sister schools, but with everyone banded together, their place was here... for now.

"Of course," Michael stated.

"Consider it done," Raphael added.

"I'm free tonight," Gabriel said casually.

"Me too," Uriel confirmed.

*Oh God.*

Lincoln sighed in relief, while my anxiety ratcheted ever higher.

*Training with four archangels?*

*Lord have mercy.*

## TWELVE



I was dressed for battle. Chain mail armor, a shield and like ten different weapons on my body. Tonight, was my training with the four archangels, and my goal was not to die.

“What the hell were you thinking? I feel sick. What if they kill me?” I paced the gymnasium, as Lincoln, Noah and Shea snickered on the sidelines.

“They’re not going to kill you,” Lincoln told me confidently.

“You might just limp for a few days,” my best friend added while sharpening her blade on a pumice stone.

“Great!” I threw my arms up in frustration.

Noah watched silently with a slight smirk in place. “How do you expect to kill the Devil himself, if you can’t spar with some archangels?” he asked.

Ugh. He had a point.

*Dammit.*

The gymnasium door opened then, and I swallowed hard. All four archangels walked in, chatting casually while dressed to kill. Their silver armor was inlaid with gold, and polished to a reflective shine resembling a mirror. One glance at Michael’s giant sword, and I felt weak in the knees. Not to mention the four gigantic sets of white wings. Yet, the way their hair swayed when they walked made me question if this was about to be a battle or a runway show, but I knew this was going to hurt.

“Good evening, Brielle,” Uriel greeted me formally. I hadn’t gotten to know him as well as the others, but he seemed the most reserved and shy of the bunch.

“Hey,” I gulped.

Raphael broke into a wide smile. “She thinks we’re going to pulverize her.”

I crossed my arms defiantly. “Hey, no mind reading! That’s not fair.”

A streak of blond hair sailed past me, and suddenly Michael was by my side. “This practice is not intended to break you, or for us to try our hardest to kill you. It’s to push you in ways we know Lucifer will, so you can be most prepared to fight him.”

I’d forgotten why we were here, what my name was. Michael was standing so close, I could feel the heat of his arm through my shirt. I gulped, stepping back a little. Why were they so nice to look at?

I shook my head, very aware that my husband was watching me.

Sera would have gotten a kick out of this.

“We trained with Lucifer in his infancy, after all,” Gabriel added, squaring off with Michael.

“So, he can be killed, right?” I had asked them before, but I needed confirmation again.

Michael nodded. “Believe it or not, he has a soul. One that can be freed upon the destruction of his body.”

Gabriel stepped forward, pressing in on me with his light. I could feel it on my skin as a tangible thing. “In which case, his soul will be released to be judged by the Creator.”

Yikes. That sounded scary, but totally deserved.

Raphael cleared his throat. “But I feel I should mention that there is always meant to be balance in the world, and wiping out Lucifer doesn’t mean all evil will leave Earth.



Some new evil will rise, and we will always have the demons he has created to contend with.”

That made shitty sense, but the new evil wouldn't be as bad as Lucy was, right?

I just nodded, letting everything they said swirl around my head. “He creates demons that kill and enslave humans. He's ruthless, incapable of love, and completely void of compassion. The world is better off without him,” I declared.

Michael was grinning like a proud father, but Raphael looked more reserved. “The prophecy says you will indeed kill him, but that choice rests solely on you, my dear.”

Free will.

Hah, if he thought I could be talked out of it, he was trippin. Lucy tortured me in Hell, stole Sera, and captured Raksha. He tried to kill everyone I loved. There was no way I would let that thing live.

Raphael nodded as if he had heard my thoughts. “Then let us train. Don't go easy on us, Brielle. Use your combined magic, and we'll push you to your breaking point, in an effort to prepare you for the days ahead.”

*Breaking point.* I gulped.

Michael nodded. “We'll protect you as best we can, but Lucifer must not be allowed into the gates of Heaven.”

Obviously.

How awful would it be if that happened and it was all my fault?

Dread turned in my stomach. What if I couldn't resist him? What if he forced me to open the gates and slaughtered all the angels there? *Don't fear. Don't fear.*

*Oh God. I'm going to be sick.*

Raphael stepped forward, placing a firm hand on my shoulder. A healing energy rolled through me, chasing away my anxiety.

“Whatever will be will be, and that's okay,” he declared.

Oh, Raph. Such a good guy, always making it seem okay if I made mistakes.

Without warning, I leapt forward and pulled him into a hug. Our armor clinked together in the process, making it a bit awkward. I wanted him to know how much it meant to me that he was always guiding me, allowing me to be me, and not making me feel bad for my mistakes.

His arms came around me immediately, squeezing me back. “We’re very proud of you, Brielle. No matter what,” he confessed over my head.

I was going to cry if I didn’t pull away soon, so I stepped back from him and nodded.

“But our pride will intensify if you lay a beatdown on him.” Michael winked.

Ahhh, a Michael wink. The only thing equal to a Lincoln wink.

“Let’s begin. We have our poker game in an hour,” Uriel stated from the corner of the room, where he looked quite bored.

The three angels shot him a look, and his cheeks reddened.

*Poker game?* I chuckled, shaking my head. Spend enough time on Earth, and you pick up our habits.

“All right, Brielle. Take your defensive stance, and we’ll each practice coming at you with a full-blooded angel power,” Michael instructed.

I gulped.

“And remember to protect yourself like you would in a real battle. Use shields, both sides of your magic, whatever you have at your disposal. You won’t hurt us,” Raphael added.

Looking over my shoulder, I glared at my husband—it was his brilliant idea to do this—but when he shrugged, I faced forward once more.

“Okay.” Pulling my sword free, I held it aloft in one hand, picking up my metal shield with the other. With ease, I called

forth my power, creating the energy shield I had learned to do easily, and dragging it over myself like a dome.

The back doors creaked open, and Emberly and her best friend, Mel, walked in then.

*Oh God. An audience?*

Mel was an adorable redheaded human, with twice the sass of Emberly. When I looked over, Emberly waved and joined Lincoln and the others on the sideline.

Michael stepped up to the plate first, staring me down. He was looking at my energy shield, seeing the edges of it.

“I’m going to break your shield,” he declared, pulling his sword free with a burst of blazing blue light.

“The hell you are!” Emberly razed him from the sidelines.

I grinned, but it was short-lived. When Michael’s face turned menacing and he raised his sword, my humor faded, and I braced for impact. Holding my metal shield above me, I tried at the same time to bolster the other one. Michael’s sword came down hard on my energy barrier, causing it to flex and wobble. Pain sliced through my body, everywhere at once, but the shield held. Tiny blue cracks appeared in its outer wall, but his sword didn’t puncture it.

*Hell yeah!*

Michael looked dumbfounded for a second. “Fascinating. Gabriel, come break this.” He stepped aside.

*Oh God.*

I tried to repair the cracks Michael’s blue light had made, but they seemed to be growing by the second. Gabriel didn’t wait for an introduction, simply tossed a ball of white fire at me. Coupled with Michael’s blue cracks, the force sent my shield crumbling around me.

My onlookers booed.

“I thought so,” Michael mumbled curiously.

I decided to give them a little taste of what fighting with Brielle was like. If I were fighting Lucy, I wouldn't let him stand around and talk.

Dropping my metal shield to the ground, I sprang from where I was crouched, sword held aloft and aimed right for Michael. Obviously, I wasn't going to hurt him if he didn't move, but I had a feeling he would be ready.

Sure enough, the archangel snapped to the side, grinning as he parried my blow with such a force, that my sword was flung from my grasp.

*Damn superhuman power.*

“Good!” he shouted. “Never underestimate the power of a surprise attack.”

Yeah, but it didn't work, and now I was weaponless. I stood there frozen, body tensed, unsure what to do.

Raphael stepped forward. “A Celestial is never weaponless. You have magic within your every pore.”

Right. I kept forgetting that, and it made me really miss Sera. She would make me look like such a badass right now. Maybe this was what I needed to hear all along. I was powerful without her.

Would I go to Hell if I flung black magic at Archangel Michael?

“Give him all you've got,” Raphael encouraged.

*Mind reader.*

Without missing a beat, I clapped my hands together, creating a small baseball-sized black blob of magic. Michael's twenty-foot wings flapped, causing the other angels to step back a foot, and I chucked the ball. Michael didn't flinch or try to deflect it; instead, he let it splash across his chest, where it molded to his metal breast plate, constricting it.

“I just wanted to see what that felt like,” he observed, looking down at the dark magic with fascination. “It stings.”

I was glad I could satisfy his curiosities.

Bringing up his sword, he cut lengthwise along his armor, shredding my black magic like it was made of paper. The dark blob fell to the floor and shriveled in on itself, leaving behind dented armor in its wake.

Michael assessed the dents with fascination. “Does it work on the Dark Prince?” he queried.

I shook my head. “No, but a mixture of both sides of my magic does.”

Kind of. My memories of my time down there were full of depression and drug-induced fatigue, so I couldn’t be entirely certain.

“Incoming!” Uriel shouted out of nowhere, then ran at me full speed.

Wind picked up and tossed my hair to the side, and panic ripped through me. Our friendly, chatty, sparring session had taken a turn. Clearly Uriel really wanted to get to his poker session.

My wings snapped out and I pumped them, causing me to rise higher and go over his head. As he passed under me, I collapsed my wings and dropped to the ground near my sword, bending to pick it up again. The moment I wrapped my fingers around the cold steel, a gust of wind slammed into my back, knocking the wind out of me.

I fell forward a bit, trying to get back the air that had been slammed from my lungs.

*What the hell? Wind magic? Really?*

“Lucifer will often surprise you. He won’t hesitate to harm you when your back is to him. He has no morals,” Uriel’s voice carried on the wind from behind me.

*Motherfricker.* He was right, and I wanted to prove to the archangels that I could do this. Anger rose up within me and I spun around in my crouched position, before bursting into the air, allowing my wings to help me gain speed. Uriel was ready, wearing the same grin Michael had. These men were angels, yes, but they were also warriors, that much was clear.

I came down hard with my sword, and it clinked against his midair. The shock of the metal weapons coming together stung my arm, sending vibrations throughout my body. We slashed our swords out, back and forth for a few moments when Raphael called out to me.

“Now, throw magic at him with your other hand, and pull up your energy shield. You must be able to do things simultaneously to even think about defeating Lucifer,” he explained.

What? I could barely process his words, too focused on meeting each strike of Uriel’s sword with my own. I could easily lose an arm in this “sparring” session.

Trying to pull attention away from my sword fight, I allowed a ball of my mixed silvery magic to form in my hand. Uriel brought his non-wielding hand up, and that gust of wind came at me again, breaking my ball apart in a second.

“Arghhh!” I screamed in frustration and snapped out with a kick, planted squarely at his chest. It was enough to knock him backward and give me the advantage I needed. Calling up another ball, I chucked it before he had the chance to break it apart with his wind magic, or whatever the heck that was. The mixed energy wrapped around the lower part of his face and started to squeeze off his air supply.

“Woo-hoo!” Emberly and Shea both screamed at the same time.

There was surprise in his eyes, and then something else. Pride, maybe? The shimmery magic around his face suddenly ballooned as if he were blowing a bubble and then popped. Shards of the magic flew in every direction before disintegrating.

Uriel stood, relaxed, and lowered his sword. “If you could have pulled up your shield and taken your blade to my neck while I was incapacitated, that might have given you the edge you needed,” he observed.

Wondering if God was watching me kick his beloved angels’ asses, and putting me on the naughty list, I simply

nodded.

“She needs to work on multitasking,” Gabriel agreed.

I spun around, unsure if training was over, or if another one of them was going to come at me.

Raphael stepped forward. “Brielle, call up your shield.”

I gulped.

Pulling my sword up, I stood with my feet planted shoulder-width apart, and started to pull my energy outward in a dome-like barrier.

Raphael stepped closer, inspecting the shield. “No. Make it stronger.”

*What?* I groaned, pulling another layer over the shield, straining to reach for my power deep inside of me.

Raphael made a fist and punched the shield dead-on, and it wobbled, shaking with the force of his hit, but it held.

“Stronger! Like steel!” he shouted. “You are a healer. You have endless amounts of energy. Find the weak parts of the shield and strengthen it until nothing can defeat it.”

Something about his words set off a light bulb in my head.

*Healer.*

I was a healer. Like him.

If the shield were a sick patient, I would send energy to the frail spots, and that’s exactly what I did now. I focused on the smallest nano-cells of my energy protection, funneling more and more into it, until it was a thick clear dome that looked like it was made of glass.

Raphael nodded, and waved over the other archangels. “Now, I want you to throw your energy balls at us, Brielle.”

A ‘what the hell did you just say’ expression took over my face. “I can’t. I’m trapped in here now,” I told him, my voice muffled through the fortified barrier I’d just created.

“That’s not true!” Emberly piped up from the sideline. “When she protected us from the demon attack, she thinned

part of her shield to allow me to come inside.”

I shot her a look.

*Traitor.*

Raphael grinned. “Come on. Give it a try.”

Exhaling in frustration, I tried to hold my shield strong while also thinning part of it, just enough to fit a baseball-sized black energy ball through it. Instead of what I’d intended, the entire thing weakened.

Walking closer, Michael stuck his metal-booted foot out, kicking my barrier, and sending the whole thing crumbling down instantly. I looked up at him in frustration, and he smiled. “Now you know what you need to work on.”

Yeah. *Everything.*

Lincoln stepped onto the gymnasium floor and bowed his head slightly. “Thank you, guys, so much. I really appreciate it. We can run drills with her now, working on the shield and multitasking.”

They nodded and shook his hand one at a time, waving goodbye to me before disappearing out the doors for their poker game, like they hadn’t just whooped my ass.

Emberly strode over with Mel and bopped on her heels. “You totally dented my dad’s beloved armor. He’s going to complain to my mom about that one for weeks.”

I just chuckled.

“Come on. We have our work cut out for us,” Lincoln called to me.

I was tired just thinking about the days to come.

Lincoln wouldn’t sleep until I was ready.

This was gonna hurt.



## THIRTEEN



The demon appearances on campus were daily now. A single demon would sneak on campus to try to find me, and tell me Lucifer was coming. Lincoln was beyond stressed—he'd lost weight, and wasn't sleeping well. When I wasn't in class, I was training with Emberly, or Lincoln and Noah, or Shea, or whatever Lincoln told me to do. I was an energy shield-making machine, now able to thin certain parts to allow me to throw balls of magic through it at my assailant. I felt ready, more than ready to go into Hell, kill Lucy, and end this entire war. I'd get Sera, free Raksha, and thwart his plan to storm the gates of Heaven. The demons in the war zone were doubling every day now, and pretty soon our forces wouldn't be able to hold them back. Angel City would fall, unless I could put a stop to it.

“Absolutely, fucking not!” Lincoln roared at the dinner table in our small trailer.

His chicken sat untouched, and I feared he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown or something.

“Just hear me out.” I reached out and clasped his hand, while Lincoln took deep calming breaths through his nose. “You've heard the prophecy. You told me yourself that you think I'm meant to fulfill it.” I kept my voice quiet and measured.

“That was before I fell madly in love with you! Now I don't care about some stupid prophecy. I just want you safe,” he bellowed.

“I won’t be safe, not in the long run. Eventually Angel City will fall, and we’ll all succumb to the demons’ power, to Lucifer’s wrath. If I could just take a team of Fallen Army soldiers down to Hell—”

“*No way.* You’re never going back down there.” His breathing was ragged, and I knew he was on the verge of a panic attack, having suffered many of them myself in the past.

I yanked my hand away from his and crossed my arms. “Then how are we going to fix this? The world is ending, Lincoln! Do you want all those lives on your conscience, because I sure don’t? I can go down there, and I can fix this. I know what his building looks like, and I know how to fight him. I have to do something.” There was mild hysteria in my voice by the end of my rant, and Lincoln frowned.

All of Angel City was on a curfew now. It just wasn’t the same happy place it used to be months ago.

We were silent for a long few moments, just staring at each other, until finally he placed his head in his hands. “I want to be selfish,” he admitted through tight lips. “I want to keep you safe.”

My heart broke then, because if the roles were reversed, I would want the same thing. “I know, but I’m the only Celestial who can go down there. The only one with powers that can hurt him. This is *my* destiny, Lincoln.”

He peered up at me through messy dark hair, so much anguish in his gaze. “If I could just go with you, I would feel so much better. I was so helpless last time.”

My heart pinched and I nodded. “But I’ll take Shea, Luke, and every other demon gifted soldier who wants to go with me. I won’t be alone this time.”

Bringing the war to Hell, that was the only way to win this. I needed to surprise Lucifer on his turf, then get Sera and Raksha the hell out of there. It had been too long.

Lincoln looked up at the ceiling, as if willing God to intervene. “We’ll talk to the archangels in the morning. See

what they have to say.” His voice held such defeat, it broke my heart, but a thrill also coursed through me.

Finally, after months of preparation, I was going to give Lucy the ending he deserved.

That night, I went to sleep with a lighter heart than I had in a long while. Most of my daily anxiety was based on the idea that I was doing nothing to help Sera and Raksha, that I wasn't going after Lucifer when I knew I should. Knowing we were going to talk to the archangels about a mission in the morning had me sleeping like a baby.

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SOMETIME IN THE early morning hours, a light shaking, woke me. My eyelids snapped open to see Lucifer's grinning face hovering over me. At first, I thought I was dreaming, but after blinking rapidly, he didn't disappear.

Standing tall in a crisp black suit, the Devil beamed down at me.

“Wakey wakey.” His voice was low and raspy.

“Shit!” I kicked out at him and tried to roll off the other end of the bed, but it was no use. He reached out and grabbed my ankle in a viselike grip, fingers digging into my flesh.

“Brielle. So good to see you. Our time has come, my dear.” His voice was so calm, it was terrifying. This man was seriously psychotic.

*'Brielle!'* Sera's voice desperately boomed in my head, and I burst into tears. In Lucy's other hand was the black case I knew held her.

*'Sera!'* I shouted mentally, reaching for that link we used to talk to each other.

*'Are you okay?'* she asked.

I tried to control my crying, so overcome with emotion that I couldn't answer.

Lucy rolled his eyes. “Get over whatever little emotional breakdown you're having. We need to leave before your boy

toy comes back.”

*Lincoln.* How the hell had I forgotten about him? I glanced frantically around the bed, but it was empty.

“Where is he?” My voice was deadly as I let a black ball of magic build up in my palm. If Lucifer had hurt him, I’d go so postal, I might actually explode.

Lucifer rolled his eyes again before flicking his wrist in my direction. My dark magic flew from my hand and splashed against the trailer wall. I’d felt his energy pulling on my wrist, and could have resisted, but I wanted him to think I was still under his control. For now. I needed to know where Lincoln was, if Raksha was alive, and have Sera in my hands before I showed him that he could no longer force me to do things against my will. I’d been preparing for this day for months, and I wasn’t scared. I felt ready.

“You will be agreeable, Brielle, or I’m going to have to get mean,” he snarled. “Your lover is attending a skirmish at the front gates.”

He was safe. I sighed in relief, but at the same time it occurred to me that it was oddly quiet outside. “Why isn’t the demon alarm going off?”

Lucifer grinned and it made my stomach turn. “Haven’t you been getting my messengers all month?”

Something clicked inside my head at his words, and my mouth popped open at the realization. “Every time you sent a demon in here, it was to learn something, where I was, or how the demon alarm was triggered.”

He nodded. “Good to see you didn’t lose your intellect in this godforsaken place. Get up and get dressed. We have an appointment in Heaven.”

My face fell. He’d come to force me to make good on my promise to him. He’d brought the key—Sera. What if I couldn’t fight him off? What if I really did open the gates of Heaven for him, and he killed every angel there in his bid for revenge?

*'We've got this. Together,'* Sera assured me, and I was almost startled at hearing her in my head. It had been so long, and I'd missed her so deeply that it hurt now to have her near.

*'I love you,'* I told her. I knew we didn't have time for a long conversation, and I wanted her to know how much she meant to me.

*'I love you too. Now get the hell up so we can kick his ass!'* she roared.

I forced myself not to grin. There was no one in the world like Sera. She was irreplaceable.

Lucifer let go of my ankle, and I scooted to the edge of the bed where my shoes were, slipping my feet inside hurriedly. I was wearing night shorts and a tank top, now with sneakers and no socks. Was it the best outfit for saving the world? No, but it would have to do.

"Get up slowly, and walk outside," he directed. I glanced down to his palm, to see a sleek black gun had appeared.

*'Wait until he takes me out of the case, and hands me to you to open the gate. Then we'll slice and dice him into a thousand pieces, starting with his balls,'* Sera instructed me.

*'Sounds like a plan,'* I confirmed.

God, I'd missed her battle strategy and winning personality.

Walking slowly through the trailer toward the door, I opened it gently, as Lucifer instructed. I didn't know if he had anyone I cared about being held hostage, like Shea or Chloe, so I decided to do as he asked... for now.

I knew he and Raksha were the only two people who could open that case he held. If I killed him now, I'd never get Sera out—and let's be honest, I couldn't kill him without her.

My tongue was burning with the question of where Raksha was, if he'd killed her, or if she was still in his inner circle. Yet, the mere act of asking that would alert him that Raksha and I cared about each other. If she *was* still in his inner circle,

and he'd believed that I'd broken out on my own, I couldn't blow her cover.

Letting myself outside, I stepped into the cool, dark night. It was too early in the morning still, and the sun hadn't yet risen, but a magnificent artificial golden glow was coming from behind the trailer, the opposite side from where the sun would rise.

"Come on. Our ride is waiting." Lucy shoved my back, urging me toward the mysterious glowing light.

I walked gingerly behind the trailer, and when I turned the corner, I sucked in my breath. Raksha was there, and she'd opened a portal to what could only be Heaven.

The most beautiful light I'd ever seen was flooding out of a hole in the air.

Raksha gave me a quick look over her shoulder, then trained her eyes on the ground. Her face and arms had more scars than I remembered.

*'He beats her every day for not stopping you,'* Sera told me.

My body shook with uncontrolled rage, and I nearly snapped my teeth from clenching my jaw so hard. *That bastard.*

"Aw, look at this little reunion. Did you think I didn't know about your special little friendship?" Lucy cooed in my ear. "But we've reached an agreement, haven't we, Raki?" he called to my old friend.

She just nodded, still looking at the ground. She wouldn't even meet my gaze.

A sob formed in my throat, and it took a great effort to control it. He'd broken her, broken her strong and feisty spirit. The spirit that told me to fight and stay alive down there.

The gun dug into the back of my head. "Go inside."

He pushed me toward the portal, but I planted my feet. Should I yell for Lincoln? Should I try to create a shield

around Raksha and me right now, maybe get the case from him and—

The gun cocked.

“One,” he counted.

I didn’t move.

“Two.” He pushed the gun harder into my scalp.

I knew he needed me to open the gate, but I also knew he was a psycho who could probably find my soul after I died, and still force me to do his bidding. He was the Devil, after all.

Raksha looked up then for a split second, and met my gaze, holding it firmly before looking down once more. That was my old mentor, telling me to cooperate, and do whatever I had to in order to survive. Maybe she wasn’t completely broken after all.

I stepped into the portal, and an immense feeling of love washed over me. At least if I was going to die, this was the place to do it.

## FOURTEEN



**T**here are no earthly words to describe the feeling that came over me when I stepped into the spiritual plane. Every single worry I had was lifted until there was just... a blankness that I realized was complete and utter peace. My mind wasn't running through anxious scenarios as it normally was; I was just existing, breathing in and out.

I'd stepped out into what looked like a hundred-acre flower garden that went on for miles. In the distance, I could hear the trickling of water, and see a castle-type structure. Closer in the foreground was a large golden arch that looked like a gate without bars. The inside of the arch had a shimmering shield, similar to the one I made for myself. These were the heavenly gates, I knew it. That soft golden glow bathed everything, even me. The light was glorious as it warmed and tingled over my skin.

Spinning around, I saw Lucifer and Raksha had stepped through as well, closing the portal behind them.

"Now, let the others through while Brielle works on the gate," Lucifer snapped to Raksha, who quickly nodded.

Did he feel it? The peacefulness? His features looked less stern, but I had no way of knowing how this place affected him.

Raksha began to open another portal, and this one I recognized immediately. It was to his brick-walled underground castle in Hell. So, he was going to let his army



through? I would open this gate, and then his men would file into the garden of flowers and storm the castle?

A hand clamped down on my shoulder, and I winced at the grip. Lucy was impatient today, forcing me to walk forward.

I could see a shimmering wall that stretched out on either side of the golden arch-gate. It was reminiscent of the protection dome I could throw over myself, but this one seemed to encompass all of Heaven. The closer we got, I could make out more buildings in the distance and... angels. There were angels flying all over the sky atop the buildings. It was breathtaking, but I couldn't enjoy it; I felt sick to my stomach, and my mind was racing with what the hell I was going to do.

We reached the golden archway that encased the city, or garden, or whatever it was. Inside the arch, the shield was thick and moved as if it were alive.

"This is the entrance to Heaven. The nearly departed, angels, and the like can pass through it with ease, but our kind needs a little help." Kneeling down, Lucy set the black case that held Sera on the grassy ground, and my breathing stopped.

He was going to take her out of it.

With his fingers poised on the levers to unlock it, he looked up at me. "Remember your vow, Brielle?" he asked, and suddenly I felt pressure on the back of my head. I went with it, allowing him to nod my head for me.

He grinned. "Good girl."

As he opened the box, something gold and shimmery pulled at my peripheral vision.

Slowly, I turned my head to the side, peering inside Heaven.

*Bernie.*

My old friend and guardian angel walked along the rows and rows of rose bushes toward me, and he was completely made of light. Free of his body, he floated, long golden angel wings shimmering out of his back.

*'I'm so proud of you,'* he confessed into my mind, and I had to force myself not to cry.

There was nothing to be proud of yet.

*'He expects me to cut an opening in the gate. What do I do?'* I was frantic now, mere seconds from being tasked with bringing a war to Heaven.

Behind Bernie, those angels I'd seen flying above the buildings were now coming this way.

*'You must try with all of your abilities to keep that from happening. It could change so much about your world, including time itself.'*

My eyes bugged out at Bernie's declaration.

Time? Had he said it could change time itself?

*'He did. So don't mess this up.'* Sera's words did nothing to quell the panic that had reached my chest and was crawling up my throat, making me want to scream.

Suddenly, the Dark Prince stood next to me, and I turned my attention toward him. He was holding Sera, but she was covered in all the black stuff, the dark magical spell Lucifer had placed on her.

The Devil's attention became riveted on Bernie. "Is that your guardian angel?"

I swallowed hard and nodded.

"How sweet." His voice dripped with acid. "And it looks like my old friends have come to play. Perfect."

The angels were flying fast toward us, and I remembered Michael's words to me.

*'Don't fear. Lucy feeds off fear, and it allows him to control you...'*

*Energy vacuums and all that shit.*

*Don't fear. Breathe. Don't open Heaven and be the asshole who ends the world.*

My gaze flicked quickly over my shoulder to the small army flooding in through the portal Raksha had created, and my stomach sank. Demons, hundreds upon hundreds of them, were filling the small valley.

*'Just breathe. No matter what, everyone simply expects you to do your best,'* Bernie assured me.

Everyone? Like all those angels? Were they all counting on me?

*Breathe. Just breathe,* I told myself again, taking in a deep breath to calm myself.

Lucifer held one hand over Sera, and the moving, oily black mass fell away, allowing her bright energy to shine off the blade.

*'I'm free!'* she yelled.

It was motherfucking showtime.

In a matter of seconds, I yanked Sera's energy, pulling the blade out of Lucifer's grasp and into mine. At the same time, I erected an energy shield around myself, leaving Lucifer stunned.

*How's that for multitasking?*

The second Sera was in my hand, a multitude of emotions coursed through me, but I had to tamp them down and act fast. Pivoting with the gate to my back, I stretched my shield over Sera and me, large enough to cover the entire gate's entrance.

Lucifer's ears started to spew black smoke then, and I knew if he got to me, he would kill me for this betrayal. I'd never seen him look so angry in all my time with him. His entire being shook with barely contained rage.

Suddenly, I felt a bone-crushing tightness all over my body.

"Drop. Your. Shield," Lucifer commanded, hands outstretched. He was nearly frothing at the mouth, and controlling my fear was becoming more and more difficult.

I resisted, staying calm, and reminding myself that I wasn't afraid of him. Not anymore. I used to run from him, feared him finding me. I used to feel like a hunted animal, but now I was the hunter. I had Sera, I'd married Lincoln, and I was about to get Raksha back. I was the winner here.

I was the one who would have the happy ending.

"No," I gritted out viciously.

Black wings snapped out of Lucy's back and he stepped closer to me, arms rising higher. The veins in his neck were bulging. "You will drop the shield and open the gate this second!" he roared, black smoke not only coming from his ears now, but his mouth too.

*Holy mother of nightmares.*

'Tell him to stick it where the sun don't shine!' Sera cried in my head, and suddenly her blade glowed with a deep golden light.

The pressure on my skin was increasing, making it hard to breathe. Lucifer was pushing everything he had onto my shield, and it felt like I was holding up a five-hundred-pound weight.

"You can do this, Brielle," Bernie said behind me, aloud that time.

I risked a glance over my shoulder, my mouth popping open in shock at the line of angels that had come to stand guard at the gate. There must have been a hundred of them, wings all touching so they formed a line. A barrier to protect Heaven. They were all clad in the same armor Michael and Raphael wore, and they looked fiercely at Lucifer, swords raised. One of them, a giant of a man with long dark wavy hair and piercing green eyes, met my gaze and nodded.

I gulped.

*No pressure.*

"Brielle!" Lucifer screamed, completely coming unhinged.

When I spun to face him, I nearly pissed myself. Black ink was crawling up his skin, slithering around his body like a

dozen snakes. His eyes were solid black, and there were oily black veins growing up his neck and swirling around his face. I was about to see the full wrath of the Devil. What he'd shown me before was merely child's play. I had messed up his little redemption plan, and he. Was. *Pissed*.

"Eat shit!" I shouted. All I had left was my anger and a huge amount of semi-fake confidence. Best to play that hand until it was taken from me.

At my words, two black pointy shards grew from his palms, and I knew he was going to attempt to shred my protection dome. Instinctively, I began to layer more and more energy into it, making it thicker and stronger just like Raphael taught me. Sera's golden light even pushed out onto the wall, helping me reinforce it.

*'He might break through it,'* I told my dagger.

Her reply was swift and fierce. *'Let him. I've been ready for this day since he took us.'* Her light pulsed then, like a strobe light, and I felt ready too. If I died defending the gates of Heaven from the Devil, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

*'We would definitely get into Heaven then. Probably be declared a saint by the Catholic church,'* Sera stated.

I suppressed a chuckle. *'God, I missed you.'*

Lucifer exploded with rage in that moment. He came at my shield with his black hand swords and hacked away at it like Edward-freaking-Scissorhands. Pain sliced across my abdomen as if he was cutting into me, but my shield held, and I forced myself not to lose my concentration. It was like the energy barrier was a small part of me, and I could feel a painful sensation through it when it was attacked, but I didn't seem to be sustaining physical injury.

Lucifer tipped his head back and roared at the sky, causing all of his minions to step back a bit. They were armed, just waiting to carry out his plot, and I was the only thing standing in their way.

The sky behind Lucifer darkened as a storm began to roll in over him.

Oh God. A storm in Heaven? How was it possible he had that power?

*'You are at the in-between. It's a space that is not Earth but not yet Heaven. Lucifer has more power there than he would inside these gates. Still, he could do untold damage if allowed to enter here,'* Bernie informed me.

Great, as if I needed the reminder.

"Fan out! Prepare to attack!" Lucifer screamed at his demons, never pulling his demonic gaze from mine.

They stumbled to do his bidding, and my eyes went to the one who had her head down in submission, silently waiting to be asked to do something.

*Raksha.*

*'I say you drop the shield, and let me give his scrotum a piece of my mind,'* Sera suggested.

Opening my mind to my soul weapon, I pushed all of my recent training and thoughts at her. She'd always been my number one battle strategist, and I wanted her to know all I had learned without having to explain it all, because there was no time.

*'Ohhh,'* she cooed. *'You trained with Michael? How is he? I miss the way he smells.'*

*'Can we focus on the Devil for now?'* I asked her, holding the shield as best I could as Lucifer rained down another series of blows, this time causing small cracks to form in the outer layer.

*'Right! Thin a small portion of the shield, like you've been practicing, and I'll shoot a beam of light at his crotch,'* she directed.

Wow. Her grudge with Lucy seemed to be a bit more intense than mine, but I liked her plan. Taking a deep breath, I thinned a small six-inch circle of my shield, right around

where his junk was. Did the Devil even have man bits? We were about to find out.

A blinding, concentrated beam of white light shot from the tip of Sera's blade, slamming straight into the Devil's junk.

A noise that sounded like a cat being run over by a car, ripped from the Devil's throat as he stumbled forward and laid both hands on my shield. His furious face was a mere foot from mine, and the way his black eyes bulged was so terrifying it would haunt my dreams forever. Black inky magic poured from his palms, no longer as swords, but now as an oily fluid. It covered my shield slowly, causing all light to be sucked from the space.

My heart flitted wildly in my chest.

I was a grown-ass woman, but I'd be damned if I wasn't a little afraid of the pitch dark. Slowly the blackness crawled over my dome, so it became darker and darker inside.

Sera's golden glow grew lighter to combat the shadows, and my panic eased a little.

*'Get ready, I think he's going to take the shield down,'* she told me.

I nodded, standing with my feet firmly planted.

"Can't you help her?" Bernie begged to someone I couldn't see behind me.

"I'm not permitted to interfere in mortal affairs," a strong voice answered.

Typical.

"I got this!" I shouted, mostly to myself, because I was now 100 percent certain that the Devil's black magic was eating away at my shield. My skin was on fire, and I wasn't going to be able to hold it much longer.

*'Be ready'* Sera repeated.

My wings snapped out, and I assumed a crouching position to jump up to the skies if my shield were to fall. If I could

draw him away from the gate, take the fight to another part of the ‘in-between,’ then maybe I could stop this war.

A cracking sound reverberated throughout the space, and black chunks began to fall to the ground as my shield gave way. Light from the outside leaked in, and then Lucifer was standing there, terrifyingly close.

Without missing a beat, I shoved off the ground and aimed for the skies, but a strong hand wrapped around my ankle, and I was yanked to the ground hard. I landed awkwardly, on one knee and with one wing bent backward. Sharp hot pain sliced into my shoulder and kneecap simultaneously, but I kept my grip on Sera. Light flared from the tip of the blade as I went into prison shank mode, slicing out at Lucifer like a crazed lunatic. Sera cut into his wrist, that was still gripping my ankle, and then I managed to stab him in the shoulder as well before he stumbled backward.

“How dare you go against your promise to me!” he roared, and I felt that pressure press down on my body again.

The strongest urge to get up and walk back over to the gate, overcame me.

Lucifer hovered over me, shoulder and wrist bleeding, and black oily magic crawling all over his skin. “Get. Up,” he ordered.

I did, not because he’d forced me, but because it was a better position to be in to fight.

Without warning, he thrust his hands out and a gust of wind shoved into me, dragging me backward so hard that I didn’t stop until my back had slammed into the invisible gate. The wind knocked out of me, as my wings and back smashed against the glasslike surface that protected Heaven.

‘*Hold me up!*’ Sera commanded. I did as she asked, barely able to plan my next move. Lucifer was gliding on the tips of his toes like a total psycho, coming right for me.

Sera shot out a major burst of light, but when it hit Lucifer, it merely fell away as if he’d erected his own shield.

*Shit.*



Sera went rapid-fire then, blasting him with several beams of light, but none of it seemed to make a difference. Just as his hand came around my throat, I jerked my wrist forward to stab him in the eye. He wrapped his other hand over mine, grabbing Sera's blade in the process. Blood poured over the blade as he gripped her and looked into my face like a lunatic.

"If I didn't need you, I'd gut you like a fish with your own knife," he whispered as I struggled to take in small gasps of air. He was going to choke me to death.

*'Oh no! He's doing magic on me again!'* Sera screamed in panic.

I tried to yank her away from his hand, but the monster held on, even though it must have hurt. He covered her blade with a black blobby mass again, diminishing her light.

*No.*

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. I was supposed to kick his ass. I was supposed to be capable of killing him.

I wasn't ready after all, and the realization crushed me.

*I failed Lincoln, myself, all of Heaven.*

Spots danced at the edge of my vision, and I wondered if he even realized he was choking me to death. He looked so enraged, I didn't think he was in his right mind.

"You can kill him. You are his only equal," the strange male voice from before murmured from behind me.

Lucifer's grasp on my neck lessened then, and I was able to suck in a precious amount of air.

"Shut up, Metatron!" Lucifer seethed. "She's an untrained child who is too soft at heart to fully embrace her power. She'll never be as powerful as me."

Metatron. I'd heard that name before. In the Bible, maybe. I didn't care right then who he was; I only cared that his words had given me a small amount of hope, and they'd distracted Lucy.

Gathering my courage, I reeled my head back and then slammed it forward, cracking Lucy right in the nose. Reddish black blood spurted over his mouth. Then I shoved my knee into his crotch and dropped Sera on the ground; she was covered in black magic and, unfortunately, was useless to me for now. Holding my hands out, I created a small black magic orb in one hand and a white one in the other.

Now I was the psycho. I was the one who'd lost my shit.

When Lucy lunged for me, I slammed my hands together on either side of his face, crashing the black and white magic into his head. A shrill scream ripped from his throat as thunder cracked overhead. His demons turned their focus away from the gate, and on to me in that moment.

I was trying to figure out how the hell I was going to survive this situation if they all jumped me, when I noticed Raksha, very quietly, crouched behind one of the giant trees. She'd created a portal to Fallen Academy, and Lincoln and Michael had just walked through it.

My backup had arrived.

Thank God.

And Raksha was still on my side. I never should have doubted her.

## FIFTEEN



**A**s soon as Raksha created the portal, she spun away from it, going to the far side of the meadow where the demons were stationing themselves. I hoped I was the only one who saw what she'd done. She'd saved my life.

Lincoln, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, Gabriel, and a sea of Fallen Army were flooding through the portal now. They all looked confused at first, but then they seemed to quickly recognize what was going on and started to fight Lucifer's army.

My two magic balls to either side of Lucy's head had done something to him. By the way he was shrieking, I hoped it had liquefied whatever brain he had, but it may have only caused temporary pain and disorientation, because he was looking more alert by the second.

*'Get me to Shea!'* Sera yelled from her place on the ground. She was still covered in that black magic, which seemed to have disabled her power, but at least she could still speak to me. Reaching down, I picked up my blade, and shouted my bestie's name. She was right by Noah and Lincoln's sides, scanning the crowd, looking for me.

When she heard my voice, she spun and I threw Sera into the air, hoping like hell she'd know what to do with her, or at least keep her safe while I could deal with Lucy. If Sera was the key to this gate, and only I could open it, then we shouldn't be together anyway.

Lincoln's head snapped in my direction when he heard my voice, and then his gaze fell onto Lucifer, who was now at my feet, clutching his head. I'd never seen so much rage in my husband. His entire face went red as he started running my way, his blue glowing sword outstretched.

Whatever my attack had done to Lucifer wore off at that moment. The Devil popped up onto his feet, wings outstretched, and grabbed me by the upper arms. My attention had been on Lincoln, to make sure he didn't get killed, and now I was being pulled upward into the air. My wings flapped like crazy to pull against Lucy, but he was too strong, his wings pumped as we went higher and higher.

I built up that mixed silvery gray magic between my palms, as he kept my arms in a viselike grip, face bearing down on me.

"I hate you!" I screamed over the wind, directly into his face. "I've *always* hated you. You're a foul monster, and I can't wait until you're dead."

The magic burst from my hands with a sharp snapping noise, and wrapped it around his lower legs, binding them together. He growled in frustration, releasing one of my arms, and grabbing my wing in a grip so tight, I yelped in surprise.

"And I've seen nothing but wasted potential in you, Brielle."

A tightening pinch wrapped around the wing he held. Then he let go of me, and I dropped like a stone in water.

*What the hell?* Looking back over my shoulder, I saw a black inky band on the wing he'd touched. I couldn't fly, and I was plummeting to the ground.

*Shit!*

I flapped my one good wing like crazy, to try and slow my fall, but I was going to hit the ground any moment and break a shit ton of bones no doubt. All my one-wing flapping was doing was throwing off my balance, making my descent more wobbly.

“Brielle!” Lincoln boomed, and then he zoomed into the air before me. I barely had time to register his blur of motion before he reached out, grabbing my arm. The force of my weight falling, and Lincoln’s sudden grip on my arm sent a flare of pain slicing through my shoulder blade, making me certain that it had just popped out of its socket.

A wail of agony ripped from my throat as the stinging sensation crawled up my entire arm. Lincoln’s face contorted in misery as he quickly flew me down to the ground and let me go, so I could cradle my arm to my chest. My entire right arm was on fire, but I was alive with no broken back, so that was a plus.

*Where the hell is Lucy?*

I looked around me, stunned at the realization that I was sitting in the middle of a war zone. One of the archangels had conjured a Celestial orb, which was floating in midair. The Fallen Army soldiers were dipping their blades into it, and slaying Lucifer’s demon horde, all while the other angels beyond the gates of Heaven waited and watched.

My eyes flitted around the space, searching for Shea and Raksha. I spotted my bestie fighting back to back with Noah, and relief crashed through me knowing she was okay.

But when I finally found Raksha, my stomach sank. Lucifer had a knife to her throat, and she was conjuring another portal.

*No.*

I stood upright, still cradling my injured arm, which was slowly losing all feeling. “Lucifer!” I roared, and I could have sworn my voice had amplified with some untold power. “Let. Her. Go!” I stalked toward them as the rage built inside of me.

He was a coward. He was going to escape, and let his people be slaughtered. *Fine.* But he would not take her.

Lucy looked over at me and grinned, holding the blade tighter across Raksha’s throat. I snapped my good hand out, and flicked my silver energy whip to life.

“Let’s kill him!” Lincoln growled beside me, his sword glowing a bright blue.

Maybe this was what it would take, the two of us together. I simply nodded. I was 90 percent sure Lucifer wouldn’t kill Raksha; he clearly needed her to open his portals, or he would have done it himself.

Raksha was trying her best to open the portal, but with Lucifer’s knife so tight on her throat, she couldn’t move much. When she met my gaze, my heart broke for her. There was so much fear and desperation there; it reminded me of my first days down in Hell.

“They’re safe and happy,” I told her, hoping she knew that I meant her wife and child.

At my words, she wept with relief. In that moment, Lucifer pulled the blade from her throat and chucked it at Lincoln. My husband jerked to the side and dodged it, but it was enough of a distraction for Lucy to grab Raksha and start backing her into the open portal with him.

*No!*

With a flick of my wrist, I reached out and wrapped my whip around his left thigh. It coiled and tightened around the Prince of Darkness like a snake, stopping him. Lincoln ran forward, intending to jump into the portal like a crazed maniac no doubt, when Lucifer thrust his hands at him. A shock wave of energy slammed into Lincoln and me so fast and hard, that everything went black as I felt myself falling to the ground.

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WHEN I CAME TO, the first thing I noticed was that everything hurt. My shoulder the most, but *everything* hurt, like I’d been hit by a car.

*‘Have you ever wondered if Michael styles his hair, or if it’s just naturally that... bouncy,’* Sera’s voice came into my mind.

I moaned, peeling open my eyelids to find all four archangels standing over me.

“Lincoln,” I croaked, trying to sit up, but a wave of dizziness slammed into me.

“I’m here,” my husband groaned. I followed the sound of his voice to see that he was laid out next to me, while Shea, Chloe, Luke and Noah hovered over him.

My attention briefly shifted to the battlefield. Once so beautiful, it was now riddled with dead bodies. Some of them our own.

“Is it over?” I asked, trying to sit up again.

Raphael bent on one knee, his eyes watery with unshed tears. “It is, and you... you prevented a catastrophic war. You changed history, Brielle.”

Holy shit. Did I? I drove Lucifer off, and didn’t open the gate. I didn’t let him control me.

I laughed nervously, unsure of what to say.

Reaching out, Raphael pulled me up slowly, so I was standing. As he did, golden light shot from his hand and into my body, chasing the pain away. He was healing me. Against the rules, against his orders. I knew he’d already healed Lincoln and broken the rules but I just wasn’t use to this Raph.

He clicked his tongue. “You ripped the tendons and ligaments in your shoulder. That will take some time to heal.”

I tried to pull my arm back. “You don’t have to.”

His hands clamped down to hold me still. “I want to. I have free will too, and I will use it to the fullest from now on.”

Michael nodded. “We all will. We’re with you, Brielle. Until the end.”

*‘I love him,’* Sera sighed.

I tried not to laugh at my infinity weapon’s comment, since no one else could hear her. What the archangels said was so overwhelming, I felt emotional and had to rein it in to keep from crying.

When Shea broke through the archangels’ barrier to deposit Sera at my feet, Raphael released me so I could go to

her. I felt much better, still sore, but it was manageable. On the other hand, my weapon was still covered in the sickly dark magic.

“I’m going to need Mr. Claymore’s help. Sorry,” Shea confessed.

Waving her off, I shrugged. “It’s fine. Thanks for keeping her safe.” I realized then that once Lucifer had seen I wasn’t going to help him, he’d put that blanket of dark magic around Sera to make her powerless, so I couldn’t use her against him.

A loud gong sounded from behind us, and we all spun around surprised. The gates were opening. One of the angels—Lucifer had called him Metatron, I believed—walked toward us. He was the extremely tall one, with dark hair and green eyes, and in his hands was a giant wooden treasure chest with a golden latch.

“Metatron,” Michael said his name with what seemed to be a hint of admiration in his voice.

The man set the trunk down, and embraced Michael tightly. “I’ve missed you, Brother. We all have.” He pointed to the gathering of angels standing just inside of the open gate.

“Hello, old friend,” Raphael greeted him. They all took turns embracing, including Gabriel and Uriel.

I stood there, dumbfounded that I was casually chilling with archangels after just saving Heaven from going to war. How was this my life?

“What’s that?” Michael asked.

Metatron gestured to the wooden box resting at his feet. “This is a gift for your wife, from the Creator.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “For Grace?”

Metatron nodded. “In it she will find the technology needed to arm the humans with equal power to fight Lucifer’s demons.”

*Equal power.*



A low whistle slipped through Raphael's lips . "Normally, the Creator doesn't like to get involved like this. He would wait for the humans to create the technology themselves."

Metatron smiled, and shrugged. "You know the Creator is especially fond of the mortals."

Raphael nodded. "As are we."

'*This is crazy,*' I told Sera. How was I just listening in on this conversation?

'*Play it cool,*' she admonished.

The angel's green-eyed gaze fell on me. "Brielle, it's an honor to meet you in person." He bowed his head.

In person? Had we met before or something?

I wasn't sure what protocol was or why he was bowing to me, so I just bowed back.

Metatron smiled. "To thank you for your service today, the Creator has a gift for you as well, but first, I've been instructed to give you all these."

Pulling some disc-shaped metal pieces from his pocket, he began handing them out to each archangel, before peering over the group to where Lincoln and my friends stood. "You too." He beckoned them forward.

Lincoln, Noah, Shea, Chloe and Luke seemed stunned, but they came forward anyway. He handed a disc to Lincoln and Noah, but not the others.

"You won't need them," he told the rest of my friends. "These discs allow the wearer to withstand the dark energies of the underworld, so long as it's touching their skin."

Lincoln's mouth dropped open in shock. "This would've been nice to have last year, when Brielle was taken."

Metatron nodded. "Yes, it would have, but it wasn't permitted at that time. Brielle learned a valuable lesson in her time with Lucifer, one that will aid her in fulfilling her destiny."

Everyone eyed their disc cautiously, including the archangels, before ultimately placing it in their pockets.

“Wait.” I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “So, now we could all... go down to Hell together?”

If I could bring the archangels and Lincoln down there, I could wipe out Lucy, and save Raksha!

Metatron nodded. “You can. What you do with them it’s your choice.”

*Free will.*

I peered at his hands. “You said you have something for me?”

He nodded, gesturing toward the gate. When my gaze followed his, the angels standing there parted, revealing Bernie. Right beside him was... my father.

A cry lodged in my throat as I broke into a run, holding my injured arm to my chest. He was a golden spectral ghost, younger and healthier-looking than I remembered him, but it was my dad 100 percent.

“Dad!” I sobbed, running full blast at the gate.

With a grin, he slowly stepped out of the gated entrance, and I sputtered to a stop a second before crashing into him. As his figure moved out of Heaven and into the in-between, his golden form solidified into a physical-looking body. It was like he was alive again.

“Hey, peanut.” He reached out and cupped my face. The second his warm skin touched mine, I burst into tears. This was all I’d ever wanted—one more moment with him, one more chance to hug him.

As if he read my mind, he opened his arms and pulled me into a hug.

I was hugging my dad. How was this happening?

I couldn’t turn off the tears; they just kept coming, pouring down my face.

“I’ve missed you. Like crazy. Mikey is a wolf shifter, and Mom’s living in Angel City. *So much has happened,*” I told him through my tears.

He smiled, pulling away to meet my gaze. It was crazy to see him so young and happy, like in old pictures. It felt like I was dreaming.

“I know sweetie. I watch over you guys all the time.” His voice... God, I’d forgotten what he sounded like. It was the best thing in the world to hear it again.

“I got married,” I croaked, showing him my ring with a shaky hand.

He nodded. “I know. To a good man, like I always knew you would.”

My throat tightened with emotion, and I wondered if I would ever stop crying. “I love you, Dad. Are you... happy here?”

It seemed like a ridiculous question. This was Heaven, after all. Obviously, people were happy here... right?

He stepped closer and a warmth washed over me; I could feel his love enveloping me, and it was unconditional, without reservation. Fresh tears streamed down my cheeks, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop them. I didn’t think I could ever stop them again.

“I’m happy, yes. I’ll be even happier when we’re all together once more, but I’m busy with my own spiritual work right now. I do check in on you all frequently though.”

Whoa. Spiritual work? There went my idea that Heaven was a permanent vacation of swimming with dolphins, and endless margaritas.

“Brielle, I must close the gate now,” Metatron’s voice boomed behind me, and I nodded in understanding. I didn’t want to say goodbye to my dad, but I was grateful for the small gift we’d been given.

“Tell your mother I’m happy for her, that all I ever want is for her to be happy,” he instructed me.

*Raphael.* I'd totally forgotten about my mom and Raph dating, but now that I was standing before my father, it came to the forefront of my mind. He knew she'd moved on, and he was okay with it. It just made me cry harder.

"I love you, Dad." My throat tightened.

He smiled at me. God, it was crazy to see him looking so healthy and happy.

"I love you too, and I'm so proud of you."

I reached out and wrapped my good arm, around him one more time. As I squeezed, I noticed his body was becoming squishier. He was losing his form, going spectral again.

"Brielle. We need to get the injured back," Lincoln called softly from behind me. "Hello, sir." Lincoln nodded to my father as I pulled away.

My dad beamed. "Hello, son."

More sobs racked my body at their exchange, and my legs went weak. What was worse than losing a parent? Having to say goodbye to them twice. I didn't think I could do it again.

"Love you, baby girl," my dad whispered, and my legs finally gave out as grief rolled through me.

Lincoln scooped me into his arms as my father backed away, until he was in Heaven once more. Metatron waved, closing the gate, and locking my father and Bernie behind it.

A huge hole opened inside my chest, but all I could do was wave. I'd run out of words, of energy, of everything.

## SIXTEEN



Saying Lucy was pissed since I'd botched his heavenly war was an understatement. Hell had reigned on Earth, and it felt like it was partially my fault. Angel City was constantly being infiltrated by demons, the skies were dark and stormy, and it rained as though we were in Demon City instead. Lucifer was making his anger known.

"Why can't you just do it for me?" I shouted for the hundredth time at Raphael and Mr. Claymore. Sera lay on Raphael's desk, covered in the black crap Lucifer had put on her a week ago, when we'd warred in Heaven.

*'Because he's an ass,'* Sera answered.

"Because this is a school, and we're here to teach. I want you to learn to dismantle the Devil's darkest spells by yourself." Mr. Claymore crossed his arms. I'd brought the matter to Raphael, hoping he'd help me and have my back, but he'd barely said five words since we got here.

"I'm not a Mage," I answered through gritted teeth.

Claymore nodded. "No. You're greater than that."

I sighed. "Raph, help me out here." I wanted to storm into Hell with the Fallen Army and take out Lucifer, but I couldn't do that until my weapon was free.

Raphael shared a look across his office with Grace. Emberly's mom had grown her human, demon hunter school fivefold since she'd received the technology gifted to her by the Creator. I'd barely had time to look at it all, but it was glowy, lethal, and badass.

“I agree with Mr. Claymore,” Raphael finally concluded.

Reaching over, I picked Sera up by her hilt and huffed. “Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

“Girl power! You got this.” Grace reached out to fist-bump me on my way out, and I couldn’t help but chuckle and fist-bump her back.

If it took every waking minute of the next week for me to learn to dismantle this energy, I would. Screw classes—this was my next assignment.

*‘It feels awful, like I’m touching slimy wet food in the sink,’* Sera griped.

*‘How do you know what wet food feels like?’*

*‘I just do.’*

Weird. I’d never understand how Sera sensed all this stuff.

I burst out of the office and nearly collided with Michael. He looked stressed, with black soot smeared over his face, and a bleeding gash above his eye.

Steadying myself against the wall, I took him in. “Oh, Michael. Are you okay?”

He looked down at Sera, and the blackness that covered her. “May I walk with you?”

*‘Yes,’* Sera answered seductively.

I ignored my infinity weapon, focusing on the archangel. “Sure.”

As we stepped away from the office, Michael stopped and faced me. “I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

Nerves clawed at my gut as I ceased walking, and faced the archangel. “Okay. What is it?”

He paused for a moment, just looking at me. “We’re all so proud of what you’ve accomplished in your time at the academy,” he finally answered.

*Oh God.*

“What’s wrong? Am I getting kicked out?”

Michael's head jerked back. "No, no. I just... Raphael would never tell you, but I think you can handle it."

*Is my mom dying? My brother? What the hell's going on?*  
"Tell me," I pressed.

A heavy sigh left him. "Tonight, the archangels and I are making an evacuation plan. We simply can't sustain this level of security night after night."

"Oh." Suddenly, I knew what he meant. "Unless I can take Lucifer out."

Michael nodded. "He's creating hundreds of demons a day. If you could fulfill the prophecy... we'd certainly have better odds."

Angel City and all of its inhabitants were counting on me. Some chick with powers she didn't fully understand. Still, I had to believe I had the power to do this. I trusted Raphael, and he believed in me. All the archangels believe in me.

Reaching out, I squeezed Michael's shoulder. "I won't let you down. Give me a week."

He grinned. "You got it."

After he turned to head back to the office, I put the conversation out of my head, and strode across campus to meet up with Mikey. I hadn't seen much of my little brother since he came to Fallen Academy, considering I was either stuck in Hell or he was off with his 'pack.' We'd all just come to accept that his life would be different from now on, and counted our blessings when he was on campus.

I'd told him, and my mother, about what my dad said when I saw him in Heaven, and it brought a sense of peace over our family. My mother had burst into tears when I'd told her my dad totally approved of her dating, and just wanted her to be happy. Now, Mikey and I were having a brother-sister picnic lunch, something I'd just started with him, and hoped to continue monthly. I never wanted to get too busy for family.

Looking up, I saw my brother sitting on a little blanket on the school field, with two sub sandwiches wrapped and uneaten. His hulking form was bigger each time I saw him,

and it felt weird to call him my little brother considering how big he was physically.

“Are you sure one sandwich is enough for you? Maybe get a small cow to go with it?” I teased.

He turned, grinning. “Yeah, I ate before I came.”

Chuckling, I lay Sera in the grass before giving him a hug.

He glanced down at my blade, and the dark magic that crawled along it. “No luck?”

A sigh escaped me as I took a seat on the blanket, grabbing one of the sandwiches. “They said no. Trying to teach me some lesson or something.” He snickered and I punched his arm. “You like when I’m mad!” I accused playfully.

Taking a big bite of his sub, he nodded. “I really do.”

“How’s the pack?” We didn’t talk about his second life very much, but I wanted him to know I was there for him no matter what.

He shrugged. “Mostly good.”

A frown pulled at my lips. “Mostly?”

“When I’m a wolf, I want to be a human, and when I’m human... I feel like an imposter, like I was born to be a wolf.”

My stomach sank. It was hard to watch loved ones go through their own problems. I wanted to fix everything for him, but I couldn’t, and it pained me.

“I’m sorry you have to deal with that.” I took another bite, thinking of what else I could say.

He shrugged. “Better than being tasked with killing the Devil.”

I scoffed. “I wasn’t tasked with it.”

“Prophesized. Whatever.” He gave me a long side look, one that was less jovial and more solemn. “But seriously, how are you going to do that?”

I was regretting this lunch already. “I don’t know... but I have to.”



“Why? Why can’t you just fight the demons he creates like everyone else? If the archangels can’t kill him, then maybe you can’t either.”

That was a very real fear I had as well, but I couldn’t let it get to me. I had to believe in what I’d been hearing for almost four years now, that I did have what it took to bring him down, that I was his only equal for some weird reason.

“The war will only grow, Mikey. It’ll only get worse unless I end him. Angel City will fall, and Mom and everyone else we love will die. Life as we know it will cease to exist.”

We sat there for a long moment, until finally Mikey reached out and squeezed my hand. “Well, if you’re planning some crazy suicide mission, then I want to be by your side.”

No way. I could never let my mother lose both of us.

“Mikey, I really appreciate that, and it’s so sweet that you want to help me, but I could never let you do that.”

Mikey growled animalistically—in warning. “Have you seen me in battle? I can rip a demon’s head off in seconds. The Fallen Army has already promoted me to lieutenant.”

Lincoln had mentioned that, and he’d told me that my brother was proving instrumental in the raids in the war zones but... it was Mikey.

“I’ll think about it,” was all I could offer.

There was no way I would allow it. Not my baby brother.

He scoffed and was probably about to retort when I heard Lincoln call my name. Maybe it was the fact that Lincoln was supposed to be on duty, or maybe it was the high-pitched panic in his voice, but even before I turned to face him, my stomach was in knots.

Getting up quickly, I rushed over to him. He was in his Fallen Army uniform, black soot and blood covering his skin.

“What happened?”

If Shea or anyone I cared about was hurt, I would lose it. We’d made it this far....

“We need all hands on deck. The demons are executing all humans who live in Demon City and won’t sign a slave contract.”

Bile rose in my throat.

“What!” The world spun on its axis for a second as I processed his words.

“I made the mistake of leaving you behind before, and I won’t do that again. This could be another ploy to lure the army away from the school.”

I nodded. “We should leave a good number behind on campus in case it’s exactly that.”

“We’ll definitely help you,” Mikey told Lincoln. His voice was gruff, and I looked over to see patches of fur crawling up my brother’s arms. The wolf was close.

I’d never gone out fighting with my little bro. Hell, I hadn’t been out on army duty since I got back. I’d been sheltered and kept safe here while everyone else did the fighting for me.

That time was over.

Scooping Sera up, I tucked her into her leather sheath at my thigh, and we all started to jog toward the parking lot. Word must have spread fast, because both students and faculty were running around in panic. Even on a Saturday, when the campus was normally dead, it was crawling with people.

“Attention, Fallen Academy.” Raphael’s voice came over the loudspeaker, which played out into every classroom and hallway, and even projected out into the quad. “All army personnel, please report to the parking lot. We have a situation in Demon City that cannot be ignored.”

With a high-pitched whine, the transmission went dead.

Oh God. Lucifer had finally lost it. He was upping his game, and I wouldn’t stand for it.

“Lincoln!” Catia’s voice called out, and we followed the sound to a big Fallen Academy bus. She, Noah and Shea were waiting right in front of the open doors. Archangel Michael

was perched on the roof, wings spread out as he spoke to Emberly and Grace, who stood below him.

As we passed them to make our way to the front of the bus, I overheard Michael asking Emberly, “How’s your pain today?”

“I’m fine!” she growled. “Let me kill some demon scum, Dad. You can’t baby me anymore. I’m sixteen now!”

He groaned, while Grace promised she would stay with their daughter on the mission. I didn’t know all the details of the technology Metatron had given her, but Grace was sporting a new sword that had some kind of button on it to activate a laser light, which could cut through flesh and bone. She was probably stronger and more capable than her husband with that thing.

Passing their family, we made it onto the bus, and huddled into the first few seats, joining Catia, who looked shaken.

“How bad is it?” Lincoln asked her. Then, his gaze shifted to me. “She was on duty at the border and witnessed it firsthand.”

Catia’s eyes were red rimmed, and she looked sweaty. “It’s... it’s genocide. The demons are asking humans to take the mark and become a slave. If they refuse, they’re openly killing them... young teenagers included.”

My stomach rolled with nausea, which quickly turned to rage. Those freaking bastards!

“Why now, after all this time?” I growled.

Demon City was mostly filled with demons and their slaves, but a good 30 percent of the population were humans who were either married to a demon slave, or were too poor to live in Angel City.

Catia shook her head. “I overheard a Brimstone demon saying it was some new initiative. Only the loyal could remain.”

*Lucifer.*

I'd never felt so much rage for a single person in all my life, until that very moment. It was a combination of every single thing Lucy had done to bring evil to my life or the world, and this was the last straw. I simply couldn't tolerate the mass killing of innocents. Hell, I couldn't tolerate the killing of a *single* innocent. This was going to end once and for all.

"Let's go. Every second we sit here another innocent dies!" I shouted.

Lincoln nodded, getting into the driver seat as Catia called out the door for any available personnel to jump on the bus. It would take Raphael at least twenty minutes to assemble the army and sort out who was staying and who should go. In that time, too many would be dead. This bus was leaving *now*.

I spotted Darren and Blake across campus near the gates. It looked like they were in charge of protecting the academy during this latest issue; it could be another trap to lure us away, and then they'd probably burn this place to the ground.

Grace, Emberly, and a handful of others jumped on, including Mikey, Tiffany and Luke, and we made our way to Demon City.

"Weapons and armor are under the seats. Suit up," Lincoln called out over the PA.

We were going to war.

## SEVENTEEN



**W**e pulled the bus up to the border gate, which had been fully closed.

“Open her up!” Lincoln called out to a guard, who was taking cover in a cement tower.

The man looked hesitant for a moment. “Sir, it’s a full-on riot over there. My orders were to shut down the border,” he shouted through the fence.

A thump sounded on the roof.

“Open the gates!” Michael thundered, and the guard looked like he was going to piss himself.

“Yes, sir,” the guard mumbled to the archangel, and with a shaky nod he pushed a button, making the solid steel begin to part.

I was wearing a bulletproof vest over a thin chain mail top. Even though modern weapons like guns were often used when fighting demons, they mostly preferred swords and knives, so you had to be careful. A chain mail top was a lifesaver when it came to hand-to-hand combat.

Mikey had already disrobed in the back, shifting into his wolf form, and Luke had done the same. It was completely unnerving to have a massive wolf and bear just chilling behind you, watching you—even if they were family.

“What’s the plan, Linc?” Tiffany asked my husband.

I wanted to punch her for calling him by a nickname instead of ‘Captain Grey’, or even ‘Lincoln,’ but now was not

the time. Besides, Michael and Chloe had taught me that coming to Earth was all about love, and I was determined to love Tiffany. A little. Sort of. Never mind.

*'Screw her, she wants your man,'* Sera snarked, and I just grinned. Although I couldn't fight with her, it was amazing to just have her around again.

Ignoring her, Lincoln pulled the bus into the city, and my eyes darted around for any sign of the chaos. More people than normal were out on the streets, most of them demon bound; and I recognized the red slave mark tattoo on their foreheads. They looked hurried, walking fast to wherever they were going.

"The bus is bulletproof and built like a tank," Lincoln assured us. "We'll get as many innocents on here as we can, and then ferry them back to Angel City."

Okay, so it was a loose plan with a lot of crap that could go wrong. Awesome.

Where were the people going? It looked like the demon bound were all heading in a certain direction. When they'd look up and notice the academy bus—and probably Michael riding on the roof, considering that was a bit conspicuous—they just put their heads back down and walked faster.

Walking over to the side of the bus, I pulled the window down a few inches.

"Where are you guys going? We're trying to help the innocent!" I called out to a nearby group.

Everyone kept their heads down except one girl—she looked barely eighteen, and wore the slave mark tattoo. Tears shone in her eyes when she stared up at me. "Wilson Park. They have our families."

Bastards.

Shea relayed directions to Lincoln as to where to find the park, while I grabbed another gun, adding it to my arsenal. I had a really bad feeling about this. We were a good five- to ten-minute drive to Wilson Park, and it was all side streets. Shea and I used to play there a bunch as kids since it had a

skate park, which made it the regular teen hangout. It was especially popular for Tainted Academy kids.

Walking toward the front of the bus, I knelt down next to Lincoln. “I don’t like driving into something we have no idea about,” I whispered. “I’m going to get on the roof, and fly over the park with Michael to scout it out.”

Lincoln’s neck veins twitched. “That’s a good idea, but have Noah go. I want you with me the entire time.”

Reaching out, I clasped his arm. I could see that being in Demon City was already causing him pain; everything about his features looked strained. “Noah and Michael don’t know this city. I can get us there and back in no time. I’ll be with an archangel. Trust me.”

He was silent a moment. “Okay, but just a flyby. Then come right back.”

With a nod, I kissed him on the cheek, then quickly relayed the plan to the others.

Emberly crossed her arms, sulking at the fact that she couldn’t fly with us. “Stupid useless wings,” she muttered.

As I was climbing through the open roof hatch—with Shea’s hand on my ass, shoving me through it—I heard Lincoln’s phone beep.

“Help is incoming,” he announced. “Raph is bringing the full army, leaving Grace’s new team back to protect the academy.”

My eyes flicked to Grace, who tipped her chin up in pride as I pulled myself onto the roof. Michael gave me a hand, helping me get on top .

“What’s up?” he asked, the wind whipping past us as Lincoln turned, and we reached out to steady each other.

“I want to do a flyby of the park. I know where it is. Let’s see what we’re driving into,” I explained, knowing he’d heard the slave girl’s response to me.

“Good idea,” was all he said, and then kicked off the roof, shooting skyward.

When I popped out my wings and kicked off to take flight, a dull ache spread down my back. My shoulder had already healed, but it was still tender. I chose to ignore it.

Michael let me take the lead, and instead of having to drive down straight streets, we were able to fly diagonally toward Wilson Park. It was weird to be this high up, and see the demon bound slaves all walking toward the same place. There must have been hundreds. I flew over the buildings of my old neighborhood, trying not to pity those still living here. Yes, it was Demon City, controlled by the ruthless baddies, but there were also a lot of good people here. People who needed loans, or healings, or whatever else they sold for their contracts. It didn't seem fair that they should have a lifetime of service for one mistake.

As soon as the park came into view, horror ripped through me and I gasped. Huddled together in a large fenced-off area, were what looked like a bunch of free souls, humans. Standing atop the edge of the skate park, was an Abrus demon with a gun to a human's head.

Slave bound families stood all around the edge of the park, and behind them were *hundreds* of demons. I couldn't hear anything from my vantage point, but from the small pile of bodies resting at the bottom of the skatepark pit, I knew what was happening. The huge half pipe where skaters would drop down into, was now filling with corpses.

And they were about to add another.

The youngish girl under the Abrus' gun was shaking her head vigorously, while her family members cried out for her to agree. He was asking her to sign a contract, I knew it.

I couldn't go back to the bus. I couldn't turn my back and let this girl die. It just wasn't within me. I'd rather die, than know I allowed a life to be taken while I played it safe.

"You take the Abrus demon. I'll get the girl to safety," I told Michael.

The Archangel of Protection grinned. "You read my mind." And then we dropped like birds going after their prey.



Tucking my wings to my back, I allowed my body weight to increase my speed, only opening them at the last minute. My shadow was the only thing that alerted the Abrus demon. Startled, he looked up as I loomed over him, but it was too late. I crashed into them both, hooking my arms under the girl's armpits, but my chest slammed into her face so hard and fast that I'd probably broken her nose. Still, she went with it. The second she saw me, and felt my hands go around her, she clung to me for dear life.

Demon City didn't have Celestials, so there was no need to explain who I was. Even with my wings being half black, she'd know I was with the Fallen Army and here to help. Her head pressed against my chest, her legs wrapped around mine as I flew her to where I knew Shea would lead the bus—down Rose Drive.

The moment I saw the bus with Noah on the roof, keeping a lookout for me, relief surged through my chest. When Noah's eyes found me coming at him with a girl wrapped around my waist, his eyebrows shot up, but to his credit, he quickly recovered and opened his arms to catch her.

"I'm going to let you down to my friend. Unhook your legs," I yelled over the wind to her. She did as I asked without complaint, and when Noah's hands came around her thighs, she let go of me.

After releasing her, I landed on the roof, wincing when I noticed the blood on her face. I had indeed broken her nose. "I'm so sorry. I've never grabbed someone in mid-flight like that."

The girl looked a little older now that I saw her up close—maybe late twenties—and seemed to be in shock. Just then, she reached up to touch her nose. "It's fine. You saved my life. Thank you."

Guiding her by the shoulders, Noah lowered her into the bus, while my mind attempted to process what I'd just seen and done.

"Brielle!" Lincoln yelled.

“I’m fine!” I shouted back, knowing he was probably having a mini heart attack, not knowing what was going on up here.

The bus took a turn toward the park, and Noah and I held on to each other to steady ourselves, as I quickly relayed what was happening there.

“So, they know we’re coming?” he asked.

I’d just flown in and taken a chick mid-air, and Michael had nabbed an Abrus demon. “Yeah, they know.”

Noah nodded, sticking his head into the roof hatch, and relaying orders to the team.

As the park came into view, my stomach dropped. There was mass chaos. Demon bound ran frantically, while the humans in the caged-off area could only huddle together, trying to shield themselves. The demons were forming a barricade around the fence, and each one was armed to the teeth, with guns and knives. The small sliver of hope in the situation, was that they’d stopped the killing now that we’d arrived.

The handful of fighters we’d brought on this first bus wasn’t going to stand a chance against the hundreds of demons I saw amassing at the scene.

“Get in the bus!” Lincoln shouted as he slammed on the brakes. The demons had spotted us and were raising their weapons.

Noah and I sucked in our wings and leapt into the bus, jumping through the hatch just in time to avoid the bullets snapping at the side of the vehicle.

“Raphael and the backup team better get here quick. We can’t get out of the bus. It would be a suicide mission, and I don’t know how long I can keep them distracted,” Lincoln stated.

Stepping up to the front of the bus, Shea grinned. “I have an idea.”

Oh God, I'd seen that look before. It was the same one she got when she suggested we rob a Cloud Nine donut store, for my dad's funeral expenses.

Noah must have recognized it too, because he looked terrified as well.

"I'm all ears." Lincoln had stopped the bus, and now the demons were stalking toward us. I was hoping the armored vehicle lived up to the hype, because we were about to find out just how much destruction it could take.

If the fate of our lives hinged on one of Shea's crazy ideas... we were screwed.

## EIGHTEEN



“**W**hat? No way! Too much could go wrong,” Lincoln told my bestie as the demons advanced on our bulletproof bus.

“I’m a master at portals. I *got* this,” she reassured him.

Lincoln gave her a quick ‘I call bullshit’ look. “We haven’t tried out the technology Metatron left us, and we don’t have one for Emberly.”

Shea wanted to open a huge portal to Hell and have us drive through it with the demons following us inside, then close it before opening a new one for us to get out, trapping the demons there. It was a crazy bananas plan.

“Oh, I’m fine. I mean, it hurts to be in Hell, but it won’t kill me,” Emberly offered.

Grace’s head reeled back at her daughter. “And *how* exactly do you know that?”

Emberly’s cheeks burned. “Mel and I tried it once. Don’t worry, I started by putting my foot in. I’m not stupid.”

Grace buried her head in her hands, clearly at a loss for words with her wild teen. I guess the fact that Emberly was half human allowed her to enter Hell unharmed.

“Let’s do it,” Tiffany, of all freaking people, chimed in from her place at the back of the bus. “I think it’ll work, and the more demons we trap inside, the fewer casualties the Fallen Army will endure once they arrive to back us up. It’ll

also serve as a distraction until help arrives so no more free souls are injured.”

We all looked at her in shock for agreeing with Shea. The only thing breaking our silence was a thump on the roof.

*Michael?*

The demons were shooting at the bus now, en masse, and I was worried about the tires blowing. We needed to do something quick, and getting out of the bus to fight wasn't smart right now.

“All right, start the portal while I talk to Michael about it,” Lincoln told Shea, then jumped up from the driver's seat with Noah quickly replacing him.

My mind whirled as I took a deep breath. Maybe I could erect my shield to cover the entire bus, protect the tires and windows from further damage while we did this portal thing...

My plasma-like wall began to rise up off my body, and I pushed it outward, covering Shea and then Noah.

“Umm... what the hell is that?” Tiffany's shrill voice came from behind me.

Ignoring her, I focused on my breathing.

“Oh, Emberly told me about this. I'm excited to experience it.” Grace walked headfirst into my shield fearlessly, as I thinned it around her body to make room for her.

“Tickles, huh?” Emberly commented, stepping inside as well.

“Don't touch me with that thing!” Tiffany scrambled toward the back of the bus, retreating from my advancing shield.

I rolled my eyes, pushing the plasma film out even farther. Lincoln stood on one of the seats, his head popped out of the roof while talking to Michael, as I covered him as well.

Tiffany screamed in fear as my shield came for her, just as a fresh round of bullets hit the side of the bus.

“Oh, shut up already!” Shea growled, trying to keep her concentration on opening a giant bus-sized portal to Hell. The film finally engulfed a freaked-out Tiffany, and moved on to Mikey, Luke, and the others, who didn’t seem to mind as my protection wall passed over them.

Once I was convinced that I’d covered the entire bus, I looked out the front window. A slight panic rippled through me at the sight of the desolate wasteland of the underworld. My time in Hell had left its mark on me, and going back there was always my least favorite thing to do.

“All right, listen up.” Lincoln jumped down from his perch. “Brielle, good job on the shield. Try to keep it going—Michael says he’ll help. Noah, Michael and I are going to attach the discs now, and we’ll go ahead with Shea’s plan. Michael says Metatron would never give us something unless it worked 100 percent.”

That was only slightly comforting, because if it didn’t work, then my husband, his best friend, and Michael, were all going to die instantly.

As he and Noah attached the discs to their forearms with leather wristbands, I focused on keeping my shield strong. At least a hundred demons had reached our bus now, and were shaking it, shooting at it or trying to slash the tires. At least we’d distracted them from killing the humans, and that’s what mattered.

Noah revved the engine as Shea pulled the portal wider.

“Can I help?” Catia stepped up next to her.

My bestie looked at the Light Mage and nodded, directing her on how to utilize her energy to assist in keeping the portal open.

“What if they just come right back out?” Noah asked his fiancée.

“Shhh, I got this.” Shea’s forehead was slick with sweat, hands out before her as she chewed her lip in concentration. Catia looked strained now as well, and I decided that being a Mage was probably one of the harder magical gifts.

I was staring through the portal into Hell when I saw another portal opening on the other side. It looked like it led back to this world.

“Shea, are you doing two portals at once?” I asked, completely dumbfounded.

She didn’t answer, all of her concentration on the task at hand. Even Catia, standing next to her, looked completely focused.

“Go. Fast. *Now*,” Shea ordered calmly, and Noah gunned the bus so hard that I flew backward into Lincoln’s outstretched arms.

Mikey and Luke grunted as we mowed down a few demons, and we shot right into Hell. Lincoln’s body tensed against me, when we sped through the portal and into the Devil’s homeland. Catia and Shea held onto the railing at the front, while they kept throwing their magic at the portal.

*Please God, keep them safe*, I sent up to the man upstairs, just in case.

The bus was fully in Hell now, and the demons were running in after us, just as planned.

“Are you okay?” I looked over at Lincoln, whose brows were pinched together.

“Yeah. It’s... tolerable.” He seemed in awe.

Relief poured through me, but it was short-lived.

“Okay, stop!” Shea instructed Noah, and the bus came to grinding halt. We were in Hell, in the middle of nowhere. Red misty fog rolled across the dirt ground, and there were a few mountains off in the distance, but that was all.

I peered behind me to see the demons had followed us in here. A good-sized crowd was still waiting at the portal opening on Earth, but we’d lured about half, which could be the game changer we needed.

Shea took a deep breath and clapped her hands together. In that moment, the portal behind us closed, trapping the demons inside with us.

“*Sigillum*,” Shea whispered, causing green light to flare inside of the bus, then looked at Noah. “Go!” she roared.

Noah didn’t question her as he gunned it, rolling our huge bus across the hellish desert toward the second portal she had opened, which looked like it led to the other side of the park on Earth. The demons were running and flying after us, but we were faster. Bullets and magic spells crashed against the bus, yet, I held my shield strong.

“Faster!” Shea screamed, and Noah pressed the pedal down to the floor.

As the front of the bus went through the portal to Earth, Shea and Catia started to shrink it around us. “*Sigillum*,” Shea said the second we were fully through, and that green light flared out once more.

Noah slammed on the brakes, crashing halfway onto someone’s front yard, and we all braced ourselves, trying not to be thrown forward.

The rooftop hatch popped open then, and Michael stuck his head in. “Naughty, naughty. That was dark magic.” He looked at Shea, but she just shrugged, which made the archangel grin. “Well done. Let’s load the humans and get out of here.”

“What was the green light stuff?” I asked my bestie, as I reached for my gun.

“After you were taken to Hell, Lucifer made it so we couldn’t create any portals while in Angel City.”

I grinned. “You learned the spell, and locked the demons inside?”

She nodded. “They’ll have to walk quite far to get out.”

*Perfect.*

A low growl from behind us broke up our conversation. My brother’s wolf wanted to pass us, eyes glowing yellow and ready to fight.

“Stay by my side,” Lincoln ordered me, leading us out of the bus while I dissolved my shield. I needed to keep my



strength up for fighting, and boy, was I ready to fight. These bastards would pay for what they'd done to the humans.

The moment I stepped off the bus, I let my wings free and stepped beside Lincoln with my sword drawn. A very enraged-looking Brimstone demon was leading the gang of Hellspawn that descended on our small group.

Michael leapt from the roof and landed before us, holding his blade aloft. Blue sparks glimmered off the sword, so brightly even the advancing demons shied their gaze.

“Surrender, or be met with swift death!” Michael’s voice boomed as if it were amplified.

In response, a fiery ball of magic hurtled through the air, right at the archangel. Michael reached up and sliced the ball in half with his sword, and the war began.

We all charged forward then. Mikey was a mass of muscle and fur, ripping past me to land on the Brimstone demon and tear his throat out. Luke was right behind him, and they worked as a team.

I stayed at Lincoln’s side, as he’d asked me, and we were just cutting down a gang of Snakeroot demons when a bloodcurdling scream drew my attention. Pulling my gaze to the direction of the noise, my stomach dropped. An Abrus demon was inside of the gated-off area with the humans, and he had a knife to one of their throats, asking the others to do something. Probably take a contract.

Without thought, I burst from the ground and tore through the air. I heard Lincoln call my name but ignored it, my gaze solely focused on the demon with the blade. My wings cut through the air as I pumped them faster, sailing over the tall fencing. I dropped into the pit just behind the Abrus demon and took his head in my hands, jerking quickly to the side like Lincoln taught me, I snapped his spine.

The hand holding the knife fell away from the girls’ throat as his lifeless body clattered to the ground with a sickening thud. Did I trust that an Abrus demon with a broken neck wouldn’t somehow come back to life and kill me? Hell no.

Reaching to my hip, I pulled out my sword and cut his head clean off in one swift movement.

Some of the humans gasped and shied away from looking, but most didn't. Most of them stared with a visible hatred brewing just below the surface.

“We've come to take you to Angel City. Free souls are no longer welcome in Demon City,” I told the group, then spun when I noticed white wings in my peripheral vision.

*Lincoln.*

My husband cut through the fence like it was made of butter, making a hole for the humans to climb through it. But instead of running for freedom or weeping in joy at my declaration, the people just stared at me with tears of utter sorrow in their eyes.

A young girl with bright red hair who looked about twelve years old stepped forward. “You expect me to leave my mom in this shit hole? My grandma too?”

She reminded me of myself when I'd first come here, bitter and full of fire. I followed her gaze beyond the fence to a middle-aged woman with red hair, and the red crescent moon tattoo on her forehead.

It wasn't fair. The demons made humans sign lifelong contracts for small and simple things like a job, money, power, a car, food, healing. Things you should be able to work off in a year or so.

It. Wasn't. Fair.

“Your mother and grandmother made their choice when they chose to align with evil. But for you there's still a chance, and I'm sure I speak for your family when I say they would rather you be in Angel City alone, than grow up here as a demon slave, which is now your only alternative.”

Lincoln's words shocked me. He'd always hated this place, these people. He'd always been insensitive to the reasons humans took a slave contract. He couldn't help it; he was ignorant of their ways. But I wasn't. I knew. I'd been in that place myself, but I'd also just had an epiphany.

Why the hell were we playing by the demons' rules?

"Just go, baby." The redheaded mother wept as Lincoln nodded, grabbing the girl's arm. He'd take her kicking and screaming if he had to, I knew he would.

"No. We're not separating families," I growled, and Lincoln looked up at me with confusion-filled eyes.

I spun on the demon bound family members who stood around the cages, weeping silently for their loved ones.

"I'm not interested in playing by the demons' rules anymore!" I roared. "If you're willing to walk away, leave everything and restart your lives in Angel City with no job, no help, then I extend this invitation to anyone who wants to leave this place today. Start fresh."

Lincoln made a strangled sound behind me, but it was too late. The joyful tears and murmurs had begun, and the people were rushing forward to leave the cage, and be united with their loved ones.

When I spun, I saw Michael had joined us, standing just behind Lincoln with an unreadable expression on his face.

"You... you can't do that, Brielle," Lincoln stammered.

I looked up at Michael, the leader of the Fallen Army. "I just did. With my own free will, I chose to extend safe harbor to any human who wants it. If God disagrees, he can strike me dead right here." I put a hand on my hip to emphasize my point.

Michael grinned. "You've been taking cues from Emberly."

Lincoln turned to Michael. "We can't, right? The demons will come for their slaves. They'll... we'll be at war day and night, defending the border from them."

Michael put a hand on Lincoln's shoulder. "We already are, son. And like Brielle said, she's free to use her will to extend whatever invitations she wants." Then he looked at me. "Though I have to say, in all my years of knowing the Creator, I've never once seen him strike anyone dead." He winked.

My cheeks heated. Okay, maybe my taunting God wasn't the most mature thing to do, but it seemed appropriate at the time. "So, they can come?"

Michael threw up his hands. "I don't know where to put them, how to feed and clothe them, but we'll find a way."

Euphoria spread throughout my limbs. I'd done something on a whim, and it felt incredible.

"We're going to need more buses," I told the boys.

"I'll call Raph." Lincoln sounded defeated, like he had no idea what crazy woman he'd married until that moment.

As I stepped over dead demon corpses and helped usher families onto the bus to freedom, I couldn't help but wonder if my dad was looking down on me. I hoped I'd made him proud, because I'd sure as hell just created a lot of work for the Fallen Army.

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WE TOOK twenty busloads of humans, free souls and demon bound, into Angel City, before the demons were able to shut the border down and keep us out. Word of my offer had spread throughout the city, and people had come in droves to take the proposal. Most of Tainted Academy fled as well. We'd had no choice but to drop them off at the four large parks in Angel City, and tell them we'd figure out how to feed and clothe them as soon as we could.

That night, the 10 percent tithe was born. It was Raphael's idea. Each citizen of Angel City, if they were willing and able, would give 10 percent of their clothing, food, money, anything they could spare for our new guests. The results brought us to our knees. I'd never been more proud to be a part of this city than I was right then. Our citizens more than delivered. They brought out old mattresses, tents, clothing, radios, makeup, toys for children, food, money. People donated their time, haircuts, bliss donuts, anything you could think of to help the refugees. I watched from the edges of the park, trying to hold in my sobs at the acts of kindness surrounding me.

One man who owned an old upholstery factory on the edge of town, donated his entire building; he said it had been in his family for over a century, and that was the way he wanted it to be remembered. It was five floors tall, and had enough room to fit everyone—if families were willing to bundle together and share the space.

I'd never had more faith in humanity, and the longevity of our race, than I did in that moment.

“You did a great thing.” Michael rested his hand on my shoulder as I watched the citizens of Angel City drop off more and more donations.

I shook my head. “I didn't do this. This is all them.”

Michael leaned forward. “But they didn't know they were capable of this, until you gave them the opportunity,” he whispered, squeezing my shoulder and walking away.

Shea sauntered over to me, eyes lined with tears. “I'm not crying, you're crying,” she said and I laughed, my own unshed tears clouding my vision.

Her arm came around my shoulders and squeezed. “It's nice to see so much love in the middle of so much hatred.”

I nodded. “It is.”

“So, what now?”

I could no longer avoid the inevitable. Lucifer had upped his game, and so would I.

“Now, I heal Sera, march into Hell, and cut off Lucifer's limbs before burning him alive.”

“Damn, you went there,” Shea observed.

I did. That motherfucker had reached his expiration date.

## NINETEEN



**R**aksha. Raksha. Raksha. Day and night, she was all I could think about in the week following our Demon City raid. I'd told the archangels that I was ready to fulfill my destiny, to go into Hell and kill Lucy, just like the prophecy foretold. Raphael had taken one look at Sera with her black magic-coated blade, and declared I was not.

“Heal the blade, and then I will follow you into Hell myself and fight by your side,” he vowed.

Finally, I had the opportunity to get Raksha back, kill the Devil, and save Earth from his wrath, and it all hinged on this stupid black shit that coated my infinity weapon.

*‘Ohh, what if you throw me in fire?’* Sera offered.

I rolled my eyes. *‘We tried that already, remember? Right after the Celestial ball failed, and I slept for nineteen hours.’*

*‘Oh, yeah.’*

“Did you think of anything?” I asked Shea. We were gathered in the small gymnasium, trying out different things while Lincoln played guitar with Noah in the corner, and pretended he wasn't ecstatic that I couldn't go into Hell after Lucy. If he had it his way, I'd never fix Sera.

Shea shrugged. “This is Devil magic, way beyond my paygrade. Maybe we ask Raphael for a clue?”

“This isn't a game,” I groaned. “He's not going to give three clues.” Besides, I'd already tried. He simply asserted that once I was able to dissolve this magic, I was ready.

Shea just shrugged.

Reaching out, I picked Sera up and stood. “I’m going for a walk to clear my head, until something comes to me. I’ll be back in a bit.”

My bestie nodded.

I was halfway to the door when Lincoln’s guitar stopped. “Where are you going?”

I spun to face him. “For a walk. I need to shake things up, get a different idea.”

“I’ll come with you.” He stood.

“No. I need some alone time. I’ll be fine, and I’ll stay on campus. Promise.” I put my hands out in a gesture for him to back off, and he read it loud and clear. I wasn’t the most pleasant person to be around lately. It killed me that Raksha was stuck in Hell and Lucy was terrorizing humanity while I sat on my ass and couldn’t even dissolve a simple dark spell. Well, obviously it wasn’t simple, but still.

Since the first day I’d come to Fallen Academy, I’d known of the prophecy. I was the black-winged angel of death, who was supposed to deliver a swift end to the Devil. Only, I was just a chick in her twenties with some cool powers I couldn’t exactly handle at all times.

*‘Stop being so down on yourself,’* Sera told me as I walked out onto the field.

*‘Why can’t I figure this out!’* My voice was growly, even inside my own head.

*‘This is a test. Raphael is testing you to see if you’re ready.’*

*‘Yeah, I know that. Clearly, I’m not ready,’* I fired back.

*‘What haven’t we tried?’* Sera kept her cool.

We’d tried a Celestial ball, Shea’s magic, my dark magic, my light magic, my silvery light magic, fire—

An idea popped into my head as I circled the field.

*'What is it?'* Sera sounded intrigued. She must have picked up on my epiphany.

*'Remember when I fought Lucy in Hell, and I threw colored magic for the first time? It seemed to really have an effect on him. Whenever a certain color came out, he knew which archangel it was attached to.'*

I'd thrown Archangel Michael's blue magic right on his face, and nearly suffocated him in front of all of his demons.

*'I wasn't really there, but yes, I remember it through your memories. So, let's try that. Do the colored magic on the blade,'* she encouraged.

I let out a big sigh. *'Problem is, I forgot I could even make colored magic until now. I don't remember how I did it. It was like a life-or-death thing.'*

Halting my pacing, I stared at the crawling black inky magic that ran the length of Sera's blade.

*'The power of the four archangels is inside of you. It's what you are, so there must be a way to bring it out.'*

She was right. It was what and who I was, and maybe that was what made me such a formidable adversary to the Prince of Darkness. Not only did I harness the dark magic he possessed, I also had that of his four rivals.

*'Give it a go,'* she mused.

Colored magic. Couldn't be too hard. I'd done it once before. On accident...

I plopped down right there in the field, not caring if any passing students saw me, and set Sera on the grass.

Holding my left hand out, I did a little test magic, playing with the white and silver, willing it to go blue for Michael, but it was no use. The pearlescent magic danced in my palm like a flame, flickering from silver to white as I passed the blade through it.

*'Look out!'* Sera shrieked, and I jumped, nearly dropping her as I spun on my heels.



There was no one there.

*'What?'* My heart was hammering so loudly in my chest, that it felt like it had leapt into my ears.

*'Just seeing if scaring you helped.'*

*'You're insane, you know that?'* trying to catch my breath, I sat down again.

*'Maybe... it's a sickness.'*

I spun her in my hands. *'What now?'*

*'Maybe the spell he put on my blade, his demons, his existence, is all a sickness that needs to be healed.'*

At her words, the golden butterfly healing light that I'd inherited from Archangel Raphael dripped from my palm.

*A sickness.*

*I wonder...*

I'd never thought about it like that, but if anything was a cancer upon this Earth, it was Lucifer and his creations.

Holding my palm above Sera's blade, I let the golden light pour over the black magic and watched as it disintegrated it like it was... eating it. My heart hammered in my chest, my healing magic ate the black stuff alive. It was so simple. The black inky mass slowly reduced in size, until it had been transmuted to nothingness. All I could do was stare in shock.

*'You did it!'* Sera flared her light in excitement.

I stood then, gripping Sera tightly and relishing in the adrenaline that rushed through my veins.

Lucifer was a sickness, and I was going to cut him out like a tumor.

"You did it." Lincoln's words came from behind me, startling me—though I should have known he would follow me out here and spy on me.

Pivoting, I faced him, and my heart fell when I saw tears in his eyes.

“Lincoln.” I reached out for him, but he crossed his arms over his chest, shrugging me off.

“Nothing stopping you now,” he growled, and began to walk away.

“Lincoln, talk to me.” I wrapped my fingers around his bicep, and tried to pull him toward me, but the bastard was too strong.

He spun on me with a wild look in his eye. “What happened to the girl who thought the prophecy was bullshit? Who said there was no way she was strong enough to kill the Devil himself?”

When Lincoln was hurting, he got angry. We had that in common.

“She grew up. She started to believe in herself.” I reached for him again, and this time he let me grab him. “You used to believe in me, before I believed in myself. What happened to that guy?” I asked my hubby.

He rubbed his face hard before looking at me with agony in his eyes. “I still believe in you, Brielle. I just fell madly in love with you and want a life with you, which is something he can take away.”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to let that happen. And I’m not going to let our future children grow up in a world where he hunts them.”

The moment things changed in him was clear, the agony in his face turned into fire at the mention of Lucy hunting our children.

“I have to stop him. I have to get Raksha out of there.”

Lincoln pulled me into his arms, crushing me against his chest. He was silent for a few minutes. “We’ll do it together,” he finally vowed.

I knew it killed him to say that, to let me go into the wolf’s den willingly. But the fact that he believed in me, believed I was capable of this, meant the world to me.

“Together,” I confirmed.

AFTER A CHAT WITH LINCOLN, I walked across campus and burst into Raphael's office, where he was speaking heatedly with Michael. Unashamedly, I slammed Sera's newly cleaned blade onto his desk, and crossed my arms.

"It's a sickness. Everything Lucy does is a disease," I told the archangel.

A grin tugged at his lips, and a look of pride lit up Michael's face.

"She's ready." Raphael grinned at his brother.

Michael looked fierce, blue light flashing in his eyes. "We leave tomorrow night. I'll assemble the army."

*Holy fuck.* I was going into Hell to try and assassinate the Devil.

*'No big deal,'* Sera assured me.

At least one of us was confident.

THAT NIGHT, no one got any peace. It was like Lucifer knew what we were planning. He sent wave after wave of demons at our walls, trying to break our defenses. He was desperate, but so were we.

The end to this war was near. I just prayed we ended on top.

## TWENTY



**W**hat did you say to your mother when you thought it might be the last time you ever saw her?

I'd convinced Mikey to stay behind with her so she wouldn't stand the chance of losing both of her children, and her new boyfriend in the same night. Now I was standing in the Fallen Academy parking lot, staring into her eyes, and I had no idea what to tell her.

"I love you so much, Brielle. You know that? You're the best thing that ever happened to your father and me."

"Gee, thanks," Mikey croaked over her shoulder.

She waved off my brother. "So were you. But she came first."

I pulled her in for a long hug, Mikey's arms coming around me from behind, as we all held each other.

Nearly every single member of the Fallen Army, who wasn't a Celestial, had been called to go to war in Hell—in my name. They all believed in me, or they at least believed in Michael, who commanded them and believed in me. Grace and her human demon hunters would stay behind with the other Celestials and defend the school, with Blake and Darren being left in charge. Now we were all saying goodbye to our loved ones... just in case.

When I finally pulled back, my mom was crying.

"Stop it, Mom. I'll be back, I swear."

She nodded. "In one piece?"

“Mostly.” I grinned.

We all laughed, trying to keep things lighthearted.

Today could be the day the Fallen War ended. The enormity of that was not lost on me.

Peering over, I noticed Raphael had no one to say goodbye to, while Michael said farewell to his wife and Emberly. Uriel and Gabriel spoke to their students from Paris’ Fallen Academy, and Raphael just stood there, looking lonely.

“Mom, go say goodbye to Raph. Just in case.” I nudged the small of her back as her eyes widened at my request.

They hadn’t made their love affair public yet. I’d seen them holding hands once, but as soon as they noticed me looking, they’d broken away. My guess was that the physical affection was new to Raphael and they were taking things slow, but if there was any time to kiss the man, it was now.

Awkwardly nodding, Mom gave me one last hug before turning, and walking boldly over to Raphael. She looked adorable in her knee-length floral print skirt, colorful ballet flats and a silk top. She’d been taking more care with her appearance lately. After my father died, she’d had only the twelve-hour working days in Demon City to look forward to, while raising three kids. Now she did yoga, took care of herself, and ate healthy. She was much more rested, relaxed and happy.

“Stay strong down there,” she offered shyly, looking up to meet Raphael’s eyes. He dwarfed her with his gigantic height.

Mikey and I pretended to be inspecting a map, that I’d had Shea draw up from the parts of Hell and Lucifer’s castle I remembered.

“Thank you, Kate. I’ll look after Brielle as if she were my own daughter.” His voice was filled with emotion, and while I tried not to eavesdrop, I just couldn’t help myself.

“I knew you would,” she answered breathless, and I looked up to find that he’d wrapped his arms around her, letting them rest at the small of her back. The hem of her floral skirt

fluttered in the breeze as she rested her hands on his broad chest, and I found myself transfixed by the two of them.

*Kiss her, you idiot.*

A grin swept across Raph's face then and he leaned forward, dipping her back like in the movies, and claimed her mouth in a kiss that would make a Hollywood movie star jealous.

"Gross," Mikey whispered.

"Shut up." I swatted him.

One by one, the students noticed what was going on and the catcalls began, which broke up their loved-up display. I'd never seen Raph with redder cheeks in all my life.

"Right. Safe travels," my mom mumbled, then walked away. I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face.

"Brielle." Lincoln's deep voice caught me off guard, and I spun to find him standing there holding a large brown box.

Pulling me off to the side, in front of our trailer, he handed me the box. "A little something."

We'd both barely slept last night, just holding each other while we tried not to think of losing the other.

"Lincoln, you're too good to me." I caressed the old box. Knowing Lincoln, there would be something priceless inside. He was never one for pretty wrapping.

"Impossible."

I popped off the lid and grinned when I saw the shiny silver chest plate armor. "It's amazing." It had braided gold around the edges and leather straps on the sides to hold it in place. Leaning closer, I read a small cursive engraving on the bottom corner.

*Mrs. Atwater-Grey.*

"Lincoln... I love it." My throat tightened with unbridled emotion.

Taking out the chest plate, he motioned for me to raise my arms. “Rose had your measurements, and Michael was able to have this forged with a special metal from upstairs.” He pointed to Heaven.

*Whoa.*

‘*Yes, it feels familiar,*’ Sera confirmed from her place in a scabbard on my hip.

Lincoln pulled the chest plate over my head, and fixed it on top of my thin chain mail top. As he tightened the straps on the side, I could see the nervousness in his gestures, his face.

Grabbing his hand, I stilled him and forced him to look at me.

“Hey. I got this, trust me. I’m going to succeed. There’s a whole prophecy about it and everything.” I winked.

Lincoln sighed. “Yeah, that’s what worries me. The prophecy doesn’t say anything about you making it out alive.”

‘*Damn, that was morbid,*’ Sera commented.

It was. Lincoln was a worst-case scenario kind of person, and that was okay.

“I guess we’ll just have to have faith.” I couldn’t believe I was the one calling for faith, but it was all I had in that moment.

“I guess so.” Leaning down, he claimed my mouth in a kiss that made my chest ache. It was a kiss that said goodbye, but also left hope for another one in the same moment. It was so scary, and I didn’t even want to think about it.

He groaned softly, low in his throat with an urgent need, and I matched his desperation, deepening our embrace. This was the best and saddest kiss of my life.

Finally, we both pulled away breathless. “I’ve got your back in there,” he promised me.

Honestly, I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I just nodded. He had his wristband on with the disc that would allow him to

enter Hell with me. We were doing this together, for better or worse.

“I need to find Shea and ask her something. I’ll meet you at the portal entrance in a few,” I told him.

We both stood there staring at each other for another lingering moment, and I memorized his face, the lines of his body, his freckles. Finally, he just caressed my cheek and walked away, leaving me to wonder what the future held for us.

Knowing I couldn’t think that far, I shook my head. I needed to go minute by minute. Angel City and the small pocket that was left of humanity were counting on me. I wouldn’t mess it up.

I walked across the parking lot, and over to the gates of Fallen Academy, where my best friend was standing with Noah, waiting to make a portal to Hell and lead an entire army through it.

“Shea, can I talk to you?”

The Mage looked up from her goodbye with Noah, unshed tears in her eyes, and nodded. While Noah walked away a few feet, to speak to Blake and Darren and give us privacy, I took both of her hands in mine. “I need you to do me the biggest best friend favor in the world,” I begged her.

Her brows knitted together. “What is it?”

I swallowed. “I’m going to be busy fighting Lucifer, and Lincoln’s going to be too busy protecting me. Noah will be protecting you. I need someone to save Raksha.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. I’d told her how the woman had helped get me out of Hell. Shea didn’t seem to understand how I could care so much for someone who’d drugged and held me captive; it was hard to explain to anyone who didn’t live through it with me.

“Shea, she’s important to me. Like family. You’re the only one I trust. I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to her.” Tears started to flow down my cheeks.



Shea squeezed my hands. “I won’t leave Hell without her. You have my word, sister.”

A sob lodged in my throat at her use of the word sister, at her loyalty to what made me happy, even if she didn’t understand it.

Dropping her hands, I pulled her in for a bone-crushing hug. “I’m so lucky to have had you by my side all these years.”

She squeezed me harder. “Stop it. We’re not saying goodbye.” Her voice pinched with restrained tears, and we both pulled back to face each other. “I’m getting married next year, and you’re going to be there.”

I nodded, swallowing down my emotions.

*‘She’s my favorite person. Out of everyone,’* Sera confessed, sounding emotional too.

I internally grinned. *‘Even more than Michael?’*

*‘Okay, she’s my second favorite.’*

Footsteps pulled my attention behind us, to the amassing army, a few thousand in all. Some were in buses, some in cars, but most were on foot. This was it. This was our last shot to save Angel City, and it all rested with me.

I swallowed hard.

“Shea, I think we’re ready now.” Michael approached with Lincoln and the other archangels.

Darren and Blake nodded and stood off to the side. They had strict orders in the event we lost, to help evacuate as much of the city as possible. They hadn’t received discs from Metatron, so they wouldn’t be able to sustain life down there. Raphael said it was for the best, that some Celestials needed to be left behind to look after things.

Shea nodded, squaring her shoulders before looking over at me. “You got this.” She winked.

My best friend was going to have to open the portal, and stay until every member was through before closing it, so this

would be the last I saw of her until it was over.

I nodded once and that was that.

The final war for humanity had begun.

*'I'm still trying to decide if I want to cut Lucy's balls off first, or pluck out his eyes,'* Sera stated.

I grinned. I think we all underestimated just how savage my blade could be.

*Lucy, I'm coming for you.*

## TWENTY-ONE



The moment Shea opened the portal and we all stepped inside, a somber mood came over our crew. There were a few demons milling about where we crossed, and we ended their life quickly without issue.

Our plan was to follow the directions under Demon City, where I'd come through Mathias's apartment when I escaped, and that would lead us to Lucy's castle. We estimated it was about a two-hour walk for those on foot, and the longer our large group stayed in Hell, the greater the chance that word would get to Lucifer. I was half hoping he would come right to me—I knew his ego was big enough—but he also might see all four archangels and go into hiding. It was a risk we had to take.

Since Lincoln, the archangels, and I could fly, we would. Michael estimated once we took flight, it would be only about twenty minutes before we were at the gates of Lucifer's castle.

We passed a few spectral ghost forms, which I knew were tortured souls. Upon seeing us, they hid behind the straw huts that dotted the land.

“Being here is...” Lincoln swallowed hard, trying to find the words.

“Incredible,” Michael offered, staring at his own arm band. The technology Metatron had given them, making it possible for them to come down here with me, it *was* incredible.

“That's one way of describing it.” Lincoln looked at a smoking pile of trash, and two Snakeroot demons fighting

over a half-eaten apple and shook his head.

Once we'd walked a few minutes, we spun around to face the army and my jaw dropped. Four armored buses, over a dozen SUVs, and rows and rows of Fallen Army soldiers stood with us. The last of the portal was closing us all in, together.

Michael flapped his wings and shot up into the air, hovering over the crowd. "Today we fight for freedom! We fight to end a war over fifteen years in the making." He couldn't even finish his sentence before the army went wild. Michael placed a fist across his chest. "May you all find peace in your heart, and keep it there always. It's been a pleasure to lead this army and my greatest life's work."

The silence spread out through the crowd until Raphael kicked up dust, flying straight up to be by Michael's side.

"Each and every citizen of Angel City owes you a debt of gratitude. You are the real angels, and it's been a pleasure to be a part of your education at the academy."

When the massive army did one big salute to the two archangels in the sky, I thought I might cry. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, we were all saying goodbye.

"Shall we?" Lincoln looked over at me. Uriel and Gabriel had taken flight as well. It was our turn now.

I nodded.

Lincoln and I flapped our wings and rose above the army, taking one last look at them before flying right into Lucifer's den.

"Brielle, lead the way," Michael encouraged me.

With the busloads of Fallen Army soldiers making their way to the front to follow us, I set off in the direction I prayed Lucifer's castle was. The air turned smoky, and I knew visibility was going to shit after only a few minutes of flying. The sharp scent of sulfur burned my nose as smoke mingled with the air.

"Is something burning?" Michael called over the wind.

"It's Hell!" I shouted back. "Something's always burning!"

Raphael flipped over and pumped his wings so he was facing us, suspended in mid-air. “Let’s ride on the roof of the buses until visibility clears. We could be flying into a trap or going the wrong way.”

At his words, the hair on my arms stood up on end. He was right—this was war, and we could totally be flying into a trap. The second we’d entered, one of the demons could have seen us and flown ahead to bring word to Lucifer.

Lowering ourselves, we landed on one of the armored vehicles. Standing on a moving bus, and not falling over, was harder than you’d think—even with wings. The top hatch popped open after a few moments, and Noah peeked his head out, probably to make sure it was us and not some flying demons.

“Oh, good. I was—” His words were cut off when the bus slammed on its breaks and his head disappeared as he was thrown into the bus. All of us who were topside lurched forward, but quickly pumped our wings, taking to the sky to keep from becoming roadkill.

Looking out onto the road to see why we’d stopped, my jaw popped open at the sight of hundreds of skeleton horses with glowing green eyes.

New demons.

*Oh, Lucy, you’ve been busy.*

Atop some of the skelehorses were Castor demons. I’d barely had time to register that this was a full-scale army, when an energy burst slammed into me from the side, knocking me to the ground, and spraying sand all over my face. Turning my head to follow the direction of the attack, I saw a grinning Castor demon not ten feet from me, building another wave-like energy burst in his hands.

Effortlessly, I pulled my shield over myself and jumped to my feet, extending it to Lincoln who stood beside me, sword drawn. He’d flown down to the ground the second I’d been thrown off the bus.

“How far back is our army?” I shouted, trying to crane my head to look behind us.

“We’ll have to hold them off until they get here,” Lincoln answered through gritted teeth.

I realized he didn’t know any more than I did. Walking on foot was much slower than riding or flying, but they couldn’t be too far behind. I hoped.

The busses’ doors opened, and Fallen Army soldiers poured out onto the cracked red earth, to fight by our side. Yet, our small numbers were nothing against this fleet of horses.

“Anyone know what special powers the horses have?” I asked nervously.

Michael and the other archangels were watching the advancing evil soldiers warily. It looked like we were about to discover these demon’s new power together.

“What’s it doing?” Lincoln pointed, while staring wide-eyed at the nearest skelly.

Its eyes were *really* glowing green, like way more than before.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to kill it,” Michael declared, taking one step in the direction of the bug-eyed skeleton horse. One second Michael was standing there, and the next, the skelly’s eyes had... exploded. A hot lava-like substance shot from its eyes and tried to spray all over Michael, but he blasted into the air to avoid it. We all stumbled backward as I tightened the shield protecting Lincoln and myself. The lava shot across the front of the bus, and the metal and rubber tires melted right before my eyes, in a stinking mass of molten iron.

*Oh shit.* This was the stuff of nightmares.

We were way out of our league here. The Dark Lord had known we were coming, and he’d built a freaking lava-spewing army to protect him.

‘*Oh, hell no. These anorexic horses aren’t going to stop us.*’ Sera pulsed at my hip.

I'd forgotten she was there. Hell, I'd forgotten what it was like to fight with her, so used to doing it by myself ever since she was taken.

Pulling her out, I thinned my shield in one spot at the front.

*'Watch this,'* she boasted. A thin laser beam of light shot from the tip of Sera's blade, and cut into the horse nearest us. Where her beam of light hit, the horse lost a limb—technically a bone stump, since it didn't have flesh.

"Yes!" Michael roared and advanced forward, cutting the horse's head right off in one swift move. The green glow that had once lit up its eyes was no more.

*'I was just getting started. Watch this.'*

A thicker beam of light shot from my dagger, and I cut my arm across the advancing horses in an arc. Over a dozen of them were sawed in half at once.

*'Oh my God!'* She'd been holding out on me. *'Do that when we see Lucy,'* I told her.

*'Oh, I'll do that and more,'* she promised.

As a group, we advanced on the skelehorse army, and took them down one by one. Sera was able to take out the first few in the front lines and make a path for Michael to get to the ones farther back. I dropped my shield so that Sera could shoot her laser of light at will.

Lincoln was tied up with a Castor demon, while I was advancing deeper into the line of psycho-lava-eye-beam-horses. Sera was just preparing for another burst of light when someone grabbed me by the hair, and yanked hard, until I was flush against their chest.

"The Dark Prince has been waiting for you," A silky rich voice cooed in my ear.

In one swift move, Sera was knocked from my hand, and then I was being pulled upward into the sky by my neck. I couldn't breathe, and all rationale went out of my head when I realized I was being dragged across Hell by an Abrus demon. He had my wings pinned with his legs, hooking his ankles

around my middle, but my throat was taking the brunt of his force.

*'Pull me to you!'* Sera screeched.

I tried to use my magic to pull her from the ground and towards my hand, but I was too panicked. Too focused on breathing. I tried to thrash and get my assailant to loosen his grip, but it was no use.

“Did you know that the average human can hold their breath about two to three minutes before passing out?” the demon informed me. “But with your Celestial healing, I’ll bet you could go longer.”

*Oh God.* He was going to kill me. And suffocating was such a bad way to go too.

We flew over the skelehorse war, and I was unable to scream or alert Lincoln. I couldn’t calm my mind enough to erect my shield again or call Sera to me. I was majorly screwed and on the verge of passing out. It all happened so fast that, I wasn’t prepared.

*How did I let my infinity weapon get taken from me again?*

“Now, if I let go, you’re not gonna scream, are you?” he asked me as we flew across the smoky sky.

I shook my head, tears rolling down my cheeks.

*Please God, I need air.* I couldn’t think straight; all I could focus on was trying to draw a breath past his crushing grip.

Ever so slightly, his fingers let up from my windpipe, and I gulped in precious oxygen. I didn’t even care that it tasted mildly of sulfur. After I managed a few breaths, his hand opened wider and gripped my jaw, allowing me to fill my lungs. I was so relieved, so happy to be alive and breathing, I didn’t even think of fighting him back or using my magic against him. Eventually, as the oxygen helped my sanity return and my panic retreat, I had the idea that I needed to fight this bastard off me.

“Almost there. Raksha will be so pleased to see you.”

All fight fled from my body in that instant.



*Raksha*. He'd said the magic word.

I relaxed, allowing him to take me. This was what I wanted anyway, to be brought to the Dark Prince. I wanted to end him. I just thought I'd have Sera, Lincoln and the archangels on my side when I did it. Yet, if Raksha was in trouble, then I wouldn't put up a fight. I'd go willingly if it meant I had the chance to save her.

As we flew, a familiar landscape came into view, the outside courtyard of Lucifer's underground castle. We neared and my eyes roamed over the faces of the demons that stood at the outer wall. I recognized a few, but when my gaze fell inside the courtyard, complete and utter shock ripped through me.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Lucifer... holding a baby.

## TWENTY-TWO



The first thing that popped into my head was if somehow that baby could be mine. As crazy as it sounded, it wasn't that far out there, considering Lucifer had wanted to track my cycles and make a baby with me before I broke free. Now here he was, holding a beautiful little infant.

My gaze flicked to a crumpled heap at his feet, and a sob formed in my throat. Raksha was on the ground, bleeding freely from her abdomen.

When we were about ten feet from the courtyard, the Abrus demon dropped me. He just let go. I flapped my wings to slow my descent, but I still landed roughly and twisted my ankle, causing pain to shoot up my shin.

"Ah, Brielle, perfect timing," Lucifer called out to me.

At his words, four thick bands of black magic shot from his free hand and wrapped around my body like ropes, binding my arms and legs against me. I didn't fight it, didn't even bother to tell him to fuck off. My eyes were glued to the baby.

"Hey, Lucy." I spoke calmly, but using my nickname for him had his upper lip curling. "Why are you holding an innocent baby?"

Lucifer laughed. "Oh, she's hardly innocent. The spawn of a Succubus demon and myself? No, no, she'll be anything but innocent."

Relief washed through me that the baby wasn't mine, but then I was filled with horror. The Devil and a Succubus demon had a baby?

“Michael’s blood... runs... through her veins,” Raksha croaked from her place at Lucy’s feet.

I tried to process her words, but all I could find myself thinking, was how badly she was injured and how I couldn’t heal her with Lucy standing right there.

Lucifer waved Raksha off then. “Just a smidgen of Michael’s blood to give her good fighting ability, but not enough to sway her moral scales.”

That’s what he’d used the blood for, the jar Mathias dropped off while I was held captive down here.

“No one is born evil,” I declared, my gaze falling on the sweet baby once more. I refused to believe she was born with any hatred. That had to be taught... if I let her father live. Which I wouldn’t.

I didn’t have Sera, the archangels, or Lincoln, and my hands were tied behind my back, but I was going to kill this bastard one way or another. Just as soon as he put down the baby.

“You’re wrong in thinking I’m evil, Brielle,” Lucifer stated calmly, while the baby made bubbles with her spit. “I just have a different viewpoint than your other feathered friends.”

I swallowed hard. “Let me heal Raksha, and then I’ll give you whatever you want.”

Okay, I’d resorted to begging pretty quickly, but she was freaking bleeding out right in front of me. I was feeling desperate.

His high-pitched laughter cut through the air surrounding us. “I already have what I want. You’re trapped here with me, and after my army kills the archangels, I’ll never let you leave. Thanks for bringing them here, by the way. Really saved me a trip.”

*Plan B.* If Sera were here, she’d do something psycho like lash out with magic and try to blind him. The entire time we’d been talking, I’d built up magic along my skin, like I did with my shield, but this was magic I hoped was about to burn through the bands that held me.

With an animalistic, roar I pushed the magic from my skin, snapping the bands in half. They fell to the ground as I burst from where I stood, shooting straight forward. My ankle stung as I leapt for the Devil, completely unsure what the hell I was going to do.

He was holding a freaking baby, for crying out loud!

Lucifer looked surprised for a moment, but that expression was quickly wiped off his face and replaced with malice. With no plan, and no desire to hurt that damn adorable baby, I just let my momentum slam into him. I turned to the side and lined up my shoulder with his chest, at the same time reaching out to cup the baby in my arms as I did a full football tackle. The force of my hit knocked him backward, and he loosened his hold on the baby, allowing me to snatch her from his grip.

I had seconds here, mere seconds, to decide of the fate of Raksha, this baby and myself. I could take flight and bring the baby to safety, but he would surely finish off my hurt friend. It would be the smart thing to do, but I couldn't bear to lose her. Could I carry them both? I had to try.

Spinning, I deposited the baby into Raksha's outstretched hands where she lay on the ground, pivoting just as a giant blob of black inky energy crashed into my chest. A burning fire settled into my lungs, and I stumbled backward in pain.

The second the fire sensation tore through my chest, I called up my healing magic. The buttery warm light flowed from my palms and right into my lungs, soothing the sharp, scorching pain that had rested there. I wasn't interested in talking anymore; I just wanted Lucy dead. The second I killed him, I'd heal Raksha and everything would be okay.

Without a word, I flung my left hand out and sent an arc of healing magic into the Devil's face, relishing in the sound of his painful hiss as it made contact.

Raksha began to crawl backward with the baby on her chest, leaving a trail of blood in her wake. I needed to get her to safety. I needed to heal her. I needed—

“Kill him,” she rasped and locked eyes with me.

I needed to kill him. Even Raksha knew and wanted that.

“Yes, Brielle. Kill me,” the Devil mocked. “Though I should warn you, if this starts going south, I’ve instructed my men to take you out.” He nodded to the couple hundred demons who stood like sentinels in front of his courtyard.

Calling up my shield to protect me, I grinned at him. “What’s wrong, Lucy? Scared?”

Thrusting my arms out, I sent a coil of silver magic to wind around his throat. It shot from my palm like a snake, wrapping around his neck with lightning speed. I didn’t let up as I moved closer to him, and blasted his chest with balls of golden healing light. When they hit him, they singed as if burning him, leaving red marks in their wake.

The fury on his face was palpable as he raised his arms above his head. I felt a giant gust of wind stir around me, and when he lowered his hands, the wind slammed into my back, hitting me with the force of a truck.

I stumbled forward, trying to keep my balance and my wits, when Lucy surged at me with a sword in his hands that wasn’t there before. Using a move Lincoln taught me, I leapt into the air, letting my wings pick me up a little, and kicked out in front of me. My foot connected with his face, and then the entire ground started to shake, the brittle castle walls lining the courtyard crumbling before my widened eyes.

I’d just kicked the Devil in the face, and he was *pissed*.

Launching into the air to come face-to-face with me, he thrust his hands out, and sent over a dozen black shards toward my energetic shield. I held my breath as they stuck into my protection wall like toothpicks, hoping to connect with my body.

“You really think you can defeat me!” he roared, his voice no longer holding any trace of humanity. Black inky veins crawled up his neck, and I tried to rein in my fear, knowing that was how he controlled me. I let my shield drop for a split second, allowing the black shards to drop with it, then flooded

him with golden healing light before bringing my protection up again.

Hissing, he shrank away from it, but it stuck to him like glue.

“I think you know I can.” I smirked. “That’s why you told your minions to interfere if it looks like I’m winning.”

He screamed in rage, and a bolt of lightning shot across the sky, the wind picking up all around me.

“There are consequences to my death, silly girl. Are you sure you want to deal with them?” he growled over the wind.

*Yes. Maybe. No. Shit. What kind of consequences?*

Before I could even think what to do next, he flung his hand out, and threw a black shard right into my abdomen beneath my chest plate, cutting through my shield and chain mail like butter. The shock of him being able to penetrate my shield had me losing concentration on it, as it fell around me leaving me vulnerable. I stumbled backward, hitting the ground hard and disoriented. It all happened so fast; one second I was in the air, and now I was lying in the dirt with a searing pain in my stomach. He’d gotten me good.

Lucifer grinned, stalking toward me like he was an animal watching his prey. Reaching down, I grabbed hold of the black shard sticking out of me and ripped it out.

“This is the end for you,” he sneered.

A shadow passed over us then, and two things happened at once. Sera was literally dropped into my lap, and Lincoln dive-bombed from the sky and laid Lucy out on his ass.

I shot a burst of healing light into my abdomen, hoping it would stop the bleeding, and then popped to my feet with Sera in my hand. There was no time to think, no time to fully heal, no time for anything but killing the Prince of Darkness, before he pulled on more of his power.

*‘Sorry I’m late,’ she apologized.*

*‘No problem. Let’s end this scumbag.’*

*'With pleasure.'*

Lincoln had gone into rage-kill mode, landing blow after blow into Lucifer's face. The Dark Prince's demons turned their attention from the outer crumbled gates of the courtyard, to the fight before me and started to advance, forming a circle around Lincoln, Lucifer and me, and shutting out Raksha and the baby so I couldn't see them anymore.

*This is going to be a lot harder if they're about to jump us...*

The sound of flapping wings drew my attention upward, and I grinned. The four archangels descended into the yard and each took a corner, fighting the demons backward and out of the circle, giving us a level playing field.

My gaze flicked back just in time to see Lincoln sail up into the air and land hard on the ground.

*'Vaporize this asshole!'* I screamed at Sera.

Her blinding white light shot from the tip of her blade, in a concentrated beam, and cut right into the Devil's left thigh.

A loud screech ripped from him and he kicked off the ground, but I used my free hand to lash out with a whip of golden energy, and coiled it around his arm, yanking him down again. Pulling up my shield, I made it stronger than ever before. Tugging on energy from places I didn't know existed within me, I thickened the walls, to make sure it could stop whatever he threw at me. I kept Sera's beam of light directly over his leg, hoping to saw the limb right off. Lucifer would be a pile of body parts if I had it my way.

Lightning started to snap at the outer edges of our circle, directly in the path of the four archangels, and the ground shook again.

"How dare you!" the Prince of Darkness screamed just as black oil-like droplets began to fall from the sky. Hissing and screaming sounded all around me, and it took me a moment to realize the black rain was acidic. My shield was covering me from it, but Lincoln and the others were getting drenched. I had to end this now, or everyone I cared about would be gone.

Anger flared up within me, and I yanked with everything I had, pulling him closer to me.

“Goodbye, Lucy,” I gritted out, feeding my healing golden magic into Sera, just as she let loose a cannon-sized ball of fiery orange light straight into Lucifer’s stomach. One second the ball was coming at him, and I was pinning him there with my golden whip, and the next it was going right through him, taking out his guts with it. I could see clear through his stomach from the big hole Sera had left there. The demons around us went crazy, hissing and shrieking and cutting into the archangels like they were possessed. Lucifer was just staring at me, mouth agape, open and closing like a fish out of water.

I glanced sideways to the base of a dying tree to see Raksha still had the baby cradled to her chest. Grinning, I stepped forward until I was right in Lucifer’s face, shooting more energy whips out of my hand to coil around him. “I’m going to make sure that baby is raised with so much unconditional love, there’s no way in hell she’ll be anything like you. Pun intended.”

He reached out, placing his hands on my shield as black flames erupted from his palms in a last-ditch effort to fight me off him.

I shook my head and with one powerful lunge, I stabbed Sera into his chest. He jerked against me, and the ground shook with tremendous force. How he had so much energy after losing his insides, I had no idea, but he fought me hard, with everything he had left in him.

*‘Give him all you got,’* I told my infinity weapon.

*‘I’m part of you,’* she reminded me. *‘I’ll give him all we’ve got. As you’ve grown in your training, I’ve grown in mine.’*

With that, an explosion of light entered his chest, pearlescent, golden, blue, and black, and a mixture of everything within me. It was all of the magic I possessed in one entity. His body started to convulse as the light entered him.



“Noooooooo!” His roar was so hollow and void of human emotion, it gave me chills, but I held on to him.

I pumped that bastard full of everything I had. His skin started to turn ashy and black as the earth shook harder, the rain fell faster, and the lightning intensified. My arm trembled with the force of trying to hold on to his thrashing body, and I felt weakness pulling at the edges of my mind.

*‘No. Stay strong!’* Sera ordered.

Suddenly, two hands landed on my back and golden healing energy raced through my shield and into me. That final burst was what Sera and I needed to land the lethal blow. As light coursed through me and into Sera, she fed it into Lucifer’s chest. He screamed one final time, before his body erupted in black flames and fell to the ground, which had ceased its shaking.

Yet, I wasn’t taking any chances. Pulling Sera out, I brought her down across his neck, severing his head like it was made of butter. The moment his head separated from his body, a shock wave burst outward with a great force.

I stumbled backward, looking at the charred corpse before me. The rain had stopped, as had the lightning; even the demons had slowed their frenzy.

Spinning on my heel, I expected to find Raphael or Noah, but instead Lincoln was standing there, hands outstretched.

“You did it.” He was staring, eyes wide and unblinking, at what used to be the Devil.

I couldn’t respond. I only had one thing on my mind.

“Raksha!” I shouted, blasting past him and the archangels. I slammed into a Brimstone demon, sending it flying over me, and then I was at the base of the tree.

Shea was there, holding the baby in her arms with tears streaking down her cheeks. Noah had his hands over Raksha’s bleeding abdomen, but it was no use. The moment I looked at her frozen face, glassy eyes staring up at the sky, I knew she was gone. Grief and guilt slammed into me with equal measure as I swayed backward.

“I’m... so sorry. She was too far gone. I tried...,” Noah mumbled.

*No. No. No.*

I fell to my knees, sobbing. The fight had left me, the adrenaline gone, and now I was falling apart.

“Um, is that a baby?” Lincoln asked from behind me.

Shea swallowed hard. “She said her name is Asha, it means hope in Hindi. And that... she wanted Brielle to raise her.”

My grief froze, as my eyes flicked up to my best friend.

“She said that?”

Shea was freely crying. “She said the baby is the only thing that kept her alive down here after you left, that the mom died in labor, and taking care of her—” A sob choked off Shea’s words, and I moved closer to my best friend, placing my arm around her. “I’m sorry, Brielle. I got here and looked for her, but it was too late.”

I’d made Shea promise to get Raksha out, and now she was carrying the guilt with me.

“It’s not your fault. I saw her right after he injured her, and I couldn’t save her either.”

Looking down at my old friend, I reached out and closed her eyelids as I leaned forward, placing my lips to her ear. “I will take care of this baby, and look out for your family until my dying day on Earth. You have my word.”

I wanted to collapse onto my back, cry, and never move again, but I couldn’t fall apart. Not right now. Not when this baby needed me. Raksha was counting on me, and I wouldn’t let her down, ever.

So, I wiped my cheeks and pulled my shit together, standing, and then reaching down to take the sweet baby in my arms. She had the most beautiful blue eyes I’d ever seen. Walking over to my husband, I looked up at him.

“She’s the biological child of Lucifer and a Succubus demon. Lucy used a bit of Archangel Michael’s blood when he made her, but that shouldn’t matter. She’ll probably have black wings and freaky powers, but that doesn’t make her a bad person.”

I moved closer to Lincoln, pressing the baby against his chest, and I saw the exact moment he fell in love with her. His entire face softened, and his mouth went a little slack as he gazed down at the adorable infant.

“She’s blowing spit bubbles,” Lincoln commented, trying to hold in the grin that I knew wanted to grace his face. Babies did that to people.

I nodded. “You wanted kids. Well, she can be our first one.”

Lincoln was a bit prejudiced when it came to anyone who had ties with the demons. Could he raise the Devil’s child as his own? A legion? I just wasn’t sure.

He reached out to touch Asha’s face, and her hand burst from her tight swaddle blanket—still wet with Raksha’s blood. She gripped one of Lincoln’s big fingers with her tiny hand, and pulled it into her mouth, sucking on it.

The grin broke free, and Lincoln sighed. “You know, we’re gonna need a bigger place. Can’t fit a crib in the trailer.”

A half laugh, half sob erupted from me as I nodded.

“And we need to get some formula and bottles. She’s clearly hungry,” he added, looking concerned.

Leaning forward, I gave her a kiss on the forehead. “It’s okay, baby. Everything’s gonna be okay now.”

I’d killed the Devil. Everything had to be okay now that that monster was gone from this Earth.

## TWENTY-THREE



Everything wasn't exactly okay, but it was better. When I killed Lucy, it set off some type of apocalypse on Earth. Permanent portals from Hell had opened up all over the place, and we couldn't close them, so hundreds of demons crawled through daily. Our demon problem had definitely intensified, but the Devil was gone, so at least no more new demons could be created, and that was a plus.

Because we'd allowed so many people from Demon City to seek refuge in Angel City, they had shown their appreciation by registering in the Fallen Army. Now we had twice as many soldiers guarding the borders, and we also had Grace's human demon hunters, who were almost about to graduate their first year. Things may not seem drastically different now, but as we culled the demon population more and more, we could reclaim our land.

"Does she need to be changed before we get out?" Lincoln turned to look into the back seat, where we had Asha clipped into her car seat.

It turned out she was six months old, and did in fact have black wings, and some freaky powers that were already manifesting when she got angry. If Lincoln was late in making her bottle, green smoke would leak out of her mouth as she cried. Also, her black wings intermittently popped out depending on her mood, but all in all, she was the sweetest baby. She slept through the night, and as long as we kept her fed and dry, she was happy. Although she and I had a special bond, it paled in comparison at times to her bond with Lincoln.

He was wrapped around her little finger, and she was a total daddy's girl, always reaching for him and laughing at everything he did.

We truly loved her with all of our hearts.

"Yeah, we don't want to bring a stinky baby to the beach games!" I told Asha, tickling her foot. She grinned and kicked out at my hand, pumping her legs in an excited gesture.

As Lincoln pulled her out of her car seat and started to change her, I found myself thinking of Raksha. We'd just had her funeral, and everything was still so raw. Her wife and son were there, and the Fallen Army gave her a proper burial with a twelve-sword salute, and even paid her family a lump sum fee for their loss.

Raphael said that technically Raksha was working for our side by keeping an innocent baby safe, and therefore she deserved a soldier's burial.

I'd profusely apologized to Elodie, but she'd told me she was actually a bit relieved. Now, at least she could move forward. Not constantly worrying for her wife anymore, and no longer living with the anguish of never knowing if she'd ever see her again, had healed her in a weird way. Every day that Lincoln and I cared for Asha, a little bit of Raksha was kept alive. Raksha kept her safe for us to take home, and I truly felt that this baby was never supposed to be raised by Lucy.

She was always meant to be mine.

"Are your mom and Raph coming?" Lincoln's face scrunched up, signaling that it was a poopy diaper.

"Yeah, all the archangels RSVP'd."

My mom and Raphael had been pretty inseparable since we'd gotten back from the war in Hell. I was genuinely happy for them.

"Ooh, can I hold Asha?" Grace's voice came from behind me, and I spun to pull her into a hug.

Grace and Michael had offered to raise Asha if Lincoln and I felt we couldn't do it, but I'd kindly told them no. This was Raksha's dying wish, and Lincoln and I had become way too bonded with her to give her to anyone else. She was our daughter, just like that. Family wasn't always blood in my book.

"Of course," Lincoln told her, handing Grace the baby.

"Oh, she has the sweetest little mouth, and those eyes!" Grace cooed.

Emberly walked up beside her mother and rolled her eyes. "She has total baby fever."

Grace pinned her daughter with a glare. "I do, and since it's not responsible for Michael and I to have another child biologically, I think we've decided to adopt. You both have inspired us. There are orphans being made every day in this war, and they need a family."

"I think that's wonderful." Lincoln grabbed the baby bag, and tossed it over his shoulder as we all walked to the beach. Just last night, Lincoln and I had turned in the paperwork to legally adopt Asha Raksha Atwater-Grey.

"Just make sure it's a girl. I want a sister," Emberly told her mother. "I hear brothers are annoying."

I grinned. "They totally can be."

Mikey and I had become closer since I returned from Hell. We'd kept our weekly picnics, and he was opening up more about his shifter struggles. After becoming an uncle to Asha, he'd informed me that he was pretty set on having a big family one day, and it brought a huge smile to my face. I couldn't wait to see my little bro settle down and have some babies.

"Oh my gosh, what is he doing?" Grace moaned, and we followed her gaze to see the archangels playing tug-of-war. Raphael and Michael were on one side, holding the thick rope tightly against Uriel and Gabriel on the other. In the center was a huge mud pit.

Noah stepped up to greet us all. "We haven't even started yet. I told them they could practice, but it turned into some

competitive bro-fest.”

“Get ’em, Dad!” Emberly yelled from the sidelines, and Michael grinned, yanking the rope with all his might. Gabriel’s foot slipped into the mud, but the look of determination on his face was unmistakable.

“Oh, Noah, you were sweet to invite them. I haven’t seen them this excited in years.” Grace grinned.

Raphael was tricked out in Hawaiian garb, complete with floral lei, and Michael was wearing a typical beach bum straw hat.

“Of course! We’re happy to have them,” Noah assured her.

“Except when they win all the events, and skew the results,” Lincoln mumbled.

“Aw, whittle Whicoln is scared of my daddy,” Emberly jived in a baby voice.

Lincoln reached out lightning quick, and scooped her into his arms—careful not to touch her wings. She shrieked and laughed, kicking and thrashing against him.

“Dump her in the ocean!” Grace called out as Lincoln walked her toward the water, to probably do just that.

“Excuse me, but Auntie Shea needs some baby love.” Shea popped out of the food tent, opening her arms toward Asha—who Grace was still holding. Grace frowned but handed over the baby, and Shea tucked Asha into her chest with a smile.

My bestie’s wedding was in six months, and no expense was being spared. Noah joked that he’d probably have to get a second job to afford it.

“I’m next!” Chloe piped up as she made her way over with Luke, to get a good look at Asha.

“No, Grandma is next,” my mother butted in, coming over to kiss my cheek. My mom watched Asha during the day while Lincoln and I worked, and they had such a special bond, almost as tight as ours.

My friends and family had surprised me. When I'd told them that Asha was part Lucifer, part Succubus demon, they hadn't blinked an eye.

*"My mother's a drug addict, so what? Our parents don't define who we are,"* Shea had declared.

They were right. Yes, Asha would have some powers to contend with, but so did I. If I could learn to control them and use them for good, then so would she.

A warm, muddy hand landed on my shoulder. "She couldn't have hand-picked a better mother," Raphael told me, obviously picking up on my thoughts.

I spun to face him, and burst out laughing. He was covered from head to toe in mud, looking like some kind of winged Loch Ness Monster.

My gaze dropped to the muddy handprint on my shoulder and shook my head. "I'm gonna have to pay you back for that."

"Oh, really?" Michael's voice came from behind me, but it was too late to react. His arm wrapped around my waist, and then I was being hauled upward and out to the ocean, where Emberly was tackling Lincoln.

Raphael grinned as he watched Michael drag me out to sea.

*'We invite these archangels to one beach party, and they're already acting like drunken teenagers!'* I commiserated to Sera.

*'Want me to blast him a little? Nothing to leave a permanent scar, but I could burn his thigh a bit,'* she called from her place at my hip.

I chuckled. *'Nah, we'll let him win this one.'*

Sera sighed. *'Good plan. He smells too good for me to really want to hurt him.'*

We were at the water's edge now.



*'What exactly does he smell like?'* I'd been dying to know the answer to that question for far too long.

Sera sighed dreamily. *'Like true love, or your first kiss, or the day someone throws you a huge surprise party, and you're so excited you just can't take it.'*

I couldn't hold in my laughter. *'Sera, those aren't smells.'*

She didn't miss a beat. *'They are to me. Michael smells like that.'*

*'Well, simmer down. He's married.'*

Sera paused. *'For now. His wife's human. I can wait.'*

*Oh my God.* I couldn't even dignify that with an answer.

Michael chucked me out into the ocean then, and I shrieked as I plunged into the frigid cold water.

My head popped up to the surface just in time to see Emberly take her father down, and drag him into the water too. Lincoln swam over to me and pulled me into him as I wrapped my legs around his waist, hooking my ankles behind his back.

"Mrs. Atwater-Grey?"

I grinned. "Hmm?"

Leaning in, he kissed my neck, dragging his lips along my jawbone, before claiming my mouth. When we broke apart, his eyes were alight. "I think Asha needs a little brother sooner rather than later."

Laughter peeled out of me. "Let me get one out of diapers before we have another."

He shook his head. "No, I hear it's better to have them close together, get through that phase quicker. Maybe we'll get lucky and have twins."

I smacked his arm. "Lincoln Grey, don't you wish that evil on me!"

His hearty chuckle vibrated against my belly, and I smiled up at him.

“Are you excited to start teaching the humans next year?” he asked as we floated in the water.

Grace had already formally hired me as a professor for her growing Demon Hunter Academy.

I nodded. “They have no idea how badass Mrs. Atwater-Grey is about to be.”

Lincoln chuckled. “If you need any pointers, I’ll be around for a consult.”

A smirk pulled at my lips. “I got this.”

The world was still overrun with demons, but I planned on helping clean it up. I was going to teach others what I knew, in the hopes that my children would one day grow up in a world free of Hellspawn.

Lincoln leaned forward and kissed me again, that time with more passion than before, and I ran my hands down his biceps, tracing the scars on his wrists. I’d been through Hell and back with this man, literally, but we’d come out on top. I couldn’t ask for anything more.

“So, I’m teaching. What’s next for you, Captain Grey?”

Lincoln looked over at Emberly, who was swimming with her dad and playing in the water. “I made a promise to a certain barely sixteen-year-old girl, that I wouldn’t rest until I’d trained her to rid San Francisco of its demon stronghold.”

I chuckled. “I guess we both have our work cut out for us.”

He nodded, landing one more kiss on my lips. “That we do.”

I didn’t mind working on the demon problem for the rest of my life, as long as Lincoln, my friends, and family were by my side.

Shea appeared at the edge of the water, holding Asha out and away from her body. White spit-up coated my best friend’s hair.

“Okay, you can take her back now.”

Everyone burst into laughter and Lincoln looked at me. “Not it.”

With an eye roll, I pushed off him and headed for the shore.

Mommy-hood was about as complex as fighting demons some days, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.

## THE END

\*\*\*Please stay tuned for the two spin-off series I have planned for this world. Sign up to my newsletter for announcements, and join my social media groups.

One series will be based at the Demon Hunter Academy, with a new character you haven’t met yet, and the other will follow Emberly, Michael’s daughter, as she takes back San Francisco.



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