



SINS OF THE IMMORTAL

JAMIE
MCGUIRE

#1 NEW YORK TIMES AND INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

SINS OF THE IMMORTAL

A NOVELLA

Jamie McGuire

Providence Trilogy
Jamie McGuire
Sins of the Immortal

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CHAPTER ONE

BEX

I'D HEARD NINA cry before, but I'd never heard the sound she made in the moment we lost Eden. The wail that came from her throat gave rise to goose bumps on my skin; the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. The room was filled with her broken heart.

"Come outside," Jared said, gently moving Nina toward the door. "Claire?"

"Yeah?" our sister said, still in shock.

"Cynthia." Jared pointed to the chair where Nina's mother sat, holding a dainty handkerchief to her hairline just above her temple.

Just as Claire began to walk over, Cynthia stood, holding up her hand. "I'm fine. If none of you mind, I believe I'll retire to my room."

"I'd feel better if you stayed at the loft, Cynthia," Jared said. "We should all go back there, actually. This place is still swarming."

Cynthia breathed out a laugh. "I'm staying for the same reason I persuaded you to bring Nina back here. This is the still the safest place for us."

"The safest?" Nina said, looking up at her mother. "Can you really say that with a straight face, Mother?"

"You have a head wound, Mrs. Grey," Ryan said, preventing Cynthia from responding. "Let us take you to get checked out, and then I'll drive you wherever you want."

"I was the PTA president for seven years, Mr. Scott. I assure you, I've faced worse."

"With all due respect, Mrs. Grey. What made you think you could go toe-to-toe with Satan?" Claire asked. "Did you really think you could stop him because angels fell out of your family tree?"

“She’s like Kim was,” I said, staring at Cynthia. She didn’t know I knew, but I always had. I could sense the darkness in her blood, just like I could sense the power magnet she held within her somehow. “Except she can turn it on and off. She wasn’t strong enough to take Lucifer’s power.”

“I used to be,” Cynthia said, looking defeated.

Nina looked at her mother, horrified. “You...”

Cynthia looked caught. “We have a lot to discuss, I’m sure. Just ... not now,” Cynthia said, struggling to stand. Her heels clicked slower than usual, and she touched every piece of furniture she passed for stability, but she made it to her room.

Nina was reduced to tears again, only emanating a combination of moans and cries, her cheeks wet. She couldn’t fight her husband. Instead, she reached for the space where Eden had been, inches from where Levi sat on his knees, bent over until his forehead touched the ground. It was weird to appreciate that my niece’s body had been reduced to ashes before our eyes once Lucifer took her life and disappeared. Somehow, it seemed better than staring at her lifeless body on the floor, but the image of her sweet face and tiny body being grayed and then blowing away into nothing would be forever burned into my memory.

“Darling,” Jared said, cradling his wife in his arms. “Come with me.”

Nina’s knees collapsed next to Morgan’s limp body, her eyes glossed over and bulging. A vein in her forehead protruded as if every one of her senses were about to boil over. “She’s not gone. He took her somewhere. She’s not gone.” She clenched her eyes shut, pushing the tears out and down her cheeks.

Jared tugged on her a few times. “Love,” he said, encouraging her.

Levi’s hand scooted a few inches away, resting on Nina’s outstretched fingers. “I’ll find her.”

Nina sniffed, wiping her nose, her wide eyes staring at Levi. "Can you ... can you do that?"

"I can. And I will," he said, standing.

"Levi," I said. "Given the situation, maybe you should take a minute to form a plan. You can't bring her back, and even if you could, it's not without permission."

"I don't ask permission," Levi said, staring at something I couldn't see.

"Jared?" Nina said, looking to him for answers. "Tell me he's right."

"I ... I don't know. I hope so." Jared was lost when our father died, and again when Nina left him almost twenty years before. This was something different; deeper. The almost silent grunting noises he made trying to hold his breath to avoid releasing his anguish made me wish I had Nina and Ryan's human hearing.

"But ... you don't believe him," Nina said, broken.

"Come with me," Jared said, lifting her in his arms, tears filling his eyes and tumbling down his face.

Claire kept her eyes on the floor, but when Ryan cupped the back of her neck, her expression crumbled. "I'll be the one to say it. She isn't coming back, Nina."

Nina leaned over again, the pain too much to bear, too much to stay upright. "What could we do?" she asked, wiping her cheek with the underside of her wrist. "It was what she wanted."

"There was nothing we could do," Ryan said, his voice cracking. "She was stronger than all of us. And she believed saving Morgan was what she was meant to do."

"You don't?" Nina said, her eyes swelling and red, her upper lip wet.

"There's always more we can do," I said.

"Bex," Jared scolded.

"I still feel her," I said, closing my eyes.

Nina closed hers, waiting. "I told you, Jared. I told you. She's not gone."

Morgan coughed and turned on his side. His clothes were bloody, but at least Lucifer had repaired the bones he'd fractured while trying to bait Eden before he'd left her friend's body for good.

I kneeled next to him, checking his pulse. "He's alive. I don't know for how long. He needs medical attention."

"We'll take him," Ryan said. He lifted Morgan in his arms, and even then, the boy only whimpered.

"How are you going to explain that to hospital staff?" Levi asked.

"We've been doing this for a while," Ryan said. "We'll think of something."

"You," Claire said, nodding to Levi. "You can't just jump into Hell and start a fight. Your Bex's Taleh. If you get killed, Bex does, too, and I'll be damned if I'm losing anyone else today."

Ryan carried Morgan out, followed closely by Claire. His heavy steps were contrasted by his wife's. She barely made a sound.

Jared guided Nina out, and I watched Levi, wary.

"Come with me," he said, finally meeting my gaze. "We'll burn it all down."

The temptation was overwhelming. I thought about losing control, destroying everything between my niece and me, but that wasn't my path.

"I have to stay here," I said, staring at the place where I last saw her. "I don't know why. It should be the opposite. I should stay close with you. But I'm supposed to stay here."

"Then you should," Levi said.

It was a moment of mutual respect, him validating my answer without judgment, and I at least didn't think of him as the enemy.

“I should’ve...” he began, but just like me, every instance he could point out could’ve been countered by the fact that it was what Eden wanted, and we all knew there was no changing her mind. He shook his head. “Is it just me? Do you feel her, too?”

“I don’t know what I feel,” I said, wiping my nose with the back of my wrist. “I don’t know if I can feel anything right now. I’m just ... numb.”

“I’m not. I’m furious, and I’m going to take it out on every demon that crosses my path until I see her again.”

“Do you know what it means if she’s really gone?” I asked, leaning against the wall.

“I couldn’t imagine,” he said, his eyes losing focus. “Honestly? I’d probably nuke the world, Bex. Then those selfish sons of bitches won’t have anything to fight over.”

I remembered what it was like to lose Nina’s friend Kim. We’d spent a lot of time together before she’d died. We spoke for hours in the underbelly of Jerusalem, uncoupled, the odd men out. She was quirky and a little weird, but in the end, she felt like family. I was sad when she died, but what I felt for Eden’s loss superseded sadness. I was curious how I would react when the time came that I processed it. Curious, and maybe even afraid.

Levi’s suggestion might have set off alarms, and I probably should have tried to talk him out of it, but they’d taken it too far. Hell, erasing her for more power, and Heaven, creating her just to die. Not to save millions, the world, or even a city full of women and children. Her story, her life, her purpose, all ended for just one boy.

“I’m going,” Levi said. “Don’t worry. I won’t get us killed.”

I nodded to him once, knowing my life was in his hands. He waved goodbye before closing the door behind him, and I sat on the bottom step, barely able to dial my phone. When the voice on the other end answered, I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to hold back tears.

“Bex? Is that you, son? I can’t hear you,” Mom said.

“I’m here,” I said, my voice breaking.

She hesitated. “Is everything all right?”

“It’s Eden, Mom. She’s...”

Mom sucked in a breath. After several moments, she finally spoke. “How?”

“Lucifer took her. He shelled her friend Morgan, used him to... She turned to ash.” I cleared my throat, trying not to squeak, but if anyone didn’t care about that, it was my mom. “She faded into ashes and blew away. There’s nothing left of her.

It took her a few moments to speak. “And where is Morgan?”

“Claire and Ryan took him to the hospital.”

“Where are Jared and Nina?”

“They left.”

She cleared her throat. Like always, she was staying strong for us. “Ashes?”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the door. My upper lip and cheeks were wet. I could feel Levi’s growing anger and his excitement to unleash his wrath and find my niece. He fully believed he could. “Yeah. Levi went to find her.”

“Find her?” Her tone changed. A hint of hope whispered in her words.

“In another plane. He’s convinced he can jump over there and get her back.”

“Can he?”

I sighed. “I hope so. He’s the son of Lucifer, and he’s pissed off. And...” My chest concaved as I tried to hold in the pain. “I miss my best friend.”

“Listen to me, Bex. Levi will find her. He’ll bring her home,” Mom said.

I nodded, even though she couldn’t hear me.

“I love you, son.”

“Love you, Mom.”

I hung up, letting the phone dangle from my thumb and index finger. Levi was still driving, and the farther he was away, the more my need to protect him fought with whatever silent voice commanded that I stay put.

I dialed another number I knew by heart, and listened to the ring, hoping for voicemail so I could just listen and hang up.

“Bex?” Allison answered, curiosity and anxiousness in her voice. “Hello?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for calling you. I know I said I wouldn’t.”

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I don’t mean to bother you, but...” I hesitated. If Levi did bring Eden back, and I told Allison she was dead, that would be one more thing I’d have to explain away. Allison was the love of my life, and I’d had to lie to her over and over. She was a law student when we first met and questioned everything. It wasn’t like my father’s relationship with my mom. Allison wouldn’t accept my vague answers and half-truths, so I had to choose.

“You’re never a bother to me, Bex,” she said, her sweet voice making my heart ache more.

“I ... I just miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” she said without hesitation. “Having a rough night?”

“One of the roughest of my life.”

“Your mom is okay?”

“Yes.”

“Eden?”

I paused. Of course, that would be the second person she’d name. Allison knew how much Eden meant to me.

“Bex? Did something happen to Eden?”

“Yeah.”

“But you can’t tell me,” she said, trying to keep the accusatory tone from her voice.

“No.”

Her face made a muffled noise against the phone as she nodded. “It’s okay. We can still talk. Tell me about everything else.”

“Tell me about you. I just need to hear your voice.”

“Well, I passed the bar six months ago, and I was hired by Tigges & Fowel five weeks after. I had my choice, and they seemed like the best fit. Tilly and I just got a new place. She’s still nosy, but I would honestly die without her cooking...”

I leaned back against the wall, listening to the only voice besides my mother’s that would even begin to remind me that I didn’t want to die, too. Allison was my anchor to being human, and so I listened to her stories of her roommate, moving mishaps, and getting settled into her new job as a junior prosecuting attorney in Albany, New York.

It was easier to focus on her than Eden’s ashes or Levi driving 100 miles per hour to Hell, so I envisioned myself in every story, immersing myself in the images she described.

“I still love you, you know,” she whispered into the phone. “Tilly says I should get out there; start dating again, but I just ... I just can’t.”

I closed my eyes. “I just want you to be happy, Allie.”

“That’s you. You’re my happy.” After a few beats she continued, “But, I know... I know that you can’t. So I just wanted you to know. Because I know that you still love me.”

“And I always will.”

“Want me to keep talking?”

“Yes, please.”

She hesitated as she thought of more to say. “I just moved into this apartment a few months ago. It’s the same price as the one in Providence, but it’s smaller. It’s within walking distance to the office, though, and there’s a cute little coffee shop on the hill just up the street...”

CHAPTER TWO

JARED

NINA'S SOBS HAD quieted down in the last hour, reduced to intermittent whimpering between silence. As she lay on my lap, hugging my thigh, I ran my fingers through her hair, saying prayers in the language of Heaven. That had always seemed to calm her most.

I'd regretted my choice to reveal myself to her more times than I could count, but those feelings of guilt were always overshadowed by my love for her, the precious moments we shared, and the life and family we'd built together.

Not this time.

My choice had hurt Nina—physically and emotionally. She'd been afraid for her life, for our daughter's, and had already lost too much before she watched our daughter's murder. Nina was even tortured in her dreams. But this... I didn't deserve to look her in the eyes after this.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, caressing my arm with her fingertips. "Do you know what I'm thinking?"

"I'm afraid to ask," I said, sincere.

She turned for a moment to kiss the underside of my forearm, but didn't look me in the eye. "Of the bench."

I closed my eyes, still combing my fingers through her light golden strands. "The night we met."

"Just the bench. It was cold that night. Do you remember?"

"I recall you being cold."

"You blew on your hands and rubbed them together."

"It's ingrained into us to replicate human movements to fit in."

She breathed out a ghost of a laugh but didn't smile. "The bench, Jared. I was cold when I arrived, and the longer I sat on

that hard, frozen wood, the colder I became. The frame was black iron, and the ground beneath was dusted in snow. I had just lost my father—my everything—and felt empty. I had nothing. And somehow, in that moment, you gave me you.”

I shook my head, feeling my eyes burn. “You had your life at college. You had your friends, your career, your whole life ahead of you.”

“And I wouldn’t trade it. I need you to know that.”

A tear made its way slowly down the bridge of my nose, settling at the end, and then dripping onto her shoulder. She crossed her arm over her chest and covered the small, wet dot with her hand. “In the end, I have to admit that I gave you nothing but pain, Nina.”

“This isn’t the end.”

“It’s the end of Eden.”

“You gave her to me; even if it was for a blink in time, she was mine. All of those smiles, those memories of you walking the floor with her, the firsts. It’s all because you sat on that bench. You gave me things no one else could. You’ve saved my life countless times.”

“We have no daughter. This is no life.” I broke down then. For the first time, I found myself not only unworthy, but unable to be a rock for Nina. I’d let her down again.

She stood and cradled my head to her stomach, gently pulling me to her, swaying just a few inches in either direction. She began praying, and my breath caught. With a human-American accent, she spoke the language of Heaven she’d heard me whisper so many times before. Much of it was barely decipherable, but I knew exactly what she was trying to say. And, more importantly, what she was trying to do. Hearing my wife’s voice speak the language of my heavenly and earthly fathers was exactly what I needed to hear in that moment.

I wrapped my arms around her legs and pressed my cheek against her middle, letting my pain fill the loft. I gasped and sputtered, cried out and growled, shook and fell limp, swayed

and nearly collapsed as waves of grief rolled over me just to come from another direction. Nina held me through it all.

“I’ve got you,” she said in English. “I won’t let go.”

We stayed that way for hours, holding each other, grieving together, but other than prayers, not much talking until I sensed her stomach twinge.

“You’re hungry,” I said, standing. My body felt two-hundred years old, sore and aching, sluggish and clumsy.

“I couldn’t possibly, Jared. Please don’t,” she said, reaching for me. “Sit,” she said.

I obeyed.

“What now?” she asked.

My brain simply wouldn’t move forward from that minute. I shook my head, waiting for something to come, but for the first time in my life my thoughts were quiet.

“Do we fight? Do we help Levi? Do we demand justice? I need to know. Was this God? Did he let this happen? Was this His plan?”

I rubbed my forehead, feeling overwhelmed. “I ... don’t know. I don’t have the answer this time.”

“Do we find the answer?”

I looked up at her, knowing my face looked just as red, beat up, and puffy as hers did. There were always answers, and she deserved them. We both did.

“I need you to stay with Lillian. I’ll send Grant.”

“Are you going to find answers?”

I stood, cupping her shoulders and kissing her forehead, slow and soft. “They’ve started a war. It’s time someone holds them accountable.”

She took a step back from me. “You’re just going to execute every demon you see?”

“Yes.”

Nina thought about what that might mean, but the sweetness of revenge sparked in her eyes. “Good. Kill them all.”

CHAPTER THREE

CLAIRE

“YOU HAVE GOT to be mother flipping kidding me.” I chomped on the wad of gum in my mouth, watching the sun rise. At least three dozen demons at my feet, and twice that many goblins. I couldn’t walk without getting blackish-blue goo on my white Louboutin’s. I hooked my arm around Ryan’s middle. It was the only time he grimaced when I touched him.

“No. Don’t. Cl—”

Before he could finish, I bent at the knees, got a good, sturdy stance, and then pushed off, landing outside of the large circle of carcasses, more than thirty feet from the center.

I released Ryan, and he rubbed his sore side. “I hate that.”

I jutted out my bottom lip.

His face screwed into disgust. “Don’t start. The only reason you did that was to keep your white outfit or ensemble or whatever clean.”

“So?” I said, unaffected by his less-than-stellar jab.

He pointed at the bottom of my shirt. “Got some uh... some splatter there.”

I looked down. Sure enough, the dark red, almost black amalgamated, dried ketchup-like goo that could only be demon blood had splattered my shirt and the pocket area of my white jeans. “Damn it!” I said through my teeth, knowing better than to rub. It would only smear. “This stuff doesn’t come out!”

“Maybe stop wearing your good clothes to a fight, then?”

“Have you met me?” I asked. “Do I own anything else?”

He grabbed my collar and pulled me to him, planting a kiss on my lips before pushing me away. “Covered in Hell slime and still gorgeous.”

I smiled and winked at him. “It’s a talent, really.” My expression sobered as I thought about our surroundings. “Were they coming for Morgan or for us?”

“Or both?” Ryan asked, wiping the bright red cut under his eye with the back of his hand. I loved that he didn’t whine like most humans would. My husband was happy just to be with me and get to trade punches and shoot a gun once in a while. Anything else was what came with the territory, and wow, did he love the territory.

A few loud pops sounded behind us, and Ryan ducked.

I watch as multi-colored flashes sizzled and then fizzled out in midair.

Ryan stood tall and rubbed the back of his neck. “I hate July Fourth.”

The popping and explosions reminded him of deployment. He was on-edge this time of year since he’d come home. I usually took him on vacation, outside of the US, but our plans were cancelled when Eden... I chewed on my bottom lip, changing my line of thought. The goblins had ambushed us just a few blocks from the hospital, forcing me off the road into the park where we were standing. “They would’ve caught us at the hospital if they wanted Morgan.”

“Maybe we should go back there? They might have him in a room by now.”

I nodded. “Not a bad idea. Since humans started getting sick when they shell, it comes with an unintended benefit for us. Maybe Morgan can sift through any memories left behind and give us answers. Maybe he can even tell us where Eden went, if she’s still...”

Ryan nodded, pulling me to him. I hugged him back, my head cradled perfectly by his neck and chin.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” I whispered, readjusting my chin on his shoulder. “I remember her first steps, her first punch, all of it. She was the perfect combination of Jared and Nina. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I dunno. I feel like we’ll see her again,” he said. “She doesn’t feel gone, Claire.”

I sighed, getting myself together. “I don’t want to get my hopes up. Let’s go back. See what he knows, if anything.”

Ryan nodded, holding out his hand and leading the way back to my Bugatti Chiron.

“Have you ever thought about getting anything less...”

“Ostentatious?” I asked. I knew it was, of course, like every car I’d had since the Lotus. I used my sleeve to clean a smudge from the black paint. The gold trim might have been a little much for someone else, but I liked my car like I liked my men.

“Not sure. What does that mean?”

Ridiculous. I rolled my eyes. “You’re lucky you’re cute and can hit a target from over fifteen hundred yards, because I didn’t fall in love with your intellect.”

We both opened our doors and sat inside. I pressed the engine button and the motor ignited, more a low gurgle than a growl and far less pretentious than the paint job.

“It makes you an easy target.”

I touched his cheek, then leaned in for a deep kiss that made my insides flutter. “Baby,” I said as I pulled away, staring into his eyes, “I’ve never been easy.”

“Well, that’s no shit,” he grumbled as I pulled away.

It took us longer to find parking at the hospital than it did to drive there. The lights and underbelly of the Bugatti blinked twice when we got too far away, instantly locking the doors. Ryan being Ryan refused to part with his old Toyota Tundra, but he didn’t really need anything fancy. We were usually together, and we both knew I was the better driver, anyway.

“Hear anything on the radio, yet?” I asked.

Ryan shook his head. He kept a small comm in his ear most of the time, listening to the Providence Police Dept chatter. Keeping our family safe was a full-time job, and Ryan and I were a team, but he was also a captain at the Providence police department. It gave us an in when we needed it, and Ryan an earthly break from the fantastical chaos that was our world.

“It’s been pretty quiet, actually.”

The automatic doors of the ER swept open. Ryan pulled and tugged at his wedding ring as we approached the front desk.

“Sometime today,” I said through my teeth.

“Trying. I don’t do this very often anymore.”

Ryan stopped at reception, resting his elbow on the counter, flashing his best half-grin at the nurse behind the desk, who immediately smiled back, batting her eyes.

I’m going to throw up.

“Hi,” Ryan said, slipping the ring into his jacket pocket. “Bev, is it?”

“How can I help you?” she said, straightening her name plate so it was in Ryan’s full view.

I rolled my eyes. *Yes, he’s cute, but damn. He’s not that charming. Why do all the women swoon?*

“I was in here earlier with my sister,” he said, gesturing to me. “We brought in a kid we found beat up or something. We were just wondering how he’s doing.”

“Oh,” she said, blushing. “I’m not allowed.”

“Of course,” Ryan said, leaning in more. “Maybe just let us know if he’s been moved to a room? We’d love to go see him. He seemed a little scared and out of it.”

Bev smiled girlishly, then looked down. “I really can’t, but you’re really cute. Maybe just... I shouldn’t.”

“Bev—” Ryan began.

She looked up, the shy and excited expression gone. “Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m old enough to be your mother, boy, now put your wedding ring back on and get the hell outta my ER.” She leaned back, getting worked up. “Tryna butter me up like I can’t get a man on my own.”

We walked away, Ryan trying to push his ring back over his swollen knuckle and me with my hands in my jacket pockets, trying to hold in the laughter.

“It’s not funny,” he said when we were finally outside.

I burst out in a barrage of giggles that quickly became louder, tears streaming down my face. It felt good to let go, but soon those uncontrolled belly laughs became inconsolable tears. Ryan hugged me, holding tight. He grunted so I knew I was holding him tighter, but I couldn’t help it, and he let me. We were surrounded by trees, behind us darkness, in front of us so many lights it was almost day. We’d spent so much time there, within those walls. Ryan had almost died twice in surgery; his blood had poured on the floor. So had Nina’s, but here we stood, outside and unwelcome.

I turned to Ryan. “Stab me.”

“What?” he said, making a face.

“Stab me. Then you can walk around in the ER.”

He shook his head. “You’ll heal. It’ll draw attention. There will be questions. I’m PD; it’s messy.”

“Okay, then I stab you.”

Ryan lifted his light blue Providence PD T-shirt, the skin of his torso crowded with scars. “Pick a spot.”

I blew my bangs from my face, frustrated. “So, we just start looking in hallways, hoping he’s been moved to a room?”

“That’s the best option we have for now,” Ryan said.

“That’s not a plan. That’s hope.”

“Hope always seems to work for me.” He tilted his head, closed one eye and grinned, knowing I was going to make fun of him.

So, I didn't. "That's sweet, baby."

"Yeah?" he said, surprised.

"No. That sucked. C'mon."

Ryan followed me toward the main entrance, his hands in the air at his sides.

I kissed at him. "I'm just giving you a hard time. You're the sweetest."

"You are," he said, holding the door open for me.

The halls were quiet at midnight. Only the nurses and radiology staff walked the halls, barely acknowledging us while the nurses made their rounds, their scrubs swishing between their thighs while they checked charts and answered room calls. The wheels of the portable X-Ray units whined between the tile floor, and the weight of the machine pushed by the radiology techs. Ryan still had to work to distract overwhelmed nurses while I peeked in rooms or at patient lists. Finally, we found Morgan on the second floor, sleeping and alone.

He still looked broken even though I'd heard his bones snap back together myself. The skin beneath his eyes were purple, his stats still low. He sucked in a shallow breath, in no hurry to exhale.

"How long does it take to bounce back?" Ryan asked, watching him with concern.

"It depends. Before Eden was born, it didn't affect humans at all except for special cases like Kim. Now, they leave something behind. Like an echo. For some it takes weeks to get back to normal, some months. Morgan was shelled by the Devil. I don't know that he will."

"So, Eden saving him was all for nothing?"

I touched Morgan's cheek. "We'll know when it happens."

"When what happens?" he asked.

"The reason for his sacrifice ... and for hers."

I shook my head at the curly-headed kid in the bed, crossing my arms. It was strange to feel sympathy for the boy I just saw murder my niece, a girl who was my most precious. We'd played hide-and-seek, she called me out on my snark—and gave it right back—when she was just four, and kicked my tail during training not long after that. She was my hero, and he'd killed her.

“Morgan,” I whispered, patting his cheek gently. “Can you hear me?” I looked back at the television hanging on the wall. There was a sign hanging from a single strip of tape that read OUT OF ORDER.

He stirred.

I patted him again. “Morgan?”

“Eden,” he whispered. Even in his sleep his face crumbled, and he mourned. His eyes popped open, and he stared at the ceiling. A tear fell from the outside corner of his eye down his temple, settling in his ear.

“It's Claire, Eden's aunt. Do you remember me?”

He blinked a few times and looked around, clearly exhausted and confused.

“You're in the hospital. You're alive,” Ryan said.

His tense muscles relaxed back into the mattress, and his eyes seemed heavy again.

“Morgan, what's the last thing you remember?”

His eyes closed, and his bottom lip trembled. “Eden,” he said, saliva gathering in his mouth. “Eden.”

“Yes,” I said, running my fingers through his hair. “But you can still help her I think. I hope.”

He blinked again, his eyes slowly wandering to me. The sleeves of his hospital gown had bunched at his shoulders, the thin blanket probably not enough to keep him warm against the intense air conditioning.

“Do you remember anything else? Beyond the end? Something that might not belong to you?” I asked.

Ryan shook his head. “He doesn’t know what that means, Claire.”

“Sshhh,” I snapped.

His eyes fell away as he sifted through the past, and I wondered if he’d be able to communicate his thoughts if he did happen to remember anything helpful.

He raised a shaking hand just a few inches from the mattress, trying to point at something. I looked back. “Wall? White board? Writing? Chair?”

Morgan’s hand fell to the bed. He was exhausted.

“It’s okay,” Ryan said. “Take your time.”

Morgan noticed the television hanging on the wall in the corner of the room and raised his chin, concentrating on it for a moment. The beeping on his monitor kicked up a bit, but not enough to get the attention of staff. He blinked, and the television switched on. He blinked again, and the channel changed to *All in the Family*.

“What do the kids say these days? That’s lit?” Ryan asked.

I frowned. “*It’s lit*. And, don’t say it. You sound stupid.”

The grumpy, loud patriarch on the screen stormed out of his living room, slamming the door, and Morgan managed to emit a short groan.

“The old man?” I asked.

“Father,” Ryan guessed.

“Good one,” I said, nodding.

Morgan closed his eyes tight, and the television scanned through several channels.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down.” I stood, trying to keep up with the imagines. “It’s too fast.”

“All I see is blur,” Ryan said.

The screen went dark, and I looked to Morgan, who stared at the hall.

“You have a look. I’m not familiar with that one. Did you figure it out?” Ryan asked.

I sighed. “Door. He remembers her at a door.”

Morgan’s eyes fluttered, and he lost consciousness.

Ryan rushed over, touched him, then looked at the monitors, which all appeared normal.

“He’s okay,” I said, touching Ryan’s shoulder.

“Cool trick, but he could’ve just pointed at the door.”

I raked my bangs away from my face, blowing out a puff of air when they fell forward again. The door clue was very good and very bad news.

“Hey. You okay?” Ryan asked.

“The door. There are three doors in Hell. The way in, the way out, and The Oubliette. I can’t be sure that’s what he meant, but if he did ... getting in and out of Hell is one thing. Getting past the door that leads to the dungeons—and out again—is another.”

“What do we have to do?”

“We don’t do anything. You can’t go down there.”

He wasn’t impressed. “You could sneak me in, I’m sure.”

I looked up at him, serious. “No, my love. Humans don’t leave Hell. I know you want to help, but you can’t go.”

He wasn’t happy but conceded. He couldn’t die, or, as his guardian, I would die, too. And that was one risk Ryan would never take.

“So how do we get you past the doors?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “No one’s ever done it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

LEVI

KNOCK, KNOCK.

I wish I could say it felt good to be back. The first time I passed through planes to land in Hell, I was just eight years old. Before long, bouncing back and forth took all the effort of blinking an eye. Since Dad revoked my authorization because I refused to kill my girlfriend, this hometown hero has had to find more creative ways to breach these boundaries. That meant sneaking in where I wouldn't be seen, leading to me mastering breaking into the one place no one would suspect: the impenetrable dungeon of Hell, formally known as The Oubliette.

The double doors of the Oubliette stood twenty feet tall and wore white-hot flames that whipped and danced around its edges. Just in front of its entrance was a few simple deterrents to the already impossible-to-escape prison: a pair of petrified thousand-year-old oak trunks to lock its captives away from both the inside and outside, and a river of molten lava, all guarded by twin demons, Ozroth and Mechziel who had single-handedly held off Michael's army for two days during the Last War. Dad didn't play around when it came to punishment, and he didn't want his prisoners escaping before they'd been reprimanded nearly to death. He also allowed only the warden and the guardians entry.

I stood just within the doors, brushing ash off my shirt and jeans.

Screams pierced the haze before me, the guttural shrieks of Hell's Most Wanted. Those who misbehaved without permission, those who made Hell vulnerable by breaking the rules, those who disobeyed or defied Lucifer, or those who—directly or indirectly—tried to help the other side. I'd had my own cell here once, in the back where they stuck the truly forgettable. The burning chains around my wrists, neck, and

ankles were a distant but still vivid memory, and that was decades before I was sent to Earth to redeem myself.

She was worth it.

The ridged soles of my boots crunched over the broken concrete and rock beneath my feet as I turned to face my former prison. The walls glowed red and orange, broken up only by wooden stall doors, the windows simple holes secured with crossing metal rods. The darkness painted the seemingly infinite ceiling. I covered my cough with my fists. Even the wind carried fire. My lungs were no longer accustomed to the Sulphur, nor the air that was almost too hot to breathe.

Excited whispers seeped in from every corner, some repeating the same inaudible words over and over. They only grew louder after I took my first step, the low rumble of the fire unable to drown them out.

I checked the first cell, the rusted metal lock as big as my head. Two female creatures sat inside on their haunches, one wearing the headdress of a nun's habit, naked from the waist down, her misshaped ostrich feet flat to the ash-covered ground. The other had a peasant's scarf over her head, bodiless except for shoulder and arms. She held up a heavy book, probably her punishment for whatever crime she'd committed against my father. Cracked eggshells were littered on the ground around them. My father particularly enjoyed punishment, and they were typically carried out in a theatrical manner, almost with deeper meaning than most could decipher other than the tortured.

The prisoners stared at me and then at each other, but did not speak.

Bones and pierced hide stretched, and rotting covered the walls; all demons, all tortured beyond belief before their deaths, only to rise again and suffer again before my father, or his generals would send them to task or end them permanently (if they were lucky). True death did not come easy in Hell. It was a mercy more than a punishment.

I closed my eyes and felt my surroundings for Eden. It was hard to feel anything in the dungeons except sorrow and

pain, but her light was present, however faint. I could feel her, but she was far away. Cell after cell I searched, and my frustration grew. There were hundreds, each scene more horrific than the one before.

The last cell confined an enormous black figure, a layer of ash settling on his burnt wool-like fur. His wide shoulders the biggest part of him, his legs reduced to that of an alligator. He was slouched over in defeat.

“Surgät,” I said. “You’ve been here a while. I thought you were the one who could open all locks. Isn’t that what the Grimoires say about you, in all their fruity, pompous text? Guess not, eh?”

He huffed at me like a tired bull, but he was centuries into his sentence, and had lost any fight he still possessed a long time ago.

“Is there a girl here?” I asked. “A human girl. Surely that would catch your attention.”

He glimpsed at me, annoyed, then returned to staring at the crumbling wall. Something fearful was on the other side, but I couldn’t tell what. It wanted inside Surgät’s cell, though.

“Answer me,” I demanded.

“Never here,” he groaned, as if the words took all he had to speak.

“Where is she?”

“Deeper.”

I frowned. “Deeper than the Oubliette? There is nothing deeper.” I thought for a moment. “Except for the temple. Are you saying my father risked taking her there?”

He looked up me, his bloodshot eyes tormented and burdened with old knowledge. “The Keepers here say they buried her beneath to keep her hidden. To keep her bound.”

“She’s in the bog,” I said, dubious. Lucifer resided in the Ninth Layer of Hell, like the Oubliette, and beneath the deepest of many of its caverns was a pit filled with a darkness so thick not even my father frequented there.

I let myself relax and think of Eden. Surgät was right—she was there, but she was restless, confused. She was imprisoned in-status, curled into the fetal position, floating in nothing and nowhere. The temple was on the far side of the Ninth Layer in a valley, and not just any valley: The Prince’s Trench. I had to work fast; the soles of my boots were already melting.

“Damn it,” I hissed under my breath. There was a faster way to get there than sneaking or even the underground tunnels, and I wouldn’t have to set foot on the ground until I arrived.

I approached the dungeon doors and flicked my fingers. They obeyed, swinging open. The gargantuan demons guarding the other side were stunned only for a few seconds before attacking, the petrified trunks laying in half on the ground. Ozroth took one swipe, holding me against the exterior wall by the neck. With both hands I kept hold of his weapon, a u-shaped pitchfork that matched his horns. The razor-sharp edges were burrowing into the thin skin of my jaw, my blood dripping down the length of the dark metal and feet dangling six feet from the ground.

Ozroth’s black eyes focused on me, puffing mist from his snout. His face was a mixture of a goat and a rat, tar-stained hair matted in places, bloody in others. He shook his head, his thick coat from neck to pelvis latently rocking back and forth, ash flying in all directions.

“Take me to my father,” I said.

Ozroth glanced at his brother and then back at me, his eyes narrowing.

“Do it now, or I’ll kill you and Mechziel will take me.”

Ozroth’s eyes grew big. He finally recognized who he had pinned to the wall. He bleated, signaling for transport. With one yank, he pulled his pitchfork from the wall, and I fell to the ground, landing on my feet. I brushed off my clothes, blood from my hands smearing on the fabric. I rolled my eyes. “Great.”

“Good to see you, Oz. Where’s Ramiel?”

A low growl gurgled from his throat.

“Junior!” Ramiel called, strolling past me as the twins prepared my cage. He was one of the only beings in Hell besides humans not to look like a failed science experiment. He was tall and blond, a jarring contrast to everything else there. His ice blue eyes seemed happy to see me, but thick with an old pain he had been burdened with that would stay with him for eternity. “It’s been a while. I hear you’re in love ... again. Why have you put yourself through such torture? You know they’ll come after whoever you care about.”

“It’s her. I’ll only love one woman, Ramiel, just like you.”

His smile vanished. “It’s her?”

I nodded, my body jerked to the side as Ozroth clamped my neck with a thick, rusted metal ring and locked it to one of the long, jagged bones used to enclose the cage. Some were horizontal, some vertical, creating squares for me to see out of, but none of the bones were human. Hell was a punishment for all creatures, from every corner of the universe.

“Wait,” Ramiel ordered, holding up one hand.

“They’re taking you to your father,” he said. “Was she captured?”

“Killed. Lucifer murdered her in front of me ... and her family.”

Ramiel had spent eons building a reputation for himself in Hell. Ruthlessness was respected here and nothing else. As the only post-war Arch, Ramiel had to show strength at all times.

He now lived among the angels-turned-demons he’d once fought against in the war of all wars: the Battle for Heaven.

Still, his hardened expression wavered just long enough for me to notice.

“She’s at the Temple, then,” Ramiel said.

“In the Bog.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Do you know where Lizeth is?” I asked.

Ramiel's eyes instantly softened, and his lids snapped shut as he focused on the human woman for which he'd grieved so deeply he'd decried God.

When his ice blue irises were finally visible again, he peered up at the pinpoint of light in the hazy darkness above. "She's sitting at a small dining table alone, looking out the window over the main gardens. She doesn't know I'm here; thinks I've just gone out for a moment. Sadness doesn't exist in Heaven."

He would likely never see her again. Lizeth was taken from him in the early days of humans as an example to other fallen Archs who'd fallen in love with a human and left his Taleh unprotected. Ramiel's love for Lizeth was legendary; the story that wrote the first rules of Hybrids. Those rules govern superhuman families like the Ryels whose biological connection to their Talehs survival would last for generations, a gift and a curse for the half angel, half human hybrids.

"Is it at all possible?" I asked. "For you to find your way to her again?"

The distant look in his eyes vanished, and his hardness returned. "Only one way, Junior. And sacrifices are hard to come by in Hell."

He signaled for Ozroth and Mechziel's minions to begin their journey. Six crooked, timid Underlings scurried from under rocks a few yards away to pick up two long sticks that carried my cage; the rickety, make-shift cell becoming unsteady until they could get a decent hold.

"What can I do to help you, Ramiel?" I asked, sincere.

Ramiel held up a hand, and the Underlings paused. "Help me?"

"What can I do?" I asked again.

He thought about my offer, quiet for several seconds before he asked, "You're going to try to release Eden?"

I nodded.

“He’ll disown you, Levi, and it will be permanent this time. Not even the favor your mother carries will protect you.”

I nodded.

“But she’ll try. You know she will,” Ramiel said. I couldn’t tell if he was concerned or simply curious. The eyes are indeed the window to the soul. I could see the wheels of Ramiel’s mind spinning, searching for an answer, a solution, something.

“My mother is the only human in history to impress Lucifer,” I said. “He didn’t allow her to live after she gave birth to me. She fought her way back from Hell. Even Eden’s grandmother, Cynthia, wouldn’t stand a chance, and you know she—”

“You’re right,” Ramiel said, amused at his thoughts. “Petra is absolutely diabolical. The stories of Petra are impressive,” his smile faded, “but she’s still human. You do this, Levi... There will be consequences.”

“There always are.”

Ramiel conceded, then took a shallow bow in a gesture of respect. “Good luck to you, Son of Satan. But if I ever catch you in my dungeon again, I’ll kill you.”

“No, you won’t,” I said with a grin.

The Underlings marched forward with a collective grunt, and set out on the pathway leading to Lucifer’s Temple. Pieces of chewed flesh peeked from between their tiny, sharp teeth, human scraps that were fed to them by their demon masters. Humans were plentiful in Hell, used like cattle were on Earth, their byproducts used for all sorts of things. Underlings were far smaller but sturdier, the workhorses of the Underworld. Different from Drudens, Underlings resided only in Hell, created only to serve Hell’s hierarchy. They had no names, no homes, no time to rest, and no rights. I couldn’t imagine a more miserable existence.

With two on each stick, the Underlings heaved me over hills and down ravines, their grayish, thin skin and quick, tiny feet making them seem like naked rats trekking over the

uneven ground. Even in the stifling heat, they didn't break a sweat. We passed oceans of wailing humans, lakes of demons, burning cars and buildings, the fire and soot whipping in the wind. Creatures crawled along the ground like insects, and other curious, creepy beings aimlessly traveled the same road we did, dazed and adrift. A low rumble from the flames and distant, mysterious cracks were the background noise for the nightmarish place I called home.

The entropy and chaos of Hell was familiar, and yet I still felt disdain. Born of the pain but detached from it, I recoiled more than I could witness. I had to remind myself that we don't always belong where we begin. Love sometimes changes us so much that there's no going back to who we once were. Eden had freed me, and, despite all my sins, I no longer belonged in the bowels of the universe. For that, I would be forever grateful to her.

The rubble began to give way under the Underlings' paws, and my fist grew tighter around the bones that surrounded me as they stumbled. They were strong, but their tiny, rat-like eyes made them clumsy. I braced to fall over the narrow ledge they followed to my father's temple below.

Somehow, we made it to the bottom, and the creatures sat the box I stood in on the ground. Once they completed their task, they backed away, cowering from what was inside.

The temple loomed above me, but not even half as high as the cliffs that surrounded the trench I was nestled in. No windows and only one open entry, backlit by the liquid fire bubbling from the abyss that sat behind the structure. My father's house didn't need doors. No one went inside without permission.

I grabbed the bones again, calling out to whatever could hear me. "Honey, I'm home!"

A woman stepped into the open doorway, then walked forward, placing her elongated fingers on the bones that made up the handrail. Her long, square, black nails curved around the banister, and they slid further down as she descended the steps made of leathered flesh.

“Cassia,” I said, greeting her coldly.

Cassia’s black hair was sectioned into rows; the thick, inverted braids pulled tight and secured at the nape of her neck with a gold ring, letting the rest of her hair fall over her bronze shoulder in a single ponytail. The strands were somehow shiny even though Hell was absent of light. Cassia wasn’t a Queen of Hell—being unable to bear children for my father—instead, she was his steward and had been since the early days of her Persian empire.

Cassia was a daughter of Zartosht, known to the Greeks as Zoroaster. His teachings were that their god alone—Ahura Mazda—should be the one and only god worshipped. As most religions, it took a lot of bloodshed to convince everyone of this, and Cassia was eager to please her father, becoming the most prolific converter in human history. Zoroaster developed Zoroastrianism, the first monotheistic faith, but Cassia developed a taste for blood, and that new addiction didn’t just go away when the dissidents and even the outliers were silenced. That was when Cassia caught the attention of my father.

“Levi,” Cassia whispered in her smooth voice, sauntering from the bottom step to my cage. Her hand slid over the bones until her palm settled on the lock. She clicked her tongue. “This couldn’t have kept you caged. You needed a ride?”

I met her gaze as she looked up at me, seductive as ever. Most men would lose their minds with lust, but knowing she was once gleefully covered in the innocent blood of children helped me to see her for what she was.

“Is he here?” I asked.

She began to open her mouth, but one of the Underlings who had carried me squealed as it toppled down the ledge to the bottom. They were almost to the top; the long fall had injured him.

Cassia was unimpressed with his writhing. He’d interrupted her. She targeted him with her hazel eyes and then looked to the far cliff. With her eye movement, his body left

the ground and slammed into the rock. He didn't get up a second time.

She was satisfied, a grin relaxing her face.

“Good to see not much has changed,” I said.

She reached into the cage and pressed her palm flat to my chest, her fingernails grazing the base of my throat. “You've come back for her. She's here.”

I could feel Eden stronger than I had since my father took her. She was sleeping, trapped deep beneath the surface in a dark dream.

I lowered my chin. Cassia was human, but she was one of the oldest beings in Hell. She would fight to avoid being punished for giving up Lucifer's newest treasure. Despite being reassigned to Earth, in Hell I was older, and there was no stronger motivation than mine.

“You're coming out to play?” she asked, amused.

“Not to play.”

She arched an eyebrow.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her close. Her black painted lips popped apart. Suddenly, Cassia wasn't amused anymore. The gold chain that connected the golden piercing of the hoop in her ear to the stud in her nostril shook as she struggled. She hissed, cutting my forearm with one of the nails on her free hand. I grabbed that wrist, too, holding them together on my side of the cage. “I don't want to kill you, Cassia, but I will.”

“I suppose we're at an impasse. Lucifer will kill me if I let you take her.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don't be so dramatic. You've made mistakes before.”

“She's the Keeper of the Balance, Leviathan. He'll kill me a thousand times and never let me die.” She relaxed and smiled. “And he'll do the same to you. I'm his precious. Only he can end me.”

“He has to know he can’t hold her. Her death was a sacrifice.”

Cassia thought about that for a moment, then her eyebrows pulled together. “Then why bring her here?”

“More importantly,” I said, struggling to hold her. “Why put you in charge of a prisoner he knows he can’t keep?”

She smiled with full teeth. “You can’t poison me against my Master, Levi.”

“I’m here to get her. Stay out of my way.”

“You’re outnumbered.”

“I’m not leaving without her.”

She pulled away, slipping through my fingers, and then sprinted up the stairs, escaping inside.

I kicked open the flimsy cage door and stepped out onto the thin layer of ash. I coughed once, looking around. Eden was so close—calling to me. If I closed my eyes and concentrated long enough, I could’ve touched her.

The ground began to rumble, and I stumbled back. A fiery beast stood up from the lake of fire behind the temple, twenty stories high. Molten rock dripped from his horns, the lava below splashing at the shores.

I had to leap out of the way from the dozens of different super-heated elements.

When I got my footing, I attempted a wave and a smile. “Amaymon! How’s it going, brother?”

He was my older brother—a lot older. His mother was Hell itself. He was born from the fire that was her blood. He simply stared down at me, unimpressed. Amaymon was usually only summoned in times of great war, and he cared for no one.

I had four brothers: Amaymon of the southern realms, Egnyn of the north, Orien of the east, and Paymon of the west. I was Leviathan, ruler of the Underworld, my father’s favorite because of my mother, Petra, the only queen who followed

him from Heaven—and later his only human queen who he'd sent to be reborn on Earth to protect his favorite son. I was considered second only to my father, and my brothers hated me for it. I was like them once, filled with hate and fury until I fell in love with Eden. Decades learning from her light had softened my heart, and loving her opened my eyes. We were both punished for it, and again when we were sent to Earth on opposite sides of a new fight for power—this time for humans instead of Heaven.

From beginning to end our story was theatrical and angsty, just as my father preferred. My brothers weren't so easily amused, and likely found their summoning to teach me a lesson somewhat satisfying if it weren't picking at old wounds. I was the favorite, but I was also the least loyal—the family screwup. My brothers were the most fearsome demons in every plane in existence, and they were continually overlooked. Jealousy led to obsession, and obsession led to hate; all feelings that were commonly harbored in a place like Hell, but for an ancient demon descended directly from Lucifer, those thoughts were always acted upon.

My birth on an earthly plane gave my half-brothers even more reason to want me dead. Humans were the reason Lucifer acted against God, and aside from Underlings, they were considered the lowliest creatures. They were emotional and fragile, but they were also capable of extreme evil that could be used as an easy advantage for Hell. Cambions were rare and not regarded much higher. To add to their insult, my human mother was favored, the only human woman allowed to live after birthing a son of Satan. Egyn, Orien, and Paymon were all motherless. Amaymon was born of the pits of Hell, not exactly a maternal or even comforting place. All of them were pretty pissed about it and projected their anger onto me.

Amaymon's brows pulled together. His words were a garbled mess, slow and nearly inaudible. In his defense, it was difficult to speak the language of Hell with a mouth full of lava.

“I know she's here,” I said. “I've come for her.”

Amaymon opened his mouth, and just when I thought he'd spew liquid fire all over me, he leaned back and shook with laughter.

“Her death was a sacrifice,” I said.

Amaymon stopped laughing and looked down on me quickly with a serious expression. He knew a sacrifice couldn't be held in Hell, especially not Eden, The One, the Keeper of The Balance.

He thought about my words, then smiled again. “You may win the war, brother, but not the battle,” he gurgled.

I shifted, trying to come up with a reason for us not to fight, but Amaymon was positioning for one. I crouched instead. “Shit,” I hissed under my breath.

CHAPTER FIVE

EDEN

FOR A TIME, the darkness held me. Disoriented, confused, unable to see or to hear anything—even my own breath. After a few seconds I realized it was because I wasn't breathing. The last moments of my life came back in waves and then all at once. My mother's tears, my father's anger. Bex's and Levi's devastation.

Levi.

I could feel him. My senses were either confused or heightened. He was so close, his adrenaline heightened as if he were about to fight, but I knew he was still there, in my home, without me. I had no idea how to get back there, or where I was, but I had to get back to him; to ease the agony in his eyes moments before I left.

The blackness was sticky, possessive, and held on to parts of me that made it almost impossible to let go. My senses were jumbled, shut off, going haywire, as if tar-like fingers slipped beneath my skin and left me as cold as my surroundings. The cold was somehow refreshing, like sweet ice tea on a blistering hot summer day, and also somehow comforting and soft, making me think twice about breaking free.

Was it better that I stay? Would it be more peaceful without me? What if my return would only hurt those who loved me more? My mother didn't have to worry about me another moment. Levi didn't have to fight anymore. No one did. Their war was over if I would only stay away...

Those thoughts spoke in my voice, but they weren't my own. They came from the darkness; whispering, hissing.

No.

NO.

The darkness had held me, but not tight enough.

As I pushed away from the cold depths, swimming upward through a lake in winter, every bone felt broken, every nerve screamed for me to rise faster, to push myself harder. Each cell in my body seeming to move together in unison at a wildly chaotic pace.

I concentrated, and my leg twitched. The movement caused a sudden burning pain to radiate up to my hip, into my abdomen, and then my chest. After the pain subsided, I willed myself to test the darkness again, and once more it punished me. An electric fence blanketed me, and each movement I made set it off.

As violent as was my end, my new beginning would be excruciating.

After a few moments building up courage and preparing for the pain, I willed myself up, breaching several levels, each time passing through what felt like hundreds of broken mirrors lined in acid and salt. My hair was on fire, my eyes melted, my fingers twisted, and my teeth gnashed in agony. And just when the pain became too much, in the hellish misery of knowing I would either be free or die again, it was over.

The same bench where my parents had first spoken was beneath me, my palms flat against the wood. My home was just a short walk away, my family inside, but I needed to rest and gather my thoughts for a moment under the warm light of the streetlamp nearby.

Was I alive?

Had I died and risen again like freaking Jesus?

Could I come back from the dead anytime I wanted?

What the hell did that make me?

Steam rose from my wet hair and the moisture on my skin. It was thicker than water, the odor similar to the bottom of a trash can, bad breath, and burnt skin. I wrinkled my nose, held my wrist to my mouth, and then let it fall away, unable to get away from the smell.

Crickets chirped loudly in my ear, as did the sound of worms writhing through loose soil, fluttering of a bat above

me, and wind grazing the branches above. Those sounds I'd experienced before, not as concise, not as sharp, but they didn't disturb me like the sounds of sap pulsing through the tree roots in the ground, a deer grunting and breathing ten miles away, the tingling inside a chrysalis as it shuddered in the wind, the blood moving through my mother's heart. I could also feel her pain. I covered my ears and bent over until it stopped, but it only got louder.

"Stop!" I yelled.

Silence.

I sat up and looked around, unsettled. As much as I wanted to run home, I wasn't sure how to announce my arrival. My family had just seen me die. How would I explain that their zombie daughter was home in time for dinner?

I stood, taking stock of my extremities. Something was different. Very different. Not off, more like extremely in-tune with all life, from inside me to miles away. When the sounds creeped in, I shut them off without effort, but hearing an ant pulling a donut crumb across the sidewalk before I could willfully ignore it made every step disconcerting.

"Mom?" I called, pushing open the front door.

The lights were out, the entire house dark. Claire's new Bugatti wasn't in the drive, so some time had definitely passed. I worried how much.

"Dad?" I called. Panic began to seep in as the idea that my parents would appear gray and elderly crept in, that Levi would be an adult with a wife and family of his own while I'd been held by death for what seemed like a few moments.

"Come into the light," a familiar voice said. I could see him in the dark, even though he thought he was hidden.

I choked out my relief. "Bex?" He looked exactly the same as the last time I'd seen him. Same clothes, his eyes bloodshot and puffy from saying goodbye.

He stepped forward, the moonlight from the window glistening on the edge of his Glock's barrel.

He swallowed as his eyes glossed over. “Who are you?”

I nodded. “This is weird, I’m sure. But ... it’s me.”

His eyes narrowed. “This is a cruel trick, even by Hell’s standards.”

I shook my head. “It’s not a trick. Where’s Mom and Dad? Claire? Levi?” I gasped. “Where’s Morgan?”

Bex’s gun didn’t waver. “I’ll kill you where you stand, demon.”

“Bex, take a breath. Do I *feel* like a demon to you?”

He paused, then shook his head. “Eden?”

I nodded.

A tear fell down his cheek, but he still targeted me, unsure. “How?”

I shrugged. “I just remember being stuck in the dark, but then I found my way back.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Is it?” I asked.

“Are you here to kill me?”

I frowned. “No? You’re my uncle. Why would I kill you, dumbass?”

His resolve finally wavered and then disappeared. “You sound like her.” He dropped his gun. “If you’re not, you can just kill me, I guess, because I can’t watch you die again.”

My eyes burned. “I’m sorry.”

He tackled me, sobbing, but after a few seconds, he pulled back, disgusted by the gel covering my body. He sniffed his hand. “What...” he gagged. “What *is* that?”

I looked at my glistening hand. “I have no idea. Whatever I swam through to get here.”

“Swam through?” he asked, covering his nose with his wrist.

“It’s ... hard to explain.”

“Nina is at my mom’s with Jared. Ryan and Claire took Morgan to the hospital.”

“I can feel him,” I said, searching his body. He was banged up, but he would live. I sighed in relief.

Bex watched me, wary. “I don’t even have to answer, do I?”

I shook my head, then looked up at him. There were some questions I had to ask. “Why didn’t you go with them? Or go on a revenge run?”

“I couldn’t,” he said, shaking his head. He hugged me again. “I couldn’t move. I couldn’t stop hearing your voice or seeing the look in your eyes when he...” He swallowed, reliving the memory. “Revenge was the first and last thing on my mind. I wanted nothing more than to light half of Hell up, but I ... just felt I should wait here. Now I know why.”

“Where’s Levi? He’s not with Dad.” I could feel everything else perfectly but him. Levi was fuzzy, cloudy, just beyond the reach of my senses.

Bex shrugged. “No. He...”

“And he didn’t follow Morgan?” I said, purposely forming it as a question, even though it was more of a statement. I just needed to think of each person I loved, and I could see their surroundings, their expressions, hear their heartbeats. Morgan was asleep at the hospital, and he was alone.

“He didn’t. But, seeing you... Levi’s pretty messed up, Eden. I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“He’ll do the right thing,” I said, confident.

Bex stood, pulling me up with him. He flung his hands, the gel flying off onto the floor. “We both need a shower, and...” He scanned me from head to toe. “You’re different.”

“You sense it?”

He nodded. “What is it?”

“I don’t know yet. I can...” I breathed out a laugh. “It sounds crazy, but I can hear everything.”

“You always could.”

“Dad is explaining how my death is permanent to Mom. She doesn’t believe it.”

“He’s going to feel stupid in an hour or so. You can hear them?”

“Grandmother is stirring. Claire and Ryan are on their way here.”

“Can you turn it off?”

“Like a television. Flip channels, make some things quiet and others louder, and turn it all off all together.”

Bex nodded slowly. “That’s kind of cool, but your mom’s going to flip.”

“Maybe we should skip that ... for now.”

“Really? The girl who is all about transparency wants to omit information from the one family member who hates being in the dark?”

I shrugged one shoulder, already feeling guilty. But I knew my mother. She thought she wanted the truth, when in reality she preferred normal. The key was to keep her from knowing what she didn’t know. Mom had already been through so much, and as strong as she was, she’d just seen her daughter die. “I’ll tell her. Just ... one thing at a time.”

Bex pointed at me. “Shower. I’ll tell everyone to rendezvous here.” He hugged me again. “Love you, kiddo. The whole world ended there for a minute.”

“How long?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“How long have I been gone?”

“Almost twelve hours.”

I shook my head, stunned. I touched my middle. “Nothing left behind? My body isn’t lying around here somewhere, right?”

“Your body turned to ash a few minutes after your death. Nina was hysterical.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered.

Bex raised an eyebrow. “Are you insane? I don’t want to hear that again. It’s literally written in the Bible not to do that. That one rule not left to interpretation, so maybe respect it?”

“It says not to take the Lord’s name in vain, Bex. I’m not arguing with you about the trinity again. I’ve been a resident of Heaven, remember? Jesus was literally my homeboy.”

Bex chuckled. “Shower. Whatever that shit is stinks, and your mom and dad are going to want to hold you.”

I left him to climb the stairs, my shoes squishing with each step. I pulled the glass door of my shower, twisting the handle and listening as the water surged through the pipes. The water raced over every calcification and gathered at the shower head, finally exploding out, each drop hitting the ground thundering in my ears.

I closed my eyes, blocking the sound. It was like magic, and I wasn’t sure why it was happening or why I could control it. My mind bounced between my loved ones, thinking of questions just to see if I already knew the answer.

Levi.

He was far away. He was in anguish. He was mourning. He was confused because he could sense me again.

The water coagulated the gel even more, and I had to work to keep it from clogging the drain. Getting Hell gel-free took several tries, the globs dripping to the tile floor.

Bex was waiting for me as I stepped out in fresh jeans, a white T-shirt, and Converse, drying my hair with a towel.

“Eden...” He trailed off, trying to make sense of his feelings.

“I know. I’m trying not to let it freak me out. Let’s just find someone to ask before we panic.”

“Is it because you died? Or did he make you different somehow?”

“Lucifer? No. I mean, I don’t know. All I remember is the dark. He wasn’t there. I was alone, and then I broke free.”

“That’s freakin’ wild, kid.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, sitting at the dining table.

“Grandmother is coming,” I said, tilting my ear toward the hall. “And so is a storm.”

“Well, that’s irony right there,” Bex said as rain began to pelt the roof.

A door upstairs closed, and a few moments later Grandmother’s heels were clicking on the marble floor, heading to the dining room. She didn’t look surprised to see me, instead glancing down to her watch.

“That took longer than I thought,” she said, sitting next to me. A clean bandage was taped to a small wound on her head. I could feel it throbbing, sense her head aching. She held my hands in hers. “Was it painful?”

Bex’s expression was indescribable. Every emotion was on his face. “You knew she’d come back?”

“I didn’t know,” Grandmother said, waving him away. “I assumed. It’s Heaven and Hell 101, Bex. Honestly, why didn’t you assume? And why hurt Nina so deeply if Eden was gone years rather than hours, or she didn’t come back at all?”

“Grandmother,” I said, stern. Over the years I’d learned it was the only way she’d listen. “What do you know?”

She squeezed my hands. “I know that you’re back, and your mother will be so happy.” When I glared at her, she continued, however outwardly unruffled. “It was a sacrifice, dear. There is nothing purer. Lucifer should’ve known better than to believe God would allow an act so pure to be held by Hell.” She sat back and sighed. “Honestly, people have been prayed out of purgatory for less.”

“So she’s a slam dunk?” Bex asked. “We have an unbeatable force on our side?”

“Of course not. She has to do her job. She still has human blood running through her veins, and that makes her fallible, obviously. Not a ... *slam dunk* ... by any means.” She said Bex’s phrase like it was inferior gunk in her mouth.

“Eden is ... different,” Bex said, trying to say it delicately. “Do you know anything about that?”

“Different?” Grandmother said, looking to me.

I nodded.

“You took a shower,” she said. “Why, aside from the obvious.”

“When I came back, I was covered in ... a gel. The smell was putrid. The water only made it worse.”

She seemed annoyed. “Of course. He kept you hidden. There is only one place in Hell with a substance like that. The Bog.”

Bex seemed confused. “I feel like I should know what that is.”

“It’s a secret.”

“You knew,” Bex said, unhappy.

“Discussing it brings—” She looked up, and so did Bex.

Something heavy was coming, with a million smaller somethings.

“Just the word.”

“It’s not allowed.”

I stood up, bringing Grandmother with me, putting one hand behind me to protect her. “Then why did you say it?”

“Because that’s what it’s called, Eden, for goodness sake,” she said, unafraid and a little annoyed. She sat down and brought me with her. “When they realize it’s me, they’ll return to wherever they came from.”

“How do you know about it?” I asked.

She shook her head. Soon, the masses of aggression and anger began to slowly fade away until it was gone.

“Whoa,” Bex said, still staring at the ceiling. I haven’t felt that since ... since right before Eden was born.”

Grandmother sighed. “Yes, well, they’re quick to react these days, and overstaff if you ask me.”

Gravel crunched in the drive as Dad and Claire’s vehicles sped into the drive and came to an abrupt halt.

“Bex?” Mom called, her voice frantic and cracked. The door slammed. “Bex!”

“Dining room!” Bex called, staring at me with a hundred questions reflecting in his eyes.

Mom rushed in, her hair, nose, and chin dripping with rain. Dad rounded the corner, soaked in someone else’s blood.

“Eden?” she shrieked. Just as she moved toward me, Dad held her back. He stood in front of her protectively, even as she struggled.

“Eden?” Mom said, trying to move around her husband. “Jared,” she said, impatient. “Let me ... let me go,” she said, leaning away from him.

“Wait,” Dad said, eyeing me.

I stood. “Hi.”

“Hi, baby,” Mom said, breathing out a single laugh. Tears immediately streamed down her face.

“*Hi?*” Claire said, bringing up the rear. “*Hi?* That’s all you have to say to us?”

“Eden!” Ryan said with a stunned smile. His eyes glossed over, but he wiped them before any tears could spill over.

“Let me...” Mom said, pushing at my dad. “Let me hold my daughter!” she screamed.

“Nina, wait!” Dad growled.

“It’s her,” Bex said. He met Dad’s gaze, both their eyes glistening with happy tears. A small, relieved chuckle escaped his throat. “I swear. It’s her.”

Dad released Mom, and had I been human, she would've tackled me to the ground. Sobbing as she pulled me, she was unable to hold me tight enough.

"What happened? *How?* How are you here? Where did you go?" she cried. Her hand grabbed the back of my head, and she held my cheek to her shoulder.

I glanced at Grandmother before lying. "It's hard to explain. I don't know where I was, just that it was dark," I said, trying not to invite back the legion that had just rushed us at full force. I didn't want to chance them returning with my mother and Ryan present.

"And stinky," Bex said, his nose wrinkling. "I'll never forget that smell."

He's playing along.

"Smell? What smell?" Ryan asked.

"She was covered in steaming, rancid goo," Bex explained.

All heads turned slowly toward me.

"I showered," I said, defensive.

Dad took a step toward me. "You were in the Oubliette?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "It was black. I didn't see anything. It was like I was underwater. Thick, gelatinous water."

"You saw no one?" Dad asked.

"She just said," Claire began, annoyed.

"What are you getting at, Jared?" Mom asked, holding me tighter to her side.

"I was hoping she'd crossed paths with Ramiel." Dad spoke the language of Heaven to my uncle. Not that demons couldn't understand it, but it hurt them to hear it, making it extremely difficult if one could get his point across quickly enough. "*He's our one contact there. Maybe we could convince him to help us find Levi.*" Dad continued in English, "The sooner the better."

“I’m sure Levi can handle himself,” Ryan said.

Dad shook his head. “This is a strategy. Eden, Levi, Bex... they’re all connected. Whatever they’re planning will be a domino effect.”

“You think they’ll come after me to kill Levi?” Bex said, raising one brow.

“Or kill Levi to kill you,” I said. “But how can our friend help?” I asked, purposefully vague.

I remembered Bex glazing over the subject of Ramiel when I was nine. Ramiel was an Arch. Now, he was an Arch in Hell—the only one. We couldn’t out him. We needed a way to speak about him freely.

“Anyone can fill me in,” Ryan said. “I didn’t major in theology.”

“Or anything,” Dad grumbled.

“Ramiel is a lost cause,” I said.

Bex’s expression sank as he fell into deep thought. “Ramiel and God will never forgive each other.”

I looked to my dad. “*We can’t speak of the contact freely. He needs a nickname.*”

Dad nodded. “*CAHL it is.*”

“*CAHL?*” I asked.

“*Cranky asshole?*” Claire asked. When Dad smiled, she laughed aloud. “*I knew it.*”

“So why is Ramiel so significant to our story?” Ryan asked.

I pulled my wet hair into a bun and tucked it into itself so it would stay. “He’s not, except that Ramiel is a fallen angel like Papa Gabe. His wife, Lizeth, was human. She was made an example of, murdered, and when Ramiel asked for a second chance, his prayer wasn’t heard. He begged, he bartered, he offered his life for hers, but God was stubborn about the first rules.”

“I thought God listened to all prayers?” Ryan asked.

“Human prayers,” Claire said.

I shook my head. “Ramiel wasn’t human.”

“And he decried God,” Bex said.

“Decried?” Ryan repeated.

Dad rolled his eyes. “How can we explain it within your understanding? He cursed at the Creator of the Universe like a spoiled teenager.”

Claire frowned. “Lizeth was an innocent, and she was murdered. That is rule number one, Jared,” she said, holding up her index finger, “and guess who broke it.”

“Careful,” Jared warned. “That’s not for us to speak of. Besides, we don’t know the whole story. It’s been told for generations. Things get repeated wrong, lost in translation...”

“Was Lizeth his Taleh?” Ryan asked.

Claire shook her head. “Ramiel’s Taleh was Abel, son of Adam.”

“Abel,” Ryan repeated, stunned. “Like Cain’s brother, Abel?”

Claire nodded, uncharacteristically quiet.

Bex finished the story for her. “Ramiel was separated from Lizeth forever, sentenced to guarding the Oubliette for eternity.”

“The oobie what?” Ryan asked.

Claire chuckled.

Dad rolled his eyes.

Claire patted Ryan on the back. “Dungeons,” she said.

Grandmother stood on the other side of me, hooking her elbow around mine. She patted my arm, but she was trying to console my mother more than me. “Eden is home. That’s all that matters. We don’t need to send her back for answers. Nothing is coming.”

“Yet,” Dad said. “You know as well as I do Lucifer is going to call on every legion he has when he realizes she’s gone. And if Levi is down there—”

“He is,” I interrupted.

“Then we need to get him out, home, and form a plan. Hell is another world. It would be like us trying to search Earth for one person. The most efficient way to find him and get him out alive is our contact, who—to protect his identity, we’ll refer to as Cahl.”

Claire stifled a laugh.

“I’ll go,” I said, glancing at Grandmother. “I feel things differently now. Sharper. I can feel Levi now. I know the general region he’s in.”

“You want her to go back?” Mom cried. She hugged me to her, shaking her head. “No. No, that is exactly what Satan wants.” She looked at me. “You’re staying here, and we can figure this out together.” She looked to Grandmother. “You agree, right, Mother?”

Grandmother pressed her lips in a hard line. She knew the answer, and my mom wouldn’t listen to reason.

“I should be the one,” Bex said.

“You’re half human, Bex. You can’t bounce planes like I can,” I said. I looked to my worried family.

“So are you,” he grumbled.

“Not anymore,” I said. “I’m different. Stronger.”

Mom hugged me tighter. “What do you mean, *different*?”

I hugged her back, taking care not to hold her too tight. “I died.”

Dad finally allowed tears to fall from his eyes. He enveloped me then Mom, and even pulled in Grandmother, holding us tightly against him.

Not one to appreciate an overabundance of affection, Grandmother quietly and smoothly slid from Dad’s grasp and stood to the side.

Claire gave us a few moments, and then she covered her mouth. For maybe the fourth time ever, I witnessed Claire lose to her emotions. She hugged me, too, and then Ryan. Bex joined in shortly after. We were a heap of red-faced, sobbing Ryels, and Grandmother watched us with a detached expression.

Claire handed me a phone. “I found this on the ground after you... I picked it up before we left. Call your grandma. She’s worried.”

I nodded, dialing the numbers. I sought her out as the phone rang, easily picking up her essence despite the hundreds of souls between her and me. She was expecting my call.

“Eden?” Grandma Lillian answered.

“Hi,” I said cheerfully, as if I’d just arrived home from a training.

She hesitated. “Did it hurt, my love?”

“It didn’t,” I lied.

“I’m so ... I’m so glad, honey. We’ve all been a mess. I’m glad they... Well, I’m just glad to hear your voice again. I love you. Come see me as soon as you can, so I can hug you,” she gushed.

“I will. I’ll come tomorrow. Love you, Grandma. So much.”

We hung up, but before I could return to a conversation with Mom and Dad, a presence nearly overwhelmed my senses.

“What is it?” Mom asked.

“Eden?” Bex said, grabbing my arm.

I looked down at his fingers around my skin, then back at him.

“You okay?” he asked.

It was Levi, that much I knew. His sorrow, his anger, his vengeance was so loud it was hard to focus on anything else.

He could sense me, too, but he didn't know why. He was searching for me, but in the wrong dimension.

"He's here," I said, reaching out for him.

"Who's here?" Mom asked.

"Levi. He's close. But he's so far away."

"He bounced," Claire said, looking to my dad. "I bet he went to find her and bring her back."

"What does that mean? He's in Hell? Without dying? Can he ... can he do that?" Ryan asked, pulling out a dining chair to sit.

"He's the son of Lucifer," Bex said, always the most patient with Ryan's questions. "In theory he can, but I doubt he thinks he can just walk out with her," Bex said.

"So why'd he go?" Ryan asked, settling in at the dining table.

"His mother, Petra," Grandmother said, touching the bandage on her forehead. She sat, leaving an empty chair between her and Ryan. "She bore a son of Lucifer and is still alive. That speaks volumes. Maybe the Devil is scared of something after all."

Mom sat next to Grandmother, checking her bandage and whispering questions as to her wellbeing.

"Why would Lucifer be afraid of Petra?" Claire said. "She's just a human." She glanced at Ryan. "No offense."

"None taken," he said, staring at Bex and waiting for an answer.

"She's a mother. Satan has no power against a mother's love, like when I protected Eden as a newborn."

Bex thought for a moment. "Petra isn't protected by God, Nina. Petra is likely a vulnerability, a chink in the Devil's armor. She knows something, too much, or maybe she has something special now like Kim did, a power that could somehow hurt him or his plan." He shot Mom an apologetic

half-smile. Even after eighteen years, just the mention of Kim sent my mom into a shame spiral.

Mom sat back, and Dad was immediately at her side, holding her hand.

“So ... what’s his plan?” Ryan asked.

“Ryan!” Dad yelled.

“It’s a valid question,” Ryan said, holding up his hands.

“I need to bring Levi back,” I said. “Now.”

Claire frowned. “You can feel him now? Is he in danger?”

I shook my head. “Yes, and yes. Like, more than usual.”

Claire looked to Dad. “Let her go. If Lucifer thinks Levi had anything to do with Eden’s escape, any favor he might still have is gone. Remember Shax and his rabid obsession with the book? Eden was Lucifer’s prize, one that was so precious to him that he didn’t even display her. He hid her.”

I frowned. “I wasn’t asking. I’m going.”

Mom finally spoke, staring at the ground. “Petra can’t save her son from this, Eden. What makes you think you can?”

“I can’t explain it, Mom. Levi will be left unprotected, making him the target of every demon in Hell. He’s there to save me. To bring me back to you. I can’t leave him there to die. Or worse... captured.”

“We’re about to fight *another* war,” Mom said.

“Okay,” Dad began, holding out his hands in front of him, palms down. “Tap the brakes. We don’t know anything yet.”

“This isn’t up for debate. No humans can reach that plane,” Grandmother said. “Except one.”

Mom stood. “I said no. We’ll ... go to the warehouse. Call for Eli.”

“This can’t wait,” I said. I was sympathetic to her concern, but we were now in a race against time.

“We have time to consult with Eli before we send you back to Hell,” Mom said. She looked to Dad. “Jared, tell her.”

Dad shook his head. “She’s right, Nina. Time isn’t on our side. We need to find Levi quickly and get him back to this plane. At least then he’s not a sitting duck.”

I nodded. “How do I find him?”

“Cahl will know,” Dad said.

“Jared,” Mom warned. “I already don’t like the sound of this.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, closing my eyes.

“What is she doing?” Ryan asked. “Why are her eyelids fluttering like that?”

“She’s locating the entrance ... I think,” Claire said.

Mom put her hands on mine. “Eden, please don’t go. I just got you back.” She desperately reached out and snatched me back to the dining room, and I looked at her with a small grin. “I’ll come back. I promise.”

Mom nodded. “Don’t forget. You promised your mother.”

I smiled at her. “I won’t forget, Mom.” I kissed her forehead and then felt myself leave her side.

CHAPTER SIX

LEVI

I LAY ON the ground sweating and bleeding, my left hand, forearm, and side blackened and raw from burns. Amaymon had grown in strength since the last time I'd seen him, and quite frankly he was kicking my ass. I was half human now, after all.

I pushed off the ground, arms shaking, and looked up at him. "Is that all you've got?" I said, breathing hard.

Amaymon lifted his chin to the sky and laughed, his voice carrying through all nine levels of Hell.

I winced, feeling the stinging burn at every place he'd struck me. With one eye closed I huffed, trying to catch my breath. "What's funny? This is funny to you?"

A loud thud sounded behind me, and I turned around. Orien stood and brushed himself off.

I let out a disgusted growl, throwing a mini tantrum with every limb. "Really? Really, Orien? You couldn't just let Amaymon handle it?"

He laughed, moving lithely toward me. He would look like a man had he not been nine feet tall, had inverted knees, or horns protruding from his forehead that curved back and into a spiral like a giant, mutant ram. His hooved feet kicked up dust and ash that traveled fast, passing over me when he finally came to an abrupt stop.

"You're looking weary, brother. I thank Lucifer that I've never had to experience a single day as a human. I couldn't fathom feeling so weak."

Cassia stood in the doorway, armored from ankle to neck. She planned to join in the fight.

"You're missing out," I said, trying to buy time. I held my fist to my mouth and coughed. I could beat Cassia. Amaymon was a struggle but slow and ultimately beatable. Adding

Orien's arrival meant a fair fight, but it also meant that Paymon and Egyn were on their way. Egyn was the most fearsome of the four.

Cassia charged, her infamous double knives in each hand. I stood in a defensive stance, trying to keep my eyes on all three. She attacked, Amaymon released a glob of molten rock, and just as I tried to avoid both, Orien grabbed me in his enormous arms and squeezed. My ribs and spine threatened to snap and crush under the pressure.

I cried out, both in pain and frustrated at my weakened state. Before I could attempt to maneuver out of his grasp, he was gone, and I was on the ground. I coughed again, gasping just to breathe.

Orien's body smacked against the far cliff, falling next to the Underling Cassia had killed earlier.

Cassia cried out, and I turned, my mouth falling open. Eden was less than fifty yards from me, grabbing one of Cassia's knives and impaling her with it. Cassia cried out and stumbled back, as shocked as I was.

Amaymon reared his hand back, preparing to strike. We all knew Eden wounding Cassia meant punishment for us all if his loyal sons didn't smooth it over with a win.

"Eden!" I warned.

She rushed to me faster than I'd ever seen her move, sliding on her knees. The ash kicked up again, this time creating a wall around us. She helped me to stand, and once I was upright, she smiled at me.

"Hi," she said.

One corner of my mouth turned up. "Hi."

In the next breath, we were in the courtyard of her home. The quiet night surrounded us; the air finally cool enough to breathe.

I looked into her big, bright blue eyes, her long lashes blinking as if she were just as surprised as I was.

"Eden?" I said, breathing hard.

She tackled me, and we fell to the ground. I wrapped both arms around her shoulders, unable to hold her tight enough. We were both breathing hard, and I cupped the back of her hair with my palm for a moment before leaning back to look into her eyes.

“You’re back,” I said, my chest heaving.

She nodded, then stood, pulling me up with her.

“That was close,” she said.

“How? You were... *How?*” I held her at arm’s length, looking her over.

She grinned, shaking her head. “I broke free and came straight home. When I realized where you were, I had to go back for you.”

I cupped her cheeks with both hands, feeling an overwhelming urge to break down. Again, I hugged her to me, but this time for just seconds before planting my lips on hers. Her sweet mouth was soft against mine and felt more than just familiar; they were an old friend, a lover, a safe place I had returned to again and again. Eden’s fingers pressed into my back, but when I growled in pain she stopped, frowning.

“You’re hurt,” she said. She looked down at her bloodstained shirt, and then her hands, sticky and crimson.

I leaned in to taste her lips once more.

She pecked my lips—her mouth softer than anything should be that had just come from Hell. “We have to get you patched up.”

I grinned. “Plenty of time for that. We should get you back to your parents. Your dad and Aunt Claire are probably sending Rhode Island’s entire demon population back to Hell right about now.”

Her face fell, looking at my chest where my heart lay behind my rib cage. Unlike her, I was still human, and my heart was struggling. “They’re inside. You have to come now. You’re running out of time.”

She was right. I was beginning to feel dizzy and cold. “Okay, then. Lead the way.”

Eden held me tight to her side as she helped into her family’s home. My feet barely touched the ground as she bore all my weight. Jared, Claire, and Bex waited inside, ready with lights, sterile covers, suture kits, bags of saline and Morphine, an IV stand and a silver standing tray with medical supplies. Bex was disgusted, not from the mess of blood pouring out of me and onto the floor, but because he sensed our kiss.

“Eden!” Nina said, touching her daughter’s arm as we passed.

“Sorry, Mom. Need to take care of this.”

Nina nodded, wringing her hands together. She’d probably been worried sick with Eden leaving so soon after dying in front of her eyes. The guilt I felt was obviously misplaced, but real all the same.

“Evening,” I said, nodding to Jared as I limped to the dining table. It was a futile attempt to ease their suffering. Politeness. As if that could change anything. “Evening,” I said, nodding to Nina and Cynthia. Ryan was there, too. “Everyone, huh?” I said, grunting as Eden helped me onto my back. Humor. Even worse. “Wow. How long was I down there?”

“Too long,” Eden said, cutting my clothes away. The two lines between her brows deepened as she worked, likely concerned about the amount of blood I’d lost. I was shivering, the human part of me nearing death.

Before I’d betrayed my father, my immortal half felt dominant. Injuries were an afterthought. Now, I felt weak, humanly fragile and far from in control of my fate. Hell had most certainly blamed me for Eden’s escape. My brothers or Lucifer himself could arrive at any moment. The punishment for treason was death, so it would be easy enough for my father to let me die, and I was close.

Eden frowned. “This is going to hurt.”

“Just get it done,” I said, growling when she poked around in my wounds with her fingers.

Eden spoke as she worked, “I don’t feel your father approaching. Nothing from Hell incoming, actually. What are they waiting for?”

I was suddenly too tired to speak.

She tried to smile. “Maybe they know we have a secret weapon. Levi?” she said, glancing to her aunt. She looked back down at me, her gaze meeting mine. “Stay with me, Levi. Fight.”

“Secret weapon?” I breathed out.

She shook her head. “Something that was mine a long time ago. Something I’d made to protect us. It was hidden away in the Oubliette lifetimes ago. Do you remember?”

I thought, shaking my head. Even that took an incredible amount of effort. My injuries were more dangerous than I’d realized.

“Bleeder,” Jared said, gloving up. “There.”

“Got it,” Eden said, wiping her brow with the back of her wrist.

“Do you need—” Claire began, running an IV line.

“That’s it. That was it,” Eden said with a sigh.

“Starting Morphine,” Claire said hanging a bag from the stand. “Ryan?”

“Perfect,” Eden said. “Bex, could you...?”

“On it,” Bex said, butterfly needle and tubing already in-hand.

Ryan breached the small circle around me and rolled up his sleeve.

I looked to Eden. She answered, seeing my confusion. “Ryan’s O Negative. Universal donor.”

“Family pin cushion,” Ryan said with a grin.

“At least you’re somewhat useful,” Jared said.

“Dad,” Eden said with a frown.

Jared glanced at Ryan.

“Save your breath. You’re not sorry,” Ryan said.

Jared looked to Eden. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Could you at least keep your thoughts to yourself? He kissed your girlfriend. It’s been nearly twenty years. Get over it.”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Claire grumbled as she hung another bag of saline.

“Wife,” Jared clarified. “Nina is my wife.”

“She wasn’t at the time,” Ryan said. His eyes danced between the annoyed stares of Jared and Claire. “I’ll shut up.”

I chuckled. “You can’t win, huh?”

Ryan grinned and shook his head, his gaze settling on Claire. “Worth it.”

Nina cupped my hand in hers. “Levi?” I could feel her hesitation, but she did it, anyway. The gesture wasn’t lost on me. She loved her daughter that much, and that love overflowed onto me. “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good, actually,” I said as the Morphine flowed through my veins. “Thank you for asking.”

Nina sighed. “Good. That’s really good. You’d lost a lot of blood.”

“He should be feeling better any minute now,” Bex said, taping the second needle to my arm.

Nina scanned my wounds, then looked over her daughter, feeling for any injuries. “Eden, you weren’t hurt?”

“They didn’t touch me,” Eden said. “In and out.”

Jared’s expression was that of a proud father. Something I’d rarely seen.

Eden finished the patch work and then removed her bloody gloves, tossing them in a garbage bin Agatha had provided minutes before. The Greys and Ryels were a well-oiled machine, working in tandem, predetermining one

another's moves, and rarely needing to communicate. It was a sight to behold.

My Cambion side finally kicked in, but it burned out the Morphine as my body reacted. Pain immediately set in.

"More?" Claire asked, manning the IV pole.

I shook my head. "My body is healing itself. I'll just have to suffer through it. It could've been much worse, though, so thank you."

"Who knew Satan's son was so ... polite," she said with a fake smile and a shrug.

I started to laugh, but it hurt too much.

Jared approached, nodding. "In and out was a smart choice. I assume you had a run-in with something big."

"My brothers," I said. "And Cassia."

Claire frowned, a glint of recognition and anger in her eyes. "Cassia."

"Who?" Nina asked.

Jared paused and offered his wife a loving expression. She nodded, knowing he would explain later. Jared was lost in thought for a moment, then blinked, his gaze returning to me. "Cassia resides in Lucifer's temple. Why were you there?"

"Looking for Eden. She was beneath the temple, imprisoned there. Or, Cassia thought she was."

"I was," Eden said.

"The Bo..." I trailed off, deciding it was best not to unleash a legion or two of demons for saying the word. The Bog was my father's secret safe, and to speak of it outside of Hell was forbidden. "Basement of my father's temple."

"I *was* there," Eden clarified. "I freed myself."

"That's impossible," Jared said.

Everyone traded glances, seeming confused.

"I don't think anything could have held her there, anyway," Claire said with a smirk.

Nina stared at her daughter. “You’re different.”

“She died,” Bex said. “Maybe her human side died with her.”

“I don’t know how, but yes, I’m different,” Eden said. “But I’m still your daughter.”

Nina’s bottom lip trembled, and she pulled Eden to her, holding her tight. “Don’t leave me again.”

“I won’t,” Eden said. She looked to her father with the same smile she had before my father stole her from us.

Eden now had powers beyond anything any of us could understand—maybe she always had them—but she was still the young woman we remembered. She’d just saved me against two sons of Hell and Cassia, so different and still the same from the being I fell in love with so many eons before. Her light, her mind drew me to her in the beginning. Eden made me curious about how the other side worked, why they were so patient, loving, somehow more so with their enemies. She wasn’t just an angel, though. She was more: powerful, and confident—even in the presence of God Himself.

“Let’s get you both upstairs,” Jared said, gesturing to the door. “Unhook him, Bex.”

Bex quickly and carefully pulled the needle from my vein and connected it to a bag for Ryan’s blood to fill for later use.

Eden let her mother go and stood next to me, hooking my arm around her neck. She was unhappy about something.

“Bex?” Eden called. I couldn’t decipher her expression, but she’d gestured toward the doorway that led into the foyer.

“Oh shit,” he said, his eyes wide. He took a step then stopped, frozen.

In the space Eden had gestured to seconds before stood a woman I hadn’t seen before. Her long, reddish brown curls fell six inches past her shoulders onto her navy-blue scrub top, her honey brown eyes through her black, rectangular-rimmed glasses, her eyes wide as if she was the one caught.

“Alli,” Bex breathed, stepping into view holding a thick roll of gauze and a large bottle of antiseptic.

“Who’s she?” I asked, my eyes dancing between Eden, Bex, Eden’s parents, and the woman.

“Allison,” Eden said, smiling softly at her, but whatever tenderness Eden felt for her was replaced with concern. My father was en-route.

Allison slid her palm down her front, nervously flattening any possible wrinkles. She was older than Eden, closer to Bex’s age. It was hard to tell exactly how she fit into their circle besides that Bex was obviously in love with her. She only wore scrub and a thin gold band on her left finger, a small oval diamond shimmering in the sun that slipped through the window shades.

She began picking at her nails like Nina did when she was anxious. “Your phone call,” Allison stuttered. “I had to check on you. You sounded awful.”

“Bex,” Eden warned.

“I know,” Bex said. He sighed and took a step, finally unfreezing from the spell she’d unwittingly put on him. “You can’t be here. You have to go.”

Allison looked at each of us, her cheeks flushing pink.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have come. I’m sorry,” she said, trying not to cry.

“Allie,” Bex began, and then looked up. “It’s too late. Allison, wait!” he commanded, his voice almost a yell. He rushed over to her and brought her back within seconds, holding her tight to his side.

I felt it, too, and Bex was right. Whoever Allison was, she’d be safer inside with us. Lucifer appeared next to Eden, smelling her hair. She wasn’t affected, but she put a hand on my chest because I was a second away from attempting to attack him.

“You’re still healing,” she said, calm. “Don’t move.”

I glared at my father, my voice shaking with anger, each word emanating from my throat slowly. “Don’t touch her.”

Lucifer smiled, then took a step back.

Jared pulled his wife close, stepping quietly into a protective stance. Human eyes may have missed him using his thumb and index finger to keep her from lurching between her daughter and the Devil. It wouldn’t surprise me, and it certainly wouldn’t have surprised my father. In fact, he was probably counting on it for one of his two dozen plans for what might happen next. I couldn’t blame Nina. Eden was her only child, and Nina had protected her since before she was born. Any rational thought left her once the entity that had murdered her child once had stood too close. Nina would try to end him with her bare human hands whether Eden needed protection or not.

“Mommy, don’t,” Eden said firmly.

Lucifer snarled in Jared and Nina’s direction, but then his attention was taken by the only other human in the room.

Allison’s mouth hung open, startled and confused by the impeccably dressed, clean shaven, black-eyed monster who had just appeared in the blink of an eye.

“Look away, Allison,” Bex said, but she was transfixed.

I could see in his eyes a mixture of fear, angst, and caution—that Allison was no stranger to him. If she wasn’t family, he was devastatingly in love with her. Bex took both of her hands in one of his, the other touching her chin with his thumb. His touch instantly broke her from her frozen state, and she looked up at him, a single tear falling down her cheek and catching at the rim of her glasses. She was terrified, as she should be in the presence of evil personified.

“Look at me. Just me,” Bex said, staring down into Allison’s eyes.

Eden looked over her shoulder, barely acknowledging the dragon breathing on her neck. “Leave. I’m busy,” she said, taking a step.

Admittedly, my attraction to her in that moment reached an all-time high. The absence of fear in her eyes while she stood next to my father—a being who made the entire universe quake—was oddly arousing.

I relaxed, knowing she was in control.

Lucifer wasn't convinced. He tried to whisper in her ear, but she swatted at him.

Jared breathed out a laugh.

Lucifer grabbed her arm, barely able to make it budge.

“What's this?” he said, jerking at her once more without result. He looked around, then screamed into the air. “I demand to know the meaning of this!” Many voices circulated throughout the room, crowding us, passing through us, rattling the windows and walls of the house.

Allison's shoulders shot up to her ears, but she remained relatively calm in Bex's arms.

Eli stood next to Jared, appearing impervious to be a part of yet another quarrel between Hell and the Ryels. He was the only one besides Eden unaffected by the presence of the King of Hell. “Good day, all,” he said, cupping Jared's shoulder.

Jared relaxed, as did his wife.

“She's mine, Eli!” Lucifer seethed.

“If she belongs to anyone, it's me,” I said. The excruciating pain just from speaking forced a groan from my throat.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” Eden said. “We have two large rooms and a staircase to go. Or, I can carry you.”

“Absolutely not,” I said, disgusted at the thought.

My father's eyes rolled back in his head, and a collective moan began to sweep up from the floor as if he were torturing the entire Underworld. His head stretched from one side to the other in an unnatural way until he finally clenched his fists and shook them next to his face, screaming once more to the back of Eden's head. “Did you hear me, you wretched bitch?”

Nina had to hold Jared back this time.

Eden caught my gaze and shook her head once, warning me not to react.

Eli held up his hand. “Now, now. We can all agree that all belong to the Creator,” he scanned Lucifer, “even when we misbehave.”

A sword appeared in my father’s hand, and before anyone could react, Lucifer buried it deep in Eli’s chest. Eli’s torso concaved, and he looked down at the enormous sword protruding from his body.

Jared’s eyes bulged; his mouth fell open. Claire sprang into action, and Bex used his body to shield Allison before the humans even knew what had happened.

“Children misbehave,” Lucifer hissed, yanking the sword from Eli’s rib cage. “I am no child.” He caught Claire midair, holding her by the throat, her feet dangling several feet from the ground. Lucifer looked up at her. “This feels familiar somehow. Shall we open your skull again?”

“*No!*” Ryan said so loud his veins bulged from his forehead and neck. He shook while he spoke, his skin bright red. The volume was impressive for a human.

Nina cried out and covered her mouth, but her hand fell away when she realized there was no blood saturating Eli’s shirt where the sword had entered. Eden watched it play out as if she were watching television, interested but unfazed.

Eli righted himself, fixing his torn Oxford. He wasn’t hurt, but he was annoyed, rare for the highest-ranking liaison of Heaven. He pointed at Claire, pulling her without touch from Lucifer’s grip and setting her gently on her feet next to Ryan.

“Lucifer, Satan, Abaddon, Beelzebub, Belial, Apollyon...” Eli listed slowly. My father winced with each. “Prince of Darkness, Fallen Star, Morning Star, Tempter, Beast, Dragon.” Eli spoke louder with each name. He walked toward Lucifer, who recoiled. “In the name of the Most High,” Eli quieted, “you will listen.”

A beautiful echo followed his words, but it was also fearsome, as if they had come straight from God.

Lucifer's breath was labored, his shoulders sagged. He dropped the sword. The heavy iron fell through the wooden floor, disappearing as quickly as it had materialized.

Jared's hands were perched on his knees as his head fell forward. "I thought," he said, breathing hard, "I thought you were gone forever. I thought it was..."

"The sword? You mean *Gehenna*," Eli said, flattening his ruffled, torn shirt with his palms. "If it were, I'd be ashes, and by the hand of the Creator so would Lucifer."

"Thank God," Jared said, standing.

"*Gehenna*?" I said, the word feeling familiar on my lips. My memory returned. It was a fabled sword that could kill immortals. "It was destroyed on the last day of the war, wasn't it?"

Jared began to answer but was interrupted.

"Twice now Heaven has spared her life," Satan spoke. "The Balance has been broken. Over and over you..." his neck stretched, and his eyes rolled in their sockets as another moan ripped through him, "...lie."

Eli arched a brow. "Did you just call the Almighty a liar, Lucifer?"

Lucifer groaned again, his body bending in ways that would break a human's every bone.

"What's happening to him?" Ryan asked.

"He's being punished, and he's fighting it. Elsewhere," Claire said.

"Elsewhere?" Ryan asked.

"It's making his existence on this plane weaker," Eden said.

"So let's kill him," Ryan said, pulling his sidearm and pointing it at my father's head. His thumb pulled down the hammer, and it clicked.

“No,” Eden commanded. “No.” Her voice was softer this time.

“She’s right,” Eli said. “Put it away.”

Ryan did as he was told, not that he had another choice.

Lucifer took a step forward, tired but refocused. “If not her, then who? She must be punished!”

Eli nodded. “Very well.”

“No!” Eden said, covering my body with hers. She looked up at Eli. “Not Levi. I’ll go.”

“Eden, stop!” I said, grabbing her wrist. “You’re not doing this to me again. To *us* again.” I gestured to her family, and her gaze panned to everyone staring at her in horror.

Tear-glazed eyes stared into mine. “Levi, I’m not losing you again, either. There has to be another way. Think of another way.”

Eli grinned. “Levi is right. You’re off limits, toots. The Lord God won’t allow that gaffe again.”

Eden looked down at me, her mind traveling through every variable and avenue. Her eyes closed tight, and I realized it wasn’t alternate outcomes she was thinking of. She had sensed my brothers coming full speed to our plane before I did.

Eden’s face turned severe. “Send them back, Lucifer!” she demanded. She looked at Eli. “There are humans here! Send them back!”

The walls rattled, and an orange glow warmed the windows. The back door cracked, and then something from the other side blew through it, sending splintered wood into the dining room.

Cassia stood, looking particularly gruesome and intimidating in as mundane a setting as the Greys’ dining room.

Lucifer smiled in satisfaction, drunk from the growing fear in the room.

“Eden,” Eli warned.

She looked down at me, her breathing faster than before. “I won’t let them take you.”

“Eden,” I said, shaking my head once. “Let me do this.”

“They’ll kill you, or worse—let you live.” Her voice broke.

“This is from the top,” Eli said. He held up one finger, pausing for a moment before nodding and speaking again. “Levi stays. He is Bex’s Taleh. To hand him over would be to also give you Bex’s life, and both would be at your disposal.”

I looked up at Eden, who breathed out a sigh of relief. Tears spilled over her cheeks. She wiped them quickly, glaring at Cassia.

“We’re okay,” I said, trying to comfort her.

“You’re okay,” Bex echoed me in a whisper. That near silence was what gained the attention of everyone he didn’t want to hear.

“Who is this?” Cassia asked with a wicked grin, nodding toward Allison.

Allison trembled uncontrollably in Bex’s arms.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise,” Bex whispered. His eyes closed in regret. In his attempt to comfort his niece, he’d drawn Hell’s focus to the woman he loved. We could all see the determination in his eyes, but that commitment to protect Allison only excited my father more.

“If you’ll not hand over the One, and not my Judas son, then who?” Lucifer snarled. His question was only theatrics. He knew who he wanted before he’d asked.

Satan’s gaze fell on Bex and Allison. “Someone to teach the Ryels a lesson. Someone to satisfy me. A sweet, tender little lamb. Their pet lamb.”

“I’ll kill you, first,” Bex said. “She’s an innocent.”

Lucifer smiled. “Well, then. Eden is special. Allison is human. Both untouchable. This sounds very much like a fair

trade, Eli. Something Heaven would allow no doubt.”

Bex met Lucifer’s eyes without hesitation. “Heaven will burn before I let you touch her.”

“Bex,” Eli warned. He wasn’t angry, but the youngest Ryel sibling was dangerously close to blasphemy.

“Eli didn’t say no,” Cassia said. She leapt from where she stood, aiming her knives at Allison as she came dangerously close to the human’s throat. Cassia’s feet hit the floor, and Allison leaned back unnaturally far to avoid the blade suddenly at her throat.

Bex had the attention of the room, holding a cutlass against the flawless, rich skin of Cassia’s throat.

“Where the hell did you get that?” Claire shrieked.

I couldn’t contain the grin spreading across my face.

The short, broad sabre sword was *Gehenna*. One of only two weapons could exist in all three realms. The small but efficient weapon was what my father used the day he turned on God. Its perpetually sharp edges had slayed angels in the thousands, and it in turn could also kill demons; definitely a creature like Cassia. Recognition erased the smug grin usually residing on Cassia’s face—and my father’s—the same time it hit me. *Gehenna* was confiscated when Lucifer and his legions surrendered. It had been hidden away for eons, and now it was in Bex’s hand.

My father screamed for his slave. Besides my mother, Cassia was the closest he’d ever come to loving something more than himself. She put away her knives, sliding them into the holsters at the back of her leather vest, and without a word, she backed away from Bex’s human slowly until she achieved safety next to my father.

“I’m going to throw you into the Oubliette, and you’ll rot there for eternity,” Lucifer hissed. He stared at Bex, and then Allison. “But first I’ll make you watch as I torture her until she begs for death. She’ll scream out your name until she has no lips or tongue to form it.”

Bex lunged at the Devil, but his brother stopped him.

“Bex spared her life!” Jared said, pleading to Eli while struggling to hold back his little brother. “Cassia attempted to disturb The Balance. Bex could’ve slit her throat, but he restrained himself. She should fall under our protection.”

“Enough,” Eli said. Bex stopped fighting. “Jared makes a good point. Regardless of what rules have or haven’t been broken—because, let’s face it, you’re both famous for skirting the rules—” he said under his breath, “the Ryels are protected, Lucifer. You know this.”

My father backed away as he spoke. “The woman isn’t a Ryel.”

Bex grabbed Allison’s left hand and held it up, showing her engagement ring to the room. “She will be.”

“Then I have until then,” my father snarled before he left, and he took Cassia and my brothers back the way they came.

Bex lunged at where Lucifer stood, but was stopped midair by Claire. He kicked and tore at his sister, trying to get to the one demon who had killed his niece. It was clear now who and what Allison was to him.

“Bex, stop!” Claire yelled, dodging his fists while somehow managing to keep hold. “Bex, please!”

Despite Claire’s begging, Bex continued to thrash until Allison stepped in.

“Bex,” she said, her voice calm. Just holding her palm to his cheek was all it took to render him helpless.

Claire grabbed his collar in both fists, ripping it when she yanked his face to hers. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she said, yanking again. “Where did you get the blade?”

Bex never took his eyes off Allison, breathing hard from fighting his sister.

Eden wore the same frown as her uncle.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Don’t do that again,” she said, stern. “Don’t you ever offer yourself in my place, or anyone’s place, do you hear

me?”

“I—”

“If we’re apart, this was all pointless,” she said, exasperated. “I won’t live another lifetime, another *day* without you. Got it?”

“I get it. I’m sorry, I just... I couldn’t watch him take you again.” I cleared my throat, feeling it tighten at the memory.

She gestured to Eli. “You heard him! My family was given protection, and I’m off limits. I understand a sacrificial death is the only way for you to get into Heaven, but your father would’ve kept you alive just enough to torture you.”

“Okay!” I said, squeezing the arm that was around her neck. I pulled her face to me and kissed her cheek. “I panicked. Won’t happen again.”

“Thank you,” she said, still frowning.

Eli stared at the blade in Bex’s hand. “Well? Are we going to talk about this?”

“I can’t,” Bex said, lowering Gehenna to his side.

Eden reached her hand toward her uncle, palm up. “Hand it over.”

Bex frowned.

Eden wiggled her fingers a few times, impatient. “You know why.”

Bex rolled his eyes and tossed her the sword. The thick grip landed in her palm.

“You didn’t know he had it,” Jared said to Eli, more a statement than a question. “How could you not know?”

Ryan scratched his head. “I thought he knew everything.”

“No one knew,” Bex said. “It was the only way.”

“How did you get it?” Eli asked.

Bex shook his head. “It was a gift.”

“From who?” Jared asked.

“Someone who knew I’d need it. That’s all I can say.”

“Eden?” Jared asked.

“I don’t know how he got it. I just know as the Keeper of The Balance it makes sense for me to hang on to it.”

“Well,” Eli said, checking his buttons. “That could change, Eden. I’ll let you know. And, Bex, whoever gave it to you stole it. Not only is that one of the Big Ten of no-no’s, it also happens to disturb The Balance. The punishment for that is death via your niece. I’m afraid you’re going to have to tell me.”

“I’m afraid we’re at an impasse, Eli,” Bex said.

Eli’s brows pulled together, but he still managed a smile. “I’m hearing you say you won’t tell me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’m sorry, Eli,” Bex said, genuinely apologetic.

Eli was certainly out of his element. It seemed, very possibly for the first time, that Eli didn’t know what to do.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EDEN

LEVI LEANED AGAINST the wall to keep himself upright while I turned the squeaky doorknob of my bedroom. Once the door was open, he held his breath from the pain, even as I supported his full weight.

“Still not healed?” I asked.

“It’s slower this time. I don’t know why.”

The color had already returned to his beautiful, albeit bruised and battered face. Those wounds were procured while trying to save me, and although I’d already loved him for an eternity, that made me want to love him for another one.

We paused at the end of my bed, and Levi leaned down to kiss me.

“Wait just a second.” I chuckled.

“Are they still talking downstairs?”

I nodded. Allison had a minor mental breakdown when Eli blinked from our plane, and only Mom was patient enough to wait for Dad to explain things his way. So Ryan offered a human’s perspective, while Bex and Claire explained everything to Allison.

“What do you mean I can’t leave?” Allison asked. I could hear her weight leave the chair she sat on and transfer to the boards of the floor beneath her feet.

“It’s not safe for you to go anywhere alone now,” Bex said.

“Unless I’m a Ryel,” she said. “Eli said... He said Ryels are protected.”

“Everything okay?” Levi asked.

I nodded again. “She mentioned that if she’s a Ryel, she’s protected.” I listened more and frowned.

“Uh oh,” Levi said.

“Bex just told her he doesn’t want this life for her. *Stupid*,” I hissed under my breath. I smiled. “She’s stubborn. She just said it was too late now.”

Allison began to pace, and Bex waited, allowing her a moment to be human. I felt bad for her, and I could feel that my mother did, too. Taking a crash course in Heaven and Hell and the creatures and laws that came with it would be frightening for anyone, and now the man she loved just said he didn’t want to marry her. That would be a shitty day for anyone.

“We all understand, Allie. It’s okay,” Mom said.

Ryan stood, and Allison paused in front of him.

“How ... how did you feel?” Allison asked. “When they told you?”

Claire sighed. “Don’t ask him. He’s a mutant.”

Allison took a step back, her heart rate rising.

Bex couldn’t hold in the chuckle that rose up in him. “She’s not being literal,” he said.

“You think this is funny? I just had a run-in with Satan himself. This isn’t a joke, Bex,” Allison said, irritated.

“You’re right,” Bex said, clearing his throat. “You’re right. It’s just that ... I haven’t seen you for what feels like an eternity, and you’re here, and it’s ... surreal. You’re still beautiful and as feisty as I remember.”

I smiled. Bex had women throwing themselves at him since he was fifteen. He’d looked like a full-grown man since he was even younger than that, but it wasn’t until he saw Allison for the first time in Titan Shipping’s lobby did he even hope to have a normal relationship. He’d been waiting to learn who his Taleh was and was devastated to learn she wasn’t it. My father’s Taleh was my mother; Claire’s Taleh was Ryan. Bex knew how hard it was for his father Gabe, an Arch, to love a human who wasn’t his Taleh—to be away almost all the

time from his wife, his family. Bex didn't want that for Allison, and so he'd let her go.

Allison spoke again. "I know you said to stay away, but when you called ... your voice... I knew something horrible had happened, and I couldn't *not* come."

We'd all gotten to know Allison while they were together. She'd always possessed a quiet strength, very different from her uncertainty in that moment. I knew it was hard for Bex to see. "C'mere. Alli, please? C'mere." His voice was softer the second time, begging her to trust him.

Allison's heart stopped pounding, and she relaxed, sitting next to him.

Bex explained himself yet again. "No, I don't think this is funny. Ryan is human like you. He was unfazed when Claire told him. Other than thinking she was messing with him at first, Ryan just wanted to know her secret so it would be one less thing standing in his way. He doesn't get rattled by much, which is probably why my sister married him."

"And you?" Allison asked.

"Me?" Mom said. She'd stayed relatively quiet during Allison's education. "It was so long ago."

"As if you don't remember," Dad said.

She paused, her mind fully submerged in the memories. "He was very thorough when he told me the truth. It was overwhelming, but I'd already had an idea something was ... amiss."

"You were very patient," Dad said. "And I was terrified."

Their feelings were making me uncomfortable. Mom had told me that story dozens of times, and I knew there was some intimacy going on that night, but it was as if they'd forgotten I was in the house.

"Please stop," I yelled. The sudden loudness caught Levi off-guard.

The talking turned to whispers, and although I could've kept listening, I tuned them out.

Levi touched his temple to mine. “That’ll be us one day, and that’s the closest to Heaven I’ll ever get. Free to be in love with you, to hold you, to share memories with you. I can’t imagine anything more perfect.”

“It’s not perfect. Mom misses her old life. She misses not knowing about the politics of Heaven and Hell.”

“She wouldn’t trade her life with your dad for ignorance.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” I said. “Not in a million lifetimes. It can be hard to watch.”

“We won’t miss it, Eden. It’s all we know.”

I looked up at him. “True. We’ve been at this for a few eons now. It’s so strange to have memories of both. I remember what it was like not to know you, and to have known you all along.”

“You’re lucky. I’ve ached for you my entire life.”

I touched his cheek and then my lips to his. Despite everything his half-human body had been through, his lips were still soft, and he held me close, pulling my shirt into both of his fists. A quiet, sweet sound resounded in his throat.

When I pulled away, his eyes were still closed, his brows pulled in. He cupped the back of my hair and touched his forehead to mine. His breath faltered before he spoke. “I love you. I love you so much. Please don’t ever leave me again.”

I nodded once. “I promise.”

I helped him lay on my bed, stacking pillows for him to elevate his head. He leaned back, complaining at the many pains in his body. I could feel them, not as pain, just awareness, and it helped me to support him where needed to make him comfortable.

I sat next to him, brushing back his dark hair.

His eyes closed as he sighed. “This bed smells like you,” he whispered.

I smiled. “Rest.”

Eventually, we would have to discuss how to get Bex out of the mess he'd gotten himself into. He'd disturbed The Balance when he threatened Cassia, and for a human who wasn't even his Taleh. Then again when he told Allison the truth. The punishment was death, but he was Levi's protector. The Balance was anything but stable, and it was my job to fix it. I couldn't kill my uncle even if he wasn't biologically connected to my boyfriend, and Hell was going to cry foul either way.

"What are you thinking about?" Levi asked, touching my lips.

I held his hand in my lap. "I don't know how I'm going to fix this."

"We'll figure it out together."

"How's that worked for us so far?" I teased.

Levi grimaced.

"I was kidding," I said.

"You're not wrong. We need a new point of view, logical and without emotion."

I shook my head. "Love is how I was sent to be with my parents, how I escaped Hell, why you came to save me, and how we found each other again. Love is not the problem."

He blinked slowly, struggling to stay awake. "I'm a lucky man."

I kissed him once more, letting my lips linger. "Sleep," I said.

His muscles relaxed, his head fell a centimeter to the side, his breath grew deeper, and he escaped our reality for a new one. I hoped it was full of thoughts of me, too full to hold even ribbons of the nightmare we'd just endured.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEVI

EDEN WAS THE last thing I saw when I fell from consciousness, and the first thing when my lids opened and eyes focused. The most beautiful creature to exist was above me, grinning and excited. If I didn't know better, I would've been sure we had already won and made it to Heaven together.

"You must've slept well. The vibes I'm getting from you are like pure light," she said.

I stretched, feeling the newly formed scar tissue tug. "That can't be. I'm the bad guy, remember?"

"Don't hurt yourself," she said. She helped me to a sitting position, making sure the pillows supported me appropriately. "If you're the bad guy, why does everything in Hell want you dead?"

"Because I refused to carry out my orders."

"Which makes you," she pecked my lips, "the good guy."

I pulled her in for another kiss, unable to stop myself, but then a thought popped into my head. "Emotion," I said, pulling away from Eden to meet her gaze.

"Huh?"

"Before I fell asleep, you said emotion could be the answer instead of logic."

"Yeah?"

I let my head relax back. "I have an idea. But we have to be careful of who's listening. It's risky."

She shrugged. "If your plan isn't impossible, it's just boring."

I chuckled and leaned forward slowly, finishing the kiss I'd started.

"Are you up for a shower?" she whispered against my lips.

My muscles twinged each time I moved. I felt ten years older, maybe more. “Why hasn’t this healed?” I growled, irritated.

Eden blinked, looking back over her shoulder. I waited to feel something too, but I could only feel love—maybe a bit of worry.

“You’ll heal. I can sense it.”

“What else do you sense?” I asked.

Her gaze met mine. “You caught that, huh?”

“Yes. It’s not Hell. What’s going on?”

She bit her lip, clearly worried. “You should hurry. You have a visitor.”

“A visitor?”

She hooked my arm around her neck, helping me to stand and walking with me to the bathroom. I didn’t know I was dizzy until the third step, but she must have.

Eden stood outside while I undressed and stepped under the steaming hot water. Once I scrubbed off soot and blood, all I could think about was asking her to join me. Just before I opened my mouth to call for her, Agatha’s voice drifted under the door.

From their conversation, she was collecting the sheets I’d slept on and replaced them with clean linens.

“Yes, he’s aware. Thank you,” Eden called to her as Agatha closed the door behind her.

I turned the lever and stepped out, tying the towel around my waist. My wet hair was wavy and still dripping down my shoulders and chest, but it was the pink line across my torso that caught my eye. “You removed the sutures?” I asked.

Eden smiled, the sunlight from the window making her platinum hair seem to glow. “Before you woke.”

I reached out to her, and she took my hand. “I’m a light sleeper. That’s talent.”

She shrugged, then shifted her weight away from me. Anyone else would've missed it, but her body language told me loud and clear. "Does me in a towel make you uncomfortable?"

"You're just ... beautiful," she said, making me forget all about whoever was downstairs. Her fingers traced a stream of water that had made its way down my chest, and soon all four fingertips were grazing the highs and lows of my skin, making goose bumps rise in the millions.

I pulled her closer, wrapping her in one arm and tugging at the towel with my free hand.

She stopped me from pulling the soft cotton away, but I planted a kiss on her mouth anyway, parting her lips and sliding my tongue inside. She grabbed my middle and pulled me closer. My body reacted violently. The bed was just feet away...

"Levi," she said between kisses. "You... you have a visitor."

"I know," I said, unable to stop. "But I need you."

"Levi," she said, enjoying my hands and lips for a few seconds more before backing away, breathless. "She's downstairs."

"She?" I asked.

After taking a few seconds to collect herself, Eden handed me a dark blue T-shirt and jeans. "They're Bex's, so the pants might be an inch too long. Agatha managed to clean your shoes, but your clothes weren't so lucky."

"Whoever she is, it can wait," I said, reaching for her again.

"You don't feel her?" she asked. Eden put her hand on my chest, looking up at me with her ocean eyes. "It's your mother."

My hands fell away. "My *mother*?"

Eden nodded slowly. "Downstairs. And she insists on seeing you now. She doesn't trust us, not that I blame her, but

she thinks it's a trap. You should go, calm her down. She's armed."

"Of course she is," I said, yanking on my shirt.

Once dressed, I rushed downstairs, Eden right behind me. My mother stood in a corner of the foyer, holding a very old, very sharp knife against Agatha's throat. She seemed annoyed.

"Mamá?"

She turned to look at me, nearly relieved, but still alert.

"Put the knife down, Mamá. Agatha is a friend."

"She touched me," Petra said.

Agatha frowned. "I was trying to take her sweater, sir."

My mother's grip loosened, her relief at the sight of me making the severity on her face soften. "Levi," she said, but she didn't move. "Is it you?" She took a step away from the wall, allowing the morning sunshine to touch her black hair. The strands fell just below her shoulders in thick, shiny waves, past her prominent cheek bones. She looked the same as I remembered from my childhood: maybe a bit older, but stunningly beautiful, and not to be trifled with.

"It's me," I said, pulling her to me. She was stiff, still unsure. "*Ileso*," I whispered in her ear. The word was Spanish for *safe*, our word to let the other know all was well.

She held me tight, my shirt already damp with her tears.

"How did you get here?" I looked around as I held her, overwhelmed. "Who told you I was here?"

She put away her weapon and then dried her cheeks, taking a step back. "Someone who risked everything to warn me. To warn you."

"About what?" Eden asked, standing behind me.

"Is this... is this her?" My mother asked.

I nodded, taking Eden's left hand and in mine, cradling it and her arm against my middle. "This is Eden. Eden, this is my mother, Petra."

Eden held out her hand. “I’ve heard so much about you, even before I met your son. You’re legendary.”

Mamá didn’t extend her hand, unmoved by Eden’s flattery. “You’re lucky I can’t kill you.”

“Mamá!” I said, unintentionally laughing.

She looked to me and spoke as if that exchange hadn’t just happened. “She has an uncle. Bex.”

“Yes?” Eden said, her brows pulling together.

“He’s your protector?” Mamá asked me. When I nodded, she closed her eyes. “Good. You’ll need one. You’re in danger, son.”

I smiled. “I’m always in danger.”

Mamá shook her head. “No. You have to listen. You’ve stolen Eden from your father. He’s disowned you. You no longer have his protection.”

“Is that what it was called?” I asked.

Mamá held both of my shoulders. “Bex threatened Cassia. A line has been crossed.”

“She tried to kill the woman he loves,” Eden said, defensive.

“Mamá, stop,” I said. She was giving me information that would most definitely get her killed.

Mamá jerked her head to Eden, her dagger eyes sizing up my girlfriend in a way that would’ve made any other girl nervous. “Cassia led armies to kill hundreds of thousands in Lucifer’s name. She’s precious to him, and Bex didn’t just threaten to send her back to Hell, half breed. The blade he holds offers permanent death. You’ve all offended Lucifer’s pride in so many ways he’ll have no other choice but to kill you, and there is nothing more important to the Devil than pride.”

“Hey,” I said, shaking my head. Whatever beef my mother had with Eden, she needed to control herself. “Mamá, enough. Show respect.”

“Levi,” Mamá said, holding my chin in her hands.

I pulled away, frowning.

“You’re not listening.”

“I am listening. Don’t say anything else. You’re putting yourself in danger.”

She smiled, surprised at my answer. “You’re my son.”

“Mamá, it’s not the first time he’s been angered, or that he’s lost. He’s always on the losing side. That’s why we need her,” I said, pointing at Eden.

Mamá shook her head, touching me tenderly. “After all that’s been taken from Lucifer lately... it’s not a game to him anymore.” Her expression softened; her eyes filled with worry. “You have humiliated him for the last time, Levi, and killing you will kill the man who threatened Cassia.” She said her name as if were poison in her mouth. “You’re both expendable, both targets, and both at the top of Hell’s list. They’re planning it now.”

“Who is?” Eden asked.

“Your brothers,” Mamá said, still looking at me. She didn’t seem to want to acknowledge Eden, but I would have to figure that out later. “They’re *all* coming for you,” she said, her eyes glossing over. “Never have they come together to destroy. Not even in the Last War. One always stayed behind, because just two of them wreaked enough havoc to decimate an entire hemisphere. They’re all three coming, Levi.”

“God won’t allow it,” I said. “They’ll wreak havoc on this plane. They’ll be seen.”

Mamá shook her head. “Like Israel?”

I paused. She was right. They weren’t punished for that, and Hell’s minions had caused a huge scene when they came for Nina and her unborn child. “This is different, though. They shelled. It was explained away as a civil war. They can’t explain the appearance of enormous demons in Providence, Rhode Island.”

“We’ll be ready,” Eden said.

“I knew one day we’d face them. I just didn’t...” she pulled at my shirt. “He won’t let you come back home. He’ll put you in the Oubliette for what you’ve done. I can’t see you suffer like that again.”

“So you remember that I escaped—with Eden’s help. We can do it again.”

She tightened her grip on my shirt, her irises dancing from my right eye to left and back again. “Levi, please hear me. This. Is. Different.”

“I won’t let anything happen to him,” Eden said. “I won’t. I promise.”

Mamá finally looked over to Eden, seeming tired. “You aren’t strong enough.”

“I might surprise you,” Eden said, hopeful for some semblance of approval.

Mamá didn’t give it to her.

“Mamá,” I said. “*Soy fuerte como mi mamá. Somos Fuertes,*” I assured her.

My words calmed her, and she nodded. Her shoulders relaxed.

Agatha stood next to Eden. “You must be tired, Ms. ...”

My mother shook her head. “Petra,” she insisted. “It’s always been Petra.”

“Ms. Petra, I can show you to your room. May I?” She gestured to Mamá’s single suitcase.

Mamá nodded once to Agatha, then kissed me one more time on the cheek. “They’re coming, and they’re going to kill us all.”

I shook my head. “The Ryels are protected. Eden is divine.”

Mamá sighed. “That’s what I’m trying to explain to you. I don’t know what or how, but they’ve figured out a way around it. Please, my son... please be ready.”

Agatha turned to Eden as if none of that conversation had taken place. “Breakfast in half an hour, Miss.”

“Thank you, Agatha,” Eden said, watching as she guided Petra down the hall.

Eden grabbed my hand and pulled me outside, closing the door behind us. “What is she?”

“Mamá? She’s human.”

“No,” Eden said simply.

“No? What do you mean no?”

“How can you not know?”

“Eden, just tell me what you sense.”

“She’s... there’s something about her. I can’t quite put my finger on it. She’s alive, and she’s dead, and she’s a stranger and familiar all at the same time. She’s Hell and Earth and strength and weakness. What is that?” she said, frustrated. Her eyes were distant as she struggled to organize her feelings. “It’s not human.” She sighed. “Sorry. Sorry, that’s not what I meant. *She’s* not human.”

I smiled. I knew exactly why Eden was having such a hard time. “She’s a Queen of Hell. She’s been with my father since the first war, and she gave birth to me, in Hell, and was allowed to live. When I was sent to Earth, she defied Lucifer, convinced the Prince of Darkness to allow her to keep me on this plane, and she has fought for me my entire Cambion life. She is supernaturally courageous, yes. But for now, she’s just human.”

“No.” She shook her head, thinking. “No, it’s something else.” She stopped in her tracks. “Morgan,” she whispered.

“Morgan? Where did that come from?”

My words snapped her back, and she seemed even more agitated. “Something’s wrong.”

“Wait. What are you sensing about my mother?”

Eden scanned my face. “How did she live after you were born again? It was mentioned that she’s the only human to

survive birthing a Cambion child.”

“She didn’t. Her pelvis was broken in seven places. She hemorrhaged. She died. They tried to bring her back, but ultimately had to call a time of death. When they swaddled me and took me away, Mamá opened her eyes and reached for me. Screamed for me. They said it was a miracle. Is that what you’re feeling?”

Eden shook her head and then snapped her eyes tight. “Morgan,” she said, upset. “Levi, I have to...” She took a step backward, but I stopped her. “Levi, something is very wrong. I have to go.”

“Eden, wait!” I said, rushing around her. “It can wait.”

She shook her head. “It can’t wait. And your mother’s return from Hell? It wasn’t a miracle. She brought something back with her. She’s tagged, Levi. She can’t stay here.”

Eden opened the door and took a step outside, but she allowed me to stop her.

“I would be able to sense a tag. There’s nothing attached to her. No demons, no entities, nothing,” I said.

“Is there anything you can’t sense?”

“No,” I said, confused.

“Then,” she said, lost in thought. “Levi, it’s been with her since you were born. Maybe ... maybe you just see it as a part of her.” She looked up at me. “It’s been with her for two decades, Levi. No one has survived separation from a tag, and she’s been attached to one for this long.” She winced.

“Morgan?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He’s in so much pain. He’s so scared. He’s crying out to me. I have to see him. I’ll be back, but she ... she can’t stay here, I’m sorry.” She took another step.

“Wait ... just ... wait a minute!” I said. “Eden,” I began, but she pulled away with a strength that said she would no longer entertain my questions.

Her face softened. “I have to go. We have time to think about this, but she has to stay in her room for now. No talk of anything sensitive around her.” She took a step, then came to hug me. “I’m so sorry.”

She took one look at her car and then disappeared, blinked like Eli.

“Whoa,” I said, looking around.

CHAPTER NINE

EDEN

PHASING TO THE hospital from my home shook me for a moment. I held my hands in front of me in shock. Only my eyes could move as I looked around the white walls and the bright hallway of the second floor where I'd spent many hours waiting for Uncle Ryan to come out of surgery. I'd never phased before or knew that it was even possible. I'd just focused on Morgan, the hospital, the second floor, and knew that I needed to be here and then I was.

Maybe just one more thing that's different about me since my death.

Tropical Melon Breeze attempted and failed to cover the scents of Lysol and bleach. The misery and exhaustion of the patients in the rooms saturated my skin; the unanswered prayers of their children, their parents, their spouses filled my ears. It was moments like those that I wished I had the healing powers of Christ. I shook my head, taking it back quickly. It was smarter to disobey. Jesus was perfect, and his transition to Heaven was brutal. I'd much prefer God feel I wasn't worthy of that grand exit, thank you.

Morgan's voice led me to his room, mixed with the background noise of the nightmare he was trapped inside. He was sleeping alone in dim light. More than a few strings had been pulled to delay the informing of his family. His memories could get them all killed.

I stood next to his bedside, the pain-ridden look on his face enough for me to reach for his arm and nudge him gently awake.

His eyes fluttered, and he looked up at me with confusion, a smile, and then his expression deteriorated, and tears quickly filled his eyes, spilling down his temples. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he said, desperation in his voice.

"Shhh," I said. "I'm okay. You're okay."

His bottom lip trembled against the top, and he shook his head, grabbing my arm. “I’m not okay, Eden. I’m not okay. I see things. I did things.” The blood that rimmed both of his irises was more pronounced when he opened his eyes wide. “W-what is happening to me?” He began to cry and shake uncontrollably, squeezing my hand.

I bent down, touching my cheek to his, trying to absorb the shuddering of his body. I whispered in his ear, “You *are* okay. I’m going to make it go away, Morg. Take a deep breath. I’m going to make it go away.”

He shook his head, but I held my temple to his, envisioning his memories, targeting all of them and pulling them toward me and away from my best friend. From the moment we first saw Levi to dying in Morgan’s arms, I wrapped my thoughts around them and pulled them into me. I wasn’t sure how I knew what to do, or even how it was possible, but Morgan relaxed against the bed, and exhaustion replaced his fear.

I kissed his forehead, and his eyes fluttered open again.

I waited, hoping what I’d just done would hold.

He looked around, confused.

“You’re in the hospital, Morgan,” I said.

He stared at me but didn’t speak.

“Morgan, do you know who I am?” I waited nervously—until he smiled.

He blinked a few times, then seemed to focus. “Did I hit my head or something?”

I breathed out a laugh. “Yeah, among other things. You were in an accident. It was my fault. I distracted you, so my parents agree it’s fair to replace your car.”

“My car is totaled?” he said, trying to sit up. He groaned.

I helped him, stuffing pillows under him for support like I did with Levi. “That’s wild. You really don’t remember?”

I typed out a text message to Bex, first asking him to contact Morgan's parents, then for him to find a new, reasonable vehicle for Morgan to drive. Bex wouldn't be happy about his temporary assistant role, especially with Allison coming back into his life, but Mom and Dad were too busy, and I couldn't trust Claire. She would get Morgan something stupid like a Rolls Royce Ghost. "Your new one will be in your driveway when you get home."

If I couldn't already feel that his memories and the fear that came with them had disappeared, I could've seen in it his eyes.

"I must have hit my head pretty hard. The last thing I remember is..." He trailed off, trying to think. "School, maybe? Wait. Did I miss graduation? What is today?"

"July third," I said, waiting for his reaction. "We graduated, Morgan. We spent most of the summer together. You're leaving for college next month," I said, feeling tears burn my eyes. I'd taken more than I'd meant to.

He frowned, then shook his head. "I don't... I don't remember graduation. No way. No, that can't be right." He looked up at me. "Was I in a coma or something?"

"It's normal for a head injury to affect your short-term memory. I'm just glad it wasn't worse. Um, your mom's on her way. I ... didn't tell her until earlier. It's a long story, but you'll understand why later. Can you cover for me?"

"Don't I always?" he said, passive. "I honestly can't remember graduation. Dang." Morgan seemed unsettled, but no longer afraid. It was an acceptable trade. "College, huh? Are you going to miss me?"

"No."

"*No?*" he said, miffed.

"We're going to talk all the time. I need you, Morgan ... to remind me of who I was. I feel so far away from her these days," I said, wiping the unexpected tear from my cheek.

"Hey," he said, holding my hand. "You're here. That makes you closer than you think."

“Morgan?” his mother said from the doorway. She wrung her hands, unsure if she should come in. She decided she couldn’t wait, rushing to his side. “What happened? I’ve been so worried! I called the police and reported you missing!”

“Hi, Michelle,” I said, standing to make room.

She looked back at me. “I called you,” she said, trying not to show her frustration. “Did you know he was here? Did you know he was hurt?”

“No, Mom,” Morgan said, shaking his head. “She didn’t,” he lied.

Michelle turned to him, grabbing his hand and holding it between both of hers. “Your father’s on his way. Are you okay?”

I pointed behind me with my thumb. “I should probably...”

Morgan winked at me and nodded, signaling he was okay with me slipping out.

I turned on my heels and headed down the hallway, pushing out the door. It cracked against the outer brick wall, and the narrow glass window shattered into a million glistening shards. I looked around, feeling embarrassed, but no one saw.

I continued on my walk, feeling electricity in the air, the smell of lit fuses and gunpowder from early fireworks, fresh-cut grass, and sea salt. My promise to visit my grandma Lillian crossed my mind, her kitchen, the smell of something with nutmeg baking in the oven, and I felt a pull. I froze, wondering if that meant what I thought it did. I closed my eyes and concentrated on her kitchen again, the wood floor, the table, the peach and cream wallpaper, the dishes on the wall, the way the sunlight...

“Eden?” Lillian said from the living room.

I turned to her and smiled. “Hi, Grandma,” I said.

“I didn’t hear you come in, darling!” She rushed over to hug me, wrapping me in her thin arms. She leaned back,

cupping my face.

“Do I look different?” I asked, realizing I hadn’t looked in a mirror in a while.

She shook her head, kissing my cheek. “Still beautiful. Come. Sit,” she said, pulling out a chair at the table.

She opened a cabinet and pulled out a glass, filling it with ice and water before sitting next to me, resting her chin on the heel of her hand and smiling. It was no wonder my grandfather—an Arch angel—had fallen in love with her. She was beautiful, and she radiated beauty. Those two things didn’t always go together. Even now that her skin was beginning to show some wrinkles, and she got around slower than she used to, her smile and the kindness in her eyes were still bright.

“I hear you’ve had some excitement.”

I chuckled. My grandmothers were no strangers to the worlds of Heaven and Hell, and they approached it all so nonchalantly at times.

I took a drink, trying to think of a way to word the last twenty-four hours. “Oh, you know. I was murdered. Death was boring, so I came back. Saved Levi from some family drama. Visited Morgan in the hospital and wiped his memories. Left, and then appeared in your kitchen when I concentrated enough.”

“Wait,” she said, her smile fading. “You what? Are you saying you transported? That’s new.”

I nodded. “Lots of new lately.”

“I guess so. That could get overwhelming.”

I sighed. For anyone else, yes, but there seemed to be so much more space in my mind, and that meant a better ability to process stress. Nothing seemed that pressing anymore, and at the same time, I was attached just enough to feel motivated to fix everything that had gone wrong.

“Allison is home.”

Grandma smiled. “I heard. Bex is all over the emotional map.” She picked at the navy-blue place mat under a small

stack of plates and a small bowl with an Americana napkin rolled neatly inside. I kept forgetting about the holiday, and at that moment, fireworks snapped in the distance. “I keep thinking he’ll be here soon, but then I remember he’s with Levi now.”

“Levi can protect himself, and I want to help. You shouldn’t be here alone.”

“I’m a Ryel. I have a protection order, remember?” She winked.

I shifted in my seat. “I’m not sure that’s enough now. Bex has Gehenna. He threatened Cassia with it.”

She paused and then tried to resume what she was doing like I wouldn’t notice. “Oh, my.”

“And Lucifer attacked Eli today.”

Grandma’s eyes widened. “He ... what?”

“Impaled him with a sword. Right through his chest,” I said, pointing to my own. “It would’ve been nasty if he wasn’t ... you know. Immortal.”

“That was ... ballsy. Excuse my French.”

I nearly spit out the water I’d been drinking. “Grandma!”

“What?” she said with a sweet giggle and an innocent shrug. “Can you think of a better word for it? Here.” She stepped into the kitchen, then returned with her signature sweet smile and a plate with a beautiful golden square of pineapple upside down cake.

“Oh, no way,” I said, already salivating.

“My apologies to your mother for serving this to you before breakfast.”

“This can be breakfast,” I said.

She handed me a fork, and I dove in, humming in delight. For a moment, I was a kid again; just a granddaughter. I closed my eyes, allowing everything else to fade away as I became more and more lost in my memories. Bex was chasing Claire around the house, Ryan was laughing, and Dad was standing

in the corner with Mom, his arms around her middle. Mom was smiling, and Dad watched Ryan with disdain.

Before I knew it, the cake was gone, and so was the moment.

“Darling,” Grandma said, wiping a tear from my cheek.

“I didn’t realize I was crying,” I said, wiping my nose and breathing out an embarrassed laugh. “I just wish sometimes that,” I said, trailing off with a sigh. “It doesn’t matter. You’re all just borrowed. I was someone else before.”

She held a gentle hand to my jaw. “We belong to you, and you to us. You always have and always will. *Nothing* has changed.”

I leaned against her hand. “You think so?”

She breathed out a laugh. “Eden. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed. No matter where in time we connect physically, we’ve always been. And I’ve always loved you. No one could ever convince me otherwise.”

I threw my arms around her, and she squeezed me back. I could feel her smile even though I couldn’t see it.

“I hate to eat and run, but...”

“Of course,” she said, sitting back. “Go save the world, my darling.”

“I’m trying. Thank you for the snack, Grandma. It was so much more than that. Something I didn’t even know I needed. I love you.”

She kissed my cheek, and I concentrated on the dining room at home. Even though I’d done it before, for some reason I was nervous that I couldn’t do it again. But still, I focused on the chairs surrounding Grandmother’s wooden oval table and the large chandelier overhead, the prisms spreading the sunlight along the dark walls.

In a blink, I was standing in the exact place I’d imagined. I laughed out loud, in awe of my new trick.

“Are you back already, dear?” Grandmother called from the hall.

“Yes,” I responded, rounding the corner.

Levi stood in the middle of the hallway, and I wondered if that would be the last time I’d miss being surprised.

“Hi,” he said with a small smile. His hands were in the pockets of his dark pants, his blue eyes staring at me from under his thick, dark brows. “When did you start phasing?”

Grandmother was standing next to him, confused. “You’re phasing?”

I shrugged. “I ... today. What you saw was my first time. I tried it again at the hospital and phased to Grandma Lillian’s, and then again to here.”

Grandmother, forever unimpressed, nodded once and left us alone for the drawing room.

Levi glanced behind him, then approached me. “You were right.”

“About?”

“The tag attached to my mother. I finally singled it out. Whatever it is, it’s old and strong. Really strong. And it’s really pissed that I’m aware of it now. She immediately began coughing and grew weak just by me focusing on it. We ... can’t remove it.”

I looked up at him from under my brow, already hating what I was about to say. “Then... I’m so sorry, Levi, but you know she can’t stay here. This is home base. We can’t effectively plan our defense against your father and brothers in Heaven’s language. It takes a full minute to say a single sentence.”

His shoulders sagged. “They know she warned me. She’ll have a target on her back the second she steps out the door. Heaven won’t protect her because she helped my father try to conquer Heaven. Where else can she go?”

I shook my head slowly. I didn’t have an answer this time.

“No,” he said. He pointed at the floor. “*No*. We’re not just going to throw her to the wolves. She risked her life to come here.”

I reached for him, but he pulled away.

“I love you, Eden. I’ve loved you for most of my existence, over lifetimes, and I’ll love you for eternity. But...”

“But?” I said, my chest suddenly heavy.

He swallowed. “She’s my mother.”

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for the answer to come. My eyes filled with tears again. “I don’t want you to leave, and I shouldn’t ask you to stay ... but I will. We have to stay together.”

“Eden,” he said, his voice breaking. “She can’t defend herself.”

“And I can,” I said, trailing off. The sinking feeling I’d had every time we’d been forced apart seeped in, filling me with panic. I touched my stomach with both hands, trying to control my breathing. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“Baby, calm down,” he said, reaching out to me. He wrapped his arms around me, the muscles in his arms tightening when he squeezed. My head fit perfectly under his chin, his throat vibrating with the deepness of his voice when he began to speak. “There has to be another way.”

“Maybe ... maybe she can survive the extraction?”

“I could,” Petra said, stepping into the hallway. “It’s a possibility.” She began to cough.

Levi released me and shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re asking. It will be painful.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “I’ve endured pain. I’ve beat death. You’re not leaving this place, son. You have to stay together. You have to stay here.” When I didn’t respond, she spoke again, “Did you hear me? You’ve been separated so many times, and not once has it ended well. I won’t allow you to leave the safety you’ve found here. Not even for me. I would sacrifice all that I have for you, Levi. Even my life.”

“Sacrifice,” I whispered.

“What?” Levi asked.

“Levi, do you...” I trailed off, her words taking my thoughts down a new path—to an old memory. “I have a plan, but... I can’t explain it here.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Again?”

Petra kissed her son’s cheek. “I’ll be in my room.”

I took his hands, and in the next moment we were surrounded by red-toned darkness and mountains of screaming humans on the horizon. Sweat instantly beaded on my forehead, and the air I pulled into my lungs felt like it came straight from a furnace. As uncomfortable and ironic as it was, Hell was the only place to hide.

“I didn’t remember at first ... but ... a sacrifice,” I yelled over the hot wind. “It could be our backup plan if ... I don’t know. We’d have to find a way to get her in before your father finds out.”

“You’re not making sense.” He ducked, a small, winged creature flying just overhead. It screeched, shockingly loud for its size, alerting any guards nearby of our presence.

I shook my head. “I understand Petra is strong, but she won’t survive the separation. We can’t let her leave. We can’t let her stay. But with Gehenna, we could rid her of the tag—even in a weakened state—and then she can go.”

“Go?”

“To Heaven. With a sacrifice.”

“You’re talking about letting her die.”

“I know,” I said, reaching out to him. “I know, but it’s the only way.”

Levi stared at me, confused. “You want to separate the tag from my mother and then kill it with Bex’s blade, and then she somehow makes a sacrifice and goes to Heaven.”

“Yes,” I said, hating myself.

“No!”

“Tell me another way, Levi. Tell me, and we’ll do it.”

“We’ll separate the tag with Bex’s blade. She lives. The end.”

“It’s not Bex’s blade,” I said. “It was mine.”

He took a moment to process my words. “Yours? Eden, it’s Gehenna. It’s ancient ... eons old, and infamous and—”

“I created it.”

Levi was confused. “Why would you create something that could kill an immortal? Was it meant ... was it meant for me?”

His question was valid. There was a time in the very beginning that we hated each other.

“I had it forged after we fell in love; after the first time they took you from me. It was for the next time they tried to separate us,” I said, a tear falling down my cheek. “You don’t remember? We agreed.”

His eyes lost focus as he tried to reach back further into his mind. “Not to kill our captors.”

“It was for us. Like Eli said... We were the first Romeo and Juliet.”

The creature screeched again.

“The title is the *Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, don’t forget,” Levi yelled. A stifling gust lifted his hair.

An eruption sounded in the distance. Not uncommon in Hell, but a rolling cloud of red dust kicked up and began barreling toward us like a dirt tsunami.

“We need shelter!” Levi yelled. “Now!”

The only thing close enough was an abandoned, rusted semi-truck with no glass intact. Levi grabbed my hand without speaking and sprinted for the truck.

“It will be a blast, then a sandstorm. We need to wait it out for ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes?” I yelled.

“We’ll be safe! Nothing will be out in this.”

Fifty yards, forty, thirty...

The blast hit just as Levi lunged for the door. We hunched over to fight being blown away, locking arms while Levi gripped the handle, our feet being pushed across the ground several inches even though we dug in. Sand and soil pelted my face and skin, even under my clothes. I could feel tiny sharp edges slicing through my skin in the hundreds of billions, and then the wind changed direction, feeding the already gargantuan wall of sand and debris towering over us.

Levi yanked open the rusty door and pulled me closer so I could crawl inside. The gear shift moved when I climbed over it with a creak, and I yelled for Levi as I made myself small enough to fit in the floorboard of the passenger side.

“Levi!” I yelled again, reaching for him.

He shut the door, every exposed inch of his skin cut and bleeding. We used our shirts to cover our noses and mouths and waited. It was eerily quiet for just a few seconds, and then the truck rocked with the second wave.

“How long do they last?” I yelled, squeezing my eyes shut. “I have to move. I can’t breathe!”

It was already difficult to breathe in Hell, but the hot air mixed with dust created a panic within me that I had to talk myself down from.

I felt Levi’s hand on mine, rubbing his thumb back and forth against my skin. “We’ve survived worse, baby. Controlled breaths. It will be over soon.”

Once the truck stopped shaking, we emerged. A sand drift nearly covered the front of the truck, and my arms were covered in mud from a mixture of my blood and sand. As the haze cleared, I noticed we were within a mile of a looming mountain with cliffs and holes carved out with precision. There were no machines in Hell, so it had to have been done by hand.

“You okay?” Levi asked, his face covered like my arms.

I nodded, coughing so hard I nearly threw up. “As if Hell isn’t bad enough. Why did you ever stay here?”

He shrugged. “It was home. And these things are easily ridden out in my father’s temple.”

“What are the holes?” I asked, nodding toward the mountain.

He squinted. “Hard to tell. There are several creatures that create them.”

“That makes me uncomfortable.”

“Well ... it’s supposed to. It’s Hell.” He patted my hair, and sand poured out with each stroke. “You’re a dirty blonde now.”

“Ha, ha,” I said without humor.

The ground began to rumble, the gravel bouncing like mustard seeds in hot oil. Now that the storm had passed, an army was coming.

“The plan,” I said.

“We have to keep moving,” Levi said.

“There!” I pointed at hollows in a mountain. We reached the base, but at least two hundred feet of loose gravel stood between us and the first cave.

“Can you make it?” I asked Levi.

He grimaced as if I’d insulted him.

I crouched and leaped, grabbing onto the ledge. My legs dangled beneath me, and I checked to see if Levi had left the ground. He hadn’t. A cloud of dust kicked up by the misshapen soldiers crawling toward him at top speed had caught his attention.

“Levi!” I yelled.

He crouched and sprung upward, reaching for the ledge. His fingers gripped, and he hung right beside me with a smile.

“Can you make it?” he asked, mocking me.

I smiled and then nodded toward the next dark entrance, more than five hundred feet up. “Can you make that?”

We both pulled up to stand in the mouth of the cave and stared at the next one, gauging the push off and inertia.

“Can you?” he asked, looking less confident.

I scratched the base of my head where my hair was damp from sweat. “Not sure. Can we phase there?”

Levi shook his head. “Satan’s rules. We can only phase in and out. He loves struggle.”

“Okay,” I said, looking up. I rubbed my hands together. “We’re getting ready to find out exactly what I’m capable of. Worst-case scenario, I tumble down to the army and have to fight my way back up.”

“No pressure.”

“We can do this,” I said, staring at the ledge.

He grinned, then kissed me quick on the forehead. “Easy peasy.”

“Lemon squeezy, let’s go.” I crouched and jumped, knowing the moment I left the ground I would just barely make it. I hit the ground, stood upright, and turned. “Give it all you’ve got! Running start if you have to!”

Levi ignored his Satan-sized ego just long enough to take my advice, jogging back a dozen feet before running full-speed and coming up just short. I reached out, grabbed his hand, and pulled him to the ledge I was already hanging half off. He dangled from the edge of the second cave with a half surprised, half relieved expression, and once I got my footing, I reached down and pulled him up.

“Nicely done,” I said.

The army gathered below us, already trying to climb the gravel, but failing.

“They’re not going to give up,” Levi said. “It will be a matter of time before they start climbing over one another.”

They're slow enough to control but not stupid, so tell me your plan, and let's get the hell out of here."

"It's possible that I might be able to remove the tag, and she might be strong enough to survive it."

"That's two *mights*," he said, doubtful.

"I've never done it before, Levi. I can't promise there'll be zero risk, but... What I can do now ... feel now ... I'm stronger."

Levi held my chin gently until my gaze met his. "You've phased four times today. Something is different with Morgan. I no longer sense evil in him. You did something to him. You healed him, and you can heal my mother."

I closed my eyes. "What if something happens to her? What if I can't?"

"What did you do to Morgan?" he asked, emphasizing each word of his question.

My lashes fluttered to protect my eyes from the strands of my hair that whipped in the fiery wind. "I took his memories."

"You..." He trailed off, surprised. "So if you can do that for Morgan, it's very possible you can keep Mamá alive."

"This is different. It wasn't life or death for Morgan."

"You didn't know that."

"I could feel it."

"Tell me, Eden."

I shrugged, pressing my cheek to his chest. "He was in pain," I said, speaking loud enough for him to hear, "and I could feel it as if those memories and his pain were mine, but it was muted. Kind of like the way my dad explains how he can feel my mother. Morgan's nightmares were torture, and when he was awake it was worse. He was left with powers."

"Powers? He—"

"So I ... I took them."

Levi released me and stepped back, his eyes bouncing around while he retreated into his mind to sort out what my words meant. “What do you mean ... *powers*?”

“My mother’s friend Kim had powers after she was possessed. I don’t remember the exact story, but—”

“And you wiped his memory.” It wasn’t a question. He was skeptical; not because he didn’t believe me, but because he didn’t want to.

I looked up at him. “Only up to that day.”

“Eden...” He sighed in frustration. He shook his head. “We’ve been around since the dawn of time. No one can do that.”

“I can.”

“*How?*” He let me go.

“I don’t know. I just... I could feel them. His feelings were sort of, well... It’s hard to explain.”

“Try,” Levi said.

I stood on the cave’s edge, staring down the cliff at the demons tearing one another apart trying to reach us. “His feelings were tangible, so I wrapped my mind around them and took them away. And then, he was free.”

“No one has powers like yours. Not Eli; not even my father,” he said.

“Be careful,” I said, turning to him. “Only one being is more powerful than Satan. I’m not God.”

Crippling fear radiated from him, but his emotions didn’t stem from our assailants, or even from being struck down by the Almighty for blasphemy. Only in the moments before I died did he feel that way. He was terrified of more than just losing his mother. “She’s a wife of Satan. If you can’t save her, she won’t just be punished by God and go to Hell. She’ll be punished by Satan for helping us. She’ll go straight to the Oubliette. Do you know what they do to humans there?” He cleared his throat. “I can’t let her suffer that way.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why I mentioned ... why I mentioned the blade. Gehenna is Plan A, a sacrifice is Plan B, and Gehenna would also serve as a last resort.”

It took him a few seconds to process what I meant. “That’s your plan? To use the blade to end her existence.”

I clenched my eyes shut in disbelief that I could say those words to him. “If it were my mother, Levi, I would prefer that to her suffering for eternity in the Oubliette.”

His brows pulled together. “We can’t decide something like this now. We need time to think it through...”

“I wish I could tell you differently,” I yelled over the howling wind and the screams of demons. “I wish it weren’t a risk. I wish I could promise you that it will work out fine...”

I watched as Levi looked high above me and stepped back, pulling me with him. I turned to see a winged creature twice the size of the one before.

In reaction, Levi held out his arm across my chest like a braking soccer mom.

I stepped around him, staring up in awe. “Wait.”

“Wait for what?” Levi said, positioning to attack.

I pointed at a man riding atop the monster’s back, only visible when its long neck moved to the side. The man’s appearance was disturbing; not because he was one of the billions of deformed, hideous beings that resided in Hell, but because he didn’t belong. He was beautiful, reminding me very much of Eli. Blond, tall, with a perfect jawline, a chiseled chin, and bright blue eyes like mine. Not even the dirty rags he wore or his worn sandals that didn’t quite house his long, filthy toes as they curled over the front of the soles could hide his beauty.

“Ramiel,” I breathed.

CHAPTER TEN

LEVI

RAMIEL BALANCED ATOP the creature while it bent its legs enough for him to leap down, and even then, it was a good thirty-foot drop.

He didn't look happy to see us.

"I'm not at your dungeon," I said, hoping to thwart a fight. "That was the warning, correct?"

"I don't have much time," he said, walking past me. He turned on his heels, crossing his arms. "I've been sent here to advise you."

"By who?" I asked.

Ramiel shook his head. "I can't say. But your mother is in danger."

I frowned. "I know. That's why we're here, to devise a plan."

"You're not going to like what I have to say," he said.

Before I could respond, he gestured to the creature above, who spread one wing. A gust of hot wind and sand blew against and over its singed feathers, but we were protected for the moment.

Ramiel could speak more softly now, protected from the noise of the wind. "If you leave the protection of the Ryels, you both—along with Bex—will die within the day. Petra is human now, one that's been tagged for twenty years. She won't survive the separation."

"You don't know what we're capable of," Eden said.

Ramiel wasn't impressed. "You're immensely powerful, Eden, but those powers are limited by your station. The Keeper of the Balance cannot complete anything that will cause inequity."

Eden scoffed “I can do what I want. Maybe the penalty is death, but I’ve died before.”

“More times than you know,” he said, holding his hands to his sides. “Try it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Try what?”

“Phase. Try to kill a human—even an evil one. One so full of filth and evil that he’ll be a celebrity down here. Hitler, Stalin, Himmler, Hussein, Kim Jong-il, Xi Jinping. All responsible for thousands of deaths on Earth just in the last century. Do you think you’re the first Keeper of the Balance? Or are you just the best one?”

Eden stuttered over her answer.

Ramiel sighed as if he were bored, and he stated his next words with even less enthusiasm, “Disconnecting a tag Satan placed on a human who gave her soul with informed consent is contrary to the laws. Petra will die. You will die. Levi will die. Bex will die.”

“No,” I said, feeling my entire body tense. “You ... you came here to advise us, so what do you advise? There has to be another way.”

Ramiel walked over to the cliff’s edge, his creature becoming restless as the master glowered down at the monsters below. “I hate them,” he said under his breath. “I hate this place.” He turned to Eden, the same expression on his face.

She instinctually reached back to place her hand on Gehenna. “Don’t,” she warned.

Ramiel paused. “For the first time in many, many lifetimes, I have a chance to see my Lizeth. The same chance you have to see your mother again,” he said, looking to me.

“What do you mean?” I asked, dubious.

“Petra must die. The question is, where will she go? Eden can’t use the blade to end Petra’s existence. Anyone else who uses the blade on your mother, Eden must send to Hell. Petra will go to the Oubliette. There is no other way, Levi.”

“The sacrifice.” Eden blinked. “Lizeth. You’ve made a bargain. With who?”

One side of his mouth turned up. “I tell you—or anyone—and the deal’s off.”

“So, you have help? Someone on the inside?” Eden looked over her shoulder. The screams of the minions were getting closer.

“What are we talking about here?” I asked.

“They can get her through,” Eden said, excited. She grabbed both of my arms, her eyes dancing as she processed hundreds of thoughts.

I shifted my feet, looking to Ramiel. “You’re sure? You can guarantee her passage?”

Ramiel simply nodded. “You have my word that someone will be waiting at the twelfth gate of Zebulun to let her in before your father can reach her.”

“How?” I’d always feared my mother’s death, knowing where she was destined to go. Each time I visited Hell I wondered if she would reside in the Temple, but it was still a miserable existence. After warning me, her destiny was sealed. But maybe that was part of a bigger plan. For the first time, I allowed myself to hope for her a better afterlife.

“We’ll worry about the how,” Ramiel said. “You make sure she exits your plane, after a sacrifice, without the tag. That’s the only way she can enter Heaven.”

I felt a twinge in my chest. “Thank you.” It was all I could manage.

“I must go.” Ramiel climbed up his winged creature, and its enormous legs bent before launching itself off the cliff and surging upward with one flap of its wings.

The tears in my eyes welled up and spilled over, vaporized before they could get to my jawline.

“Huh,” Eden said, watching them get smaller and smaller until they disappeared into the darkness. “I thought that thing lived inside this... Oh, shit.”

A new creature stepped forward with a guttural snarl. Eden and I raised our chins slowly to see its head glowering down at us.

“Is this a pet too, I hope? Like Ramiel’s?” Eden asked.

“It’s a daeryx.”

“In summation, how do we beat it?”

“For starters, it’s not a pet.”

“Summary, Levi,” she said, impatient.

“They’re strong, but slow. Very aggressive, mostly around its dwelling.”

Eden pointed at the hole in the mountain. “You think it lives here?”

“He looks pretty pissed, so I’m going to say yes.”

The daeryx was enormous, as tall as the huge cavern behind it. Part dragon, part crab, its six legs ended with a single claw that clicked against the hard red clay we stood upon.

“Oh, I should’ve called this one,” I said, taking a step back and bringing Eden with me.

“Hi,” Eden said, holding up her hands palms-out. “I don’t want to hurt you. We’re leaving. Cool?”

I yanked her back as the daeryx’s long neck extended. It reared back, then surged its head forward, a foul stench blasting into our faces once it bleated a warning—or possibly a war cry, calling for others.

“We don’t have time for this,” Eden said. She took a quick glance at the base of the mountain. The demons were beginning to climb over each other, forming a living pillar reaching closer to us every second.

“We need to move,” I warned.

As Eden gauged the creature pre-strike, it reminded me of the first time I saw her. Creatures residing in Hell were what nightmares were made of and made life in the Underworld

seem surreal in the worst possible way. But being in Eden's presence, surrounded by every mundane object of Earth, was phantasmal. She had the same look on her face as she approached the daeryx as she did the first time I saw her: petite, blonde, and full of piss and vinegar, the human form of my immortal love. Even if she hadn't been beyond beautiful, my love for her had spanned lifetimes; any perceived flaw would be just another reason to love her. The moment we met was so vivid. She was so clean I could still smell the chlorine and fluoride on her skin. Now, every time she moved a handful of sand fell from her hair, and another drop of sweat streaked the soot on her face.

“Okay,” she said, finishing her calculations.

“We have a plan?”

“Just ... be sure to stand clear.”

Eden sprinted toward the enormous daeryx, and all I could do was watch with an amused grin. She was a tiny thing, dwarfed even more by the dragon-like creature as she grabbed one of its legs. The daeryx bleated for just a few seconds, but despite its weight—every bit of eight tons—Eden managed a good grip on the back of its ankle, planted her left foot, and pivoted to swing the monster three hundred and sixty degrees before letting go, hurling the monster over the cliff. Regardless of its long claws creating trenches in the rock to slow its trajectory, the daeryx slid all the way to the edge, right next to me.

I looked at her, surprised that she'd miscalculated.

Eden stood up, gesturing to her foot.

I bent my knee and kicked the daeryx, loosening its grip to send it over the ledge and down into the pillars of demons. Hideous beings were scattered in every direction, and noises pierced my ears that I was sure would alert Hell's hierarchy. The daeryx wasn't dead, but at least now it and the demons were fighting one another.

Eden looked at me with a grimace, her chest heaving. “It was heavier than I thought.”

“Well done, but we’re out of time.”

“So the new plan is to separate it from Petra and then kill it?”

“With the blade.”

She nodded slowly, still thinking. “But how do we separate it without killing her too fast? And is her coming to you with information enough of a sacrifice?”

I stared at her. “I’ll remove the tag. Give Petra the blade. She’ll protect me.”

She shook her head. “She’ll be near death, Levi. She won’t be strong enough to wield a sword, even a small one. And, forgive me, but she’s a wife of Satan. You’re really suggesting we give Petra Gehenna?”

“She’s my mother first. Everything she has ever celebrated or suffered has been for me.”

“Levi...”

“Can you think of another way?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t trust her.”

“Do you trust me?”

Eden’s eyes danced as she tried to find a different solution, but the longer she thought, the more frustrated she became.

The commotion from below drew our attention. The daeryx’s growls had turned to shrieking. Once he was overpowered by their sheer numbers, the demons made quick work of pulling the creature apart. His massive neck fell limp, freeing the army to resume fighting each other to climb the wall.

She raked back her hair only for the wind to blow it into her eyes. “The powers I’ve developed could make anyone feel overconfident. Something deep inside is whispering for me to be careful, and I’m not sure if it’s my voice or something else. What if, despite all of our combined knowledge, the blade, my new powers, and my best efforts... Levi, be honest with me. If I can’t do this, can you forgive me?”

Levi processed my words and then blinked. “Eden...”

“I know. It’s a lot to ask. It’s a lot to promise, but—”

“She’s going to die today. Like Ramiel said, what matters is where she ends up. This is her only chance; *my* only chance to see her again. If she sacrifices herself, Hell can’t hold her. You’re not guilty of disrupting The Balance, and she is home with me until the very end, and then... My God, Eden. She would be allowed into Heaven.”

“She won’t get through Heaven’s Gates with a tag attached to her,” I said. “And it will kill her when we take it off.”

“She’s died before. I know she can do this.”

“You expect her to kill the tag *after* she dies?”

“Just ... please trust me,” I said, my hands balling into fists. I was desperate to get Eden on board before we phased out. “You know death isn’t real, Eden. It’s a doorway. I’m going to give her the keys to the right one.”

Her lips pressed into a hard line, and she tilted her head, already apologetic. “This doesn’t feel right.”

I touched her face. “I understand your hesitation, I do. But no one walks away from a war feeling like they’ve won. If I know she’s waiting for me in Heaven, and I get to keep you? Do you not understand it’s the best-case scenario? You asked me for a better way. This is it.” I looked down, seeing the living pillar of demons had nearly grown to the top. “They’re almost to the top. We have to go. Are you with me?”

I turned away from the ledge, my toes teetering on the edge. “Are you with me?”

“Trust fall?” she asked, one side of her mouth turning up.

I reached for her hand, and she took it, turning to stand next to me. We leaned back, falling backward over the ledge toward the pillars.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EDEN

MY EYES OPENED just as I sucked in my first breath of fresh air. The first thing my gaze settled on was the chandelier above. I was focused more on what was at the bottom of the trust fall, so we didn't end up in the hallway where we'd been, instead landing on our backs in Grandmother's bedroom. That meant my sweaty, soot and sand-covered skin lying against my grandmother's one-hundred-year-old Tabriz Persian rug. I could hear her sigh from the drawing room.

I scrambled to stand, with Levi's hand still in mine. I pulled him up, but slowly. He had pushed his body too hard while we were in the Underworld.

"I shouldn't have brought you down there so soon," I said. "You're still not healed."

"I guess it takes me longer the older I get?"

"Or you've lost favor. Maybe some of your powers were given to you by your father?"

Levi frowned, unhappy with the thought. His expression changed. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

I nodded. Whatever it was hanging on to Levi's mother emanated a constant, low growl that grew louder when I fixated on him. The demon knew I was aware of it. The old entity was a spy for Lucifer himself and had already relayed all the information it had gathered at that moment. I was glad we'd found a way around its eavesdropping, but no one else could hide the way Levi and I could.

Grandmother's heels clicked down the hallway, and she opened the door, gesturing for us to get the hell out of her bedroom. Politely, of course. We stood in the hallway, waiting for her to speak.

"It's listening," Grandmother said. "And has been quite cantankerous since you left. Whatever you plan to do, you should do it now."

“My parents should be here,” I said. “We need all the guidance we can get.”

Levi nodded.

I dialed Dad’s number and held my cell phone to my ear.

He picked up on the first ring. “Everything okay, sweetheart?” Dad asked.

“I need you to come home.”

“On my way,” he said, hanging up.

I looked into Levi’s eyes, hoping he’d change his mind. “You’re sure?”

He hesitated. “It’s up to her, but I know what she’ll say. Eden?”

“Yes?”

“Your grandmother is Cambion.”

“Yes. You sort of let that cat out of the bag with my mother present, remember? My mom didn’t speak to my dad for three days after that.”

“But ... how does she hear the tag? Typically Cambions don’t have those senses. She seems to know a lot more than she should.”

I waited a beat. “Maybe you should ask her.”

Levi shook his head. “She scares me. You ask her.”

“Your father is Satan, and my grandmother scares you?”

Levi frowned. “If I said yes, would you think less of me?”

I turned toward Petra’s door and stared at it for a full minute. “If I asked you to pray with me, would you think less of me?”

“You won’t.”

I sighed, grabbing his hand. “Pray with me.”

His brows pulled together, and the tears forming in his eyes made them glisten in the low light. He had to swallow his sorrow before he spoke. “I don’t know how.”

“I’ll show you.” I closed my eyes and squeezed his fingers. “Father God, hear our prayer...”

CHAPTER TWELVE

LEVI

ALTHOUGH IT WAS my idea, the thought of allowing my mother to die didn't feel real. I concentrated on the after, in Heaven where she would never be at my father's mercy again. Still, I had a lot of life left, and I wanted to spend it with her. I wanted her to see my wedding, my children—if any of that were even possible. No matter how many times I had tried to find a different end, her sacrifice had, ironically, the best possible outcome.

“Levi?” Eden's soft fingers touched my forearm. “My father will be pulling into the drive any minute.”

I took in a deep breath, filling my lungs and yet not feeling like I was getting any air. The demon was still growling, preparing for a fight. My mother held her fist to her mouth, coughing. She knew why. We all did. The tag was putting pressure on her airway to warn us to change course.

“Grandmother?” Eden called.

Just a few seconds passed before we heard Cynthia's heels clicking down the hallway. “Yes, dearest?” she said.

“I need you.”

Eden's simple sentence created a ghost of a smile on the old woman's lips.

Eden began to speak, but she paused. Jared was arriving with Nina, and the rest of the family, including Allison, was seconds behind. “Can you help?”

Cynthia nodded once. “I'll help Agatha get the room ready,” she said, walking back the way she came. “Agatha?” she called.

Jared closed the front door, and then he was next to his daughter in the hallway just outside my mother's room.

“What's going on, Levi?” he asked.

I felt sick. Her death was approaching fast, and saying it aloud to Jared made it more real. Too soon. “Mamá came to warn me about my brothers. She’s in danger.”

“I can feel it,” Bex said, standing next to Jared. He looked to his brother. “She’s been tagged. Seems like it’s been with her for a very long time.”

Jared sighed. “She can’t stay at the house if she’s tagged, Levi. We’ll have to move her to a safe house. Let me think on it.”

“We already have a plan.”

Jared’s brows pulled together. “Why do I feel like I’m not going to like it?”

“We’re going to extract it so Petra can go to Heaven when she dies,” Eden said in the language of Heaven. I could feel the demon getting frustrated by his inability not to listen in.

Jared shook his head, answering her the same way. *“She’s not going to Heaven, Eden.”*

“She will with a sacrifice,” Eden responded.

Nina didn’t understand the language and looked to her husband for answers he couldn’t give.

“It hurts the Others to listen to our language,” Jared said. “It’s best if we speak this way. I’ll explain later.”

Jared thought for a solid minute, shaking his head as he ruled out each idea. Bex was trying to come up with something better, too.

“I can’t let her leave. She can’t stay. She’ll die out there anyway without Levi. And when she dies, she’ll go to Hell,” Eden said.

Bex blew his hair from his face. “Damn.” He looked to Jared. “They’re right. I don’t see another way. Do you?”

“No,” Jared said. He led the way to Mamá’s room, heaving a deep, somber sigh. “I can’t believe we’re going to do this.”

“He did it,” I said, unable to hide the angry shaking in my voice.

“Wait,” Nina said, recognition in her eyes. “What about Eden? Will she be held accountable?”

“It’s possible,” Jared said.

“Then no,” Nina said, stopping in her tracks. The whole group stopped with her. “There has to be another way.”

“Trust me, Mom,” Eden said. “Please?”

Nina’s eyes glossed over, and she hugged her daughter. “Eden, please don’t—you promised.”

“And I’ll keep it,” Eden said, rubbing her hand up and down on her mother’s back. “I’ll do whatever it takes. Do you trust me?”

Nina nodded, and after some hesitation, she let her daughter go.

Eden took my hand, and we continued down the main hall toward my mother’s room. She stopped just as I reached for the doorknob and leaned her shoulder against the wall. “You should talk to her alone.”

I scanned her sweet face and kissed her temple before stepping inside alone, closing the door behind me.

Mamá was sitting in a cushioned chair in the corner, reading something on her cell phone. The sunlight poured in from the blinds, creating a thousand tiny dust motes all around her. Other than the fact that she was a Queen of Hell, she seemed angelic. She’d draped a baby blue blanket over her legs as she rocked back and forth in her bare feet, her naturally bronzed skin darker from the Florida sun. The sight of her nearly sent me back into the hall. *How can I tell her?* My mother was strong, but the idea I thought was perfect moments ago now seemed selfish as I looked into her eyes. How could I be part of any plan that allowed the light to leave them?

“What is it, son?” Mamá asked.

My throat felt like it was closing as I tried to speak. “I just spoke with Eden. We have to keep you close to protect you.”

“So I’ll stay here?”

Her relief broke my heart.

“When you came back, Mamá, Lucifer sent someone to watch you.”

She stared ahead at nothing, recognition lighting a fire in her eyes. She was angry, but not surprised. “A tag.” She crossed her arms, indignant. “Of course he did. If I stay here, how...?” She trailed off.

She knows.

“Mamá,” I began.

This time, her understanding took her from shock, to loss, to resolute. She grabbed my hand with both of hers and held tight. “I understand,” she said in her softest, most comforting voice.

“It has to be you.”

“Me?”

“To do what mother’s do,” I choked out. I kneeled by her side, and she touched my cheek with her palm. “You’re strong. You can do this.”

It only took a few seconds for her to understand, and then she seemed almost excited. “Don’t cry, my son.” She smiled. “Don’t shed a tear. This is... Don’t you see? It’s what we’ve always wanted. What’s important is that I love you. I love you more than anyone in the universe. I couldn’t be prouder of you, the choices you’ve made, and who you’ve become.”

“It’s because of you,” I whispered, barely able to speak.

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s because of you.” She touched her forehead to mine, and we stayed that way for what seemed like a dozen minutes.

She coughed again, and this time it persisted until she began a full-blown coughing fit.

No one came in to rush us. All we had was time and yet, time was the one thing we didn’t have. As the tag grew

nervous, he punished her. It believed we were preparing to remove it, but it had no idea what we planned to happen next.

Agatha came in with a glass of water and handed it to me. I helped Mamá take a few sips until the demon relaxed its grip.

Mamá nodded, pushing away the glass. “He’s a bag of fun already.”

“You can do this.”

“I know,” she said, meeting my gaze. “And I will. Now...” She cleared her throat and settled back. “No reason to give it anything more.”

I wrapped my arms around her middle and lay my head in her lap while she stroked my back just as she did when I was a child. Dwelling on the fact that I’d never experience it again in this life was too painful, so I pushed it from my mind.

“I love you, Mamá. No woman more perfect could have been chosen to raise me, to love me, to protect me as you’ve always done.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she smiled down at me. “I have never felt anything but honored. You have blessed me every day of your existence.”

I stood and wiped my eyes before stepping out.

Eden stepped away from the wall and crossed her arms over her middle, clearly hurt by the expression on my face.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “That was harder than I thought.”

Eden threw her arms around my shoulders, holding me tight. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, grabbing the back of my neck. “I’m so... I can’t imagine. She pulled back. “But you have to promise that you won’t go in until it’s time.”

I nodded, knowing she was only hoping to spare me from as much of the process as she could.

“Ready?” Eden asked her father.

He wasn’t as confident as Petra, but he hadn’t heard Ramiel’s promise.

“We’ll need everyone,” Eden said.

Bex, Claire, and Ryan nodded.

“You’ve explained?” Eden asked Bex.

“What I could, yes,” he said. He took Allison’s hand. “Allie, it’s going to get scary in there. You’re not going to understand it until it’s over. Just trust us, okay?”

She squeezed his fingers with hers, nodding.

We filed into Mamá’s room together, and she watched us gather with wary eyes.

My body felt slow, what I imagined when humans explained the feeling of exhaustion. Every muscle, every nerve, every vein felt heavy; my stomach sick. The release of the tag, Mamá’s sacrifice and death, had to be timed exactly right, and we had to trust Ramiel that someone would be on the other side waiting to let her in before my father could get to her.

Cynthia and Agatha brought in an impressive arsenal of medical supplies, mostly concentrating on keeping my mother comfortable. Valium, morphine, oxygen, vials of nausea medication, and bags of saline, IV tubing and a canula kit. They moved in slow motion around us, and all I could do was stare at the beautiful, fearless woman who was my mother. Her gaze settled on me.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m tracing every line of your face.”

There was no time in Heaven, so we couldn’t know how long it would take for us to be reunited again.

Eden approached my mother. The infamous Petra was still sitting in her chair, her hands crossed daintily on her lap even though she was anything but delicate. My father had sent a tag strong enough to stay attached to my mother, and stealth enough to remain undetected. It wouldn’t be your run-of-the-mill soldier of Hell. Whoever the tag was, fighting it would be similar to fighting Cassia—if not more difficult—and my mother would have to find a way to do it while near death.

That thought terrified me. The tag would likely be a challenge for Eden—or anyone—to extract, meaning Satan had chosen wisely. I could help neither one of them to maintain The Balance.

I took a deep breath and sighed. If anyone could survive, it would be Mamá. But that wasn't the plan.

“Levi, I think she'd be more comfortable in the bed,” Eden said.

Mamá nodded, but I confirmed. “I'm going to lift you into my arms, okay, Mamá?”

After she agreed, I picked her up and then pivoted, carrying her the four feet it took to reach the twin-sized bed. This particular guest room wasn't a small one, but certainly less than half the size of Eden's. Agatha had moved a mirrored vanity and some paintings into the hall, leaving just a dresser, a chair, a loveseat, and the bed. Still, there was plenty of room for a nearly full crash cart, oxygen tank, and IV pole and the four of us with space to spare.

“I'm sorry.” I gently encouraged her to lie back. A ripping noise interrupted the quiet, and I used the piece of fabric I'd torn from the sheet to tie Mamá's wrists to the iron headboard. “We'll need more padding here,” I said.

Agatha immediately left the room, and within minutes she was back with pillows and tape. I tied my mother's free wrist to the other post, and helped her get as comfortable as I could, but she was coughing again. The tag was going to make this as agonizing as possible, and for that, I hated it even more.

“It's important to try to remain calm,” Cynthia said. “Force your body to relax if you must.”

Mamá raised one brow. “You've done this before?”

“I have,” Cynthia replied.

Mamá sat back, unimpressed. “Well, you lived. I'll do this my own way.” She let her shoulders fall, settling against the mattress and then looking at Eden. “I know how this works. Just let me know when it's time.”

“You’ll know,” Eden said.

I kissed my mother’s forehead once, placing my hands on hers. “I love you, Mamá. I can’t describe to you how much.”

She kissed her index and middle finger like she used to do when I was a boy and held them to my forehead. “You don’t have to. I already know.”

I took her hand from my head and kissed it, then stood, taking steps back until my back was to the far wall directly in her line of sight.

“I love you, son,” she said, staring at the ceiling. She took in a deep breath and exhaled until her entire body relaxed. “I love you more than my own life. I’m ready.”

Chapter Thirteen

EDEN

MY FATHER, AUNT Claire, and Grandmother stood at each corner of the room, quietly chanting cycles of scripture, The Lord's Prayer, and all forty-four lines of the Athanasian Creed.

"Shouldn't a priest be doing that?" Allison whispered.

Bex leaned into her ear. "Think of it like security clearance. They've all seen and experienced more than your average priest. They can also sense, recognize, and target the tag. This is far more effective. An exorcism can take a priest months. They can do it in an afternoon."

"What about Ryan?" she asked. "Even as a human, wouldn't one more help?"

Bex tried not to smile. "He can't get the words right."

Dad grinned for half a second before refocusing on the scripture he was reciting.

Petra's coughing worsened, and with every passing minute she became visibly weaker. After the latest coughing fit, a bit of blood soaked in the tissue Levi held to her mouth. Sweat beaded at her damp hairline, her olive skin paler, her lips somehow a dark but faded shade of violet blue.

"Is she okay?" Allison asked, staring at Petra's mouth.

"Cyanosis," I said, gesturing for Cynthia to increase Petra's oxygen. "Inadequately oxygenated blood is the likely cause. We can help with that. Grandmother?"

Agatha tended to the oxygen tank, then took Petra's levels. "Marginally improving, I'm afraid, but better nonetheless."

Levi looked at his watch, taking his mother's pulse. "I know it's difficult, Mamá. But your heart is still strong."

Petra looked away, focusing on her restraints. She seemed more irritable with each passing minute, her breathing shallower, her level of comfort plummeting. Despite her

appearance after just an hour, the tag had just begun. His only line of defense in this plane was torture until someone in the room demanded mercy.

“Can’t they help her? What are we waiting for?” Allison whispered in Bex’s ear.

Petra’s head sagged, chin at chest, the dark strands of her hair falling forward. An unsettling growl with both bones rattling low and shrieking high tones came from somewhere inside her. After a gasp, Petra picked up her head, breathing fast, her eyes wide. She was fighting for control, and so far, she was winning.

“You’re doing great, Mamá,” Levi said.

Agatha handed him a fresh cold cloth. “It’s quite impressive, actually.”

Levi held the wet, white cotton against his mother’s forehead. “Mamá, deeper breaths. Slow.”

Allison whispered in Bex’s ear again. “What was that noise ... the um ... the—”

I rolled my eyes, motioning to Allison. “Can’t you warn her before putting her in these situations?” I asked Bex. “Do you not ask questions?” I asked Allison.

“She does. A lot of them,” Bex said, hugging her to his side. “You know there’s no way to prepare anyone for any of this.”

“And there’s no point in whispering. We can all hear you. Superhuman hearing.” I winked, pointing to my ear. “Bex should’ve told you that, too.”

She frowned at him. “I can’t imagine why he’s left that out.”

“Ryan and Nina are happily ignorant to private conversation,” Bex said.

“Bex, you really should get her up to speed,” I said.

“Oh, uh,” Bex began. “Petra...”

“Not now,” I said, exasperated.

“No,” Petra said, her voice tired. “Go on. I do love to hear the old stories.”

Bex looked to Mother, who nodded and then continued, “Petra is a Queen of Hell—the only queen who’s also a fallen angel.”

“There are female angels?” Allison asked, surprised.

“Oh, yes,” Petra said with a satisfied grin. “Many. And more lethal than any of the males.”

Bex continued, “Levi’s father is, as you know, Satan. Levi was born in Hell. Eden lived in Heaven.

“I fought you, you know,” Petra said. “In The Great War.”

Eden touched her chest. “Me?”

Petra cocked her head, still leaning against the headboard. “You don’t remember?” She sighed. “I suppose not. It was eons ago. You nearly fileted me. A formidable adversary, for certain.” She looked to Bex. “Well? Go on.”

Bex rubbed the back of his neck. “So, Levi and Eden fell in love. They got caught. They were punished. They kept finding each other, getting caught, then separated. This last time, Eden was sent to Earth’s plane in human form as punishment. Her memory was wiped.”

“Some of it still hasn’t come back,” Eden said, grimacing.

Bex continued, “Levi was sent, too, but his punishment was a mission: to kill Eden. So, Petra demanded to come, too, to protect her son while he completed his objective. We Ryels are notorious for eliminating threats to our family. Petra is the only Queen of Hell to survive childbirth, and she did it twice, but now we know her return to Earth’s plane to protect Levi was by the Devil’s design. When she brought Levi to this world, she died, too, and upon returning to this plane she came back with a demon attached, something ancient and extraordinarily strong. When Satan or a nobleman of Hell attaches a demon to a human, we call it a tag. Normally this isn’t allowed and disturbs The Balance, but Petra is a fallen angel, so she doesn’t fall under the usual protection of Heaven. In other words, she’s damned. She came here to warn Levi

about a plot against him, and now she's in danger. To safely keep her here, we must remove the tag. That, uh ... that about sums it up, I think?"

Everyone not focused on chanting agreed.

"So, we're here to witness the tag's detachment?" Allison asked.

"Or my death. Humans usually don't survive," Petra said.

"You've survived before," Allison said.

Petra managed a small smile at the compliment.

"I'm embarrassed that I'm unfamiliar with the story," Allison said, sheepish.

"Don't be," Bex said, "It's not as if you'd have seen her on TMZ. America's Most Wanted, maybe."

"Bex!" I said again.

"He's not wrong," Petra said. The corners of her mouth turned up as she gazed at her son. "I've led quite the life. The words seem to take the remainder of her strength, and her head fell forward.

Levi tended to her. "Mamá?" He lifted her chin, but her eyes were rolled back into her head. He looked to me. "It's time."

I nodded. "Remember. You promised not to go in."

"I understand. Go," he said, holding up his mother's head.

I closed my eyes, searching for Petra's lifeforce and the tag who held her between the planes of Hell and Earth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LEVI

“EDEN,” I WARNED. Mamá’s lips were blue.

“I know,” she said, her eyes popping open.

Mamá’s eyes focused. The tag finally allowed her to breathe again.

Eden hadn’t even broken a sweat, but Mamá could barely form a sentence; she had surpassed exhaustion and was now just focusing on taking her next breath.

Jared and Nina, Claire and Cynthia still stood in each corner of the room, continuing their chanting to distract and weaken the demon. Otherwise, Mamá would’ve been dead hours ago.

“Petra?” Eden said, leaning down to look into her eyes. “Stay with me. It’s not time yet.”

Mamá met her gaze, and a ghost of a smile touched her lips. “Stubborn.”

Eden’s expression softened. “Yes, he is. More than I realized, but we’re getting there. Rest.”

Cynthia brought my mother water, allowing her to take small sips from a straw, and then encouraged her to take a bite of a protein concoction on a pita chip. “It’s odd, but it will help to keep up your energy.” She looked to me with a reassuring nod.

“Thank you,” I said.

“We’re wasting time,” my mother said. Dark circles had formed under her sunken, bloodshot eyes.

“You can tell me,” I said. “If you want a break, if you want to stop all together, or if you change your mind about...”

She shook her head. “I want to be free.” After a few breaths, she spoke again. “And, I want to piss off your father.”

I managed a grin, but it quickly faded. She was feisty even as she faced death.

Eden squared herself, planting her feet on the ground.

“Ready?” I asked.

Mamá nodded.

Eden’s eyes rolled back in her head, and moments later, so did my mother’s. A deep growl filled the room, coming from every corner. Agatha seemed nervous, but Cynthia’s shoulders were relaxed, her eyes settling on her granddaughter with pride.

Mamá’s back arched, and a short cry was muffled by the same strangled sounds she’d been making each time Eden took hold of the beast. Her eyes bulged, indentions forming on her neck where the demon squeezed.

“Eden,” I warned.

“Almost there,” she said.

Mamá made a choking sound as she struggled for air. Her eyes rolled back until only white was visible, and then her body began to seize. Four invisible talons sunk into Mamá’s skin, drawing blood. The crimson liquid oozed from the wounds, pooled, and then streamed down her neck, filling the hollows behind her protruding collarbones. There, the blood divided into more streams before spreading downward to her shirt.

Sweat began to bead on Eden’s forehead. Cynthia wiped her brow.

“Eden?”

Eden was too focused to answer, and I knew we were close, but the tortured expression on Mamá’s face was unbearable.

“I’m going in,” I said.

“Levi, don’t,” Cynthia commanded. But she was too late.

My skin instantly sizzled at the rolling flames in the room, the embers floating around Mamá, Eden, and me. The tag was

hanging onto my mother's side like an overgrown toddler, talons on its hands and feet. It was larger than I'd seen for something that could survive for long periods in two planes. Eden was in a mental battle, standing a few feet away, her eyes still closed.

"Levi," she warned. "Don't!"

Eden knew as well as I did that Mamá couldn't approach the Pearl Gates with a tag attached to her. We had to set her free first.

I jumped on the demon, prying its hands from her throat one finger at a time.

I met the tag's eyes, coming within inches of his deformed face. "Let her go," I said, struggling. "You're killing her."

His talons sunk deeper.

Mamá was finally able to suck in a breath, and she wailed.

Her screams were heard by my father.

"Eden," I warned. "He's coming."

"I know," she said, her eyes still closed.

"He's coming!"

"I know!" she yelled back. Whatever Eden did next hurt the demon, and he buried his face into my mother's neck, his thin gray skin trembling over its exhausted muscles.

Mamá's eyes met mine, and for the first time in my life, I could see her panic.

"Eden, stop!" I begged.

"No!" Mamá croaked, shaking her head.

"She's afraid," I said, looking to Eden.

Eden opened her eyes and looked to Mamá, who reached out and then shook her head.

"I'm sorry," Eden said, closing her eyes.

Mamá pulled back her hand, and she touched my cheek. She shook her head, still unable to breathe. Her eyes fluttered,

rolled back, and her body relaxed, her hand falling away and to her side. I stared at her hand, hanging lifelessly off the bed.

“Not yet!” I yelled. “Eden!”

Eden pulled Gehenna from behind her, showing it to the tag. It immediately recoiled, loosening its grip on my mother.

“I’ll end you! Free her!” Eden screamed.

The moment the demon showed weakness, Eden lunged, effortlessly prying its fingers off my mother’s tiny body and then tossing it over her shoulder and onto the floor. They grappled, and then Eden gained her footing and held the thick skin of its neck with both hands, pinning it against the burning wall of Mamá’s bedroom.

“Mamá?” I said, shaking her. “You have to come back. You have to fight to open your eyes. It’s time.”

I grabbed my mother’s shoulders, shaking her as the room burned around us. “Mamá!”

Her eyes flickered, and then she gasped for air.

“Is she ready?” Eden yelled, still holding the tag. “Are you?”

Mamá tapped my arm, and I helped her to stand. She was wobbly, but she kept her balance.

Eden stepped aside, freeing the tag to barrel toward Mamá like a freight train. On all fours, it loped toward her so fast drool slid from the corners of its mouth and across its leathery skin to its ears.

I unleashed every bit of my rage, tackling the tag and ramming my fists into its head and sides. Hundreds of tiny razor-sharp teeth snapped inches from my face as it fought. That was when I felt the first of my wounds tear apart.

“Petra!” Eden called, true fear in her voice.

I was on my back, and the demon sunk its teeth into my shoulder and then shook its head, tearing my flesh from the muscle and my bone from the socket. I cried out, feeling even more human than before.

“Here!” Petra said, gaining the tag’s attention. “I am your slave no more, demon! You failed! I am free!”

I turned onto my stomach as the demon shrieked and then ran to my mother, pouncing and taking her to the ground.

“Mamá!” I cried.

She wrestled for just a few seconds before the demon grabbed her neck and pulled. Her body went limp the same time Eden sailed through the air, sinking the blade into the tag’s back before it had a chance to reattach.

The monster shrieked, and a slosh of dark liquid splashed at Eden’s feet before its entire body turned to ash.

I stared at Mamá’s lifeless body on the ground, most of her throat gone, her eyes staring above, vacant. “Mamá?” I called.

Eden checked Mamá, kissed her forehead, and then rushed to me.

“We have to go,” she said softly. “Your father’s coming.”

We phased back to Earth’s plane, where Claire, Jared, and Nina had stopped chanting. Jared was tending to his exhausted wife, Agatha was detaching tubes and monitors from my mother, and Cynthia was covering her with cheese cloth.

“Wait,” I said, limping to Mamá’s side.

I was unable to take my eyes off my mother, knowing it would be the last time in this life. “Eden?”

“She’s conflicted,” Eden said, her eyes closed. “She’s right outside the Eighth Gate. This is her chance at a sacrifice, at seeing you in eternity outside of Hell. But she doesn’t want to leave you.”

“Go, Mamá,” I said, kissing her cheek. “You can go now,” I said, attempting a reassuring smile. I put my palm on her forehead. “I’ll see you soon.”

“He knows,” Bex said. “This is war, you know.”

I held Mamá’s hand in both of mine. A tear fell from the outside corner of her eye and across her temple to her dark

hairline. She had always been beautiful, and even after fighting for her life, she was beautiful still. I had been afraid of her death since I was a boy, knowing her fate, but now that she had the possibility of something different...

“Mamá,” I began. I brushed back her hair with my fingers. “You leave me now, but we’ll be together again.” My face crumbled.

“She’s in,” Eden said with a relieved sigh. “She’s safe.”

My head fell forward, and my shoulders trembled with my silent sobs. I sucked in a breath, trying to steady my voice.

Eden’s hand squeezed my shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I...”

“My father was coming. She had to get beyond the safety of the gates before he could get to her.” I reached up to place my hand over Mamá’s eyes, closing them completely. “It was quick. For that I’m grateful.”

“You gave her eternity in Heaven, Levi. You know as well as anyone that was the most selfless thing you could do,” Cynthia said, twisting off the knob of the oxygen tank next to the bed. “Your father never would have allowed it. She had to die during a sacrifice.”

I lifted my mother in my arms, her blouse still sticky and wet with her blood, and then lay her back gently, covering her with the thin white cloth Cynthia had provided.

Jared began a beautiful prayer in Hebrew. She was God’s now.

“Levi?” Eden said, calling after me as I passed her.

“I need to bury her,” I replied, heading for the garden to retrieve a shovel.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EDEN

FOR A BEING who'd existed with him for eons, I didn't know how to behave around Levi. He'd been quiet, but not brooding. Mourning, but not sad. It was difficult to know what to say, if I should apologize again, even though I'd done it at least a dozen times. He didn't want or need to hear it, and although I knew how he felt and what words made his heart speed up with anxiety or slow as my words or presence calmed him, guilt clouded everything.

At the same time, I longed to be there for him, to help him, save him, to take away his pain, but then the guilt and the awkwardness of my human side would take over, and I'd let him walk the halls of my grandmother's house alone.

The unique sound of glass hitting Grandmother's marble countertop echoed, pulling me from my self-loathing. Agatha lightly kicked the wooden leg of my stool, and I sat up taller, watching from the kitchen as my grandmother clicked across the dining room in six-inch snakeskin Louboutin's.

Agatha began filling the goblet in front of me with dark red wine.

"I'm eighteen," I said. "Does that not count since I'm immortal?"

"No one is too young for the blood of Christ," she said in her thick Scottish accent, pouring her own. "Pretend it's communion and drink up."

"So you've known this whole time? About all of us?" I asked before holding the glass to my nose and smelling the rancid grape concoction.

"I know what I need to know. It's dangerous to know too much here."

I took a sip, then a gulp.

Agatha clinked her glass to mine before I placed it on the counter. “May the power of Christ compel ya.”

I breathed out a laugh, then took another drink.

Agatha pulled my hair from the tie that held it back and ran her fingers through the light blonde strands like she did when I was a girl. I closed my eyes and inhaled, letting the memory take over. Agatha had always had a calming aura about her. She had always been neutral, the perfect middle ground of my mother and grandmother. Not too sweet, not too tough. Never judging or taking a side. Agatha was the unsung hero of my story and my mother’s, too.

“You’re being too hard on yourself. It was Petra’s choice, maybe her only choice not to spend eternity in darkness.”

“Anyone who’s been there wouldn’t want to return.

“Levi understands that.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“What is it like?” she asked, but then shivered.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No ... yes. Yes, I want to know.”

“It’s grotesque. Worse than a nightmare. Every breath you take burns. Sulphur fills your nose, your lungs. The heat sizzles your skin, like standing too close to a fire and not being able to step away. The landscape is barren. Everything is red, or orange ... or black. But the things there, not everything is human. It’s a place where evil from everywhere goes. And, whatever they were, you’d never recognize it on its plane because they’re all misshapen. Hate, bitterness, regret, and pain change you from the inside out. Humans are in the millions, and they’re piled on top of one another, consumed and manufactured and tortured and writhing in misery. They reach to the dark sky, to the speck of light above.”

“Is it Heaven? The light?”

“It is. Just visible enough to torture the damned even more.”

She shifted in her seat, disturbed by my description. “It’s nearly what I’d imagined. I’d have never thought there’d be more creatures than humans and demons.”

“We aren’t alone in the universe. No one is immune from death or the afterlife. I keep telling myself that I didn’t contribute to her death but helped her get a ticket out of Hell, but it doesn’t help. There’s something there, now, between Levi and me, and I ... I can’t fix it.”

She leaned forward and met my gaze. “You aren’t supposed to fix it, dear.”

“Aren’t I? Isn’t that what I was sent here to do? Fixing things is literally my purpose, and I can’t help the man I love.”

Agatha sighed. “How frustrating that must be, if that’s how you see it.”

“What do you mean?”

She tapped the counter with the tips of her fingers. “Your father’s due home any minute. You best be finishing that before he’s home. Immortal or not, he clings to decorum.”

I downed the rest of my glass and sat it in the sink. “How else is there to see it?”

“Restoring The Balance. That’s your purpose. You can’t restore something unless it’s broken, old, neglected. You need to let go of that nagging feeling you can change things before. Your job is in the after.”

I nodded.

Agatha winked and nudged me. “Even the Almighty allows free will. Petra made a choice. And, it was a smart one if you ask me.”

“She did. You’re right. I know you’re right.” I exhaled. “So why do I still feel like this?”

“Because your heart is talking, and you’re not listening.”

I winced. “I’m a powerful being. I should know what you mean.”

“Talk to him, ya daft cow.”

I laughed out loud, and then it faded. “I can barely look at him. It’s times like these I wish my human side would have just died with me.”

“And then what? How could you fight for humanity if you can’t understand us? Levi doesn’t blame you. He understands her choice to leave him now to spend eternity with him later.”

“Why would Levi blame her?” Dad said, walking into the front door.

Agatha stood up straight, her expression abruptly professional. “I’ll just be tidying the upstairs.”

“Dad,” I said. I felt that he was on his way, and that he’d arrived, but I was too focused on my conscience to take time to prepare.

He took one whiff and knew what I’d been up to. He hesitated, and I rolled my eyes. “Yes. I had a glass of wine. Proceed with the lecture.”

He sat next to me, crossing his arms over the counter. “I’m not happy about it. I’m also aware you’re technically older than me.”

I smiled.

“I was actually going to ask for a glass,” he said.

I stopped smiling. “You don’t drink.”

“Your mother is with Bex and Allison, and if *you*’ve been driven to drink, it’s likely a good idea for me.”

“Well then,” I said, standing to find a glass in the cabinet. A discreet popping noise interrupted his next question as I pulled the cork. He waited for the crackling to pass as the effervescence whooshed into the perfect curves of his crystal stemware.

He breathed in the Malbec and then took a sip, silently approving of what he likely thought was my choice. I’d never let him know otherwise. Heavenly being or not, I would always be his little girl.

“I know it’s difficult.”

I stared at my empty glass in the sink, tears streaming down my cheeks. “She arrived to warn Levi. His brothers are still plotting to attack him. Something feels wrong.”

Dad hugged me to him, kissing my hair. “Shhh. You did the right thing. This life is a blip compared to eternity. You saved her from Hell.”

“I could’ve saved her. I should’ve figured out how to do both.”

“Eden,” Dad began. “You’re powerful, but there are rules.”

“I went to see Morgan. I took away his memory of killing me. I healed him from his possession. I’m phasing.”

He let me go. “You’re ... phasing.”

I could feel him trying to remain calm, at least on the outside. He was choosing his words carefully, but not as much as his delivery.

“It’s okay, Dad. I know it’s alarming. And you’re also listening and immediately trying to figure out how to explain this to Mom ... or not. She’s stronger than you think, you know. And it’s no secret that she won’t stand for you keeping anything from her when it comes to me.”

He squirmed in his seat, knowing I was right. “Hybrids can’t phase.”

“I’m different. I’m—”

“An immortal. Something like Eli?”

I nodded.

He itched his nose and then gulped his wine, pushing his empty glass toward me so I’d fill it again. After downing half his glass, he braced himself. “And how is Levi?”

“He buried Petra in the backyard, under the shade tree. He said she would’ve loved to have sat on the bench and watched the wind slide through the leaves. She liked the simple things.”

“That’s nice,” Dad said with a far-off look.

“I don’t ... I don’t know how to comfort him.” My voice broke.

Dad took me in his arms and squeezed. “Eden, comfort is simpler than most people think.”

“I know, but there’s so much guilt. I can feel his anger. The blame. It’s eating me alive from the inside out. I want nothing more than to help him through this, but I can’t go anywhere near him.”

Dad put his thumb under my chin and lifted my face until my gaze met his. “You had to free her from the tag so she could get into Heaven after her sacrifice. It’s a process Levi is familiar with.”

My bottom lip trembled. “Why doesn’t that make me feel better?”

“Why use the blade?”

“I couldn’t send it back to Hell. It might have reported something it heard to Lucifer.”

“You’ll be reprimanded.”

“I’m aware.”

He smiled. “What you did, Eden? It’s the most important gift you could’ve ever given them, do you know that?”

“I should’ve given him more time with her. We should’ve waited. I should’ve tried to think of another way. I don’t know why we rushed it.”

He turned to his drink and took another sip, nodding. “What’s important is being there for him now. I’m thankful I don’t know what it’s like to lose my mother. Levi must feel like an orphan. He feels lost, but you’re his beacon, Eden. It will be difficult, but you’re going to have to go to him. If he needs anyone right now, it’s you. More importantly, you’ve taken Levi from Lucifer and then allowed his wife to go to a place he’ll never be able to touch her again. We all need to be at our strongest right now.”

I nodded, wiping my eyes. “Okay.”

“I know you loved him once. Do you love him now?”

“I always have, and I always, always will,” I whispered.

He pushed the glass of wine away. “I’m going to pick up your mother and drive her to work. Take it from me, my love. Your world will be right again when you’re right with Levi. That’s how soul mates work.”

Dad kissed my temple and then pulled his phone from his jacket pocket, immediately dialing and then walking out of the dining room. The news of Petra’s death would spread fast in both Heaven and Hell, and it would cause questions, panic, rumors, and all of those things led to unpredictable scenarios.

“Levi?” I said, knocking on my bedroom door.

The knob turned, and Levi held the door open, bare skinned from the waist up. Confusion never looked so beautiful. His blue eyes scanned me from waist to hairline. “You’re knocking on your own door?”

“Yes. I was trying to be respectful.” The immortal part of me recognized him, longed for him. The human side was shaking in her leather boots.

He opened it further and gestured for me to come in.

I slipped past him, fidgeting as I turned. “I’m sorry. I haven’t been ignoring you. I’ve been ashamed.”

He crossed his arms over his middle and shrugged. He was the son of Satan, one of the most powerful beings in existence, and he struggled to be in my presence. Not because of what I was, but because of the silly emotions between us.

“Did you forget?” Levi asked, shifting his weight.

“Forget what?” I asked.

His brows furrowed. “Our love has spanned lifetimes. We were sentenced to eternal separation, but I found you. I watched you die, and you came back to me. Now, here we stand, terrified of hurting each other.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “It’s that human side of us, I guess. A weakness.”

He shook his head, reaching for me. “It’s the best part of us. Vulnerability allows us to feel more deeply, to love each other on a deeper level.”

“I hate it,” I said, fighting tears.

He grinned as he finally caught my elbow and pulled me into his chest. My head fit perfectly in the gentle curve between his chest and chin, and I let myself melt into his embrace as he wrapped his warm arms around me. We didn’t speak or move; we existed as one, letting the moment take as long as it needed. Time passed as tiny, beautiful chimes, from one comforting note to another, stringing together in perfect sequences. I closed my eyes, feeling a warm light surround us, like mid-day on the beach, the breeze from the ocean cooling the parts of my skin hit directly by the sun to form just the right temperature.

Levi was the sunlight warming my skin, the breeze running through my hair, the soft sand beneath my feet, the refreshing saltwater washing over my toes. He was a perfect day, a strong hug, a deep breath, a sigh of relief. Levi was with me in my beginning, and he was my happy ending. I ran my fingers over his smooth skin. As many times as he’d gone to battle for us, no scars marred his body. He was perfect, like me, yet filled with so much pain.

I touched my lips to his neck, feeling his warmth against my tender skin.

He sighed.

“I wish it couldn’t been different somehow,” I said, keeping my eyes closed.

“I know.”

He was quiet, and the natural urge to blame warred with the overwhelming love he felt for me. “We can discuss it with her after this life.” He lifted my chin. “Until then, we have to let her go. We have to let go of the guilt. I buried mine with her.”

One corner of my mouth turned up. “You can’t lie to me.”

His eyes glossed over. “I just miss her, Eden. I’m going to miss her. I’m processing, grieving; there’s really no way around that. A distraction might be our best bet, but we have to feel this. We have no other choice.”

My eyes fell to his lips. “A distraction?”

Every nerve in his body blazed, and that enhanced what I was already feeling by a thousand. My fingertips dug into his skin, and he leaned down to press his lips against mine. The warmth from his mouth spread throughout my body, all the way to my fingers and toes, surrounding me in that light I’d just envisioned. The heat, the sunlight, the waves, love, happiness, comfort—everything that felt good hit me at once like electricity bursting deep inside of me.

Levi reached back, and the door’s locking mechanism clicked. I could see the gears, the metal merging, working together to engage without looking. I could feel it, just the way I could already feel what Levi was about to do to me. The first time I saw him, the moment I recognized him, the first time I fell in love with him and the second time here on Earth; time was merged into that one moment in my bedroom as he held me tight in his arms, sliding his tongue into my mouth. The dance was both soft and strong, and each time he kissed me he pulled at me tighter.

Levi took a step back, and I mirrored his every move until we were standing at the edge of the bed. The wetness on his cheeks mixed with mine. It wasn’t until that moment I realized we were both crying, for Petra, for each other, for the inescapable end and the inevitable forever after.

I let darkness undress me in the middle of the day, letting his love soak through my skin as he kissed my collarbone and shoulder as the fabric of my clothes slipped down my arms. He slowly turned me around, as if we were dancing to the song of the universe only we could hear. Everything had led us to that moment, and I succumbed to being slowly lowered to the mattress and feeling the soft sheets on my back and the heat of his skin against the skin of my chest, middle, and between my thighs.

He kissed me again, hovering just inches above me.

His hesitation only made me want him more. “This isn’t the first time.”

“It is in this life, in these bodies,” he whispered. His lips grazed my ear.

I pulled him into me, and we both held our breath. I wasn’t sure what it was like for humans or hybrids, but returning to a love affair that had started an eternity before set off a million tiny fireworks just beneath every inch of my skin. My memories of him filled me as he did in the present; thoughts of his soul touching me deep within combined with him moving against me in the moment. My senses and thoughts were overwhelmed, and the minutes that passed were endless and yet moving too quickly.

Levi began to tremble, and the soft moans coming from his throat sent me over the edge. He followed seconds after, holding me tight, shivering with every euphoric spasm that ensued. Our bodies tensed and then relaxed together, and I fell in love with the way the weight of him held me to the bed.

He breathed hard against me. “What lacked in creativity...”

“Don’t. This is perfect. Everything was perfect, don’t ruin it with unnecessary vacillation.”

He breathed out a laugh. “Okay, then.” He planted a hard kiss on my lips. “The deity has spoken.”

“Did you do that? The memories?” I asked.

He relaxed at my side, grazing the curve of my bare hip with his fingertips. “I couldn’t help it. Just touching you brings it all back. It’s all I’ve thought about for so long, holding you like this. Being this way with you again.”

“More than a distraction?”

He kissed my temple. “Much more.” He pushed up from the bed and began to get dressed. I didn’t have to ask why. Morgan had arrived with Bex and Allison.

Levi smiled at me while I dressed, seeing me in a new way. The grin plastering my lips into an upward curve wouldn't go away, either, and I worried that everyone downstairs would know. Bex absolutely would. "Oh, God," I said.

"What?" Levi asked pausing.

I covered my eyes. "Bex. You're his Taleh. He knows. He knew... He probably... Oh, God."

Levi cringed, unable to come up with any words of comfort.

"Let's just get this over with," I said, slipping on my shoes.

Levi followed me downstairs. Bex and Allison were in the dining room, sitting with Morgan, watching him eagerly consume an entire charcuterie board by himself.

"Eden!" Morgan said with a bright smile.

"He has news," Bex said, failing at every attempt to make eye contact with me.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry," I blurted out.

"For what?" Morgan said, wrinkling his nose.

"She's talking to Bex," Allison said, trying to maintain a straight face.

Bex looked ill, the third most miserable I'd ever seen him, only losing to my death and his loss of Allison. "I don't suppose you can *not* do that again?"

Levi tried to answer, but only came up with a few unfinished words. He finished with a sigh and an apologetic smile.

"The news?" Allison said, prodding Morgan.

"I scored a scholarship. Full ride."

I beamed as I took the seat in front of him. "Really? That's incredible Congratulations!"

“Well. It was a Titan scholarship. I don’t know how much I earned.”

“Morgan, you’re an exceptional student. All of it was earned,” I said.

“Congratulations,” Levi said, stuffing his hands in his pocket.

The movement caught Bex’s eye, and once he caught a glimpse of Levi’s hand, he cringed, likely remembering where it had just been.

Bex stood up quickly. “I... I’m going to get some air.”

“I really am so, *so* sorry,” I said, calling after him.

Allison covered her giggles with her hand and then wiped away her smile. “It’s not funny at all, oh my God.” She cleared her throat. “Congratulations, Morgan.”

Levi shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a little funny.”

Allison burst into laughter, and Morgan stared at me, confused yet again by our strange family.

I forced a smile. “When do you leave? Need help packing?”

“Nope. Titan is covering all that. They connected us with a company that helps military families move. They come in two weeks to box up almost everything except the essentials. My mom is so relieved.”

“Wow. A company who not only pays for college but for moving and transportation. Who knew that was a thing?” Levi asked.

I glared at him. “I’ve heard of it.” I smiled at Morgan sweetly. “That’s truly amazing, Morg. So happy for you.”

Morgan peeked at Levi before speaking to me. “We should, you know, hang out before I go.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “The usual?”

“Yep.”

“It’s a date,” I said, feeling Levi’s uneasiness. He knew better than to be jealous, but he worried this wasn’t the time to be giving into foolish human proclivities.

“I know,” I said in Levi’s general direction.

“You know what?” Morgan asked.

“Nothing,” Levi and I said in unison.

“Okay,” he said, standing. “One last hurrah to celebrate. I thought I’d be nervous to go without you, but ... I mean, no offense, but I’m not.”

“None taken, Morgan, it’s great. It really is.”

“You’re not going to college?” Allison asked.

I pressed my lips together in a hard line.

“Why is that?” Morgan asked, suddenly realizing how strange that was.

Allison immediately realized her mistake. “That’s right,” she said, snapping. “Gap year.”

I nodded. “I know. My parents aren’t happy, either.”

“Did I know about this?” Morgan asked.

“Yes.” I nodded.

He seemed confused. “Things are still fuzzy from around the time I was, you know, comatose.”

I shook my head. “No worries. When do you leave again?”

“Two weeks. Let’s plan for the weekend before, but we should hang out before then.”

“Definitely,” I said.

He stood. “Okay, I have a lot to do. Write a thank you letter to Titan for one. Text me,” he said, jogging around the table to give me a hug.

“Eden,” Levi said.

I turned my back to Morgan the moment he reached for a hug, forcing him to squeeze me from behind. He froze and

then pulled his hands back.

“What?” I said, turning to him.

He stared at me for a moment with horror on his face.

“Morgan?” I asked.

He shook his head, seeming to come out of it. “Nothing. I don’t know. Whoa.”

“You okay?” I asked, touching his arm.

Morgan winced and then relaxed under my fingers. I searched his mind and came up empty. Whatever had happened, it was something I couldn’t see, or it was just there for a moment; an echo.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. We’ll talk later,” he said.

I went in for a hug, and he leaned back, patting my shoulder. “Talk soon.”

Morgan left in a hurry, leaving Levi, Allison, and me to trade glances.

“I left something behind,” I said.

Levi shook his head. “No, something was close.”

“Agreed,” Bex said, rounding the corner. “It was decent-sized, too. Nothing small like a Druden. Something I could tangle with.”

I frowned. So did Allison.

“What?” Bex said, side hugging her. He kissed her cheek.

She was clearly disturbed, her expression unchanging even as her head tilted from the kiss. “It’s not something I enjoy thinking about, you fighting dem—”

“Babe,” Bex said, interrupting her. He shook his head, and she nodded.

He’d already educated her about humans and their acknowledgment of demons. For us, they hovered out of duty or to antagonize. For the most part, they left humans alone unless they were noticed or acknowledged, and that made them curious. Even Allison, who was being protected by a

known demon killer like Bex could fly under the radar if she played the game right.

“Sorry,” Allison said.

Bex smiled. “You’re doing great. Nothing to be sorry about.”

“It took my mother years,” I said.

“Years,” Allison said, the innocence leaving her eyes.

Bex’s brows pulled together, and he pulled her closer. “Hey. I’ll never let anything happen to you, I promise.”

Allison managed a small grin and nodded, but Bex wasn’t fooled. He took her hand and guided her down the hall and to the courtyard.

“She’s tough,” Levi said. “She’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t know. She loves Bex, but some people can’t handle it like my mother did. So funny to think about the stories she told me, and how she described herself as weak and ridiculous in the beginning. She’s too hard on herself.”

Levi reached for me and pulled me close. I breathed him in, relaxing until I heard Bex scream at us from the courtyard.

“Enough for one day!”

Levi released me, letting his arms slap to his sides.

I chuckled. “We’ll figure it out, too.”

“Promise?”

“Somehow...” I said, frowning as any ideas eluded me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LEVI

EDEN SAT UP the same time as I did, her fingers pressed against my sweat-soaked arm.

I stared at her door, breathing hard, trying to catch my breath and figure out a way to tell her what I knew.

“Was it a nightmare, or did you venture to your old stomping grounds?” she asked, squeezing my arm. “Levi?”

“Give me a sec,” I said, coughing.

That was the thing about breathing in Hell. Even if it was just a few minutes, the sulphur and heat made your throat and lungs feel seared, irritated, and scratchy. Swallowing made it that much worse. It used to annoy me that the feeling carried over, but now it came with the territory of bouncing planes.

“You went under,” she said, concerned. “It seems to affect you more than it used to. And you’re still not healed completely.”

I coughed again, and for a moment I had to suck in a few wheezing breaths to cough again, but my lungs finally settled down enough for me to form words. “I feel weaker every day. It’s alarming how much power my father gave me. Maybe I’m just Cambion after all.” That theory wasn’t something I wanted to share with my girlfriend, one of the most powerful beings in the universe, but it was proving to be right.

“Why did you go without me? You’re not in any shape to —”

“It wasn’t a choice.”

She frowned, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I was summoned.”

“I don’t suppose you can tell me who,” she said, pulling me to the mattress with her and holding me to her chest. Her skin was so soft and warm, her fingers so strong and delicate

at the same time, her lips against my temple plush, tender whispers on my skin. It was such a contradiction of where I'd just been and what I'd seen.

"Not here," I said.

She nodded and squeezed me tight, as if she already knew what I wasn't saying. We needed to prepare, but my body wasn't ready for a return. As much as I hated it, I needed to rest.

"I wonder..." she said, sitting up. "I changed Morgan's memories, his brain. I wonder if I can manipulate your healing process?"

I shrugged. "You can try."

She held her hand against my stomach and closed her eyes. She was silent for a full minute, then grinned. "I think I..."

The pain from my wounds began to subside. Eden's heart rate rose, her eyes flickering beneath her closed lids.

"It's..." she began again, instead concentrating. Her eyes popped open, and she lifted her hand and pulled back the dressings to find flawless skin where my wounds were. "Holy sh..."

"Don't...!" I raised my voice, then quieted. "Press your luck."

Her eyes widened. "How do you feel? Do you think I just messed with The Balance?"

"I don't think you could've done it if you did."

"Right. Sit up." She patted me. "Sit up! Stretch, move around," she said, excited.

I did as she commanded. The pain and stiffness were gone. "Whoa. I feel better than better. It's like it never happened."

She covered her smile and giggled. "It was like doing surgery in my brain. I could feel your skin, your muscles, your fascia, your blood *individually*; even your cells!"

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Not getting hurt again, though.”

She shook her head. “Understandable. But if you do, know I’m here for it.”

I chuckled and wrapped my arms around her shoulders, nuzzling her nose with mine. “Thank you, my love.”

She sighed, at total ease. “Any time.”

Eden’s phone pinged. It was Bex, and the text message simply read, “Stop.”

Her laughter chimed across the room. She was the happiest I’d seen her since she’d come back. I couldn’t tell her that my brothers were planning an attack that night. Not yet, anyway. I didn’t want to spoil the moment.

“What?” she asked, her smile fading.

“Not a thing,” I said, tackling her to the bed.

I swept back the nearly white strands that had fallen into her face, her ice blue eyes staring into mine, her bottom lip full and glistening from her biting it the second before.

“Except that I love you. I love you, Eden. Whatever happens next, it’s us. You and me.”

She nodded and then touched my cheek.

“I know.”

“You know?”

She nodded and then giggled when I grabbed her side. She laughed out loud, not trying at all to escape my grip. I could tell she was holding back. I wasn’t even sure if I was actually tickling her. But what I had to say next would put all this to an end, so her pretending was fine. More than fine. My black heart needed the white lie, and she likely knew it.

When I stopped, she relaxed, but the content smile I expected wasn’t there.

“We’ll make it, one way or another.”

“I’m limited,” she said, biting her lip again as she fell deep into thought. “What if ... what if I can’t help you? What

if I can't help my family?"

"*What-ifs* don't exist, Eden. We'll handle what comes along."

"If it doesn't, though," she said, her gaze rising to meet mine. She squeezed my shoulders with her fingers. "If it doesn't, we still have Gehenna, to use it for what it was created for."

"No," I said. "I'm not going to let that happen."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Don't you remember what it was like apart? Every thought of you was painful. I felt sick. And I thought about you nearly every moment. When you were in the Oubliette it was worse." She looked at the pastel painting the sunset outside had cast on her windows and bit on her perfect oval thumbnail. "Humans know death. They know injury, but they don't know pain."

I frowned. "No?"

She looked at me. "You don't know pain until you've been on your hands and knees begging God to heal your heart."

"Pretty sure humans know that pain."

"Not the kind that spans lifetimes."

I leaned down and kissed her forehead, then the wet line that spanned from the outside corner of her eye to her hairline. "We won't need Gehenna. I promise."

"I feel it. They've decided," Eden said.

I sighed, hoping our moment of peace could last a bit longer. "We need to bounce."

She nodded, crawling out from under me then standing next to the bed. I sat on the edge of the mattress, my elbows perched on my knees, looking up at her. "We don't have to do it now."

"Yes, we do," she said, reaching out for me.

The second I stood, we phased, and those same platinum strands that I had combed back were now blowing wildly against her face.

Eden stood two feet away from me in her short silk baby blue nightgown, lace straps curving over her shoulders and bordering the bottom hem. Her exquisiteness was the opposite of anything I'd ever seen in Hell. It felt wrong for her to be standing there, and it also felt wrong that I was home.

"No, you're not," she said, reaching her hand out to mine.

"You're reading minds now? What was the point in bouncing planes?" I asked, taking her hand.

Her bare feet navigated the dirt ground riddled with glass, broken cement, and burning refuse as if she were taking a stroll on a white sand beach.

"Not reading minds, just feelings, and that expression on your face made it pretty obvious." She glanced over her shoulder. "We should keep moving."

"I feel it, too." Something big had already picked up on our presence.

"Were you here earlier with Ramiel?"

"Yes. There are traitors on both sides. In Hell and in Heaven."

Eden's thoughts scrolled across her face. "There are two now?"

I stopped and held up my hands. "Just hear me out."

She glanced behind us. "Hurry."

"My mother came to me. No, that's inaccurate. She met me on a neutral plane ... ish."

"That was reckless!" She shook her head, disgusted. "She could've been cast out and negated everything we went through to get her there. Everything *she* went through. What were you thinking?"

"That what she had to tell me would only take a moment."

"Where did you meet her?" she asked.

I cleared my throat. "Right outside the gates."

Eden's mouth fell open. "I thought she got in?"

“She did. She had help bypassing the system, though, to get inside before my father got to her.”

Eden looked around, then pulled me with her, sprinting to the next building. She leapt up broken pieces of wood, and we landed on a collapsing roof, three stories up. Her eyes scanned the horizon before we ducked behind what was once the roof access to an elevator shaft.

“Someone will be punished,” she said. “Maybe by me. Levi, what did you do?”

“She was let in through the eighth pearl.”

“The eighth pearl is small and doesn’t open for anyone.”

“It does for the *Awal*.”

“Do you mean AWOLL? Or *awal* as in first in Arabic?”

“You know the story of the first brothers?”

She was getting impatient. “Cain and Abel? Of course.”

I sighed. “Mamá was owed a favor. Cain convinced Abel to open the Eighth Pearl.”

Eden thought for half a second, then waved her hands in the air. “Way-way-way-way-wait. Why would Cain owe your mother a favor? After all this time and she hadn’t cashed it in? And how in God’s name did Cain get his brother—who he murdered—to help him satisfy that favor?”

“Uh...” I said, already knowing her reaction. “Mamá was the whisperer in Cain’s ear.”

Eden lowered her chin. “Petra convinced Cain to kill Abel?”

“She taught Abel how to fashion a knife to protect his livestock. She also told Cain to disembowel Abel with that knife.”

“*What?* How is it possible that your answers make *less* sense of all this?”

“She was playing both sides to create jealousy and piss off the Almighty, Eden, that’s what she did back then. Listen, she

helped them both, so they *both* owed her favors.

“So they’re the two traitors.”

“Three.”

She blinked. “And Ramiel.”

Even with her infinite intellectual power, it took her a moment to put the pieces together. She nodded. “Cain is old. One of the oldest here. He got the sword for Bex?”

“He was also one of the most trusted—enough to breach Lucifer’s temple. This was their chance. They’ve been conspiring there for centuries,” I said, pointing to the gates of the dungeons. “Since the last time we found our way back to each other. They knew we were their one chance.”

“One chance for what?”

“They haven’t told me that part yet.”

“And you trust them? Levi!”

“We have to go,” I said, peeking around the elevator shaft top. “We have to go now!”

“I know. I feel them. But Ramiel and Cain are traitors. Apparently, Abel is, too. Levi, we can’t link arms with them. I definitely can’t! I—”

The ground began to tremble.

I grabbed Eden’s arm. “It’s not just minions this time.”

She frowned. “What? Who’s with them?”

“Paymon. They know we’re here. We have to go.” I pulled on her, but she seemed mesmerized by the glowing fires bringing up the rear of the herd of demons barreling over the carcasses of still-smoldering vehicles and buildings.

“I’m not afraid,” she whispered.

“Paymon has never left a contender alive. Not once. If my brother struggles at all with both of us, he’ll keep us from reaching the dungeons. If my other brothers arrive, we’re in trouble.”

I looked past her, seeing hundreds of smaller demons crawling over the landscape toward us, and two larger ones, slogging along like trolls. Slow, but powerful. Their drool hit the ground and created holes in the sand, melting everything it touched.

“He can’t beat me. I’m a little curious, actually, to push myself ... to see just how much damage I can do.”

“Eden,” I said with a sigh. “I’m more human than ever. You can’t concentrate on Paymon and...”

She turned to me. “Keep you alive?”

I frowned. I hated that thought, but it was the truth.

She shook her head, seeming frustrated with herself and a bit disoriented. “I don’t ... I don’t know what I...”

“It’s Paymon. I’ll explain later. Let’s go!”

We sprinted together toward the dungeons, dodging the elephant-sized fire balls they shot at us from behind. Eden came from the side and shoved me fifty yards off course, and I rolled, narrowly missing a winged creature that had been unleashed on us. She fought with it briefly, wasting no time in bringing it to the ground. In one leap she was on its back, breaking its neck with one twist and riding it to the ground with a flurry of soot shooting in every direction.

She ran to me, sliding on her knees. “You okay?” she asked, helping me to my feet.

“Yeah... I think I rolled my ankle.” I laughed without humor. I was no longer Leviathan. I was becoming more human with each passing minute.

“Can you run?” Eden asked.

I nodded, but I could barely keep ahead of the herd before; now it was a fair chase. I was beginning to worry that I wouldn’t be able to bounce back to Earth’s plane.

Horns bleated, and hundreds of marching feet vibrated the ground beneath us. War cries and shrieking could be heard over the winds of Hell.

“They didn’t bring as many this time,” Eden said, running alongside me. She could’ve reached the dungeons by now, but she held back, keeping pace.

“They don’t need to. Paymon is enough.”

We jogged to a stop in front of the doors, glowing from the fires that whipped off the old iron toward us and more violently the closer we came.

“We can’t phase,” she said. “So how do we get in?”

“They’ll open the doors.”

She glanced behind us. The herd was closing in. The crawlers had slowed, giving the larger, strong demons time to catch up.

“*When?*” Eden said, yelling over the grunts and shrieking.

“C’mon, Ramiel,” I said under my breath, looking up.

I glanced back again, seeing that my brother’s small army would be upon us in the next minute. I didn’t want to yell Ramiel’s name, but he wasn’t giving us much choice.

Recognition lit Eden’s face. “They’re using us as bait. We have to bounce. This is a trap.”

I grabbed her hands, but something was different. She felt it too, and her face paled. “You can’t bounce.”

I clenched my jaw, and then took a rock and threw it at the doors. It vaporized immediately. “Ramiel! You son-of-a-bitch!”

“I thought you said you trusted them!” Eden said. Her blue nightgown was covered in dirt, just like her hair and face.

“I thought you said not to!”

Eden’s mouth fell open. She was too busy worrying about me being stuck in Hell to sense our escape was seconds away. She gripped my shirt. “Maybe I can do it for the both of us. Maybe...”

The doors opened behind me. We were both yanked inside, the iron hinges red hot and whining as they closed

again.

I bent over and grabbed my knees in an attempt to catch my breath, hacking at the smoke and sulfur burning my throat.

“Are you okay?” Eden said, kneeling next to me.

A loud bang rocked the dungeon doors, forcing dust to fall from the ceiling like rain.

Eden looked up at our host with vengeance in her eyes. “Why did you draw them in, Ramiel? They know we’re here, now. They won’t stop until they get inside!” she seethed.

“Exactly,” he said, oddly at ease. He turned away from us, taking a few steps before he paused. “Come with me. It has finally come to pass and knowing Paymon we don’t have much time.”

“*Come to pass?*” Eden said, helping me to stand. “What the hell does that even mean?”

He continued walking.

“Ramiel!” Eden yelled. “Mind letting us in on the plan we apparently helped launch?”

He didn’t stop again. “Come with me. You’ll know soon enough.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EDEN

I INTERLOCKED MY elbow with Levi's, helping him limp down the hall. I'd tried to scan his body to find out why his powers were waning so profoundly, but nothing was different except for how weak he'd become.

I looked around, peeking into each prison and at the pitiful creatures inside, all broken from decades of torture. The sick dread that came over me was familiar. "I remember this place," I breathed. "You were in the back, waiting for me in a cell."

Levi smiled. "You came to free me after we were discovered."

"And it wasn't even the first time."

"No," Levi said, breathing out a quiet laugh. "They should have learned their lesson."

"I guess that's why they sent you here, hoping you'd learn yours."

Levi pulled me closer to his side. "I was born without a soul, Eden. You're the closest thing I've had to one. There isn't a being that's ever existed who could get a taste of that and learn to stay away."

"Is that what it is? This whole time you were in love with my soul?"

He smiled down at me. With the fires crawling up the walls and flickering on the ceiling above, his irises seemed to glow even more than normal. He touched my chin with his index finger and thumb. "No matter what form you take, which lifetime or plane we're on, your soul will always be my map to you. Not this," he said, gesturing to my skin and bones, hair and clothes. He touched the center of my chest, pressing his finger gently into my skin. "You."

I threw my arms around his shoulders and hugged him tight. His brothers were on their way, if not arriving any minute. He was injured, he couldn't bounce, and the first of many attacks had started, rattling the huge doors.

"It's impossible, right?" I asked.

"Not impossible," a woman said from behind us. She was a tiny thing, bronzed skin and green eyes, and the tattered hem of her thin linen dress fell at her ankles. By her accent I could tell she was from the very early times of humans. She was beautiful, even more so than Cassia, and just as strong. A dead demon dangled from her blackened fingers. She threw it to the floor and the limp, hairless flesh and bone slid across the hall and hit the wall, catching fire and incinerating instantly. The woman gestured to its ashes. "Kershus. He's a scavenger, a spy, and he'd slipped in through a little-known tunnel. He'll respawn soon. We should begin."

"You have a knack for arriving at the right time," Ramiel said. He clearly knew her, but as familiar as she seemed, I couldn't place her. Her long, onyx hair was braided in some places and fell in loose curls in others, the singed ends hitting the small of her back. She was barefoot like me, but like her fingers, her feet were black, caked with soot.

"It's good to see you again, Eve," Levi said.

My mouth fell open. "Eve. Adam's Eve?"

She grinned. "No, he's Eve's Adam; lazy, passive, unambitious shit that he is." She turned her attention to Levi. "I didn't think you'd survive going head-to-head with your family. I'm impressed." She looked to me, the kindness in her eyes misplaced in such a dark place. "And you. You were always bound for something astronomical. But the Keeper of the Balance? A nearly impossible task, *Asuranachmineh*." She called me by name, beautiful and flowing, but not in English—or in any language on Earth. It was familiar, but so deeply embedded in my past she could've been speaking of someone else.

I shouldn't have been surprised to see her in the Underworld; after all, she was the first to sin. The first mother

of a murderer, the first human to befriend Satan. But Eve's DNA was flawless. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, and like Ramiel, there was something very wrong about her beauty existing within the nightmarish backdrop of Hell.

A loud boom shook the doors again, this time rattling my bones. I could feel the strain on the doors through the floor, the walls, and it shook through to my core. Streams of eons-old dust and dirt began to filter down from the ceiling.

Ramiel smiled on me like my father did sometimes. "It's by design, Eden."

"So you want them to get through?" I asked, looking for an exit. "I've been here before, but it's been a long time. With Levi injured, we'll need an escape plan."

"Not escaping is the plan," Eve said, walking with Ramiel to the back of the Oubliette.

"Wait. What?" I said, following her further. We were deeper in the dungeons than I'd ever been, passing cells containing so many revolting scenes of torment that I made myself stop peering in, instead concentrating on Eve, who seemed unfazed.

Levi encircled his fingers around mine, trying hard not to hobble. Beads of sweat formed between our palms, at my hairline, and on the small of my back, fanned by the thin fabric of my nightgown each time I took a step. The broken bits of gravel and dirt beneath my feet was hot, but it didn't burn. Still, I wished I'd taken the time to dress before we left. *A trip to Hell is never short.*

Ramiel stopped at a circular steel door, the metal tarnished, the borders blackened by superheated fire that had rolled through the corridor at least once before.

We waited for a solid minute before Levi finally shifted his weight. "Respectfully, Ramiel. You know what's outside. What the hell are we waiting for?"

"The door."

“I see that, but you obviously have an end-game here, and we need to know what that is before my brothers and their legions breach the entrance,” Levi said, as if he were reminding him. “They’re still attacking the outer doors.”

“We need everyone here, first,” Ramiel said. “Patience. It takes time to get all the players together on such short notice.”

As if on cue, the lever jerked upward, the door unlatched, accompanied by the high-pitched sound of metal grinding against metal. Two men walked through, and had Eve not embraced them both, I would’ve already known their names. The sons of Adam had dark, rich skin like their mother’s, but only Cain’s hands and feet were stained with the dirt that Eve wore. It must’ve been a mark, a reminder that they’d failed God—maybe even ancient burns. The sons were nearly identical with their round, deep-set russet eyes and short chins they’d inherited from their father. The high cheekbones and jawline from Eve. Their dark hair was so coarse but soft like wool, braided close to the scalp. Deciding which was Abel and which was Cain wasn’t difficult. The taller brother had the glow of a glorious eternity spent in Heaven; the other was shorter and hunched over, worn and haggard after spending the same time in Hell.

It was strange knowing Eve was their mother. She looked maybe ten years older than Cain.

Abel spoke in a language I didn’t understand, but he said it with a smile.

“I’ll translate. They can understand you, but the descendants of Adam speak their father’s tongue only,” Eve said. “Abel apologizes for their tardiness.”

“Abel,” Levi said, outstretching his hand. “Thank you. I know you took a great risk to get my mother through the gate before my father could stop it.”

Abel spoke, and again, his mother translated. “I’m the first human to arrive in Heaven. One procures many favors over such a long time. I called in them all,” he said with a smile. “Sans one.” Abel turned to his brother.

“Cain,” Levi said with a nod.

“My debt was to Ramiel,” Cain muttered, communicating with Eve’s assistance. “He’s helped me escape from many horrors here, in this very place. He asked me to use my position to retrieve *Gehenna*. You brought it, yes?”

Eve didn’t have to translate the last part, but any explanation had to be cut short.

“Yes,” I said. “Levi has it.”

Ramiel’s expression changed. “Levi, do you sense it? Your father knows.”

Levi nodded. “My senses are weak, but yes. That I can feel.” He grabbed my hand, turning toward the corridor. “The tunnel Kershus came in through. Where does it lead?”

“To the temple,” Ramiel said. “You’ll need to escape through the portal. Don’t hesitate. Abel will destroy it behind him.”

“And you?” I asked.

Recognition hit, and Levi’s shoulders sagged. “No. No, not you, too.”

Ramiel smiled. “A sacrifice is a sacrifice, no matter where it happens, and saving you will help me see Lizeth again.”

“They’ll tear you apart,” I said, my brows pulling together. “And it won’t be immediate.”

“I’ve endured worse,” Ramiel said. “And then I’ll be with her. Anything is worth that.”

“That’s what all of this is about? To return you to Lizeth? I don’t understand what part the brothers will play.”

Eve smiled. “Ramiel will rejoin Lizeth. Cain and I will finally be free of this place with the help of *Gehenna*.”

“You expect me to kill you? The mother of all humanity and her first son? It will disturb The Balance to use *Gehenna*. I can’t, even if I wanted to.”

“Not you,” Eve said. “You.” She looked to Levi.

“Me?” he said. He was keeping weight off his ankle as much as possible, signaling he was feeling worse, not better. He wasn’t healing at all, now.

Cain spoke to Ramiel, his words quick and without emotion. *“This will be your part, Levi. As the Keeper of the Balance, Eden can’t do it, but you can.”*

“Once it’s done, Levi,” Ramiel said, his voice low, “once you know I’m gone, you must go through the portal. Abel has to destroy it before he leaves to let me into the Eighth Pearl.”

“Didn’t you hear me? Using *Gehenna* disturbs The Balance,” I said. “I’ll be expected to punish Levi. I won’t let him do it.”

“Levi,” Ramiel said, “this was their only request for helping us get your mother and me through the gates.”

My gaze locked with Levi’s. “No.” I shook my head. “Don’t you dare do that to me. I don’t care what they’ve done for you. You can’t put me in that position.”

“You’ll see after this is all over that you have nothing to fear. There will be no more chances. No alternatives. This is the way it’s meant to be. When you died,” Abel said, *“it set all of this in motion.”*

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The course of events. Levi looking for you, the fight with his brothers, falling out of favor, the development of your powers, Petra escaping Satan, resulting in him renouncing Levi, and that would leave him open to be assassinated by anyone in Hell. It’s the perfect storm and positions you perfectly for what you were born to do.”

“You mean keep the balance? How so?”

Since I could remember, I’d known my place in the universe. Other than protecting my family and training, I’d never really had a chance to balance anything. My title had always been something said and not experienced, and now that my powers had been amplified, my purpose was even more puzzling.

“You’ll know when it’s time,” he said.

I wasn’t impressed. “So you know, and you’re not going to tell me.”

“Trust me, it’s better this way,” Eve said.

The outer doors crashed open with a boom, sending wind and flames toward us. We all held up our arms to shield our faces from the heat.

“Levi?” Ramiel called.

Levi looked to me. “What do we do?”

I frowned and then looked to Ramiel. “If you betray us, if anything said just now isn’t absolute truth, I’ll come for you. I’ll come for you, and I’ll rip you out of Heaven myself. On my mother’s life, if anything happens to Levi, I won’t care about the consequences.”

“Understood.” He pulled out his sword, took a breath, and ran toward the entrance.

Eve hugged her son Abel, who held on a little longer than we had time. Then she kissed his cheek and did the same with Cain. Abel kissed his brother’s cheek as well.

“I’m sorry, my brother,” Cain said.

“I’m sorry, too,” Abel said with a heavy expression. “I didn’t want this for you.”

Cain nodded, and Eve wrapped her arms around her son’s, pressing her cheek against his.

“Levi,” Eve said, squeezing her eyes tight.

Levi positioned himself with Gehenna. “You’re sure?”

“We’ve been waiting for this a long time,” Eve said.

Cain began chanting something in his father’s tongue.

Levi raised his sword, hesitating just long enough for Eve to press her lips against her son’s cheek one last time. Gehenna cut through the air, and then through their necks. Before their heads hit the dirt, their bodies turned to ash and disappeared in

the wind being pushed from the entrance. I turned away, despite there being nothing left.

Levi breathed hard, balancing himself with Gehenna's tip dug into the ground.

Immediately a dark feeling came over me. "Levi?"

Abel spoke, but we couldn't understand him without his mother or Ramiel to translate. I hadn't been taught that language, and neither had Levi. Abel resorted to body language, waving for us to pass through the round door.

Demonic shrieking grew louder, as did the millions of feet barreling toward us. The walls shook with the weight of what was coming.

Ramiel's war cries soon became screaming, harmonizing with the shredding of his skin and the separation of his joints.

I took one step to help him before Abel and Levi grabbed my arms. "He's in pain!" I said. "Let me end it for him!"

Levi shook his head. "That's not how it works, Eden, and you know that. It's what he wants."

I stepped back inside, feeling defeated.

Abel pulled the heavy door closed behind us, gesturing toward another doorway. I had to shield my eyes from the intense white light that poured from it.

"This is the way home?" Levi asked, bearing his weight on my shoulder.

Abel nodded.

"Something's not right," I said, feeling equally repelled and drawn to Levi in a way I hadn't felt before. Whatever it was, it wasn't pleasant.

We stepped through, and in the next moment, I felt the coolness of my mattress beneath me. I sat up, breathing hard and coughing.

Levi was struggling to pull in a sufficient breath, too, but he reached for me.

I pushed him away, then covered my eyes, sobbing.

“Eden?” Levi said, sitting up.

“What?” Dad said, pushing open the door.

Mom had just began running up the stairs, but soon she was there, too, her eyes wide. “Eden? What is it?”

“Ramiel!” I cried.

“Eden, c’mere,” Levi said, reaching for me again. I scrambled off the bed.

“Please don’t,” I said. His touch created a new feeling inside of me that I couldn’t explain.

“Don’t what? Touch you?” he asked, confused. He stood but kept his distance.

“Ramiel?” Dad asked.

“We went under,” Levi explained.

“That explains the smell,” Mom said, covering her nose while still trying to comfort me with her free hand on my forearm. “Eden, honey? Are you okay?”

“We did something awful,” I said, unable to stop the tears. I shook my head. “It’s bad. It changes everything.”

“I feel it, too,” Bex said, stepping inside my room.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Mom said, trying to guide me to the bathroom.

“I’m okay,” I said, sucking in a staggered breath. I let my hand fall, wiping my wet cheeks. “There was nothing I could do. I couldn’t save him, or Petra, or Eve, or Cain... All because of the damn rules!” I said, raking my hair back with my fingers. “What good are my powers? What good is Heaven and Hell and everything in between with so much death and sacrifice and torture and evil?”

“Tell me,” Mom said, touching my cheek. “What happened?”

“Ramiel sacrificed himself for us. He did it to get back to Lizeth. He said it had to do with me keeping The Balance. I

don't even know what that means! What the hell am I keeping? Why is it such a mystery?"

Mom turned to Dad.

For the first time, my father didn't have an answer, and he looked helpless.

"We'll figure it out," Dad said, hugging me and Mom to him.

"It shouldn't be that way," I said, feeling more tears come. Before I died, my human side didn't seem like such a weakness.

"Eden," Mom said, touching my cheeks. "You're so young yet, and you've been through so much already. It's okay to be unsure, to be frustrated. It means you care. Don't worry, my love. It will all be okay. We'll make it so."

She took me into her arms, and I realized I'd just come back from the dead. She probably had to fight every maternal instinct she had not to hover.

"Are *you* okay?" I blurted out.

She blinked. "Am I..." She trailed off, thinking.

"I died right in front of you, and now that I'm back I've been wrapped up in this sword and Bex, Levi, and Ramiel. Are you? Okay?"

Her eyes glossed over, and a single tear fell from her eye. "What matters is that you're back. You do whatever you need to do, just..." Her expression crumbled.

"You don't have to be strong for me, Mom."

"Just ... stay. Okay? I can't lose you again." Her bottom lip trembled. "I can't."

I wrapped both of my arms around her, careful not to squeeze too tight. I didn't have to hold back with Levi, my dad, Uncle Bex, or Aunt Claire, but Mom, Ryan, and Allison were different. Even more so now. Still, it made our embraces even sweeter.

With my cheek pressed against hers, I whispered, "I'll never leave you again."

Mom squeezed me tighter, her shoulders trembling.

Dad kissed my forehead. "And Ramiel? He's with Lizeth?" Dad asked.

"He must be," Bex said, walking into the room. Allison was with him, but she hovered in the doorway. "I can't sense him anymore," he said.

"He crossed through the Eighth Pearl," Eli said from the corner. "But you're all causing quite a stir up top."

We all turned to face him. He was wearing a fresh new shirt, one without a tear from Lucifer's blade.

"Really? You'd think Satan kabobbing you with his sword would've pissed someone off," Levi said with a smirk.

"His temper isn't exactly a surprise, but it's been taken care of," Eli said in his typical unaffected tone.

"How?" Dad asked.

"That's between Lucifer and The Almighty." He shrugged. "And you'll find out soon enough." Eli stepped forward from the dark corner, still in rolled khaki chinos and sandals. Even in the moonlight pouring in from the window, his skin was nearly glowing tan as if he'd just returned from a sunny holiday. He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "The plan."

I wiped my cheek. "What about it?"

He arched an eyebrow. "So you admit it? Making deals with one side behind the scenes? Not becoming of The Keeper of the Balance."

"It wasn't her plan," Levi said, coming to my defense. "She had no idea. Neither did I, until we arrived in Ramiel's Oubliette."

"And yet you're part of it," Eli said.

"What's going on?" Mom asked. "What is he talking about?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, already feeling her anxiety. “My death set off a chain reaction.”

“Well, that’s Lucifer’s problem,” Mom said.

Her answer took me by surprise. She usually wanted more information than that.

Mom held me tight to her side, pausing for a moment at the circulating smell of Sulphur, but soon glared at Eli. “You know as well as anyone it’s a process. She’s learning so many things. She didn’t ask for any of this, Eli. Tell Him she deserves a learning curve. She’s still half human.”

Eli glanced at me.

“What?” Mom asked, catching the motion. She’d been left in the dark so often she was hyper aware of any signs of secrecy.

I wiped my eyes again. “You have all the subtleness of a napalm suppository.”

Eli chuckled, and even Dad had to suppress an unexpected guffaw, but the tone quickly became serious again.

“Eden, am I witnessing your denial of any part of Ramiel’s agreement with Cain and Abel?”

I nodded, waiting. This wasn’t a friendly check-in. Eli was investigating. I’d been accused.

Levi sensed it as I did and took a protective stance in front of me; the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, his muscles tensed, and his hands balled into fists.

Eli grinned, touched by Levi’s diminutive but powerful gesture. “She’s safe, Levi. I’ve only been sent to corroborate the stories of Ramiel, Cain, and Abel, and it all seems to check out.”

Levi reached back, grabbing my hand tight. Something far more potent than déjà vu paused the world around me. We’d been there before, accused and separated for more than a few lifetimes. The agony only flashed through my soul for a moment, but it was enough to nearly incapacitate me. I

grabbed Levi's middle with my free hand, pulling him to my chest.

He held my hand tighter.

"Levi, however," Eli began. "I don't have to tell you he disturbed The Balance. He's done enough in the past twenty-four hours to warrant a tribunal."

"You know it's what they wanted," I said.

"Do you feel that?" Eli asked. "The difference in how he feels so close to you? He feels like an enemy now. You're aware of his offenses. Just because you've found a loophole doesn't mean it's excused. Eve and Cain have long been sentenced by God. Levi superseded that sentence. He's absolved of any involvement in Ramiel's transfer, but no, he's not with Lizeth."

"What? Why?" My voice was higher and louder than I'd meant for it to be.

"Eden," Eli said. For the first time, he seemed frustrated. "You can't fool The Almighty, and it's dangerously near blasphemy that you tried. Ramiel is being held. Lizeth is allowed to visit until his release."

"But he'll be released," I prodded.

"One day," Eli said. "Abel has been detained for a time as well. But your choice has forced Heaven's hand, Eden."

"To punish Levi," I said.

"You're to exile him," Eli said. "I'm sorry I didn't have better news."

"To where?"

Eli didn't have to answer. I already knew.

"I'm not sending him back to Hell," I said, my voice firm.

Eli remained stoic.

"Eli!" I begged. I locked eyes with my father, then Mom, then Uncle Bex, pleading with them to help me.

“And he must return *Gehenna* to The Temple,” Eli said. “His Cambion status will return, and he will be protected ... by Bex.”

“*What?*” I cried.

Bex’s mouth fell open. He was speechless.

“Wait a second,” Dad began.

“What did I just hear?” Claire asked, rounding the corner into my room from the stairway and passing Allison. Ryan was right behind her. “Tell me I heard him wrong,” she said, tears already filling her eyes. She was shaking to hold back her rage.

“I’m ... exiled with Levi? I don’t understand,” Bex said. He was in total disbelief.

“No!” Allison screamed from the door.

Our entire family exploded with emotion, screaming and crying and arguing with Eli.

“It’s the only way to stop Lucifer’s sons from breaching this plane. We’re avoiding a war, and...” Eli said, pausing, “Levi is dying.”

The room grew quiet. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, he’s just losing the powers his father granted him.”

“Those are long gone,” Eli said, strolling across the room. “Lucifer has turned his back on him. Levi is a man without a country. He’s fully human now, and his body is struggling to navigate his actual age. His cells are breaking down. If Levi and Bex don’t accept this sentence, they’ll die anyway.”

Bex grabbed Allison just as her knees went out from under her. She covered her mouth and sobbed. Saying *no* over and over was all she could manage.

I sat on the edge of my mattress, stunned.

“One thing before I go,” Eli said. “I’m saying this as a friend. The Balance was disturbed before you were born, Eden. As impossible as it seems, it’s never too late to fix what was broken. It’s never too late to go back, even if it could

change everything. You were given the most extraordinary powers. More than you even you know. Use them wisely and take it all back.”

I looked up at him, defeated. He was speaking in riddles as usual, but I was too emotionally overwhelmed to decrypt his divine comfort.

“You have twenty-four hours to say goodbye,” Eli said. He looked me in the eyes. “Your mother can help. Your grandmothers can help.” He appeared next to me, whispering in my ear with a soft voice and compassion in his eyes. “So say your goodbyes.” He disappeared, and the wailing began again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LEVI

AFTER AN HOUR, the cries subsided, reduced to the occasional whimpers from Allison. The Ryels were in full planning mode, trying to figure out how to reverse the damage we'd done.

Eden was still sitting on the edge of the bed, unable to move, but Lillian and Cynthia had posted themselves on each side of her, holding her hands. She stared at nothing, her eyes rimmed red. "I don't know how, but I'm going to kill him. I'm going to find a way into Heaven, and I'm going to make Ramiel wish he were back in Hell."

I kneeled in front of her, but she looked away.

"I can't do this," she whispered. "Please don't make me do this," she squeaked. She sucked in a quick, staggered breath.

I didn't answer. It wasn't me she was begging.

"Well, it explains why I feel like I've been run over by the flu," I said with a half-ass laugh. My grin faded. "Eden, look at me. We'll figure this out. We always do."

She shook her head.

"Hey," I said, using my finger to turn her to meet my gaze. "You giving up on me?"

A single tear overflowed and streamed down her cheek. "I ... I don't know how to fix this. How do I fix this?"

"That's what we're doing," Cynthia said, patting Eden's hand. "We will all fix it. Together."

"We could force a tribunal," Dad said. "We plead our case to every friend we have up there and convince Him that we can satisfy Eden and Levi's mistake another way. They were betrayed. God has a soft spot for betrayal. He's experienced it himself."

"Eli wouldn't have come here and told Eden how to punish Levi if there were another way," Claire said. She

swallowed down another sob. “But they’re not taking him. They’re not taking our brother, Jared. I’ll fight to the death, and I’ll die for him a hundred times if I have to.”

“No, you won’t,” Bex said, holding Allison. “Levi and I will go, and you’ll keep thinking. We all will. But you’re not getting yourself killed. We’ll be fine until you bring us back.”

Claire shook her head, uncrossing her arms long enough to quickly wipe another tear from her cheek.

“Mom?” Bex said, looking to Lillian. “Tell them it will be okay.” He could barely form the words around the tightening of his throat.

Lillian looked at her family with glossed eyes. She blew out a sigh to steady her voice, and then she lifted her chin. “We haven’t lost yet, my loves, and we’re not starting today. This isn’t over.”

“We have lost,” Nina said. “We’ve lost more than most.”

“Your mother can help,” Allison said quietly. “Your grandmothers.” She looked up at Bex. “What did Eli mean by that?”

Bex’s brows pulled together. “Remember when I told you about Nina’s father, Jack, and Jared’s father, Gabriel, dying? That’s what started all of this.”

“Can you tell me now?” Allison asked.

“A demon named Shax had Nina’s father killed. He was our father’s Taleh. Our father weakened and died soon after. It disturbed The Balance.”

Nina smiled, leaning her head against the door frame of Eden’s bathroom where’d she’d just been to get more tissue. “And so did Jared revealing himself to me. On a bench, in the snow.”

Jared stared at Nina with the deepest love in his eyes. “And I’d do it again.”

Nina’s bottom lip trembled. “Would you?”

He nodded, fighting tears. “A million times over ... until we got it right.”

“Until I got it right,” Eden said, her expression crumbling. “I was given all these powers. I was sent to save our family and the world, and for what? Did I really just ruin our lives? Ramiel,” she sniffed, “Ramiel said it would be fine. Abel... I really thought we could trust him. I thought...” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what I thought now. Morgan, Levi, Petra, and now our entire family. I’ve ruined everything.”

“You’ll come for us soon,” Bex said, struggling to smile. “I believe it. I believe in you.”

“Why?” Eden said, sobbing. “Why would you believe in me? I failed. I’ve failed all of you. I never did what I was born to do, and then I messed up so badly two of the men I love more than my own life are sentenced to Hell.” She took a faltering breath, staring at the floor. “I’d do anything to take it all back.”

“Isn’t that what Eli said?” Allison said, leaving Bex’s side to stand in the center of the room. She looked to Eden. “Bex said your powers are so strong no one understands it. You can do things not even immortals can do. You are an immortal, aren’t you?”

Eden shrugged one shoulder.

“Eli said to take it all back,” Allison said. Her chest caved, and tears instantly filled her eyes. “So take it all back.”

“What do you mean?” Bex asked.

She didn’t take her eyes off Eden. “It was Shax who disturbed The Balance, right?”

Jared stood upright. “Oh my God.” He looked to me, then to his wife, who’s mouth was hanging open.

Bex stood next to Allison. “You think Eli meant she could go back?”

“Maybe that’s been her purpose all along?” Ryan asked. “She goes back, saves Jack, and reverses Bex and Levi’s sentence.”

“Wait,” Jared said. “We need to think about this and what it could mean.”

“Like what?” Claire asked. “Having Dad back? Jared...”

The oldest Ryel shook his head. “His death is what pushed me to talk to Nina for the first time. What if I stay away from Nina? What if it changes everything?”

“What if Eden is never born?” I asked, frowning. “This is insane. No. Even if it were possible, there are too many risks. Bex and I will go, and you can all think of another way.”

“Jared, do you trust Eli?” Claire asked. Her eyes were bright again, excited about a solution.

“I don’t even know if I can do it,” Eden said, standing.

“Claire, what if we...” Ryan said, clearly concerned. “If Jared and Nina don’t end up together, you and I don’t end up together.”

Claire blinked, thought for half a second, and then dismissed it. “No. You’re my Taleh. Nothing will keep Jared and Nina apart, and nothing will keep us apart.”

“How can you be sure?” Ryan asked. He was breathing hard, panic behind his eyes.

“What if something changes, and I don’t cross paths with you?” Bex asked Allison.

She pressed her lips together, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Anything is better than you spending eternity in Hell. If I have to be without you, I’d rather it be this way.”

Bex shook his head. “No.”

“I trust Eli,” Nina said, her gaze locking with her husband’s. “And I trust your love for me. I vote yes.”

Jared wiped a tear from her cheek.

“We started this,” Nina said.

“I did,” Jared answered, his brows pulling in.

“Shax did,” Allison said. “It’s possible we could all still be together.”

“It’s possible we won’t,” Bex said. “I vote no.”

“I vote no,” I said immediately.

“I vote yes,” Allison said. “If I ... if I can vote.”

Claire looked to Ryan. “I’m sorry, baby. I vote yes.”

“I vote no,” he said, hurt.

She hugged him. “I’ll fall in love with you again, I promise.”

He pressed his wet cheek against hers. “No, Claire. It’s still no. You’re pregnant. I won’t risk losing you and our baby.”

Everyone gasped.

“You’re pregnant?” Lillian blurted out with a half-cry, half-laugh. She stood to hug her daughter and son-in-law.

“That changes things,” Eden said.

“It changes nothing,” Cynthia said. “I vote yes. Eli, Ramiel, Abel, they know what they’re doing.”

“How?” I asked. “They’ll reverse, too. Then how will they get what they want? It will reset everything for my mother, too.”

Cynthia shook her head. “A sacrifice is a sacrifice. There are no loopholes for that. They’re absolved. Eve and Cain are gone forever.”

“With all due respect, that makes no sense,” I said.

“It doesn’t have to. Some rules can’t be broken.”

“But some can?” Eden asked.

“I vote yes,” Lillian said quickly. “I’m sorry, Ryan, and I’m sorry, my son, but I can’t let you go to that place. I won’t watch you go to Hell. I just can’t.”

“Daddy?” Eden said.

He looked to Bex.

“Jared,” Bex warned. He shook his head. “It’s too risky, and you know it. Eden might never be born. If it even works,

she won't exist. She won't be needed. Claire is pregnant. You have to know it's not the right thing to do."

"You don't know that," Nina said. "Eden may just not have the same powers, or any powers, but we'd have children. This all hinges on Jared speaking to me, and he will. I know he will."

"What if it's not Eden?" I asked. "What if Ryan and Nina end up together? Bex is right. There are too many risks involved. If even one thing changes, it all changes. We all lose far more."

"I vote no," Jared said. He tried to smile at Bex, but his grief took over. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Bex." A grunt came from his throat before he took a breath. "I'm so sorry."

Bex hugged his big brother, whispering words of comfort.

I looked to Eden, and then everyone else did, too.

"You're The Keeper of the Balance," Nina said. "It's your decision."

"If I vote no, we're tied," Eden said.

"But if you decide it's right, then the yeses have it," Nina said.

"Please don't," Ryan whispered. "Please."

Eden's breath picked up as she met eyes with everyone in the room.

"This was your purpose all along," Nina said. She hugged her husband tight. "I trust you."

Claire grabbed her mother and husband and held them tight.

Bex hugged Allison tight, closing his eyes.

"No!" I said, grabbing Eden's arms. I touched her cheek. My throat felt like it was closing in. "You can't leave me again. I won't let you."

She cupped my cheeks with her soft palms. "We always find our way to each other. I'll find you, or you'll find me. But

eons later, and look at us. This time will be no different.”

“You don’t know that!” I said, panicking. “What if I’m not sent to Earth because you’re not needed for The Balance?”

She grinned, tears in her eyes. “Then I’ll find you, anyway.”

She pushed up on the balls of her feet and pressed her lips to mine, letting them linger. When we parted, our gazes met for just a few seconds before she closed her eyes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NINA

THE AVERAGE DAUGHTER respects her father. She might regard him as her hero, or she may place him so high on a pedestal that no object of her affection could ever compare. To me, my father deserved more than respect, loyalty, or even love. I had a reverence for him. He was more than Superman; he was God.

One of my earliest memories of him was watching two men cower before him in his office. I didn't understand the purpose of their castigation, but I knew Jack Grey's verdict was always final and never argued with. Not even death could touch him.

I knew the gentle side of him: the man who left important meetings to take my trivial phone calls, kissed my scrapes, and rewrote fairy tales so that the princess always saved the prince. Just a few months before, my father had watched with pride as I'd graduated from Providence High School and then begun my freshman year at Brown University. Now, I wondered if I knew him at all.

I shivered against the cold, turning the ring my father had gifted me for my sixteenth birthday on my finger while I waited for the bus. The gold caught for just a moment, and then I took it off for the first time in almost three years, putting it inside the pocket of my jacket. I'd already given back my car. It didn't make sense to keep the ring.

The bench beneath me was painfully cold, but after what I'd seen and heard, it was a welcome distraction. My father wasn't the successful businessman who ruled Titan Shipping with an iron fist. I'd learned in the last two hours that he was a criminal, a thief, a liar, and—if he was behind the deaths of the small group of police officers who'd been found near the Narraganset—a murderer.

My throat tightened, and my chest heaved. I'd hoped to get home before breaking down, but Jack's pleas for

forgiveness kept ringing in my ears.

The families in the area had little need for public transportation, specifically so late in the evening, and those who used it at all were the hired service employees who worked in the colossal residences nearby. No one was working this late at night, except for Alec, of course. I wasn't sure what 160-pound lawyer in his five thousand-dollar suit and loafers would do to protect me, but in my father's eyes, at least I wasn't alone.

Alec touched my shoulder. "You're sure I can't drive you home, Nina? It's cold, it's dark, and it's snowing." He looked around with his dark, beady eyes, disgusted at the weather.

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I ... need some time."

He sat next to me. "It's natural, you know, to feel pressure. And this ... this is a lot for anyone. You're a brand-new college freshman. To have this dropped on you today of all days... Well ... it has to be incredibly overwhelming."

"I can do it."

"Of course you can. You have always loved being at the office with your father, and you're respected."

"Taking over for him was always the plan."

"Nina—"

"Will he go to prison?"

"I'm very good at my job, Nina. We'll be working around the clock to make sure he doesn't."

"Maybe he should," I said. The betrayal tasted like poison on my tongue. My father had always had enemies, but I never thought I'd be one of them.

"I know," Alec began, "I know you're hurting, but you have to know he loves you, and everything your father does is to keep his family safe."

I craned my neck to look at the lanky, balding man next to me. He was shivering harder than I was. "Alec? Please stop."

“It will all make sense someday. The shareholders need a new face for Titan, and you make sense.”

“I’m eighteen, Alec. None of this makes sense.”

“You’re not a child, anymore, Nina. And you’re the only person your father trusts to run the business he built. Everyone is safer this way.”

“What about Grant? What about my mother?”

Alec shook his head. “It has to be you.”

I stared down at my hands. The peach hue had long left my fingers. I pulled my coat tighter around me. The frigid air was beginning to seep through the wool and into my bones. “You can go. I’m fine here. I’m sure you have more to discuss with Jack.”

Alec shot me a side-eye. “You know he’d rather die than to see you so disappointed in him.”

“He doesn’t get to be disappointed. He made his choices. Good night,” I said. “Thank you for walking me here.”

I stared forward, hearing Alec’s expensive loafers squashing against the wet sidewalk.

Moments later, the sloshing of bus tires approached, slowing to a stop in front of me. The sounds of commuters exiting the bus never came.

The bus driver cleared his throat to get my attention.

I heard him. I heard the door sweep open, but the numbness beneath me kept me where I sat.

“Miss?”

As the seconds passed, a sinking feeling came over me. I couldn’t move. Soon, the news of my father’s crimes would be all over the news. All of my new friends would know. In that moment, freezing on that bench felt safer than returning to campus.

“Miss?”

After I'd ignored him for the third time, the door shut, the air brakes released, and the bus slowly pulled away from the curb. I was alone again.

The snowflakes began to fall harder, filling up the triangle of light cast by the streetlamp. Snow made the world seem quiet, and I looked up, grateful for the silence. Some would touch my face or pants and vanish; some tumbled to the ground.

Watching the snow and my breath crystalize and float around me was a strange respite for what I'd just endured. The documents, the papers, the legal jargon I'd had to listen to for the past two hours was at least subdued while my skin screamed from the cold.

Jack was only questioned today, but at any moment, he could be arrested. In preparation, I was appointed the executor of his estate and briefed on my new role at Titan Shipping. I wasn't sure how I would juggle the hours at Brown and learn the accounts, policy, and procedure at Titan. The sick feeling in my gut hadn't left since I got the original call from my mother. I was only nineteen, and completely unprepared and incapable of the responsibility I was faced with, but I would do it for my father. For all of us.

I'd pushed down the anxiety and nausea for hours, but the stress and uncertainty finally released in the form of uncontrollable tears. Just as I did in childhood, I rocked back and forth to comfort myself. A frigid breath of air flooded my lungs to prepare for what felt like would be full-blown sobbing, but at the top of my breath a man sat next to me. I released the air in the form of an awkward cough, covering my mouth with my hand.

I'd only planned to glance, but then I couldn't seem to look away. He was beautiful—more than beautiful. He looked at his watch, tactical but expensive. “Damn it. I think we missed the last bus.” He pulled his cell phone from the pocket of his black motorcycle jacket and dialed. His voice was deep and confident as he greeted the person on the other end of the line, but he was polite when requesting a taxi.

When he ended the call and replaced his phone, he turned to me, hesitating only for a moment before asking, “Want to share a cab?”

I folded my arms as the wind blew through, reminding me of the discomfort of winter as it broke through my coat and seeped into my skin. Despite my current situation and impending emotional breakdown, I had to get back to Brown. I still had a paper to write.

“Yes. Thank you.”

After an awkward moment of silence, the man spoke again. “Do you live around here?”

“My parents do. You?”

“My parents recently moved into the neighborhood. I own a loft closer to downtown.”

“I live in the dorms at Brown.”

“How do you like it?” he asked with a small smile. His eyes were lit with what look like subdued excitement, as if he were surprised to even be speaking to me.

“I like it.” I nodded, wiping one eye. I sniffed and looked down. “Brown has a great campus.”

He stared at me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher and then looked forward again. He was older than me, though not by more than five or six years. I wondered if he knew who I was. There was a glimmer of familiarity in his expression, but I couldn’t quite place him.

“I’m Nina,” I said, reaching out my hand.

“Jared,” he said, taking it.

“Wow, you’re hand is really warm!” I said, letting my skin thaw against his.

“Yours is cold. Do you have gloves? If not, you can borrow mine.”

“I’m okay. The cold is ... a nice distraction.”

“A distraction?” he asked.

Before I could answer, his cell phone vibrated, and he checked it again, seeming frustrated before he put it away without responding. He didn't ask any more questions, and we sat in silence until the cab arrived.

Once the cab pulled to the curb and stopped, Jared hopped up quickly to open the door. I stood and nodded to him before sliding in. The door ajar bell dinged, and the wipers dragged across the windshield, the background music to Jared's stunning smile as he closed the door. He jogged around the back, closing his door and settling into his seat behind the driver.

My God, he's beautiful, I thought. It took longer than I'd wanted to stop staring, and he caught me. But he didn't seem to mind.

"Brown University, please," Jared said in his deep, smooth voice. "Two stops."

"You got it," the driver squawked.

The wind whipped outside, blowing the collecting flakes across the road like white snakes slithering ahead. I shivered at the image and pulled my coat tighter around me.

Jared turned in his seat to look behind us as if he'd heard something, but all I could hear was the engine, the heater blowing through the vents, and the tires buzzing against the road.

"Did you forget something?" I asked.

"No," he said with a chuckle, facing forward. "Are you, uh ... are you alright? I noticed back there you were upset?"

"Oh," I said, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay," I said quickly. "It's complicated."

"I'm not going anywhere if you need to vent," he said with a small smile.

"Oh, um. Well, I just started college, and my family just put more on my plate. I overwhelmed. Guess I was just having

a moment back there. It's pretty overwhelming to think about."

He waited for me to continue, so I did. "My father owns Titan Shipping. His business and personal lives just ... I don't know how else to say it ... merged, I guess? Now, his focus is elsewhere, so he's asked me to step up. I don't ... I don't know I'm going to do it all. I don't know if I *can* do it all."

I waited for the expected pity in his eyes, but there was none. My relief caused me to smile, which in turn made a grin lift one side of his mouth. He had a nice face. I was sure I'd seen him in a magazine ad at some point.

He stopped grinning, instead seeming confused.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

His eyes widened, and he lunged for me. He yanked me toward him, held me to his chest, and turned. In one move, we switched places, and then headlights smashed through the passenger's side, barreling toward us.

The cab's fiber glass and metal crumpled, throwing us into the park adjacent to the intersection we'd just tried to pass. The tires hit the curb, launching into cartwheels over the wet ground. The back window shattered, simultaneously spraying me with glass and leaving me on the grass and snow, to go on to roll several more times before coming to a stop in the darkness beyond the streetlamps. The world around me, time, and reality blurred, but I knew I was still curled into a ball, surrounded by Jared's warm body.

"Nina?" he grunted, beginning to loosen his grip. "You're breathing, thank God."

He let go of me and jerked twice, the motion sending pain shooting through my body. Two loud gunshots went off just a foot or two away, and the cry from whomever was at the receiving end of those bullets was drowned out by the ringing in my ears.

I cried out, letting the agony leave my body, even if the relief only lasted an instant.

Jared carefully adjusted me as I whimpered, making sure not to unfold my broken parts. He stared down at me,

frowning.

“Nina?” he said, scanning my body. “Stay with me. Keep your eyes open.”

His blue-gray eyes were so beautiful against the night sky and falling snow, but soon the pain spread throughout my body, robbing me of any other thought.

I groaned as Jared used his cell phone to make a call. Even that made my broken parts scream, so I stayed silent. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to open my eyes or focus on anything but my shattered body.

“Claire? Ran into trouble. I need medical. Now. We’re near uh…” he looked around, “First Baptist Church on Waterman.”

He put the phone away and held me gently, looking me over. “Stay with me.”

“Holy shit, are you okay?” a man said, running up with his friends. “Tucker, call 9-1-1! Is she okay?” he asked Jared.

“She will be,” he said with a faltering breath. “She will be.”

“Is that Nina Grey?” someone from the friend group asked. “Kim! *Kim!*”

Kim scrambled to my side. She fell to her knees, pulling off her ridiculous hunter’s cap. “Nina?” she looked to Jared. “What happened?”

“We were T-boned,” he said, his voice breaking. He nodded in the direction of the crushed cab.

“Oh, shit! Oh, shit!” Tucker yelled. “There’s a guy! I think he’s dead! Josh! C’mere!”

Another of the boys left us to view the carnage.

“Ryan?” Kim asked. “Did Tucker call?”

“Yeah,” Ryan said, staring down at me, his eyes full of worry. He took his jacket off and covered my legs. “Is she going to be okay?”

“How bad is it?” Kim asked Jared. “Can you tell specifically?”

“Broken ribs. Broken pelvis. Broken femur and ankle. She has internal bleeding. Her spleen will have to be removed.”

“How do you know that?” Ryan asked. “Are you a doctor? Kim, do you know this guy?”

Kim and Jared traded glances, and she nodded. “Yeah. I know him.”

Sirens wailed in the distance, interrupted every few seconds by the panicked exclamations of Kim’s friends—all but Ryan, who sat near, quietly holding my hand.

“She doesn’t look good,” Ryan said. “Shouldn’t we do something?”

“You’re going to okay, Nina,” Kim said. “Hold on. They’re almost here.”

Jared leaned down to kiss my forehead, his lips as warm as his hands. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I knew something wasn’t right. I should’ve caught it... I should’ve known they...”

“They who?” Ryan asked.

My eyes felt too heavy to keep open, and I realized they were swelling shut. It became too painful to take a breath. Every muscle felt like it was spasming, every bone in pieces. I’d never been in so much pain in my life.

I was supposed to hold on, but I needed to rest. The only thing that felt good was being in the strong, warm arms of the man I’d just met. Even though my friends were begging me to stay, I fluttered my heavy eyes twice and then let them close.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JARED

CLAIRE WATCHED ME pace back and forth in the waiting room. Nina had been in surgery for half an hour, and I could feel every incision, every needle, every clamp, every suture. My shirt and jacket was still damp with her blood when her parents arrived, quickly followed by mine.

Cynthia Grey's heels clicked down the hall, much more fearsome than the anger in Jack's voice. Had she not subtly signaled for him to keep calm, he might've taken a swing at me.

"How is she?" my mother asked. My life depended on Nina's survival, and although my mother loved Nina like one of her own, she undoubtedly worried she would lose us both.

"About the same," I said, clearing my throat.

Claire handed me a stack of folded clothes. "Change first. We'll talk about it when you're back."

I glanced at Jack, then my father, then nodded to my sister before leaving for the closest bathroom. I pulled open the door and let it close behind me, gripping the sink and staring into the mirror. Everything Jack had said would happen, happened. I was distracted and that put Nina in danger. I shifted, letting my jacket fall off my shoulders and to the floor. I reached back and peeled off my shirt. Nina's blood had soaked through my shirt to my skin, and a pattern of crimson was left behind.

I closed my eyes, feeling that she was still lost under a cloud of anesthesia, her skin, tissue, and nerves crying out. She couldn't hear them, but I could. They were tending to the bleeding first, and they'd just finished removing her spleen like I'd suspected they would. It was what they began separating from her body next that stunned me.

I splashed water on my face, my chest, and then pulled dozens of paper towels out of the dispenser to dry off, feeling my knees weaken. I fell back against the door and slid down

the wood until I was sitting on the bleach-washed tile, covering my face with my hands. My one job was to protect her, and she was on the opposite end of the hall, pieces of her being cut away to save her life.

Claire knocked on the door twice. “Jared?”

“Not now.” I stood up and changed into a white T-shirt and jeans, letting my forehead fall to the door. I couldn’t face Jack and Cynthia. They had preached separation for years, and the first time I disobeyed, their greatest fear came true.

The lock was picked, and Claire slowly pushed on the door. When she saw me, she pulled me in tight. “What is it? What’s happening back there?”

I had to lean over, but I buried my face into the crook of her neck, shaking my head. “She’s still bleeding?”

“Can they stop it?”

“Maybe. They’re performing a hysterectomy right now.”

Claire stiffened, but then relaxed. “Jared? Jared, listen to me. They’re going to stop the bleeding, patch her up, and you’ll have saved her life.”

“I should’ve seen it coming,” I cried. “I didn’t see it coming.”

Claire grabbed my face with both hands and forced me to look down at her. “Is He perfect, or not? Are we made in His image, or not? Are our choices part of His plan, or not? Answer me, Jared.”

“We’re Hybrids, Claire. We’re part of a long line of punishment.”

“Or a long line of lessons. This means something. I don’t know how it could have ended up differently, but whatever that was, wasn’t meant for you or her. Do you hear me?” When I didn’t answer, she slapped me once—hard. “Suck it up, buttercup. Your Taleh is in the operating room. We have enemies looming. You good?”

I sniffed once and stood tall, nodding.

“You good?” she repeated, this time firmer.

“Yes,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Fix your face. I’ll meet you out there.”

She left me alone, and I splashed more water on my face, feeling supernaturally exhausted. I took a few deep breaths and rejoined my family. Now Nina’s roommate Beth, Kim, Ryan, Tucker, Josh, and another friend, Chad, were there, too.

Beth stood when she saw me and threw her arms around my neck.

“Thank you,” she said with a Southern twang. “Thank you for saving her life.” She held me at arm’s length. “Kim told us what you did, and had you not been in that cab with her, had you not used your body to shield her, had you not shot the driver of the other car who was still coming after her ... she wouldn’t have a chance. I don’t ... I don’t know who you are or what’s going on, but she’s still here fighting because of you.” Her eyes filled with tears that toppled over and down her cheeks. “Thank you for giving my friend that chance.”

Beth turned on her heels and sat between Kim and Chad. Chad hooked his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his side.

“She’s right, you know,” Bex said, looking up at me with his big blue eyes. “I know you must feel awful, but this isn’t your fault.”

“It’s mine,” Jack said, walking toward us.

“It’s ours,” my father said, standing behind him. “We took the book. We set all this in motion.” He turned to look at Kim, who was glaring at him.

“We’re returning it tonight, and if they won’t back down, we’re going to end this,” my father said.

Jack’s eyes lost focus. “They’re lucky we’re going to offer them a deal.”

“What they’re attempting disturbs The Balance,” my father said.

“If they don’t agree to a cease-fire, how do we end this?” I asked.

“We’re not going to wait,” Cynthia said. “It ends tonight.”

“Cynthia,” Jack said.

“They came after my baby girl, and I have it on good authority they’ll keep coming after her.”

“From who?” Jack asked.

“Someone we haven’t met yet,” Cynthia said, her expression softening. She patted her husband on the shoulder. “This ends tonight.” Her heels clicked across the waiting room floor and down the hall.

Bex frowned. “She’s not supposed to get involved, right? That’s her one rule, right?”

“Technically, she’s Cambion. She’s still part human,” Jack said.

“But,” Claire shook her head, “she’s a Queen of Hell. She’s *the* Queen of Hell. Even Lucifer is afraid of Lilith. That’s why he put her on this plane to become Cynthia. To soften her with motherhood and a human life.”

Lillian blew out a laugh. “Motherhood doesn’t soften a woman. Becoming a mother only makes you fiercer. They don’t know what they’ve done.”

“Should we...?” my father asked.

Jack shook his head and stared down the hall where Cynthia had gone. “She doesn’t need our help. That woman doesn’t need anyone’s help.”

I sighed, feeling Nina’s vitals improve. “They’ve stopped the bleeding,” I said, relieved.

Jack’s eyes filled with tears, and he grabbed my arm. “So, she’s going to be okay?”

“She’s got a long way to go, but she’s fighting.”

Jack put both hands on top of his head and walked away, taking in deep breaths to fight the sobs caught in his throat.

Claire put her arms around my waist and locked her fingers. Ryan tried stealing a glance at her, quickly looking away when he realized I'd caught him.

Two hours passed, and then a third. After five hours, the nurse came to update us. She had several breaks, including a fractured pelvis. They'd stopped the bleeding, and her heart was strong. After another two hours, they'd closed her up, and she was in recovery. The surgeons, Dr. Gregory and Dr. Milacek, arrived to update us again.

Cynthia still hadn't returned.

"When can I see her?" Jack asked.

"She'll be in recovery for a while. It was a lengthy surgery with a lot of moving parts," Dr. Gregory said. "A nurse will come get you when Nina's ready." He glanced around the room, and then took Jack into the hall. He quietly told Jack the grave news about what Nina had lost, and Jack grabbed his knees, breathing hard.

Jack Grey wept.

I'd never seen him cry before, not even a lip tremble. I waited for him to come back in and lash out at me, but instead he returned to the waiting room, took one look at me and took me into his arms.

I'd thought I couldn't cry anymore, but Jack's gesture of forgiveness—or whatever it was—was overwhelming. He squeezed me tight, and then held me away from him. "You have my blessing, Jared, if she'll have you."

Jack walked away, leaving me standing in the center of the room in shock.

I looked to my dad, confused.

"Shax's book," my father said. "Jack was sure that the girl in the prophecy was Nina. Her lineage, you being a hybrid. He was looking for a way to stop it, or a loophole, because he knew that with your burden of your Taleh being the woman you love, it was only a matter of time before you introduced yourself. And Jack knowing his daughter, it was only a matter

of time before she fell for you. We took the book to save her, son.”

“From me.” My voice cracked.

“No. From her fate,” Lillian said. “The prophecy talks about the woman’s child being The Keeper of the Balance.”

My face paled. “So Jack gave me his blessing because now he knows the woman in the prophecy can’t be Nina.”

My mother touched my arm, her expression crumbling before tears fell. I walked backward, barely able to stand upright before falling to the empty chair behind me.

Beth stood. “What happened? Is Nina okay?”

“She’s okay. She’ll be fine,” Claire said, offering her best comforting smile.

I covered my face with my hands, wishing more than anything that I could turn back time so Nina would at least have the chance at her former life. If I was less selfish, I’d have kept my feelings to myself so Jack and Gabe would never need to save her from me. She’d love someone else, have a family. Be safe, happy. I’d ruined her life before she’d ever really knew me. Who knows what loving me would do to her?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NINA

WAS I SUPPOSED to cry? When they told me the news, when I learned that the choice to bear children had been taken from me before I'd ever really decided if that was what I wanted... I didn't feel anything. Confusion, maybe. Numbness. But not sad. How can you miss someone you've never met?

And yet, a feeling was still gnawing at me, nagging, insistent that I recognize it. But that feeling stayed just beyond my grasp.

Of course, my mind had been preoccupied with trivial things like healing. My bones were shattered, broken, and put back together with pins and rods. The inside of me was still bruised, and some things had been torn from me forever. Still, I couldn't cry. A far away voice kept saying that it would be okay, that all the pain and my fight to sit up, stand, and walk again would be worth it.

I looked across the room at the man I'd shared the cab with. He met my eyes for only a moment before looking down at the book he scribbled in every day.

"All good?" he asked, still writing.

I looked at the white board hanging on the wall just a few feet from the foot of my bed. My nurse's aide was Cadee Connor, CNA, my nurse was Misty Horn, RN, my vitals were good, and it was my fifty-third day on the second floor of Rhode Island Hospital. I'd woken up on day three. Jared was in the waiting room down the hall, and once I'd agreed for him to visit, he'd been there every day since.

I pushed off my palms to sit up more. "I must've dozed off."

"You worked hard today." His voice was so calming. Deep, smooth, and masculine all at the same time.

I grinned. "It was ugly, but a first step is a first step."

“Five,” he said, looking up at me with a smile. His blue-gray eyes softened. “You took five steps. It wasn’t easy. I’m proud of you.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear and pretended to look up at the television until the blush left my face.

“So, you go home tomorrow.”

I nodded.

“I was going to ask you,” he began, “if you’re up to it, that is. I was hoping to celebrate your emancipation. Would you be interested in dinner? With me? Tonight?”

I breathed out a laugh. “I can’t... I’m sort of stuck here until tomorrow.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I might’ve made arrangements down the hall.”

I pressed my lips together, trying not to allow the ridiculous grin begging to spread across my face to break through. “Are you asking me on a date, Jared Ryel?”

He nodded. He closed one eye, already cringing at what he was about to say. “I’d be honored if you’d join me for dinner.”

I looked down. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Beth has offered to help in that department. She said she’d stop by to help if you said yes.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’ve been plotting.”

His deep laugh filled the room. “Guilty. I was thinking I’d cook? Make all your favorites?”

I crossed my arms, ashamedly entertained at how nervous he seemed to be. I remembered the first time he smuggled in non-hospital food. A bag full of amazing sweet potato fries with all these interesting sauces that I hesitated to try until he asked me to trust him with nothing but hope in those beautiful blue-gray eyes.

I’d hoped that was a date, but every day I wondered when he’d stop feeling sorry for me and return to his life.

“You don’t have to do all that, Jared. Do you honestly think I’d say no?”

His eyes lost focus for just a second before he answered. “Maybe you should.”

My heart sank. Maybe it was the goodbye dinner I’d been dreading.

“Not that I want you to,” he clarified. “I just uh ... we’ve covered a lot of ground this month. We’ve had a lot of time to talk and get to know each other, and I ... feel like it’s time.”

“Time?”

“For me to officially ask you on a date.”

“This will be a date?” My heart banged against my chest so loud I was sure he could hear it.

“Yes.” His eyes softened. “And to talk ... more. So, what do you think?”

“Jared,” I began.

He shifted in his seat, waiting for my answer. He was undeniably beautiful, as if he’d stepped out of a Banana Republic catalog and into my life. “We’ve spent a lot of time together. You saved my life. You’ve been here every step of my recovery. We’ve no doubt bonded over the accident we were in, but...”

He shook his head. “That’s not what this is for me, Nina.” He cleared his throat. “Is that what this is for you?”

“*No*,” I said it too fast and too loud.

He seemed desperate to relieve me of my immediate embarrassment. “You have to know I have feelings for you.”

The butterflies in my stomach exploded like a million fireworks, the burn spreading throughout my entire body. I felt shaky and calm and on the verge of tears.

“Whoa,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing.” He stood and kneeled next to my bed, taking my left hand in his. He stared at it for a moment, then lifted it to his lips, closing his eyes. “It’s hard to explain this because of what the accident took from you. It feels selfish to say, but the accident changed my life. It’s awful what you’ve gone through, and at the same time I couldn’t be more grateful to have been in that cab with you, and to be here with you now. The way I feel... It isn’t pity. If I feel sorry for you at all, it’s because it’s my fault you’re—”

I pulled my hand from his grasp and shook my head slowly. “Don’t say it.” I said. “Don’t you dare. I won’t let you think that about yourself.”

“It’s hard to explain now, but if you agree to see me tonight...” he began.

I grabbed his hand in both of mine, squeezing. His skin was so warm, so soft, it was hard not to want to touch him all the time.

I took in a deep breath and blew it out, suddenly overcome with emotion. “There is nowhere else I’d rather be.”

“Yeah?” he asked, beaming.

My smile couldn’t be contained. “Yeah.”

He leaned over and kissed my temple, his more-than-warm lips lingering there for a few moments. “I’ll let Beth know,” he said softly into my ear. “I’ll be back in a few hours with dinner.”

I nodded, watched him leave, and then relaxed my head against my pillows, pounding my fists against the mattress in excitement. *Holy shit*, I thought. *I have a date with the most attractive man I’ve ever seen in real life, and he just said he has feelings for me!* What?

I texted Beth to thank her for plotting with Jared and then tapped out a list of items like a razor and my favorite perfume. I put my phone down, and then—silence. *Oh, no.*

I worked on another paper, I finished homework, I polished my nails, and I still had hours before Jared’s return. He didn’t say what time, but he did say dinner and cooking,

and I assumed that would be at the earliest five o'clock. That was three hours away.

I leaned my head back and blew a strawberry through my lips. Patience was a virtue I did not possess. Amusement park lines, doctor's appointments, college acceptance letters—all enough to drive me insane. Waiting on a date with Jared felt very much like torture.

Beth rounded the corner holding a tote in one hand and a garment bag in the other.

I clapped my hands twice above my head and then held my palms forward to praise Beth's very existence. "Perfect timing!"

"Jared texted me and said I should head on over just in case you were feeling anxious. I have everything you asked for except the blue dress."

"Probably a good thing. I don't think it will go with my cast," I said.

"Shower first?" Beth asked.

"We'll need to call the nurse."

Beth glanced at the white board. "Misty today. Oh, I like her."

"Me, too." I looked up at her. "He's cooking."

She grinned from ear to ear. "I know."

"What else do you know?"

She pressed her lips together before she spoke. "That's all. Besides he's so into you it's ridiculous. I could listen to him talk about you all day. Chad likes him, too. Ryan ... not so much. It's not hard to see why."

"Why?" I asked.

Beth rolled her eyes.

Ryan had visited me almost as much as Beth and Kim. We'd created our own game, talking to each other in

commercial slogans, and we played cards a lot. Ryan was good to his core, but he didn't trust Jared. "What?"

"It bothers him that Jared shot that guy. He says it's weird that the cops aren't investigating. And he worries about you. He says Jared is taking advantage. We all think it's just because he has a thing for you, and Jared is in the way." She giggled.

"He has a thing for me? No, he doesn't."

"Oh, Nina. Really?"

"If Jared hadn't shot that man..."

"I know," Beth said, suddenly solemn. "We all know. It's crazy how they've gone after your family. Does your dad deal with the mafia or something? I mean, I wasn't going to ask, but since you brought it up..."

"You brought it up," I said.

"Oh. You're right," she said, blinking. "But, seriously. Didn't you say your daddy moved his security team onto your property? I'm surprised someone ain't at your door right now. I'd be scared outta my mind." Her Southern twang became thicker when she got excited or upset, and she was full-blown Okie at the moment.

"Jack's handled it, I'm sure. How are things with Chad?" I asked.

She giggled, her whole expression resetting. "Moving along. It's so weird that we started talking in the waiting room the night of your accident. Is trauma bonding a weird way to start dating?"

I shrugged. "I'll let you know."

"Oh! No. No way. That's not what tonight is. That man is twitterpated."

"He's what?" I asked.

She laughed. "Didn't you watch cartoons when you were little?"

"Not really. My mother didn't allow it."

She made a face. “Weird, my television raised me. You look nervous. Why are you nervous? You’ve been on first dates before.”

“Not with Jared Ryel. I don’t know why he’s hanging around. He’s perfect. Do you know how many times he’s seen me wake up, my hair matted to the side of my head, probably dried drool around my mouth. God knows what he’s seen while I’ve been unconscious.”

“Well, whatever it was, he’s falling for it pretty hard.”

I wrinkled my nose and lowered my chin, trying to hide another obnoxious smile. “You think so?”

“He’s here every day, Nina. Every day. He brings you fresh flowers every week. And now he’s cooking for you, all your favorites, and bringing it all here.”

“I told him he didn’t have to,” I said, feeling my insecurities flare. “What if he has these feelings because I almost died? He says it’s not pity, but what if he...”

“Nina?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut your pie hole, I have work to do.”

I frowned. “Don’t interrupt my anxiety attack. It’s rude.”

“Hello, hello,” Misty said as she swished into the room with her baby blue scrubs. She squirted hand sanitizer into her hands and rubbed it around in circles as she stepped closer. Her blunt-cut, chestnut hair brushed against her shoulders as she scanned the room. “I heard a rumor you have a date with the hot blond tonight.” She pushed her glasses up the subtle bridge of her button nose. “I want details.”

“The rumors are true,” I said with a smile.

“Well, it’s about time,” she said.

“And that means I’ll need to shower and shave. Is Cadee busy?”

Misty’s mouth moved to the side, and she looked at me like a puzzle to be solved. She held up a finger. “Okay. We can

do this.”

“You’re not going to get Cadee?” I asked, feeling guilty. Misty was always busy helping everyone, even patients who weren’t hers.

“First date with Mr. Amazing. I’ve got you, boo boo.”

Misty made herself busy in the bathroom, setting up a chair in the shower and collecting plastic to cover everything that couldn’t get wet—which was a lot.

The three of us worked to make my shower as painless and efficient as possible, and I emerged from the shower area shaved, shampooed, and lotioned. Misty left us alone to tend to other patients, leaving Beth to the less labor-intensive things like blow out my blonde bob and do my makeup, but she came back to help with the task of getting dressed.

“This was tricky,” Beth said. “I wanted to get something you’d feel beautiful in but that was also comfortable and easy to get on and off.”

Misty and I both looked at her.

“Over your cast and such,” she said.

Misty peered over at me and smiled but kept working.

“So,” Beth said, standing up to get a look. “The powder blue chiffon made sense. Strappy and short for a touch of sexiness, and flowy so it’s not restricting.”

“Great choice,” I said, sitting back to rest. Even small tasks seemed to take a lot of energy.

Beth polished my toenails and then dabbed some perfume on my neck and ankle and then stepped back to view her hard work. “Beautiful.”

“Yeah?”

“Prettier than a speckled pup.”

I laughed out loud. “You’re such an Okie.”

She bent down to kiss my cheek. “I’m ready for you to come back home. I wouldn’t rather be shackled up with any

other Yankee.”

“Soon, hopefully.”

“Have fun.” She winked. Then, she left me alone to wait for Jared.

It was already dark, the only sounds from the hallway were the occasional intercom call and beeping from other rooms. I didn’t have time to get nervous, because Jared rounded the corner and knocked on the door as he walked into my room.

“Come in,” I said with a smile.

He paused, seemingly speechless at the sight of me.

He was wearing blue slacks and a crisp white button-down shirt, his dark blond hair was freshly cut and lightly gelled in place, and he was clean shaven.

“You look...” He took a breath. “Wow. This doesn’t feel real. You’re stunning.”

I felt my cheeks flush. “Thank you.” I began to sit up, but he stopped me.

“Do you mind?” he asked, gesturing that he was going to pick me up.

I nodded, and he gently slid one arm under my knees, the other behind my back. We were so close, his lips just inches from mine. He smelled like fresh laundry, soap, and sunshine, and he lifted me in his arms as if I weighed nothing.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

I nodded again. Being that close to him made my brain turn into mush. I couldn’t think of a word much less anything witty to say.

He carried me to the wheelchair and then sat me inside of it, positioning the foot pedals.

“It’s a short trip to where we’re going. I guess I could’ve carried you, but I thought this would be more comfortable.”

“I’m not sure you thought that through,” I said, purposefully not checking for his reaction. I couldn’t help it; the wheelchair was a significant let down after being in his arms.

He chuckled, then stood behind me, backing me out of the room and then pushing me down the hall. We passed a half dozen rooms, the nurses and nursing aides smiling at me brightly as we passed the nurses’ station. Then, Jared turned into what looked like a breakroom.

Tall candles burned in the darkness, and my heart began to pound in my chest.

Jared switched on the light, and a lone, round table sat in the center of the room, covered in a white tablecloth, the centerpiece a clear vase holding pink and white tulips.

I looked up at him. “Those are my favorites.”

“I know,” he said, putting the chair’s wheels in park before lifting me into his arms again.

He sat me at the table in a padded chair. The place setting in front of me was made up of white plates, rose gold silverware, and a stemmed wine glass.

“Did you do all this?”

“My sister helped.”

“Claire?” I asked.

I’d only seen her once and for less than a minute. She came in to speak with Jared because he hadn’t been answering his phone, and she’d taken him out into the hall.

“Oh,” I said.

“Oh?” he prodded, a knowing grin on his face.

“I didn’t think she liked me.”

Jared went to the counter against the wall on my left and then brought an oval plate with a steaming pot roast bathing in au jus.

My mouth fell open, and then I closed it to take a deep whiff. “Oh my God. I was just taken back to my childhood.”

He nodded. “It’s my mother’s recipe.”

He turned and brought more dishes. Roasted butternut squash with parsnips, sweet potatoes, and shallots, made-from-scratch dinner rolls, and a twice-baked truffle potato.

“Jared...” I said, pausing. We’d spent a lot of time talking and getting to know one another, but I wasn’t convinced I’d told him how to prepare every one of my favorite dishes.

“Save room,” he said. “There’s an Angel food cake for dessert.”

“I told you all of this?” I asked, looking over the food with bewilderment.

“Not exactly. But it will all make sense soon, I promise.”

I nodded, watching him load my plate with food. He sat before me, and we dug in. There was no shame in my intermittent moans of satisfaction. He’d made everything perfectly, and the smells floating about the room made me feel like a girl sitting in Lillian Ryel’s kitchen again. She was the wife of my father’s head of security and...

I looked up at Jared, mid-bite. “I know this recipe. Your mother’s recipe. I’ve had it so many times. You were at the bus stop. Your family had just moved in.”

Jared nodded, but I could see the panic in his eyes. He held up his hands. “I was hoping we could discuss it all tonight. There’s a lot of information, and it didn’t feel right to dump it all on you while you were still healing.”

I’d asked him his last name before. Somehow, we’d always gotten off on another subject. I didn’t even notice until I realized the next time that I still didn’t know his last name. “You’re Jared Ryel? Gabe’s oldest son?”

Jared nodded slowly.

“Why didn’t you just tell me at the bus stop?”

“It’s ... complicated.”

“Because of my father?” I asked.

“I’d hoped to get into this a little later in the evening.”

“Well, we’re here now. What does this have to do with my father?”

“He’s part of it, but there’s more. And I need to tell you before we ... before this goes further. You need to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“What *I’m* getting myself into?” I set my fork down. “Tell me everything.”

Jared lowered his chin. “You’re not going to like it.”

I felt tears burn my eyes. “There are few things—when it comes to my father—that I like these days.”

So, I listened. To Jared’s childhood, about his training, Claire and his baby brother Bex’s training, and how Jared had been assigned to me. That’s when he paused, waiting, watching for my reaction.

“So, you’re saying you’ve been ... watching me.”

“Yes.”

“Before the bus stop. For a while now.”

He winced, closing one eye. “Yes.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, processing the last bit. “If my father didn’t want you anywhere near me, why did he assign you to protect me?”

Jared sighed. “Because he knew no one could protect you like I can.”

“And why does my father know that.”

He inhaled and nodded, preparing for something. He exhaled, then. “There are layers to this, Nina. And I feel like... I’d like to tell you in a way that will be easiest for you to digest.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I wasn’t sure what or who to trust anymore. Mostly I just wanted my legs to work so I could get up and leave.

“Remember,” he began quickly, seeming to read my thoughts, “when I brought those sweet potato fries with all the sauces, and you thought I was nuts?”

“Vividly.”

“I asked you to trust me.”

“Apples and oranges, Jared. I’m not trying a new food.”

“It comes down to trust. I’m about to tell you something that will be hard to hear. That may even seem impossible. I just need you to trust me.”

“Trust you,” I said. I twisted my father’s gift to me around my finger while staring into Jared’s blue-gray eyes, knowing now why his face had seemed so familiar. Those same irises that I’d gotten lost in more than once while I healed were begging me to have faith in him.

“You being here with me every day. Is that because it’s your job?”

He stood up and knelt next to me. “Out of everything I tell you tonight, please believe this. I thank God every day that it’s my job to keep you safe. But, Nina, being able to talk to you, for you to see me, to hear my name come from those lips...” His gaze paused on my lips. “I have to remind myself that it’s real.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear then leaned toward him with my eyes closed.

“Nina,” he breathed, “there’s more I need to tell you.”

“Oh, you will,” I breathed.

I rested my fingers on each side of his neck. My thumbs grazed his jawline, and I pulled him closer and pressed my lips against his. He cautiously returned my kiss, but as I worked my mouth against his, he relaxed. His arms wrapped around me, and although I could tell he was being careful, he pulled me closer. A quiet hum of satisfaction escaped my lips, and his mouth grew more urgent. He sat up taller on his knees to tighten his grip, and his hand clutched the back of my neck.

My breath became ragged as his mouth parted, and his outstandingly warm tongue found its way to mine.

He groaned in frustration, and then his grip tightened, and he held me away a few inches.

“What?” I asked.

“We still have a lot to discuss.”

“I’m done talking,” I said. I pulled on him, but he didn’t budge.

Jared pulled the chair to him and sat, and I pouted at the distance. He was more than amused at my fortitude.

“I’m a little jealous,” I said. “I was hoping with all the training you did you hadn’t found time for girls. But when you kiss like that...”

He breathed out a laugh. “I beg to differ. I’m not an idiot. It’s not a difficult concept.”

“I have kissed boys—some of those boys more than once—who never kissed like that.”

He leaned in, cupping my cheek and running his thumb along my bottom lip. “That’s because you kissed boys, sweetheart.”

“So, not even one?” I asked, feeling intoxicated by him.

“By the time I was interested in girls, I was already in love with you, Nina.” He said it flippantly, like it was so mundane to him, and then he looked like he’d nearly swallowed his tongue.

“You’re in love with me?”

The pain looked on his face made me worry about what he’d say next.

“I’ve loved you for a very long time.”

I exhaled.

He scrambled to explain. “I know. I know it’s a lot to take in, but you have to remember you’ve only known me for a couple of months, and I’ve always known you. Your father

didn't want you to be afraid, so your protection had to stay secret. He felt it was best."

"So why did you sit next to me on the bench?"

Jared looked down, searching for the right words to say. "I couldn't stay away from you any longer."

"And Jack has just allowed you to continue coming around?"

Jared swallowed. "He's allowed it."

"Why?"

He cleared his throat. "Nina, what I'm about to tell you is going to sound impossible. You might even think I'm crazy, but I need you to trust me."

I watched him, seeing the pain, the worry, the love in his eyes. I could have him wheel me back to my room and refuse to see him, have my father assign someone else, but I didn't want to. I'd fallen in love with Jared Ryel in that hospital room down the hall, and whatever he told me, I was going to listen, believe, and find a way to keep going. We couldn't change the way we'd been thrown together, but we had control over what happened next.

I reached for him, and he slid his fingers between mine. "Sweet potato fries?" I said with a smile.

His shoulders relaxed, and he grinned. "Sweet potato fries."

EPILOGUE

EDEN

IMMORTALITY WAS A trip. Mortality was worse. Watching my mother wave at my aunt who was once my mother ... well. There was no way to explain that.

I straightened my graduation cap and pushed the tassel away from my face, feeling Aunt Nina squeeze my shoulders. We were standing on the field, our high heels sinking into the freshly cut grass. Nina had never had children of her own, so she and Uncle Jared treated me like I was their daughter, too. They would never know that in another life, I was.

“Ryan,” Aunt Nina said, handing her phone to my dad. “Get one of us girls,” she said. “Claire!” she called, pulling Mom in and calling for Aunt Allison, who waddled over and wedged her large, pregnant belly into the frame. “Grandmas, too, let’s go,” Nina said.

“I love you, and I’m so proud of you,” Mom said through her teeth as she smiled. “But I hate pictures.”

“I know,” I said with a smile. “Almost over.”

Dad snapped pictures, next to Grandpa Jack and Papa Gabe, who were taking millions of their own. Once they finally stopped, Mom kissed my cheek and nonchalantly tried to get back behind the lens.

“Proud of you, kiddo,” Uncle Jared said, squeezing me quick.

“Love you,” I said, hugging him back.

“And Brown, now? Your aunt couldn’t be more excited. She lived in Andrews Hall for a bit, you know.”

“I know,” I said.

“That’s where she met Beth and Kim and your dad.”

“I’ve heard that one, too,” I teased.

“Oh, we have dinner with Beth and Chad tonight, don’t forget,” Aunt Nina said. “And Kim thinks she can make it, too.”

“Really?” Dad said. “I haven’t seen her in forever. The band’s getting back together.”

Nina hugged me tight. “My baby girl’s all grown up. It happened too fast,” she said, tears in her eyes. “Far too fast, Eden. You know if you need anything... I know a thing or two about Brown. You call or text me, and I’ll be here.”

“You promise?” I asked.

She cupped my cheeks. “I love you more than I could ever promise.”

“You have a party to go to?” Mom asked.

I nodded.

“Text me,” Dad said.

“I think if I get into trouble, you’ll be the first to know.”

“The goal is for the police chief’s daughter not to find herself in any trouble,” Dad said, kissing my forehead. “Be safe. We love you.”

My parents chatted with my aunts and uncles and grandmothers, and then we said our goodbyes, my mom the last one to wave and blow me a kiss before ducking into her McLaren.

“Well, we did it. Now what?” Morgan McKinstry said from behind me.

I turned to face him and hugged him tight. “Now we celebrate.”

“We’re not really going to one of those stupid parties, are we?”

I let him go, turning to face the football field exit where families were leaving in mass exodus. “Of course not.”

“What are you doing?” Morgan asked.

“Waiting,” I said.

A motorcycle growled in the distance and only got louder as it entered the parking lot of the high school. After a few gratuitous revs of the engine, it cut off. The driver put down the kickstand and immediately began walking toward us.

“Who’s that?” Morgan asked.

I smiled. “A friend I met on the Internet.”

“Wait. Is it the guy you’ve been looking for? You found him?” Morgan asked.

“Morgan!” his mother called. “Morgan! Come say hi to Grandpa Ellis!”

I smiled, watching Levi walk toward me. He looked almost the same as he did the last time I saw him, just a little older—seven years. He still walked with that confident swagger.

I took off my graduation cap and let it fall to the ground next to me.

He stopped just inches from me, looking down into my eyes. He combed back a few loose platinum strands of my hair that had fallen into my face when I removed my cap, unable to take his gaze from mine. He held his palm to my cheek and leaned into it, closing my eyes. The universe was right again.

“I’d almost lost hope,” he said.

I shook my head. “Claire’s not like Nina. She wasn’t about to get pregnant too soon, even after she finally agreed to marry Ryan.”

“This is so surreal,” he said. “I’ve dreamed about this exact moment so many times.”

“I promised you, didn’t I?”

“You did it,” he said, shaking his head. “Jack and Cynthia. Gabe and Lillian. Jared and Nina, Ryan and Claire, even Bex and Allison. You kept them all together. And you found me. I don’t know how you did it, but you gave them all their happy endings, and they don’t even know it.”

“You know it,” I said. “I was afraid you wouldn’t.”

He cupped my jaw and leaned down, planting his lips on mine.

It didn't matter that we hadn't yet met in that lifetime. I melted into him, letting his mouth move against mine for as long as he wanted. He'd had to wait for me another quarter of a century, but he did—patiently.

“I've always known you were the one, Eden,” he whispered against my lips. “You're my beginning and the end.”

I pulled away from him, shaking my head. “Our story will never end.”

Leviathan, Prince of Hell, Son of Satan, Son of Petra, enveloped me in his loving, gentle arms.

And in his arms, I stayed.

A Note from the Author

Thank you doesn't seem enough, but I must thank you for sharing this with me, my first book and the completion of my first series. I hope you enjoyed getting to know and spending time with Jared, Nina, the Ryels and the rest of the characters as much as I did. Nina and Jared have a special place in my heart; they feel very much like family and I'm sad to see it end. I hope the final installment was everything you've been so patiently waiting for, and I can't tell you how much it means to me that you've seen them through to the end.

Thank you,

Jamie

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