



THE PRICE OF  
**SOULS**

PIZZA SHOP  
EXORCIST - FOUR

DAKOTA BROWN

THE PRICE OF SOULS  
A Reverse Harem Tale

Pizza Shop Exorcist  
Book Four

by

Dakota Brown

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A Reverse Harem Tale

Pizza Shop Exorcist, book 4

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# Dedication

For Lynn. Thank you for everything. So glad you're one of  
the Untold Gals.

# Acknowledgments

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This last year has been as insane as the previous and heading into 2022 we're looking at more uncertain times. Hopefully these words can provide some distraction in these uncertain times, and hopefully years down the road someone looks back on this dedication and the virus is a distant memory that they have to do a bit of googling to find out more about.

Stay safe out there. I love you all.



# Chapter 1

*Mal*

There's an advantage to having the ruler of Hell on your side, I thought as I stepped out of the portal Lucifer had created for us. A moment before I'd been in the hot, dry deserts of Santa Fe, and now I stood in the dark, damp humidity of an Italian evening. I hadn't been to this part of the world in at least a century, and it felt like I'd stepped into the past.

Memories intruded as I studied the narrow alleyway the portal had opened into—cobblestones on the ground, stone walls surrounding us. Even the smells, perhaps not as pungent as the last time I'd been here, but still familiar. I wrinkled my nose.

Ezra already stood a little ahead of me in the alley and he looked around curiously. I wondered if he'd ever been here before. I might even be brave enough to ask him. He acted like nothing happened, but I couldn't help but remember how badly he'd trounced me when I'd attacked him not long ago. Fear for our exorcist and an unfortunate case of hungry vampire had me taking my anger out on him. I hadn't been that badly beaten since I'd been human. I'd gotten a bit of revenge when I'd fed from him after, though I felt a little guilty about it now. Only a little, though.

Ezra frowned and ran his hand through his hair. His curls had frizzed badly with the switch from dry heat to humid heat. I felt a tickle of magic and then his hair settled.

“That’s cheating,” I said.

“No one is going to take a crossroads demon with frizzy hair seriously,” Ezra replied with a shrug.

“True.” I’d almost forgotten that he’d been a crossroads demon before he became one of Lucifer’s princes.

Aaron stepped out of the portal behind me, followed by Sabian, and then the ruler of Hell himself, Lucifer. Azrael, the angel of freaking death, was supposed to meet us here after we’d gotten the book so he could pass messages between us and the fairy lands where our exorcist was currently trapped, and possibly aid in our escape. He could move between realms with little issue. Death came for everyone, eventually, after all. Even the nearly immortal fay.

Wars were always messy. I’d fought in more than my fair share, and sometimes you couldn’t save the ones you loved no matter how hard you tried. We were certainly at war with agents of Heaven and Hell, but I was determined that we would save the woman we loved. She would not be getting a visit from Death any time soon if I had anything to say about it. Well, at least not like that. He’d probably see her well before I did. I shook my head and refocused on our task. Keeping Chris Price alive and in possession of her soul.

And to do that, a couple of demons, a half-angel, and a vampire had to break into the Vatican and steal a book of magic.

In an effort to stop Chris from defeating them, Mammon and his conspirators had put a leech spell on the exorcist, which would eventually drain her to the point where they could steal her soul, just like they had done to countless others over the last few weeks.

She and the half-fay mage Brennan O’Neal—the one who had initially captured her, I might add—had escaped to fairy. I still wasn’t sure I trusted Brennan’s change of heart, but at

least he'd saved her life. The shift to another realm had slowed the leech spell, but she couldn't return until we figured out how to defeat it. Even Brennan, with all of his experience, didn't know how to dispel something created in cooperation between a demon and an angel.

First, we had to save our exorcist, and then we had to stop the soul stealing before the magic triggered an apocalypse. Not to mention, all of those lives potentially lost. Then, we really had to stop Mammon.

Our research had led us to a Grimoire said to be housed in the secret Vatican archives deep in the catacombs. How they were keeping books from succumbing to the environment in the cave system, I didn't know. Possibly magic.

"Shit, we're really doing this, aren't we?" Aaron whispered.

Lucifer, shorter than Aaron, reached up and slapped him on the shoulder. "Relax, at least none of the holy weapons are designed specifically to kill you."

Aaron, eyes wide as saucers, stared at the demon, who chuckled.

The ruler of Hell's expression darkened when he turned his attention to Ezra. He seemed to specifically blame his prince for failing to protect Chris. We'd all failed, but I knew that didn't matter to Lucifer.

Ezra, perhaps sensing his liege's attention, turned to face us.

"Do not fail to retrieve this book. Far more than Chris Price's life is at stake."

"None of it is more important than her life," Ezra replied, a touch defiantly.

Lucifer arched an eyebrow before his lips slowly turned up into a smile. "Perhaps." Sabian moved to Ezra's side in silent support of his prince, and Lucifer's other eyebrow rose. "I want her returned to us, as well," he finally allowed. "Make sure it happens quickly."

They both nodded. Aaron, standing next to me, moved to try to hide behind me despite being far taller than I was. Lucifer's gaze settled on us for a moment before he turned and headed back to his portal.

It snapped shut, revealing an ancient stone wall and the end of the alleyway.

We all shared a glance.

"We do not have much time," Ezra said. "They have wards against glamors, so we need actual disguises."

He left the alley before I could ask him how he knew that.

"Why would the Vatican ward against glamor?" Aaron asked.

"To prevent people from sneaking in and stealing things," Sabian pointed out.

I laughed. "Yeah, and since the Catholics practice magic, they know about that sort of thing. They don't call it magic, of course, but they're just as deep into the occult as I am."

"Okay, so I'm guessing they have all sorts of nasty surprises, too, and perhaps even things like traps and stuff?" Sabian chimed in. The incubus looked both excited and worried. Only Sabian could pull off the mix of emotion needed for that expression.

"Probably. I've never actually been in the Vatican before, just in this general area," I admitted then held up my hand for quiet as I heard soft footsteps and a muted conversation from the street near where we waited for Ezra to return. It was in Italian of course, but I spoke the language. The conversation was nothing related to people randomly appearing in an alleyway or anything else interesting, so I listened until they were out of hearing range before dropping my hand.

"We're going to have to be extra careful," I said.

"You know, I offered to be a distraction. I'm still up for that." Aaron shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think they can do anything to actually contain me or hurt me if I go full on angel aspect. It's...weird...but will get a lot of attention."

Sabian grinned. "I'd love to see the reaction, but we should probably try stealth first."

I nodded agreement. "We'll leave that as an option if we need it."

Aaron looked relieved when he nodded his agreement.

We fell into an easy silence, lurking in the shadows and waiting for Ezra

It didn't take long for the demon to return. "I found what we need, and I got us a hotel room so we can change without hiding in an alley."

"Thank you, Prince Ezra," I said.

He shook his head. "Ezra is fine. No need for titles amongst friends."

"Okay," I replied, deciding not to over analyze the situation. I supposed we were friends, or at least working toward friendship. Aaron, Sabian, and I had certainly hit it off well, and Ezra was trying now that he'd gotten over some of his possessiveness.

We all followed the demon prince out into the street, and I tried not to let old memories overwhelm me as we walked quickly through the ancient city. Lucifer had dropped us off outside the Vatican walls. It would have been easier if we hadn't had to get in, too, but I supposed the ruler of Hell making a portal straight into the Vatican violated some sort of rule or another.

Ezra led us to a fairly modern building nearby and we went inside. The hotel was nice enough. Fancy, and full of tourists in various states of confusion. Ezra led us to the counter and said a few words to the person behind the desk, who looked relieved to be speaking his native tongue.

I didn't listen in after figuring out it was about our accommodations. After a minute, the desk clerk handed over a key and Ezra gestured for us to follow.

The clerk gave us all a curious look, which I noted, then ignored as we all filed out of the lobby and into the elevator at

the end of a hallway.

We managed to get an elevator car to ourselves, and I rolled my shoulders to ease some of the tension.

Sabian looked at me and tilted his head, so I shrugged. “Old memories.”

“How old?” Aaron asked absently as he studied the elevator wall.

I wasn’t sure if he was actually interested in the design on the paneling or if he was avoiding looking at me while he fished for information.

“Long enough that there were actual Romans here,” I finally answered. So far, I’d avoided talking about my past much with everyone. I preferred to look forward, anyway, but someday I should probably get talkative. I knew they all wanted to know, but they’d figured out I wasn’t that interested in sharing and had mostly left my past alone.

Aaron’s eyebrows rose.

“I’ve been here since then, a time or two, but not for several centuries.”

“Mal, you really are older than dirt.” Sabian grinned at me.

I rolled my eyes and headed out of the elevator when the door slid open. Ezra gestured and I followed him to a suite down at the end of the hallway.

Not taking much time to glance around—it was nice, but we were on a mission—I turned toward Ezra. “Okay, so clothing. Are we expecting to come back here at all?”

“I find it unlikely we’ll have the leisure to return. I’ll send all of our clothing to my domain so I can summon it later. Get dressed.” He gestured at several outfits he had set on the table.

“Sabian, a word,” Ezra said after pointing out which pile of clothing I should take.

I took a spare moment to glance out the window. Scores of tourists wandered the streets and studied the ancient structures that made up Rome, even this late in the evening. Most of my

time here had been unpleasant and I'd never willingly returned until now. Though I wasn't exactly here as a tourist.

There was something highly entertaining about donning the priest's clothing that Ezra had acquired for me. Amazingly, he'd judged my size and it fit. I folded up my other clothes and went out into the main room. Ezra was already changed, and Aaron joined us a moment later, fussing with the buttons on his shirt.

Not long after, a woman wearing a nun's habit came out of one of the other rooms in the suite.

I stared, and it took me a moment to realize that Ezra had talked Sabian into shifting into a female form.

Aaron looked completely confused.

"I said nun, not sex worker wearing a nun's outfit," Ezra said.

"I'm an incubus. What did you expect?" The woman's voice certainly held the same feel as Sabian's but much more feminine.

Aaron sort of choked before clearing his throat. "Sabian?"

The incubus did a little twirl. "The one and only."

"Oh, boy," Aaron breathed out.

Laughing, I shook my head. "You'll have to tone it down a little, or you'll attract too much attention."

"I could be the distraction," Sabian mused. "Sexy nun running through the streets of the Vatican?"

"We're not here to cause an incident," Ezra growled. "At least not that kind."

Sabian pouted.

"Let's get in before they close the gates, and we waste more time," I suggested.

"Yes, try to look pious, or something," Ezra said.

Aaron chuckled. "You're joking, right?"

The demon shrugged. “This is not something I’ve ever done before, believe it or not. Just try not to attract attention.”

“This super tall black priest will attempt to avoid attracting attention,” Aaron replied.

Ezra took a deep breath. “I’m going to throw a glamour on us until we get out in the street. Sabian,” he snapped. “Stop.”

The incubus was practicing cute little waves.

“You are no fun.” Sabian’s pout intensified. “You have no idea how many people have fantasies about nuns.”

“I was a crossroads demon. I probably encountered it more than you did, since you spent most of your time in Hell.”

Sabian stuck his–her?–tongue out at Ezra.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Ezra sighed. “I’d rather we didn’t get killed in the process of trying to rescue our exorcist.”

Sabian waved his hand around as if he were unconcerned. “It’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

Sabian would never do anything to endanger the mission, even without Ezra snapping at him. He wanted our exorcist back just as much as the rest of us did.

Ezra finally helped Aaron finish dressing and then, under the cover of his glamour, we headed back out into the hotel.

None of us spoke, just followed Ezra through the lobby and out into the humid air. He dropped the glamour and I tried to look pious, or at least inconspicuous. I wasn’t sure any of us succeeded. However, in most cases, it was unlikely that anyone looked much past the black clothing and the priest’s collar.

The first obstacle was the gates into the Vatican. A little smooth talking from Ezra, and his flawless Italian accent, got us through the doors with little trouble. The next step? Find the entrance to the catacombs. Not the ones that the public saw, but the ones that housed the secret tomes. Unfortunately, there were several likely places to look, the most obvious being the Apostolic Archive. Fortunately, Lucifer had told us



he had some inside information saying we should actually start in the Papal Palace instead.

Ezra seemed to have some idea of where we were going, and we followed, winding our way through the thinning crowds.

“How are we going to find this?” Aaron looked around while we walked, staring like a tourist. I imagined he’d never been here before. Before I got too judgmental about it, I realized I was also gawking.

Shaking my head, I made myself focus on our task. If this went well and we didn’t get on some sort of Vatican watch list, I could come back and play tourist in the future.

Though, the way things were going, I’d probably end up on their hit list.

Ezra continued on as if he knew where he was going. He probably did. “Carefully, Aaron. Very carefully.”

We knew the name of the book we sought. The *Grand Grimoire* was a book of black magic that you could buy copies of online. We’d even picked one up to see if it would be useful. Obviously, since we were sneaking into the Vatican, we needed the original version, which was said to be housed here. The online version was missing entire sections, including the one related to this spell.

Some would call any dealings with the occult dark magic. I’d had a few brushes with true dark magic in the past, and I could say that wasn’t true. Everything I’d ever read about this book suggested it was the definition of dark magic. Lucifer had confirmed that it was a foul book and was interested in having it interred in Hell when we were done with it.

Ezra led us off the main pathway. Trying to look like I belonged and attempting a pious expression—whatever that meant—I followed. Sabian kept his head down and hands clasped together.

I tried to stay alert to anyone paying us an undue amount of attention, but for now it seemed we’d escaped any unwanted notice.

Ezra rubbed at his arms and clenched his hands before sighing.

“Are you all right?” I hoped Ezra would be able to handle being inside the Vatican.

“Skin tingles. There are wards and charms all over the place, not to mention the general religious atmosphere. I’m uncomfortable, though it’s not as bad as I thought it would be. Is any of that affecting you?”

“No,” I replied. “I had noticed them, but nothing so far is bothering me.”

“Good. Sabian?”

“The habit is armor enough for this pious nun,” the incubus replied.

Ezra shook his head, and I could imagine the eye rolling that was going on.

“Ezra,” Sabian said after a minute.

“Yes, Sabian?”

“You said they had protections against glamour, yes?”

“Yes, that’s why we’re wearing real clothing instead of glamour.” His tone suggested he was explaining this to a child.

“Right. You have horns.”

Ezra cursed, in English this time.

“We’ll just roll with it,” Aaron said after we stood around indecisive for a few moments. “Hopefully if the wards strip your glamour, no one will notice.”

“If we hurry, we’ll be fine,” Ezra finally said and hastened toward the palace.

The shadows were lengthening, and we really did need to get moving if we wanted to walk in the front doors.

The public entrance was starting to close, but Ezra led us down a side path through heavily manicured gardens and up to a different entrance. He approached the ornately carved wooden door like we all belonged, and the attitude worked.

Though the priest sitting at a desk near the door queried Ezra, it only took a few moments for the priest to go back to the book he studied. He barely looked past Ezra. Either his book was very interesting, or they rarely had people trying to sneak inside doors dressed as priests and a nun, and he truly wasn't worried.

Sabian, at some unseen signal from Ezra, took the lead and we hurried through the ornate hallways. I was very careful to keep my hands at my sides and stayed well away from the various artifacts that lined the walls. Most of them were holy artifacts, and while I wasn't a demon, I had no illusions that the church wouldn't classify me as such, and their weapons likely would react to me. Some of them, anyway.

Ezra and Sabian did the same.

Sabian took several twists and turns through various hallways before stopping in front of a bookshelf.

He and Ezra whispered briefly, before motioning Aaron forward.

"That book, pull it out," Ezra ordered.

Aaron complied, though the book only came partway before we heard a click.

"Now, open the door."

"Holy shit," Aaron whispered as he shifted the bookshelf for us. "How do you...?"

"Later," Ezra hissed.

Sabian slipped into the dark opening and we followed, waiting for a moment while Aaron closed the bookshelf doorway behind us. Before we were plunged into darkness, I noted the dank looking stone walls and the staircase leading down into blackness. The musty wet smell would have had me turning around and looking for another hidden storage spot for the book we sought if I didn't know they had powerful magic at their disposal. They would need it to preserve artifacts in this kind of environment. My vision shifted so I could see the heat signatures of my companions and make out enough of my

surroundings that I could navigate nearly as easily as if I could see normally.

“Aaron,” Ezra whispered. “Can you see?”

“Yeah, well enough,” the half-angel answered.

Without another word, Ezra led the way down the narrow stone staircase. I could feel the smoothness of the steps under the slick-soled shoes I wore and wondered how many priests had slipped and fallen going down into these secret catacombs. None of us were likely to have any issues, still I wished for my normal shoes with a bit more tread.

I wanted to put my hands out and run them along the walls, get more of a tactile feel for the place, but I was wary of the wardings. I hunched my shoulders at the oppressive feeling pressing down on me from the stone walls. I wasn't sure how Ezra was standing it, and I gained even more respect for the powerful demon. Sabian—he picked his way down the stairs, holding up the skirts of his habit—didn't look one bit bothered. Maybe being an incubus, verses a different sort of demon, prevented this place from affecting him as much. Maybe it was just Sabian. Either way, I was impressed he didn't seem bothered.

It was something of a relief to reach level ground after the long staircase. It felt like we were miles underground, though I knew that wasn't possible. My skin crawled, and nearly every fiber of my being wanted me to turn and sprint back up the staircase and out into the open air.

Aaron came to a sudden stop, and I almost ran into his back.

If it hadn't been for the danger my exorcist was in, I might have caved and turned tail. Frowning, I glanced around. That feeling was not a normal one for me. Sure, I felt fear, but I'd not felt anything like this since I was a young human.

The wards.

I stopped and studied them more closely. Yes, there were several with the intent to turn back intruders. They were

strong, and it was likely my personal wards that had protected me to this point.

“It’s the wards,” I said quietly.

One of them—I thought it was Ezra, actually—heaved a sigh of relief.

“That what is going on?” Aaron’s tight voice gave me a great deal of insight into how he felt.

I took a moment to adjust my personal wards and the feeling lessened to the point where I barely noticed it.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “Let me see if I can help you.” I nicked the end of my finger with a fang. I needed some sort of carrier for the warding, and my blood would work well in this circumstance.

“Thanks, man,” Aaron breathed.

I put my hand on Aaron’s back. He flinched, but I suspected it was from the tension, not because he didn’t want me to touch him. Once he settled, I traced my thumb in a sigil on the back of his shirt before pushing a bit of energy into it.

Aaron sighed and much of the tension left his muscles. Clearly, it had worked.

“Ezra? Sabian? You both okay?”

“Now that I know what is going on, yes,” Ezra replied.

“I’m fine,” Sabian replied. Hearing his intonations in a feminine voice messed with my perception a bit.

I paid closer attention to the various types of wards lining the hallway, but the heavier “stay out” protections were behind us and we moved relatively unhindered down the corridor.

“Is it just me, or is the air getting drier?” Aaron glanced around as he spoke, and I wondered how well his angelic vision worked down here in the dark.

“It is,” Ezra replied.

“There’s light ahead, too,” Sabian added.

I peered around Aaron's shoulder, letting my eyes adjust to the presence of enough light for my sensitive eyes to see by.

"Mal, do you sense anyone?" Ezra glanced at me.

"Let me lead," I said in reply. "I'll let you know if I do."

The others let me past, and I stalked down the hallway, all my senses alert for potential prey. No scents of sweat, the coppery tang of blood, or any of the products humans used on their bodies, lingered in the air. I didn't hear breathing, or the beating of anyone's heart, nor did any voices intrude on my awareness. Still, I moved forward slowly, aware that the right kind of wards and magic could hide those things from me.

The others followed, moving nearly silently, but not so quietly that I couldn't hear them behind me.

The light brightened slowly as we approached, though a bend in the hallway prevented us from seeing what waited around the corner.

I waved everyone back while I slowly worked my way around the corner, alert for magical or mundane traps.

The view in the light felt almost anticlimactic, and I gestured for the others to join me. This looked like a more heavily used entrance to the catacombs. A long stone staircase much like the one we had used led up. I couldn't see the other end from where I stood. Electric sconces lit the area with steady light, though it looked like whoever had installed the lighting had simply attached modern lights to the existing sconces designed for oil lamps. I did use the term modern loosely.

The hallway continued in the direction we were going, and nothing adorned the blocks of stone that formed the walls. If I remembered correctly, they were probably some sort of dolomite rock. Useful information if I ended up having to rely on their properties while I created wards.

I could feel the weight of age in this place. I didn't know the history of the area well enough to know how old these lower levels of the palace actually were and if they were truly part of the catacombs or not, but they felt ancient. Even to me.

We glanced at Ezra. He finished studying the passageway that contained the staircase, before continuing down the hallway. After a moment he stopped and waved me forward. This hallway was so straight that we could see for quite a way, but that also gave us nowhere to hide.

Alert for any signs of wardings or a hint of other life, I moved slowly down the hallway. The others followed, no one protesting my cautious pace.

The hallway dead-ended into a T-junction. I carefully looked both directions before stepping back toward Ezra and the others. “There are at least four humans to our left,” I whispered. “No one to the right, though I sense a larger concentration of magic there. No magical traps that I’ve sensed yet.”

“We go right,” Ezra confirmed my suspicion.

Painfully slowly, we made our way deeper and deeper into the warren of tunnels under the palace. I was conscious of the time pressing on us. Brennan had made it clear Chris’ life depended on our ability to get this done quickly—as if we hadn’t already known that. One mistake would end this mission and probably the entire group of us, so we had to be careful.

After a small eternity, I shuddered as the magic protecting this area grew exponentially stronger. We were wandering in the dark again, but light flickered in the distance.

“I don’t sense anyone, but the wards just kicked up several notches,” I told the others.

“Yes. I don’t dare use any of my powers down here unless I need to. Can you do anything about it, Mal?” Ezra’s eyes gleamed in the darkness when I turned toward him. With the light in the distance, I didn’t need to use my heat vision to see the discomfort creasing his brow.

“Give me a minute.”

I studied the magic. I could do a lot about it, but there was nearly a hundred percent chance any tampering I did would get attention.

“Depends on how fast you want company,” I whispered. “I can tamper, but it will get noticed.”

“Let’s push on, for now,” Ezra decided.

Taking a breath I didn’t need, I shoved into the almost physical wall of magic trying to keep me out. Fortunately, for as much as I was reacting to it, the magic was not reacting to me.

We turned a last corner, and I stopped, my fingers twitching with the need to touch everything.

“We could spend lifetimes down here and not read everything,” Aaron breathed in awe.

“Holy shit,” I finally managed.

The secret archive of the Vatican stretched below us deep into the ground. I knew something about engineering and water tables and knowing we were at sea level made the depth of the archive even more impressive. We had come out at the top of a huge stone well, for lack of better visual. About every twenty feet was a new level worked back into the stone. Thick columns of rock supported the whole thing. In between the columns I could make out rows of shelves in some of the open spaces. A precariously narrow staircase spiraled down the outside, connecting the levels. Even my vision couldn’t make out what was at the very depths of the well.

“Black abyss,” Ezra muttered. “It’s at the bottom.”

Aaron turned to face the demon. “How do you know?”

“Lucifer’s inside information,” Ezra replied. “A source that wishes to remain anonymous. I don’t even know who it is.”

“Gabriel,” Sabian said.

We all looked at the incubus, who shrugged.

“I wasn’t told not to tell anyone,” he said. “And I don’t know for sure, but let’s call it an educated guess.”

“It’s really at the bottom?” Aaron groaned.

“Yes. The scope of the archives was not made clear to any of us.”



“I guess when you can just fly to the bottom...” Sabian muttered.

Ezra and I both turned our attentions to Sabian, then Aaron.

“Sabian, you are shapeshifter. Aaron, you have wings,” Ezra finally said. “I can use demon tricks to speed my descent. This might bring attention upon us sooner, but it’s a risk we’ll have to take.” The demon prince turned his attention to me.

I sighed. “Movies aside, vampires aren’t shapeshifters. I can’t turn into a cloud of bats. I could jump but recovering from the landing would take more time than we have.”

“Darn,” Aaron replied. “Do you at least hang upside down like a bat when you sleep?”

I blinked a few times. “I don’t think Chris would like that very much. I mean, I could, but why?”

Aaron sighed. “There go all my delusions.”

I gave a bark of laughter before sobering and giving the situation a quick thought. “I could get down there quickly using my abilities. They’re not ones I use frequently, but I can do it.”

“Okay, next order of business,” Ezra said. “No matter what, we get that book out.”

“Are you not expecting us to all make it?” I pursed my lips and studied our surroundings again. It was a complicated situation should we get discovered.

“I don’t think any of us are going to die,” Ezra replied. “But there’s a very good possibility that one or more of us will get trapped here. We must rescue Chris. The rest we can deal with later. Mal, you need to get out because you’ll be performing the spell reversal. I’m good at demonic magic and wards, but I’m shit at human occult stuff. If needed, Lucifer and Gabriel will assist you, as will Azrael, so you shouldn’t need any of the rest of us.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t especially happy about it, but of the four of us, I was the most likely to end up dead if I got captured. They probably could kill the demons, but they’d probably just

get banished. Aaron might get an extended stay as a curiosity, but he'd probably be fine. Old Gabe might even come to his rescue. His logic made sense.

"Then it might be better if I stayed up here as a lookout. If someone comes, I'll throw something over the edge."

"Make sure it's a priceless artifact," Ezra deadpanned, mischief dancing in his eyes. Or maybe that was hellfire.

I nodded agreement.

"Let's get this over with." Ezra clenched his jaw before looking over the side.

I found a deep shadow to hide in.

A golden glow surrounded Aaron, and wings unfurled from behind him. He flexed them, glowing bright enough that I couldn't look directly at him.

Ezra... well, that was creepy as fuck. He melted into the shadows, like, literally melted. I wondered if Chris had observed that particular magic trick yet. He could likely step right off the edge and be just fine. I'd lost track of him though, so I had no idea what his plan was. He was simply gone.

Sabian quickly shed his habit and left it in the shadows next to me. He knelt, wearing only underclothing. I watched, fascinated as his skin seemed to melt and run like wax before reforming into leathery wings. The image of a female-bodied Sabian with leathery wings would be tweaking my brain out for a long time. He now looked far more demonic than I'd ever really imagined him. It was an aspect of him I'd have to get used to. Not bad, just different.

Sabian and Aaron shared a glance before they both launched themselves over the side of the pit, leaving me alone.

Very, very alone.

I stilled myself, making not a sound and listening for other signs of life. Not even rats disturbed the archives, at least that I could sense. Impressive. I just hoped it would stay that way.

## Chapter 2

*Ezra*

Melding into the shadows let me descend to the base of the well of books rapidly. Aaron and Sabian met me at the bottom, Aaron staring at me as I stepped out of the shadows. I simply arched an eyebrow then glanced at his wings.

Seeming to realize it was silly of him to be freaked out by my powers when he had his own, Aaron forced a smile before looking away. Especially when Sabian appeared far more demonic at the moment.

I turned my attention to our surroundings. The bottom level of this structure was lit with a few globes of light that must have been some sort of spell. They weren't electricity, but they certainly weren't lit fire. Their illumination was enough for my eyes, but a human would have needed more. The air, which should have been dank and musty considering we were well below the water table, was cool and dry.

The book we sought thrummed out dark energy, and I was drawn to it. Even if I hadn't had a good idea of where the book resided, I would have known where it was the moment I stepped out of the shadows. Each book in this collection was set into its own alcove in the stone wall. There were about

twenty down here and all were ancient. The wardings protecting each tome were so strong, they were nearly visible.

All of the books on this level were of questionable content. The malicious nature of the books resonated against my senses, reminding me a bit of home.

“This place is creepy as hell,” Aaron muttered.

“Yes, exactly,” Sabian concurred.

I shook my head and moved as close as I dared to the alcove that contained the *Grand Grimoire*.

“That the one we want?” Aaron asked.

“Yes.”

I didn’t have to tell either him or Sabian to stay back while I studied the protections around the foul tome. I was right, we weren’t all getting out of here tonight. We could get the book out, though.

Sighing, I turned to the others.

“That good?” Sabian read my sigh correctly.

I had to hold back a sharp reprimand at Sabian’s familiarity. I was getting used to the shift in our relationship, but at times it still caught me off guard. After a moment to collect myself, I nodded. “Indeed.”

“Someone going to have to sacrifice a hand?” Aaron joked nervously.

“No, hopefully not. However, we do not have the time to unravel these traps. It would take me a day at least, and the tampering would be unlikely to go unnoticed. Mal might be able to do it a little faster, but it is still unlikely to make a difference. We will get noticed. The skill in which the watchdog wards were put into place is beyond even Mal’s grasp of the occult.”

“So we set off the trap?” Aaron’s glow faded until he was standing there without his angel aspect.

“Yes. If I’m reading the wards correctly, whoever takes the book will get caught in a sticky trap. They should be able to

get the book and if timed properly, toss it before they are fully immobilized.”

“Toss the priceless evil artifact.” Aaron raised both eyebrows.

I chuckled. “It’ll be fine.”

“Okay, so, I’m going to be grabbing the book, am I right?” Aaron kept eye contact with me.

“It would be my preference, as the priests are unlikely to harm you. Sabian and I would likely suffer a great deal. Ideally, they’d simply banish us, but I am not sure that is how they would proceed. I’m sorry.” *If only we had more time*, I thought to myself.

“I’ll do anything for Chris,” Aaron replied. “How do we do this?”

“Assume your aspect again. Grab the book and toss it as far as you can toward myself and Sabian. We will stay back and one of us will grab the book. Try to escape. It is remotely possible your powers will let you. I can guarantee you Sabian and I will not be able to escape the trap, should we trigger it.”

Sabian glanced at me, and I could hear him thinking we should not leave Aaron alone. He was right. I nodded.

“I will remain behind while Sabian and Mal escape with the book. If required I can provide an additional distraction for their retreat.” I almost wished for an excuse to unleash some demonic power in the middle of the Vatican. Almost.

“Wait, you’re staying?” Aaron frowned.

“You might need backup.”

Aaron looked relieved, but he shook his head anyway. “No, dude, you need to get out of here. A prince of Hell in the Vatican’s hands?”

I grinned. “Chris will rescue me.”

That got Aaron to laugh.

“Okay, enough time has been wasted. Ready?” I didn’t want any of us to think more about this than we had to,

including myself.

Aaron moved into position while Sabian and I backed off. I prepared to grab the book with the thick shadows that crawled through this dark place.

The half-angel took a deep breath then lit up with a brilliant glow. He rolled his shoulders and lunged forward.

As I'd hoped, his angelic nature momentarily bypassed the wards, but as soon as he placed his hand on the tome, they snapped into place. He had just enough time to twist and throw the book before he was immobilized.

I wrapped shadows around the grimoire and jerked it away from the reaching tendrils of the sticky trap. Sabian grabbed it as soon as it was clear and leapt, leathery wings working.

Something pinged off the walls—Mal's alarm that people were coming—then I heard a door slam and the smothering feel of devout humans pressed in on me. It would still take a moment for them to arrive. Hopefully Mal's own version of shadow powers would conceal him and Sabian as necessary. I had a lot of confidence in the vampire, and Sabian would give himself up, if necessary, to get Mal and the tome out. I just hoped it wouldn't come to that. Chris would not be happy if one of us got killed in the process of rescuing her. A price we were all willing to pay, yet it would be much better if we didn't have to.

Aaron's glow intensified, and I shielded my eyes and stepped back into the shadows, melding with them so I wouldn't be seen. The Nephilim blazed like an ember, his four wings turning into six as he struggled against the wards. Though he didn't quite go full angelic with the multitude of eyes, I thought he was going to be able to slip the wards when the clatter of feet on the stone steps announced that we were no longer alone. They must have started from a much deeper level than we had, to make it down here this quickly.

"*Arresto!*" one of the three priests scrambling down the steps shouted at Aaron.

Aaron didn't speak Italian, but the meaning was clear enough. He gave one last attempt at breaking away from the sticky trap, but the distraction had cost him, and he stilled.

The priests murmured amongst themselves at the glowing half-angel.

Aaron didn't drop his angelic aspect. Likely wise.

One of the priests stepped forward and demanded to know what Aaron was doing here. The other two were softly speaking prayers and I was significantly grateful I was not on the receiving end of their magic. It wouldn't hurt Aaron one bit.

Aaron, who didn't understand the language, didn't reply.

The priests conferred, not at all impressed by the angel in their midst. That worried me. Even Catholic priests in charge of this collection should be somewhat in awe of an angel. Maybe Aaron wasn't as safe as we thought he was.

I caught a sense from Sabian that he and Mal had escaped and then he was out of range of my ability to communicate with him. At least on holy ground.

Turning my attention to the priests, I listened as they conferred.

Aaron was frozen in a twisted position and had to be uncomfortable. He said nothing, continuing to maintain his angel aspect. He watched the priests but remained quiet.

"The archangel said to watch for intruders," one of the priests said.

"Any angel trying to steal that book must be working for the enemy," another agreed.

"Michael will come for this one if we call," the last priest said. "Let us contain it and turn it over to the Host."

Yeah, we didn't want that.

Aaron still had no idea what was going on and beads of sweat formed on his brow.

The one priest prepared a containment. I recognized the spell from his words—Latin this time. The other two went to work dismantling the wards.

Aaron's eyes widened and his glow intensified. Clearly he was on the same page I was, attempt escape as soon as the trap was disabled.

They dropped the wards. Aaron sprang for the sky. The priest with the containment spell was quick, but I grabbed him with the tendrils of shadow and disrupted his spell. The pain of using demonic powers on someone of pure faith was worth it to free Aaron.

Aaron hesitated.

“Go!” I shouted at the half-angel.

Aaron fled, leaving a burning afterimage in my vision from his angelic light.

The priests all shouted in dismay and anger, and I sank more deeply into the shadows.

“Lock this level down,” one of the priests ordered. “There's still something here, I can sense it.”

*Black abyss.* I was not in a good position to escape. There were sticky traps all around me and while I might be able to get past the priests, I did not want to chance it. On the other hand, I was about to be trapped.

I slid through the shadows, trying to balance caution with haste.

Before I could escape, fantastically bright light seared into my eyes, and I staggered back, forced into my physical form as the shadows fled.

“Fuck,” I muttered, shielding my eyes. I narrowly avoided the reaching tendrils of another of those damn sticky traps.

The priests were clearly not expecting the light show, either. All three dropped to their knees.

Not willing to kneel before anyone but Chris or Lucifer, I managed to stay on my feet.



“You lost it?” The voice was impossibly loud, and the priests covered their ears and whimpered in pain.

Though I was cut off from my reserves of power by being on holy ground, I was not helpless, and I shielded myself from the worst of the pissed off angel’s effects. The blinding light diminished, and I could make out the being raging before us. He hovered in the air, four white wings keeping him aloft. The angel wore the aspect of a man in a business suit, but that was far from his true appearance—simply one humans could handle.

There was no way the archangel had missed my presence, but I still headed toward the stairs. Maybe he’d ignore me.

“You, stay,” the creature hissed. He grabbed me by the throat, and my skin lit up as if wreathed in hellfire.

I managed not to cry out in pain, but it was only sheer will that kept me silent as my skin burned under his touch. His fingers tightened as he berated the cowering priests. Strictly speaking, getting strangled wasn’t going to kill me, but damn it was uncomfortable, and I clawed at his hands. Michael had the advantage since we were on holy ground, but hellfire would still burn him. I summoned some from my internal reserves and laid my hands on the back of his. Michael snarled and dropped me as the hellfire scorched him.

I scrambled away but didn’t try to escape. That was a pointless use of energy.

Michael turned his attention on me, and I readied myself for a fight. On neutral territory, I might have even had a chance of winning. We were not on neutral territory.

The archangel sneered at me and blasted me with pure holy power. If I’d been a lesser demon, that would have been the end of me. My shields held, but the sheer power behind the blast threw me backward straight into one of those damn sticky traps. He didn’t even try to fight me, cheating bastard.

“Black abyss,” I snarled as the wards tightened around me. I struggled, but there was no escaping. Especially not with an archangel stalking toward me. His eyes blazed with holy light, and I would have flinched away if I could have.

“Where is Chris Price?” the angel demanded, reaching through the wards as if they didn’t exist and jerking me out of the trap.

“Go fuck yourself,” I growled in Demonic.

The angel didn’t reply, simply tightened his grip around my neck, holy powers burning into me. This time, Michael ignored the hellfire I tried to burn him with. He simply squeezed until the angelic energies overwhelmed me and my vision faded to black.

## Chapter 3

*Aaron*

I felt like shit for leaving Ezra, but he should be able to handle a few humans and he had told me to run.

Though it freaked me out still, I had taken my full angelic aspect, which allowed me to phase through the ceiling of the palace and fly out of the Vatican. I'd tripped a ton of wards on the way, but none of them had been able to contain me. I knew I'd been seen. There was no way anyone outside could miss a streak of golden light flashing across the sky. Not this late at night, anyway.

I had no idea where Mal or Sabian were, but I suspected they, or Azrael, would be able to find me, so I headed for the ground. It was late enough the streets weren't super crowded. A few tourists pointed and I guessed the internet would have a great time with whatever videos they captured.

I didn't stay on the main street long, instead floating back into the smelly alley and dropping my angelic aspect. I wished I had an easy way to change my clothing. I tugged the white collar off. That would have to do. Now I was just a black guy wearing all black and sulking in the darkness. That wouldn't raise any alarms or anything. Well, I had no idea how people would react in Rome. Back home it would have gotten the

cops called on me, if nothing else. Shaking my head at that bullshit, I hurried out of the alley before I got caught. Shoving my hands in my pockets, slowing down, I wandered, looking around as if I were a tourist. It wasn't super hard to pretend. I'd never been here before, after all.

Before long, the whine of a sport bike intruded on the quiet evening. Hoping it was Azrael or one of the other riders, I stopped and waited.

Sure enough, Cáit—also known as War—zoomed around the corner on the motorcycle form of her spirit horse, Red. Red did not usually allow passengers, so I wondered what her plan was.

She skidded to a stop in front of me. “Get on!”

“Seriously?”

“Red is playing nice for now. There's too much at stake. Azrael has Mal and Jin has Sabian. Where's Ezra?”

“I don't know. He helped me escape.”

Cáit frowned. “He'll have to take care of himself for now. Let's go.”

Not needing any further encouragement, I scrambled onto the back of Cáit's bike. I was way too tall to comfortably ride behind her, but I folded myself as best I could and hesitantly put my arm around her waist.

She patted my hand reassuringly as the bike zoomed away from the curb. The thing about the motorcycle form of the spirit horses was they could drive themselves, so strictly speaking Cáit didn't have to have her hands on the controls. It still freaked me out a little. That was nothing compared to the sudden shift into equine form and the launch into the sky that had me tightening my hold on Cáit into a death grip.

War let out a delighted laugh as we raced into the sky. Red whinnied in reply.

“You are all insane,” I muttered.

Her laughter lightened my pensive mood a touch.

The magic of the spirit horses mitigated the biting cold and lack of oxygen as we raced through the night sky far more quickly than humans could travel in any contraption they'd so far invented. Still, the breeze that did cool my skin had a zip to it and had brought a flush to Cáit's pale skin when she twisted around to look at me. I did feel awkward riding double with Cáit. I'd grown used to riding on Azrael's spirit horse with him, but Cáit was a different story. Red was smaller than Azrael's horse, Alba, for one thing, and being pressed against Cáit felt inappropriate. I knew I was being dumb, but I couldn't help the feeling. We danced above the clouds, the occasional cluster of lights from a city showing through the gaps. The stars shone vibrantly above. This I could get used to. It occurred to me that I could probably manage to fly on my own, but I wasn't that good yet. Maybe in the future, I'd practice.

Once we were at cruising altitude, I relaxed my grip a little. "Sorry about that."

"No worries, Aaron. So, what happened? I haven't gotten any info other than to come find you."

"Well, we snuck in and got the book. Mal has it, so hopefully he's wherever working on finding out how to save Chris. I got stuck in what Ezra called a sticky trap. That was an unfortunate part of our plan. Some priests came down and weren't real impressed by my bad angel self for some reason, and I think Ezra got worried that they weren't going to treat me as gently as we had hoped. He distracted them at a critical moment, and I was able to escape. He told me to go, and I fled." Something of my unease at leaving Ezra must have shown in my voice. Cáit patted my hand again.

"Ezra knows what he's doing," Cáit finally said.

"Yeah. I hope so."

"He'll be okay." Cáit shook her head and chuckled. "I never thought I'd be rooting for the demons."

"Or riding a horse hundreds of feet in the air," I added.

"True that," she replied.

The sky lightened as we charged through the time zones until we raced into morning.

“Okay, we’re heading down,” she said a short time later.

I couldn’t help tightening my grip as Red dove. Cáit didn’t say anything, and I doubted she minded.

We headed down, and based on the red-brown dirt and general features of the earth below us, I thought we were headed toward Chris’ place in New Mexico.

I had to look away as the ground rushed toward us, but I’d caught enough to know where I was right before my stomach forced me to shut my eyes.

We jolted lightly as Red touched down, and after a few more moments, came to a halt.

Forcing my eyes open, I hoped Cáit hadn’t noticed my fear.

“You okay?” Cáit glanced at me, eyes twinkling with mirth.

Well, shit, she’d noticed. “Yep,” I managed to squeak out.

“Great. Let’s go see if Mal has unraveled the secret of saving Chris yet.”

I nodded, managed to release my grip from around Cáit’s waist, and awkwardly slid off Red.

“Thank you,” I said to the spirit horse.

The red mare nodded her head. I didn’t dare pet her, though. She was a prickly thing.

Cáit swung off her mare’s back, patted the spirit horse, and then we headed for the house. Chris’ driveway was crowded with vehicles, but I didn’t see evidence of Alba. He would have either shown as a white sport bike or his horsey self. I wondered where Azrael was.

We hurried inside. I winced as powerful demonic energy pressed down on me, giving me an instant tension headache.

Cáit glanced at me. “You can block that.”

“Right.” I sighed. I was getting the hang of a lot of things, but it took far less energy to simply accept the low-level

discomfort Sabian and Ezra gave me than it did to use my powers. Lucifer was a different story.

She patted my shoulder and we hurried into the living room. Lucifer sat in the armchair I preferred, brow furrowed, eyes glinting with hellfire. I did my best not to flinch when he glanced over at us, but damn did he look furious.

Sabian had returned to his masculine appearance and was curled up on one corner of the couch, picking at the hem of his pants and staring off into space.

Mal sat on the other end of the couch with his elbows resting on his knees and his face buried in his hands.

This was not promising.

The book we had stolen from the Vatican lay closed on a new coffee table. Ezra and Mal had broken the last one when Mal had taken out his hunger-induced aggression on the demon. Mal had lost that fight, badly.

“Where is Prince Ezra?” Lucifer’s voice lacked most of its normal seduction. The anger that had replaced the temptation sent chills up and down my spine.

“He helped me escape,” I replied. “I’m not sure if he got out.”

Lucifer cursed and his expression turned inward for a moment. “Ezra is still in the Vatican. We will have to deal with him in the future.”

His anger made me want to drop to my knees and plead for forgiveness. Instead, I sat on one of the spare chairs. “Is he in danger?”

“Likely,” Lucifer replied.

“Wait—”

“There is nothing we can do at present. We must focus on rescuing the exorcist,” the ruler of Hell insisted.

I snapped my mouth shut on anything else I might say.

Cáit, bless her, asked the question I desperately wanted the answer. “So, I take it the news isn’t good?”

Mal sighed. "It's not good, but it's not hopeless."

"It's hopeless," Sabian muttered.

She turned her attention to Lucifer when Sabian and Mal failed to elaborate.

He leaned back in the chair and steepled his fingers.

"Azrael has gone to deliver our findings to Chris Price and Brennan O'Neal. The hopelessness of the situation is entirely dependent on what the mage knows."

"Well, he knows a lot, so hopefully it'll be okay." Cáit crossed her arms. "Do tell." War was way braver than I was to continue trying to draw information out of Lucifer. Of course, one of her boyfriends was the angel of death. Azrael was not someone even Lucifer would risk crossing.

"The spell is every bit as insidious as we suspected. They are likely using a version of it on all the humans whose souls they stole. Chris was able to resist as long as she did because of both her innate abilities and the connection she had with Prince Ezra."

I couldn't help but notice the way Lucifer caressed Chris' name with his voice. Crap, Sabian might have been on to something when he wondered if the demon was interested in our exorcist as more than a curiosity. That, however, was not the primary concern, so I put it out of my mind.

"It does take someone with angelic powers and someone with demonic powers to cast, though the angel involved likely damned themselves in the process."

"Unless they actually trigger an apocalypse," Cáit pointed out. "Azrael is convinced that changes the rules considerably."

Lucifer nodded in agreement. "Reversing the spell is the problem, as I'm sure you guessed. There are two methods. One requires a magical artifact that severs all bonds. This is the easiest method, as it will sever the spell. It will also sever Chris' bond with her own soul. However, as we have Azrael on our side, that is less concerning than it sounds. The other option is to have someone possess Chris and trap her soul to her body. Ezra would have been the ideal choice as he's done



it before and they already have a relationship, but he is lost to us at this time. It would be best to seek the knife and hope we don't have to come up with other options."

Having seen Azrael return my parents' souls to their bodies after Ezra had taken them in a successful attempt to keep Mammon from stealing them, I chose to believe Lucifer. I wanted to ask what Lucifer meant about Ezra being lost to us, but I kept silent. He was trapped in the Vatican, and I'd left him there. Damn it, I felt like an ass for leaving him behind.

"Azrael also agreed the knife was the best option. As I said, he's off talking to the mage. The biggest concern is that this particular artifact hasn't been seen in any circles I have access to in several ages. It could be anywhere, and we do not have time to track it down if by some miracle the mage doesn't know where it's at."

"What are the odds?" I felt I had to ask.

Lucifer shrugged. "Normally, I'd say astronomical, but I also don't believe in coincidences. It would not surprise me if Brennan O'Neal has an idea of where the artifact is."

"That seems awfully convenient," I replied.

"Chris has a very strong helping of the old blood running through her veins. She has magic and untapped other powers. She has been consistently drawing people she needs to her to play her part in this conflict. The mage has switched sides after capturing her—an act that should have brought him considerable reward and yet he gave all that up to save her. I'm certain she had something to do with it, one way or another." Lucifer's sharp tone allowed no further argument.

"Okay, so if we don't find the artifact?" Cáit asked.

"Then we have to find an angel that is both powerful enough to work with me to reverse the spell, and willing to risk falling should we fail."

"Azrael—"

"Is not the right kind of angel," Lucifer interrupted her.

“Why does the angel helping you risk falling?” I couldn’t help the question.

“Because to unravel the spell, we have to take it onto ourselves and convince the spell we are the casters. If we fail, the angel will have effectively assisted in killing Chris.” Lucifer shrugged. “I’ve already fallen, and it is of no consequence to me, but I very much doubt any of the powerful angels would take the risk. We’re far more likely to find the artifact.”

“Fucking fantastic,” I muttered.

Sabian’s listless attitude and Mal’s obvious despair made perfect sense, and now we’d lost Ezra, too. I just hoped we could get him back.

“So now what?” I finally asked.

“Now we wait for Azrael to return. That is all we can do.”

I’d have felt better if Lucifer didn’t sound so resigned.

## Chapter 4

### *Price*

I paced the confines of the small room I shared with Brennan O'Neal. He'd laid down on the bed to give me room and his breathing had slowed. Probably asleep. I was too keyed up, even though exhaustion dragged at my limbs and made my steps sluggish.

We were almost out of time. Our ability to stay at the inn was up once morning came, and the fae who ran this damn waytown wanted nothing to do with the trouble following me. They'd been willing to let us stay for three more days, and I doubted we'd convince them to let us stay longer. Then it was either back to Earth where I'd probably immediately suffer a soul-losing event that would condemn me to a fate worse than death, or we took our chances in the fae wilds. Also, likely a death sentence, except I had Brennan who was a powerful mage and Mayhem, my hellhound. Of course, right now he looked like a Pomeranian. A little yellow fluffball who had somehow decided he actually liked Brennan and was curled up behind the mage's knees.

The mage was rolled over on his side, facing the wall. He'd been sleeping on the floor, but I'd taken up the space with my

restless need to move despite the exhaustion that was destroying my life.

Mayhem perked up and growled at me.

Sighing, I sank down onto the edge of the bed, and once there the effort of getting back up was too much. I stared at the floor, then at the narrow slice of bed remaining.

Fuck it, Brennan could deal. He didn't like to be touched because of past trauma, though he'd made some exceptions for me over the past couple of weeks, but I wasn't about to intrude on his space more than I had to. There was room for me on the edge of the bed.

I curled up on my side, and Mayhem shifted so he was pressed against the back of my legs. I couldn't sleep, but I didn't have the energy to move any longer.

"Do you want me to move?" Brennan murmured.

"Naw, mate. Unless you're uncomfortable."

"Try to get some sleep, Chris. One way or another we're going to have a busy day tomorrow."

I didn't answer, and by his breathing, the mage had drifted off again. How could I sleep? My guys were probably in the process of sneaking into the Vatican right now to steal a book of spells. Demons, a vampire, and a half-angel. In the seat of Catholic power. There was nothing good about that scenario. Especially since we knew the angels were involved with the attempts to start the apocalypse. Not to mention the attempts to end the Price bloodline.

I was terrified I'd never see them again. They were in so much danger and I was laying here, not able to do anything.

Brennan shifted behind me, but I didn't pay any attention to him until he wrapped his arm around my stomach and pulled me against his chest.

"Chris, go to sleep," he ordered.

His command must have had some magic behind it because the next thing I knew, light was shining in the small window. Strange thing was, Brennan still had his arm around my

stomach and his breath tickled the back of my neck. It surprised me that he hadn't turned away after putting me to sleep. My back was still pressed against his chest and at least a small part of me was happy to be there, as if I'd somehow claimed a piece of something I considered mine.

Not wanting to disturb the mage, I laid there until his breathing changed and tried not to think about how nice it felt curled up against him.

Brennan sucked in a breath, arm tightening around me.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I must have fallen back asleep before I could roll over."

His voice, low and gravely from sleep, was doing weird things to my exhausted brain.

"No worries," I replied. "We're both tired."

"Yes." He rolled away from me, and I struggled to get out of bed, feeling a little empty after losing his touch. Mayhem pressed against me, and I scratched his furry head.

"We should get cleaned up and get out of here before they decide to kick us out."

"Yeah." I sighed.

"It'll be okay, Chris," he said softly. "They'll have figured something out."

"I hope so." Brennan didn't know the details of their mission. I'd tell him as soon as I knew the guys were safe.

By this point, I had something of a morning routine worked out despite my unfamiliar surroundings in a waytown in fairy. I wanted one more bath before we hit the road and the magic would clean my clothing. Assuming they hadn't already cut us off from that luxury. Hopefully the inn was similar to human hotels in that you had a few hours in the morning to get out.

I hurried to the baths as much as my drained body would let me. Brennan caught my arm part way down the stairs and helped me the rest of the way. The hellhound trotted along behind us, unwilling to leave me alone.

“Fuck mate, this sucks.”

“Hopefully you’ll be back to your old self soon.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I was starting to lose hope, but threads of it still held me together.

Brennan put his hand in the middle of my back and pushed some of his magic into me.

I took a breath as it burned through me. It wasn’t an unpleasant burn, more like a particularly good whiskey working its way down my throat. I kind of wanted to groan in pleasure, but I kept that to myself.

“Thanks,” I finally managed to say.

“I don’t know how much that will help, but it’s something.”

“Yeah, I appreciate you trying. Appreciate you doing everything you’ve done.”

“You’re welcome. Go get cleaned up. We’ve probably got about an hour, and I’d like to get something to eat before we have to leave.” Brennan headed for one of the private changing areas and I found another. As much as I could, I hurried through cleaning my teeth and all of that, then I wrapped the provided robe around myself and headed for the soaking pool. This place was amazing, and I hoped I’d be able to experience it again someday under better circumstances. The communal bathing area was tiled in scenes straight out of a fantasy novel.

After lowering myself into the warm pool, I stared at the unicorn that pranced across the ceiling, losing myself in the design.

“Chris?”

I jerked myself awake. Brennan stood over me, wearing one of the white robes, hair wet. I’d slept through the entire bath. Shit, this was getting bad.

“Sorry.” I tried to get out of the tub. My limbs dragged at me, despite the restorative properties of the enchanted water. “Fuck,” I muttered.

Brennan held out his hand, and I flailed a little.

Without voicing a complaint, he stepped into the water, robe and all, and cradled me in his arms before lifting me out.

I supposed it was a good thing he wasn't particularly interested in things like sex because he was certainly getting an eyeful now. Accepting the help, despite the fury of my body failing me, I rested my head against his shoulder.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, Chris."

I wasn't sure when he had gone from calling me Price to calling me Chris, but I decided I liked it. He carried me back to the changing room I'd chosen, helped me dry off and steadied me while I pulled my clothing on. He studied me, not looking away despite my nudity, but not making me feel like he was ogling me inappropriately, either. It was simply that he accepted me in whatever state I happened to be in. I missed the heat in my guys' eyes when they looked at me naked, but the lack of expectations in Brennan's expression was relaxing.

Once I was clothed, Brennan simply picked me back up and carried me up the stairs to our room, Mayhem following us. We did a quick check to make sure we had everything. Not that we'd had much with us. It was more of a reflex than anything.

I made it down to the common room on my own two feet and collapsed onto a bench at one of the tables while Brennan went to get our breakfasts. The common room had become as familiar as the baths over the last week that I'd been here. Everything in this world had an organic feel as if the building had been grown instead of built. The lines flowed smoothly, and there were very few truly straight lines. Right now, we were the only people getting served, and the innkeeper, a dour fay who didn't like Brennan one bit, looked relieved that we were almost out of his hair.

The food, when he returned with it, was delicious as usual, and I devoured my portion, saving enough to feed the hellhound sitting on the bench next to me.

Then, with the innkeeper glaring at our backs, we headed out into the waytown.

“What now?”

“Now we lay low until they try to kick us out,” he replied.

Screams and an angry whinny disrupted any thought of laying low. Especially when a certain demonic horse galloped straight toward me.

I glanced at Brennan. “About that—”

He smiled and shook his head. “Never boring around you, Chris.”

“Hey, buddy,” I said when the nightstallion slammed to a halt right in front of me.

I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around his big head. The heat from his flaming mane could burn but would never hurt me. The warm breath he blew on me as he took in my scent tickled my skin and I felt the bond we’d developed slip back into place.

“Hey, I thought of a good name. What do you think about Inferno?”

The demon horse perked his ears forward before nickering.

“Great, Inferno it is.” Though I did wonder how he’d arrived. I knew there were barriers preventing demons from entering. Mayhem had slipped through with Brennan in his Pomeranian form, but there was no way they would have let Inferno through. He either looked like a demonic horse or an iron one in his Harley form. The mythical fay aversion to iron was a real thing.

My unasked question was answered in moments as Azrael, riding his spirit horse Alba, trotted into view.

Most people ignored the angel of death, but a few of the older fay knew who he was and shied away.

“Come with me,” Azrael said. Alba turned before I could ask any of the dozens of questions that I needed the answers



to. In public probably wasn't the best place to ask them, considering the nightstallion was getting a lot of attention.

I tangled my hands in Inferno's mane. He used his magic to help me onto his back.

"Brennan O'Neal, you should ride with one of us. We must move quickly," Azrael said.

I was closer and sensed Inferno's willingness to play nice with the mage despite the recent past, so I held out my hand.

Warily, Brennan took it. As soon as we were mounted, Mayhem hopped up behind him and then we followed Azrael at a fast canter.

A few of the town guards raised their arms in protest at our speed, but Azrael ignored them, instead heading straight for one of the gates out of the waytown.

People scattered, yelling obscenities. Azrael must have been in a hell of a hurry to be that pushy.

As much as I wasn't a horse person, it felt strangely good to be back on my nightstallion, fingers wrapped in his warm mane. His magic would hold me on his back no matter how poorly I rode, but I was beginning to get the hang of it. Maybe it was the bond between us that I'd been missing. Maybe it was the feeling that on Inferno's back I could accomplish anything, including saving my life. I didn't know, but it felt good.

Brennan's arms lightly holding my waist as he rode behind me also felt good.

*Bad Chris. You have plenty of men already.* I'd told myself that on a few occasions recently, in regard to a certain demon prince and half-angel, and yet they were now both my lovers. Brennan likely would never be a lover because of his past, but maybe I could still keep him. That was not a decision to make without talking to the others, and likely not something we would discuss any time soon. I was sure they felt very differently about the mage than I did.

Once we were outside the wall that surrounded the city and away from the road and the people on it, Azrael slowed.

The angel's sword appeared in his hand, and he waved it in a circle around us while saying a few words I didn't catch. Perhaps it was a language I didn't know.

"We are safe from the dangers of fairy for a short time," Azrael said.

"Are my guys okay?" I blurted out.

"Sabian and Mal escaped with the grimoire. I have no news of Aaron or Ezra other than that they remained behind because of the difficulties involved in retrieving the book."

"Azrael, are they okay?"

He smiled faintly. "They're not dead, if that's what you mean."

I took a breath. "Okay, that's a start. So, what's the plan?"

Alba moved over to us, so we could speak while mounted, and Azrael pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. "Brennan O'Neal, do you recognize this?"

I knew the answer before he responded. Every muscle in his body went rigid. Inferno shifted under us.

"Lucifer thought you might have an idea of where it was located," Azrael said.

"Yes. If it is the same knife, Elsa has it. She, uh, likes to use it on her toys." Brennan didn't elaborate, but I could imagine he had some direct experience with it.

"This knife severs bonds. I don't know how she was using it, but for our purposes, it will free Chris from the spell. You will retrieve this knife and return to the waytown. We need to return to the earthen plain as we will need some demonic and angelic magic in addition to the knife. You will also require my assistance. Do not try to use it without me or you will die." Azrael handed the paper to me. "Should you become separated, at least you will know what it looks like if you have the drawing."

"Thanks, mate," I said.

"Yes. Hurry, you have very little time."

“I know.”

His lips tightened as if not expecting my sharp tones.

Before we could say anything else, Alba turned and trotted away for a few steps before he vanished.

“Well, fuck,” I said.

Brennan’s hands trembled where he held me. “Indeed.”

Despite the fearful reaction his body told me he was having, his voice was steady.

“So, how are we going to do this?”

The mage took a few even breaths before he sagged behind me. “I’m not sure I can.”

“Fair, mate. Can you at least get me close?”

“Yes. We must move swiftly. The presence of a nightstallion in fairy is not going to go unremarked.”

“Yeah, got that idea. Okay, Inferno, let’s do this.”

The nightstallion whinnied and pawed at the ground.

“Where to, Brennan?”

He sighed and pointed. “That way.”

Inferno’s magic was the only thing that kept us on his back as he leapt into a gallop from a standstill. Clearly, he was taking the need for speed seriously.

“You going to fly?” That would be easier.

The stallion snorted and shook his head.

“He’s a demon in an unfriendly environment. His powers are not as strong as when he’s on Earth or in Hell. Were the barrier to keep demons out not in place, he’d be at full strength. Still, this is plenty fast for our purposes, as long as he can keep it up.”

This got a head toss from Inferno.

“Think that means yes.”

Brennan put his arms back around me, this time holding me tightly. “I will do what I can, Chris, but—”

“I’m going to shank that bitch if I get a chance,” I growled, furious at what I imagined Brennan had gone through at her hands.

He simply took another shuddering breath and fell silent.

Inferno raced across the plains and toward the thick forest. I hoped there was a path we could follow, and I was grateful I didn’t have to walk it this time. No, I had Mayhem and Inferno with me, and Brennan knew the way. We’d get this damn knife and cause some chaos in the process. Then we’d deal with this spell and hopefully all my men waited for me on the other side of the portal home to Earth. I refused to let myself think about any other possibilities.

∞ ∞ ∞

The forest had closed in around us hours ago, yet Inferno, occasionally with direction from Brennan, chose another one of those invisible pathways that made the going easier. My burst of determination and energy from earlier had faded, leaving me slumped against Brennan’s chest. The mage held me with one arm and kept his other tangled in Inferno’s flaming mane. He rode easily, and I guessed he had experience on horses.

“How far are we?”

“We’re making good time, Chris. Maybe another hour.”

“Okay, great. Before we get there, what do we need to do to keep you safe from Elsa?”

Brennan sighed “I don’t know if we can.”

“I should have asked Azrael for a weapon,” I muttered.

“I’ll make one for you when we stop,” Brennan said.

“Oh?” I tilted my head back and looked up at him.

“I am a mage.”

“Right.”

My energy had waned enough that I was a little worried about being able to accomplish this. Especially since Brennan didn't think he could help me.

“Inferno,” Brennan said sometime later. “Can you stop here for a moment? We need to prepare.”

The stallion slowed.

“Chris, stay mounted. I'm going to create a few weapons.”

I did as instructed, and Brennan slid off the nightstallion after Mayhem hopped down.

Curiously, I watched the mage as he inspected a nearby tree. He finally touched a branch, and it came away in his hand, though it had moments before been attached to a living tree.

Brennan touched the tree that had given him the branch and pushed a bit of energy into it.

Interesting.

After thanking the tree, or whatever he'd been doing, Brennan took the limb and twisted his magic through the wood until it freaking melted in his hand. Sort of. He did the same thing a couple more times until the branch was now in sections.

He spent some time with each section, shaping them with his magic until he had formed them each into wooden daggers. He handed one up to me and I studied it, impressed.

“That's cool as shit,” I said.

The praise brought a smile to Brennan's face.

He helped me secure them across my back with some vines he coaxed from another tree. Clearly not the same variety as the murder vines. What had he called them? The fay version of honeysuckle. I shuddered as the memory of one of the vines tightening around my throat surfaced. I'd used the same vines

to trap Elsa and get her to renounce her claim on Brennan not long ago.

“So, she can’t just like reclaim you or anything, can she?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean she can’t simply stab me.”

“Cool, well, stabbing may be easier to prevent since you’re not coming, right?”

Brennan put his hand on my thigh and trapped my leg between the nightstallion and his chest. “I’m not leaving you, Chris. I can do this.”

“Okay, mate. Deal.” I couldn’t help but sound relieved.

“She kept the knife in her sleeping chambers, last I knew. I have a spell that will lead us to it.”

“Best guess, we’re not going to be sneaking in.”

Brennan looked at the nightstallion then back at me. “He’ll fit. So, no, we won’t be sneaking in.”

I hadn’t considered riding the nightstallion inside, but the idea appealed to me.

“Okay, cool, so we’re charging in. Great. Love it.” I smiled.

Brennan matched my grin. “I must say, if we light the place on fire I won’t mind.”

Inferno nickered happily.

“What does the place look like?”

“Very similar to everything else you’ve seen. Grown, not constructed. Her estate is large. The forest has been cleared away from the main grounds and a wall surrounds it. The wall will not be an issue for Inferno. We’ll break in through the front door. Between my magic and Inferno’s and Mayhem’s we should be able to make it in relatively unhindered. We grab the knife and get out. I don’t recall anything other than the standard wards against the forest in her home, though that could have changed by now. There’s nothing original about the layout of her place. The master suite is up the grand staircase and off to the left.”

“That’s fantastic. Thank you, Brennan.”

For a moment his expression went blank as if he were expecting more. When I just tilted my head, his expression cleared.

“You’re welcome.”

Shit, what had he been expecting from me after the praise? I really was going to shank that bitch if I got a chance. Whatever she’d done to Brennan had left deep scars.

“Ready, then?”

Brennan nodded.

“Great, mount up.”

He swung up behind me. Mayhem shifted to his hellhound form and ran along behind us. Brennan whispered directions to Inferno and the nightstallion took a turn, splashing into a running creek and following its course. If we hadn’t been literally in a race against time, I would have enjoyed the dash through the forest on my surefooted steed. As it was, I just hoped I lived long enough to do this sometime for fun.

“Hold on,” Brennan said.

His arm tightened around my waist and his fist clenched in Inferno’s mane. I wrapped my hands in the flaming strands of the nightstallion’s mane as well and trusted the creature’s magic to keep me onboard. I wasn’t quite sure what the two of them had planned, but as we barreled through the stream, water hissing from the demonic horse’s feet and steam rising behind us, I began to have an idea. A wall loomed ahead, and Inferno made no move to slow down. If nothing, he increased his speed.

“Fuck me,” I gasped as his muscles bunched and he leapt into the air. “Thought he couldn’t fly!”

“He can fly long enough to get us over this.”

Brennan, damn him, sounded like he was enjoying himself.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn’t help it.

The mage laughed. “Relax, we won’t let you fall.”

Doing my best to imitate a growl, I forced my eyes open just as we landed on the other side.

It felt like we'd leapt from the jungle straight into an epic romance saga. The grounds were full of lush green grasses, carefully trimmed to an exacting length. The garden beds were packed with vibrant flowers and other foliage. Knowing what little I did of Elsa, they were every bit as deadly as they were beautiful. I suspected that working for her wasn't any more pleasant than being one of her toys.

Brennan tensed against me, but he still breathed evenly, and I didn't feel like he was going to flake out on me. No, I trusted him to have my back in this, and I'd have his. There was no way Elsa would get her hands on my mage ever again. If she tried, I had a dagger-shaped stick I would introduce into her guts.

Inferno's hooves pounded across the ground. Someone screamed.

Manor house was a good way to describe the main building on the estate. I didn't have a ton of time to study it as we raced forward. I was really looking forward to riding a flaming demon horse through those opulently carved wooden doors. I imagined the inside was every bit as ornate as the exterior. The manor looked to have three levels, and many balconies had been grown into its exterior. The architecture blended well with the backdrop of the jungle, not garish but still, knowing who lived here, I wanted to burn it to the ground.

Brennan leaned forward, taking his arm from around my waist and chanted in what was probably the fay language. The doors banged open, and we charged inside.

A couple of fay men scattered as we thundered toward the grand staircase.

"Is that grass?" I asked, momentarily distracted by the green floor.

"It's a type of moss that works well as a floor covering."

"Cool," I said, then something else I'd seen caught up to me as Inferno and Mayhem charged up the staircase. I was



again grateful for the magic that kept me clinging to Inferno's back.

"Is it normal to wander around naked in fairy?" The fay men we'd scattered hadn't been wearing anything.

"No. Just in Elsa's house." Brennan didn't elaborate and I didn't need him to. What a sicko.

"Fuck, mate," I murmured.

He took a breath but didn't otherwise reply.

Adrenalin warred with my soul-deep exhaustion. I had to get through this, and I wasn't going to leave Brennan to fight this battle on his own.

Inferno blasted around a corner, and we met our first resistance. Guards armed with long pikes or spears or something stabby blocked the hallway, standing two deep. Either Elsa thought we were after her, or she knew what we were coming for. I couldn't imagine she would have managed to get armed guards blocking this specific corridor that quickly otherwise.

I'd guess she'd probably already talked to the demons and knew what we were after.

I swear I felt Inferno's amusement as he bellowed hellfire. The guards screamed. The demon didn't even slow, plowing through the flames of the failed resistance.

Brennan and I ducked as a low hanging light fixture threatened our heads. Inferno was not a small horse.

We stayed low over Inferno's neck until we came to a large set of double doors. There were no guards, but they didn't open when Brennan blasted them with magic.

Mayhem barked a challenge before charging forward and body slamming the doors. They crashed open and the hellhound tumbled through, absorbing a blast of magic. His eyes glowed as he charged up on the magic being thrown at him.

Brennan and I slid off Inferno, and the nightstallion charged into the fray on his own. He screamed his anger and lashed out

with hooves and fangs.

The mage and I rushed to the door and stopped, watching the carnage as Mayhem and Inferno let off some steam. Literally.

Someone had tried blasting the creatures with water. It hadn't done anything but heat up the room even further.

Elsa's bedroom suite was currently a large mess of chaos. Furniture smashed, and people scrambled out of the way of the enraged demons. Elsa stood there, one hand up as if she were about to gloat, but her expression had changed to shock.

Fortunately, the demons were only trampling armed fay. The naked ones cowering along the wall were relatively safe from the slaughter.

Elsa turned to run. Mayhem leapt forward and clamped his teeth around her thigh, bringing her to the ground.

She screamed and something fell from her hand.

Brennan darted forward and grabbed whatever she'd been holding before she could reach it. The hellhound dragged her into the middle of the room.

I staggered after the mage.

Inferno settled as the resistance dwindled to nothing. I didn't care to look close enough to find out if they were still alive or not. At this point, it really didn't matter as long as they stayed down.

Mayhem had released Elsa's leg, but he loomed over her, and she kept her eyes fixed on the hound.

"Just couldn't stay away, could you, Brennan?" She managed some arrogance despite the situation.

He didn't reply as he studied the object in his hand.

"Who are you communicating with?" he asked, holding up a small round disk.

She glared and didn't answer.

Demons, most likely.

Brennan shrugged and his hand glowed for a moment with magic before the thing crumbled to dust.

I finally made it the rest of the way into the room before stopping and leaning on Inferno's shoulder.

"You look like you're on your last legs, Price," she hissed. "Maybe you should have spent more time appreciating your toy instead of coming after me."

"Where's the dagger?" Brennan demanded.

"Gave it to the demons." She smirked, which, really, was impressive that she had the nerve considering she had a pissed off hellhound drooling on her.

"You're lying," Brennan said calmly as if he knew without a doubt that she would not have parted with the blade.

I, on the other hand, didn't know her that well, and one of the knives Brennan had made for me appeared in my hand as if on its own accord. Anger and adrenalin gave me a burst of energy, and I stalked forward.

"Yeah, you'd better be lying."

Elsa looked at the expression on my face and the knife in my hand and paled.

"It's in the other room."

"Let her up, Mayhem. She's going to take us to it." I glared at her until she nodded.

The hellhound backed up, and Elsa scrambled to her feet, limping from the bite on her thigh.

We followed Elsa into the other room. Mayhem kept an eye on Elsa with a low growl rumbling from his throat that would have turned my bowels to jelly if he hadn't been my dog. Inferno stayed behind to watch the guards he'd put on the ground.

She hurried into the next room. This was a bedchamber with all sorts of kinky toys and apparatuses. I recognized some of them, though they were the fay version, organic-looking instead of manufactured. It was a room you could have a heck

a lot of fun in, if you weren't with someone as depraved as Elsa.

The knife in question was sitting on a table next to her large canopy bed. The drapes were drawn back to reveal a fay male tied to the bed. Hell, she didn't even follow the rules. You never left a bound person alone. Of course, why would I think she would follow rules?

"Tell you what, I'll trade the knife for Brennan. It's got a spell on it to keep my toys from getting ideas." The smirk had not left her face.

I sheathed the knife and stalked over to her so I was right in her face. I was about to take a shitty calculated risk, but if this knife broke bonds, then it wasn't much of a risk.

"I don't own him," I said.

She laughed. "You've claimed him enough times, and he has not refuted you. The bond is there."

"Oh, well in that case, sure. Brennan for the knife."

I could almost feel him go rigid with shock, but he said nothing.

Elsa's eyes widened, and she dropped the knife into my hand as if it burned her. Maybe that magic she'd told me about.

I clutched the dagger in a white-knuckled grip before shoving it into her stomach, angling up, hoping I hit something fatal quickly.

Hot blood washed over my hand. Her eyes widened as the pain and realization of what I'd just done set in.

"Didn't think you had it in you," she gasped.

"He's my mage, bitch," I snarled at her.

I jerked the knife out, twisting it. I did not want her getting back up. The life faded from her orange eyes as she slid to the ground.

"Holy shit," Brennan breathed.

I turned to face him.

His mouth hung open as he stared at Elsa's lifeless form. Brennan's gaze shifted back to me, and he snapped his mouth shut.

“Sorry, mate. Really didn't know what else to do.”

The shock on his face made it clear he had no idea what to say. I wasn't sure I would have had a good response myself.

The burst of energy I'd managed fled, and I slumped to the ground, landing on my knees. The strength left my limbs, and I lost my hold on the knife.

As my vision blackened, I really hoped that Brennan wasn't mad at me. If I managed to wake up, I'd apologize again. I seriously hoped I woke up. This would be a shit way to die. Though, I suppose I had freed Brennan from one of his personal demons.

There was that, at least.

## Chapter 5

### *Price*

I clawed my way back to consciousness just in time to see a knife plunging toward me.

*Fuck!* I tried to move, but strong hands held me down. *I have got to stop waking up like this*, I had a moment to think before the knife sank into my flesh.

Pain sheered through me, hot fire spreading from my chest as the knife slid through skin and bone with no resistance. I felt like my entire body tore into pieces and flew off into different directions.

I would have screamed, but there was nothing left for me to scream with. I was floating in a sea of white, adrift and alone.

An eternity later, a hand closed around me, like, completely freaking around me. I wasn't even sure how I knew it was a hand, I just did. It jerked me out of the floating sea of nothingness and plunged me back into a world of agony.

My eyes flew open, and I gasped, jerking upward—or trying to, anyway. I was still restrained.

I focused on the visage looking down on me and almost screamed again. The familiar artfully tousled black hair framing a familiar pale face and soul-consuming eyes was

briefly overlaid by a more skeletal face with a black cowl and ashy gray wings spread behind. I'd only seen that aspect of Azrael before in artistic depictions of Death.

"Azrael." I managed to interrupt my scream and gasp out his name instead.

"Yes." He smiled, as if glad I'd recognized him. Or maybe was just happy I hadn't called him Jesus.

He was pressing on my chest or something, and I made the mistake of glancing down. Nope, his wrist disappeared into my torso.

"Shit, mate," I groaned. "What the hell?"

His smile broadened. "I had to shove your soul back into your body."

"Thanks." I leaned back, not able to keep my head up any longer. Slowly, more of my surroundings intruded on this *moment* I was sharing with the angel of death.

Azrael pulled his hand out of my chest, and I instantly felt warmer. I hadn't noticed the cold freezing my limbs until it was gone, and my body started to warm.

Something sharp dug into my back in various points, and now that I could focus on something other than my good friend Death, I noticed the vibrant blue sky, the scent of pine, and the cooler bite to the air, all of which made me wonder where the hell I was.

"Is she okay?" Was that Sabian's voice?

I looked back. I'd expected it to be Mal restraining me, but no, it was someone far more terrifying. A seductive smile curled Lucifer's lips.

"Welcome back, Chris Price."

"Thanks," I breathed out. His eyes flickered with hellfire, and I tried to jerk my gaze away from his. Something possessive in his expression was making my stomach do flip-flops, and that was simply not a feeling I could deal with at the moment.

“I’ve really got to stop making a habit of getting myself killed,” I muttered once I managed to look away. I guessed it was only Lucifer’s presence that was keeping Sabian from rushing to my side.

I looked toward where I’d heard his voice. The sight of my incubus standing there next to my vampire and my half-angel nearly brought tears to my eyes. It took me a moment to wonder where Ezra was. I twisted until I could look around me, but I didn’t see him. Only Brennan standing next to Mayhem. Inferno stood on the other side of Brennan.

While I wanted to spring to my feet and throw myself into the arms of my lovers, Lucifer still held me pressed to the ground, and I didn’t have the energy to fight him.

Though, now that I considered it, I felt a lot better than I remembered feeling for a while.

“Yeah, second that question. Am I okay?”

Azrael nodded. “Yes, the knife cut all the bonds the magic had created. I reintroduced your soul to your body. You will be just fine. I suggest some additions to your warding to prevent that in the future.”

I glanced over at Mal. His brow furrowed as if he were already thinking of what to do to protect me.

I wanted them over here with me and was about to tell Lucifer to take a hike so I could wrap myself around my men.

Azrael leaned back. “You do not need me for the moment. I will go look into that other matter you requested of me.” He pocketed the knife I’d taken from Elsa. Apparently, he had no trouble with whatever spell the fay had put on the dagger, or they’d been dispelled.

“Thank you, Azrael. I am in your debt,” Lucifer said.

“If we can prevent this from becoming an apocalypse, I will consider all debts paid,” the angel replied.

Before I could thank him, he vanished.

Back to wanting to tell Lucifer to take a hike, I glanced up at him again.



He studied me, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to know what was on his mind or not.

“All of your marks are gone. Your wards. Everything.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I replied dryly.

“Well, we'll have to fix that.” He pressed his hand to my chest before I could object.

The pain of an entire tattoo session distilled down into a few moments of time burned through me. I yelped, grabbing his wrist with my hands as my back arched up off the ground.

“Not going to give me a choice this time,” I gasped.

“You already chose. I'm simply returning the mark to its proper place.”

“Sure.” I wasn't going to argue with him. “Why do I get the impression you, uh, *improved*, on this one.”

Lucifer's smile turned evil. “Because you know me.”

There would be a point in time soon where I'd be brave enough to ask him what he'd done. Not now, though. Now, I was just grateful to be alive.

Lucifer's hand left my chest, and the burn faded to a dull ache that I could easily ignore.

As soon as he took his hands off me, I rolled over and got to my knees. The world swam for a moment, and before I could recover Mayhem bowled me over.

“Mayhem, buddy, careful.”

He slobbered all over me, still the size of a small pony and leaving enough drool that I felt I needed a bath. Our bond snapped back into place for the third time. I hoped I'd never lose it again.

Before I could recover, Inferno stood, towering over me.

“Hey, buddy.” I raised up my hand and he snuffled it with his soft muzzle, hot breath warming my cold fingers.

“Okay, can I get up and throw myself into the arms of my guys now?”

Inferno nickered as if amused.

“Speaking of, where’s Ezra?”

Before I could climb to my feet, Mal was grasping my hand and pulling me upright. I collapsed into his arms. Sabian wrapped his arms around from behind so I was sandwiched between them. Aaron stood close and I held out a hand. He took it, so that I was touching all three.

We didn’t speak, just held each other. I’d get the answer to Ezra’s location once we’d had a second. I was sure if he could be here, he would have been, and worry ate away at me. He was strong and powerful, though, so I had to believe he was okay. Especially since no one had acted like he was dead when I’d asked where he was.

I breathed in Mal’s incense and old books scent when I buried my face against his neck. Sabian’s warmth was a strong counterpoint to Mal’s cooler skin. Aaron’s strong hands clasped mine and held tightly.

“We’re not sure where Ezra is,” Mal finally said. “We had to focus on you first. We thought he could probably take care of himself for a short time. Lucifer says he’s not dead, if nothing else.”

“Well, that’s something. Did he not make it out of the Vatican?”

“I don’t think he did,” Aaron supplied. “He helped me escape, but that was the last I saw of him.”

“Fuck,” I breathed out.

“He’ll be okay, Price,” Lucifer said from where he observed us. “However, we need to get your protections in place, and then we need to regroup. We’ve got a lot to still accomplish.”

“We’re going to need Ezra,” I pointed out. “*I* need Ezra.”

From a purely practical standpoint, I needed access to his power. From everything that mattered, I needed him to hold me in his arms and melt for me when I commanded him.

Sabian kissed my neck. I groaned, other thoughts intruding on my worry. “He’ll be okay, and we will get him back, but Lucifer is right. We need a minute to breathe.”

“Where can we go that is safe? Actually, where the hell are we?” I didn’t move from Mal’s embrace, but I was curious about our location.

“South Dakota, near the entrance to the mound,” Brennan said from the side where he had been quietly observing.

“Do we still need him?” Mal whispered in my ear, meaning Brennan.

“Yeah, mate.”

“Damn.”

“He saved me, Mal. Also, his situation is a lot more complicated than you might think. Go easy.”

Mal’s arms tightened around me. “He delivered you to Mammon.”

“He was being used. I’ll explain later.”

Mal grumbled but relented.

Now that I’d wrapped myself up with Sabian and Mal, and had at least managed to cling to Aaron, I thought catching up on lost time with my guys was in order. I leaned back and looked around, but other than Aaron’s SUV there wasn’t any place around that looked safe, or comfortable for a good, long fucking.

“Hrmpf,” I muttered.

“What do you require, Chris Price?” Lucifer asked.

Right, he was still here.

“A good, long fuck. So, someplace safe. Got any ideas?”

Lucifer’s eyebrows rose before he shook his head. “I’d suggest Hell. I’d suggest Ezra’s domain, in fact, if we knew where Ezra was.”

“Michael has him,” Azrael popped back into existence.

We all jumped, and Brennan held up his hands as if ready to cast. Mal moved vampire-quick to place himself between me and Death. We all relaxed a moment later when we realized who it was.

“Black abyss,” Lucifer hissed.

“Michael?” I said slowly. “Like, archangel Michael?”

“The same,” Azrael confirmed.

“Well, shit.” I hugged myself. Aaron took Mal’s place, holding me against Sabian.

“He is still in the Vatican and relatively unharmed. Likely they know he can be used as collateral. While he’s useful in that regard, they will be unlikely to kill him.”

“Great.” I sighed.

“This does confirm what I had expected,” Lucifer said. “Michael is behind the plot. I don’t know if it is enough evidence for Gabriel, but we should meet with them.”

I sagged and let my guys hold me. I was tired of making decisions and being in charge. “What do we do?”

“What would you like to do, Chris Price?”

“Get laid.”

The Devil laughed. “I’m sure that won’t be hard to arrange.” He fell silent for a moment. “Return to your home in Santa Fe. I’ll coordinate a meeting with Gabriel. Once we’ve dealt with the archangel I will transport us all to Hell and leave you at Ezra’s estate. You do need time to recover.”

“I will take my leave. Aaron, call me if you have further need of me,” Azrael said before vanishing again.

Sleep sounded amazing. Sleep and sex, not necessarily in that order. Though if we were going back to my place I might not get my guys in bed for a bit. I’d hoped that would help distract me from my worry over Ezra. Fucking angels, anyway. Why did they have my demon prince? I mean, I knew the answer to that, I supposed. I really wanted to scream in frustration, however.

“You also need to reinstate your wards.”

“Yeah, would be helpful to tie them into Ezra’s power, though, for the shield wards. Or should I not do that again? They are dangerous.”

“They have saved you far more than they have hurt you. We will tie your wards into a larger source of power. I will see to it.” Lucifer’s smile turned panty meltingly seductive, and I almost told him no. My fear of falling into Mammon’s hands was greater than whatever the Devil had planned for me, however. At least Lucifer wanted me alive and in control of my body.

“I can help, as well,” Brennan offered. “I have some ideas on how to improve the wards so that they can’t actually overload and take you out. That is the biggest weakness with the last set you had.”

“Thanks,” I said at the same time as Mal growled at Brennan.

The mage ignored my vampire, staring ahead passively. Now that I knew his background, I knew what that look meant—he was shutting down to avoid trauma—and I never wanted to see it again. He was my mage, damn it. I just had to get my guys to accept his presence.

“Okay, so back home. How are we getting there?”

“Ride your nightstallion. I will meet you at your home, and the others can drive. It will be a few hours, but we can get started on the design for your protections.”

“I have a list of things we need for her,” Mal said. “I’ve been working on it.”

“Good,” the Devil purred.

I squirmed against Sabian as Lucifer’s voice caressed me. Sabian tensed before sighing sadly. He kissed my neck again.

“How exactly are we doing this? Got tattoos last time.” I wasn’t sure if I was up to an extended tattoo session yet. I’d just returned home after nearly dying, and while I liked the

clatter of the tattoo gun and the sting of the needle as it injected ink into my skin, I wasn't keen on it at the moment.

"Magic," Lucifer said as if it should have been obvious. "We will draw the designs on your skin, then bind them with magic."

"Who's magic?" Mal asked. "I'm sure Ezra could have done it, and I might be able to, but I'd have to learn how first."

Lucifer shrugged. "Yours, mine, Brennan's—it doesn't really matter. It just matters that we protect our exorcist before the enemy strikes again. You have power, Chris Price, and you can do many things, but you're still human, and quite vulnerable. The others can take far more damage than you can, and we need to level the playing field a bit. You are the key to defeating Mammon."

I didn't miss that he called me his exorcist. I did bear his mark, and I supposed the phrasing was fair, but it still made me twitch. It made Sabian twitch, as well.

"I'm not objecting. I just wanted to know how we were doing it. So, you're going to, like, take a Sharpie and draw all over me then magically make them into tattoos?" I asked.

"Yes, that's a good way to describe it."

"Kay, that should be interesting." I could think of all sorts of naughty things to do with being drawn on, though probably not with a permanent marker. This, however, probably wasn't going to be naughty. Pity.

"Great, let's go."

Mal gave Brennan a dark look before he came over to my side again. "I'll go with you, so we can work on your design. Sabian, Aaron, and Brennan can take the car."

I glanced back at Aaron, and he nodded agreement.

"I will meet you there," Lucifer said and simply faded away.

"Neat trick," I muttered.

Now that we were more alone, I plastered myself to Aaron, pulling his head down and meeting his lips with mine. Aaron crushed me against his chest, and we devoured each other, almost getting in each other's way in our haste as we kissed.

We were laughing when we let go of each other.

"Thank God you are okay," Aaron said. "Or, you know, whoever."

"You, too. And thank you for keeping me going those last few days."

Aaron grinned, and I was pretty sure he was blushing, too. "It was certainly my pleasure."

I turned and threw myself into Sabian's arms. He met my lips with his own, knowing what I wanted without any question. Sabian could both read my mind and sense my intent. He consumed me with his kiss, burning with desire as his lips melded with mine. Our tongues danced together as I opened for him, and he for me. I'd missed my incubus so much, and he had risked everything to help save me. I was so lucky to have him in my life.

I leaned back, losing myself in his amber eyes for a moment before Sabian released me into Mal's strong arms.

The vampire slid one hand behind my neck and the other around my waist, and he held me against him as he expertly kissed me until I could barely think. I was about thirty seconds away from stripping and pulling his clothes from his body right there in the forest when he broke our kiss. His eyes shone with happiness.

My contentment faded a bit when I couldn't find myself in Ezra's arms. Worry for the demon prince had me frowning.

"We'll rescue him," Mal said, smoothing his fingers along my brow.

"I hope so. Fucking angels," I muttered.

"Okay, we need to hit the road. Will your nightstallion carry me?" Mal glanced over at Inferno.

"Hey, how about it, Inferno?"

The stallion tossed his head in assent. He was getting a lot more willing to carry my guys around.

“Inferno,” Sabian said. “Good name.”

“I thought so,” I agreed.

I gave Sabian and Aaron one last quick kiss before I went over to Brennan. I had to apologize again. I’d almost forgotten what I’d done to get the knife.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t really going to give you up for her, but I knew the knife would sever the bond.”

Brennan studied me for a moment. I twisted my hands together, nervous about his response.

“You did what you had to do.” The way he said it did not sound like a recrimination. “There is nothing to forgive. Besides, you fixed it so quickly, I barely had time to freak out about it.” He smiled.

“Freak out, huh?”

He shrugged. “That’s basically what I was doing on the inside.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry, though. I really had no other ideas.”

“You killed Elsa for me. You don’t need my forgiveness, but you have it. As you said, I’m your mage. All of fay knows it without a doubt now. I do not think you will ever be challenged in that manner again.”

“Damn straight.” I grinned at him. “Hey, what happened after I passed out?”

“I got you back to the mound as quickly as Inferno could carry us. Azrael met us there. Somehow he knew I needed him. We took you through and I think you woke up for the rest.”

I looked at my hands, remembering the feeling of hot fay blood gushing over them. Brennan or someone must have cleaned the blood off, probably magically, because they were clean.



I shook my hands, trying to get the feeling of blood off them.

Brennan caught them in his hands and I stopped twisting them, shocked that he was willing to touch me.

“You did what you had to do, Chris. Elsa was an evil person and had harmed many fay. Though I didn’t stay to set anyone free, they finally had that option on their own. We are all grateful.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay, yeah, you’re right.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” Suddenly aware of the vampire staring daggers into my back, I pulled my hands away. “Well, see you at home.”

Brennan’s expression went neutral again and he nodded, though I didn’t think it was because I’d pulled my hands away but more because of Mal’s glare. I’d talk to the vampire. We had a flight ahead of us and a little bit of time.

Brennan climbed into the car with Sabian and Aaron. They waited while I magically climbed up onto Inferno’s back. Once Mal was seated firmly behind me, one arm gripping my waist almost painfully tightly, and the other wrapped in Inferno’s mane, the nightstallion leapt into the sky. Mayhem stayed right by our side.

The SUV drove away as we climbed.

Before Mal could say anything, I started talking.

“Imagine being born into a family where you were completely despised because you were half human. Then being raised by beings that wouldn’t protect you from anything, and in fact used you as a verbal and possibly physical punching bag once your mother died. I don’t even know how he ended up with that fay bitch I killed, but she was into some seriously kinky torture. Brennan is doing the best he can, but he had to break out of a great deal of conditioning just to rescue me. Cut him some slack.”

Mal didn't reply for a moment while we soared through the air. Finally he rested his chin on my shoulder.

“Okay.”

“That's it?”

He shrugged. “He saved you. You trust him. You've clearly claimed him. Okay.”

“Oh.”

Mal kissed my neck, sending my heart racing. “I'm just happy to have you back and not dead. We're going to protect the shit out of you with these new wards. Brennan can help. If you think we can trust him, then I'll do my best.”

“Yeah, I think a little kindness and appreciation with him will go a long way. And, it won't hurt to have another powerful magic user on our side. He might even have some knowledge that will be useful for us.”

“Are you sleeping with him then?”

“Uh, no. One, I would not do that without talking with everyone else. Two, he can barely stand being touched from all the abuse he's had.”

Mal sighed. “Poor guy.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. New topic. Your protections. I've got a lot of ideas, and I guess we're stuck with Lucifer helping since Ezra is MIA.” He paused. “Which is less than ideal. I was finally starting to like the prince.”

I forced a laugh. It was either that or freak out a little.

“We'll get him back, Chris. I'm not sure how, yet, but we'll do it.”

“Yeah, or I'll burn it all down trying.”

“Let's hope it doesn't come to that. He's in the Vatican, after all.”

“They keep my demon from me, they're going to regret it.”

“Agreed. Let’s get you protected and figure out our plans. Next steps will obviously involve rescuing Ezra, and we have to shut down whatever it is that is doing the soul stealing. They’ve been at it again. Azrael said he’s worried if he counters them too much it will trigger the apocalypse, but if they keep it up, it might also do the same thing.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Do we have time for all the sex in between my wards and the next steps?”

Mal rumbled in pleasure. “I sure hope so.”

“So, what do you think Lucifer has planned?”

“He wants you.”

“Fuck, mate, he’s already freaking got me. I don’t know what he did with his mark this time, but it’s different than the last one.”

“I’ll see if I can figure it out once I get your clothes off.” He lowered his voice and the seduction in his tone had me squirming on Inferno’s back.

The nightstallion flicked his ears back and snorted.

“Sorry, buddy.”

I swear the creature sighed.

“Are you going to let Ezra mark you again?”

I hadn’t even thought about that. “I think so. Especially since he will have more time to consider how he’s doing it.”

Mal nodded. “You have access to some of his knowledge. Do you know how to do those marks?”

“You mean me bind Ezra?”

Mal pressed his lips to my neck. “No, Chris, I want you to bind me.”

“I– You do?” Goosebumps pebbled my arms at the thought, and I wasn’t sure how to interpret my reaction. Partially excited, partially terrified.

“Yes. Sabian will want it, too, I’m sure. If you can figure out how. Maybe even Aaron.”

I took a breath and leaned back against him. “I’ll see if I can figure it out. Then we can talk about it. I don’t have access to his power, though.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you have that back once Lucifer is done with you.”

I shivered, and my hand went to my chest where Lucifer’s mark lay between my breasts. I hadn’t looked yet, but I knew it was more extensive than the last one. His was now the first ink I’d acquired, and he hadn’t had to worry about interfering with anything else on my skin. I was sure he’d taken advantage of that.

“I really don’t know how to interpret his interest in me,” I admitted quietly.

“By the time we’re done with you, Chris, even the Devil himself will have a hard time doing anything to you that you don’t want.”

“Good. I just wish I knew what he wanted. Actually, I’m not sure if I want to know, or not.”

Mal kissed me. “I’m sure he wants your full allegiance. He probably wants in your pants. He probably wants to own you completely. He’s the Devil, after all.”

“He can’t have all of me,” I said.

Mal chuckled. “I notice you didn’t say he can’t have any of you.”

I took his hand and moved it to my chest. “I think I already gave him some of me, mate. Price of getting Sabian back and all.”

Sobering, Mal nodded. “We’ll deal with that as we come to it, Chris. As ridiculous as this is, there are far worse things than the Devil that we need to deal with right now.”

“How in the fuck did I get myself into all of this?” I muttered.

“Regrets?”

I twisted slightly so I could look Mal in the eyes. “None.”

He captured my lips, kissing me as soundly as he could manage while mounted behind me on the nightstallion.

Inferno snorted but otherwise didn't object to the short make-out session on his back. Smart boy.

"I was so afraid I'd never see any of you again."

Mal wiped a few tears from my cheek. "We were terrified. Especially when Brennan brought you through. You were so limp. I almost couldn't hear your heartbeat. And then the spell burst to life, and I thought we were too late. Azrael saved you and even he looked worried for a few minutes. If I never have to see him sink his hands into your chest, or anyone's chest again, it'll be too soon.

"Same, mate. Same."

We fell into silence after that, and it wasn't long before Inferno angled for the ground.

"I guess we'll get an idea of what sort of deal with the devil we're making in a few minutes," Mal said. "As much as I want to tie you to the bed and ravish you for hours, I want you protected more. Wards, then disappearing into Hell, then sex until we're all exhausted. Then we'll make our next plan."

"Getting Ezra back," I said.

"Yes and stopping the soul stealing. Chris, we may have to stop that before we rescue Ezra."

"I—"

"It will depend on a lot of factors, but stopping the apocalypse is more important than rescuing Ezra."

"Saving me was more important than stopping the soul stealing?"

"Yes," he said. "At least partially because we need you to put an end to all of that. I'm worried about Ezra, too. Maybe not as much as you are, but I don't want to see him hurt, and I do want to see you back in his arms."

"You do?"

“He loves you, and he makes you happy. I told you, I was even starting to like him. We need him back, but we also don’t want to end up dealing with the end of the world. I think he would probably agree.”

“The tricky thing will be keeping them thinking they need him for collateral.”

“Yes. We’ll work on that. One thing at a time. First, we have to decorate our exorcist.”

“And then sex,” I declared.

Mal laughed. “Yes, and then sex.”

## Chapter 6

### *Price*

It was amazing to be home. I paused in the entryway and took in the feeling of being in my own space. I'd never really noticed how good it felt. Maybe because I'd been gone for a while, and nearly died and all that, but entering my own home grounded me in a way I hadn't realized I'd desperately needed.

Mayhem bounded inside and sniffed around.

Of course, some things had obviously happened while I was gone.

"Uh, mate, where's the kitchen table? And is that a new coffee table?" I glanced at Mal.

Mal ran his hand through his hair and avoided my gaze. "I might have picked a fight with Ezra," he said after a moment.

"You did what?"

Mal shrugged. "I guess I was a little hangry."

I burst out laughing since it was obvious that he, at least, had recovered from the fight, and I doubted Ezra was seriously injured from that, at least. "Okay, don't piss off a hungry vampire. Got it."

“He kicked my ass, too.” Mal looked even more embarrassed when I glanced back at him. “He is a demon prince,” the vampire pointed out.

“True.” I decided not to give him a hard time about it. Before I could change tracks and tackle Mal to the couch, the wards shivered and the front door opened. “I take it he’s just got open access to the house now?”

Mal nodded.

“I guess it’s not like we could really keep him out if he wanted in, anyway.”

“He did lay in some protections that should keep Mammon out, however.”

“Well, that’s something,” I said as the subject of our discussion walked into the living room.

Lucifer had a faintly amused smile on his face as he interrupted our conversation.

“You know, mate, the others won’t be here for a while. You could take a hike for a few hours.”

The amused smile broadened. “I could, but you’re relatively unprotected outside of the wards on your house.”

“Vampire, hellhound, nightstallion, wards, all that—”

“And the Devil himself on your side. Aren’t you lucky?”

I was about to tell him off when Mal grabbed my hand and pulled it to his lips, distracting me from my tirade. “We’ll work on your design. Brennan can add to it, and then we’ll get it imprinted in your skin. Getting you safe is more important.”

The tickle of his breath across my hand after the press of his lips on my skin had my stomach tightening and my heart quickening. The heat in his eyes as he met my gaze did not help any.

I groaned. “Not sure I agree right now.”

Mal grinned at me and released my hand. “Then I guess we’ll have to tell you what to do for a while.”



“Not helping,” I whimpered, the heat from his gaze seeming to find its way into my core and expand into a pool of desire.

Lucifer cleared his throat. “I’m not leaving until you’re warded, Price.”

“Guess you can watch then,” I blurted.

His eyebrows rose. Clearly, I’d surprised him.

“As tempting as that is—” Frowning, he trailed off and headed for the door. Mayhem trotted along behind him in his Pomaranian form.

I glanced at Mal, tilting my head.

“Gabriel, if I had to guess.”

“Guess they can watch, too,” I replied with an annoyed sigh.

Mal kissed my forehead. “You’ll survive a bit longer. It’s not like you’ve been completely deprived.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t had vampire in like, forever,” I whined.

Mal sucked in his breath, but anything else he might have said was interrupted by the child-like angel that walked into the living room, followed by my old friend Darius.

“Price, how are you?” Darius looked me up and down, and I wondered if he was in the loop on the last few weeks or not.

“I’ll live.”

He tightened his jaw but didn’t ask anything else. Fair, I guess. I didn’t ask him how he was.

“Adversary, you have news?” Gabriel looked to Lucifer.

I swear the demon rolled his eyes without actually rolling his eyes.

“We retrieved the book as promised. It is now safely locked away in Hell.”

Gabriel sniffed.

That might have been the angel equivalent of a disbelieving snort, but I wasn't sure.

Lucifer ignored Gabriel's jab and continued. "Clearly we restored Chris' good health. In the process, Prince Ezra was detained. Michael has him and seems to be the one behind this plot for the apocalypse."

"Do you have any further proof other than that Michael detained a demon found in the Vatican?"

I could see where the angel was going with that, and I wanted to shake them. It was pretty obvious Michael was involved. Otherwise, why would he be hanging out in the Vatican in the first place instead of off doing archangel things. I kept my mouth shut for once.

"That should be sufficient." Lucifer's tone said he agreed with my sentiment. "However, I will provide more as we have it."

Gabriel inclined their head. "We will watch. Be vigilant, Adversary."

They left the living room and were soon out the front door.

A pressure on my chest I hadn't even noticed eased, and I rubbed at it. "What the fuck?"

"You're spending too much time with demons," Darius supplied.

Mayhem flattened his ears and wrinkled his lips at the priest.

I didn't point out that it was his fault, or that I hadn't had a choice or anything. It was initially his fault, but I could have been rid of them many times and I'd chosen to keep my demons around. I supposed if it meant I would be uncomfortable around angels, so be it.

"Azrael doesn't bother me," I replied just to be contrary.

"Azrael's nature is very different than the other archangels," Lucifer said. "Also, he's not a prick. Gabriel could keep us from feeling the unpleasant aspects of their presence. They choose not to."

“Ah.” I turned my attention to Darius. “You hanging around, mate?”

The priest glanced at Lucifer then back to me before shaking his head. “No, Price, I have confession to receive in a few hours. Maybe you should come.”

I flipped him off.

He didn’t smile, but he did leave after casting another glance at Lucifer. I wondered how that conversation had gone, when he’d realized who exactly was in my living room this time.

I was almost sorry I’d missed it.

“Okay, wards. Let’s do this.”

Mal and Lucifer glanced at each other, then me.

“Might be easiest just to start drawing. This will take a while,” Lucifer said.

“Sure, whatever,” I replied, thinking they meant on paper.

And that’s how I ended up on my slate topped altar table, naked, being drawn on by a vampire and the ruler of Hell himself with dry erase markers.

I was pretty sure there was at least one or two bad horror movies that started out this way. And I was talking about the B class cheese factor horror movies where you laughed and drank because they were just ridiculous.

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“I think I’ve reached the pinnacle,” I said after a few hours of them muttering over the markings they were making on my body.

“The pinnacle of what?” Mal asked in a distracted mutter.

“I have no idea, but this is clearly a peak. I can never reach this height of ridiculous B-horror movie energy ever again. Like...it’s just not possible.”

Both Mal and Lucifer stopped arguing over a sigil on my back and I could tell they were looking at me, though I lay on my stomach and stared at the doorway Ezra had made in my wall. At least I had a thick, fuzzy blanket to lay on.

“Seriously?” Lucifer asked after a moment of silence between all of us.

“You do watch movies, right? I’m naked, on an altar, and you’re drawing occult symbols all over my body. You... like literally being the Devil and all that.”

He finally chuckled. “Yes, I suppose. This is a first for me, I’ll admit. Despite what the movies might portray.”

Mal patted my butt cheek.

I buried my face in my hands and wished I wasn’t completely aroused. Mal was doing a good job of ignoring my uncomfortable and completely deprived state of needing dick, though I knew he could smell it. I wasn’t sure if the Devil could tell or not, but every time I’d get my ardor under control, he’d slide one of his warm hands across my skin and light me up again. Jerk. He had to know, but that was a topic I just wanted to bury. He terrified me, and I had no idea what to do about it. Or him.

Mal finally rested his cool hand on my shoulder.

“Done?”

“Almost. We just need Brennan’s input.”

“Cool.” I yawned. Maybe I could just get some sleep.

“Okay, how are we going to power all of this?” Mal asked the demon who proceeded to stroke the back of my thigh.

I was suddenly no longer tired, and I wanted to scream. Being this keyed up for hours was wearing me out.

“Yeah, good question. Even without seeing all of this, I can feel how much energy it’s going to take. At least to activate.” I wasn’t sure I was going to like the answer to this, either.

Lucifer didn’t answer right away, instead tracing his finger around the edges of the large bare circle I’d insisted they leave

on my back for Ezra's mark. I wanted a visible one this time. Fortunately, the Devil had agreed. I'd been half afraid he wouldn't let me have Ezra back.

I shivered as the heat from his touch contrasted with the cool air. Mal's hand tightened on my shoulder, but he didn't object to whatever Lucifer was doing. I could feel power drag through my skin, though it didn't burn like when he'd marked me earlier. I wasn't objecting per se, I was just completely weirded out. Especially when I felt a connection snap into place. That almost sent me spiraling over the edge of an orgasm, he had me that keyed up.

"What'd you do, mate?" I panted.

"I'm doing two things," he replied. "Roll over."

After a moment to catch my breath, I forced my limbs to cooperate. Normally the dry erase markers would have marred, but Lucifer had fixed the ink with magic so that it would stay unless they purposefully wiped it off. They could have used Sharpie but we'd probably all be high from the smell and none of us wanted that much Sharpie in our lives.

The amused grin on Lucifer's terrifyingly handsome face turned seductive as he touched the mark he'd made on my chest.

I was naked and now the ruler of Hell was running his fingers softly over my skin and staring at me with desire burning in his eyes. Did I mention I'd been aroused all day? Holy shit were my ovaries weeping. There was no way either of them had missed how wet my legs were.

I whimpered as the energy his touch stirred in my chest vibrated through me and settled as an intense heat in my core.

Mal inhaled and his eyes darkened with lust. His fingers dug into my arm where he'd rested his hand after I'd turned onto my back.

"Could you not?" I muttered, without any real conviction behind the request.

Lucifer chuckled. "But you're so responsive. It's so much fun."

I groaned as he traced his finger from between my breasts and the middle of his mark, down my sternum until his hand rested over my diaphragm.

My body was practically vibrating with need. My breasts ached, I wanted someone to touch them so badly, and the rest of me? Well, let's just say it wasn't going to take much to send me spiraling into one of the more intense orgasms I'd had ever. Just like I was a little afraid of the demon with his hands on me at the moment, I was a little afraid of that much intensity rocketing through my body.

Maybe Lucifer sensed this, maybe he was actually listening to my requests, because some of the fire cooled when he laid his hand on my stomach.

Some of Mal's tension eased as well and I was in less danger of having bruises on my arm from his grip.

"To fully answer your question," Lucifer finally said. His tone had shifted back to his normal seduction levels instead of his "freak Chris out" seduction levels. "Here..." He traced a circle around my diaphragm, fingers brushing against the sides of my breasts as he did so. "I'm tying you into your own reserves of power. The power is all yours. No one can take it from you. Even me, once this is complete. It's my gift to you."

I raised my eyebrows, unable to figure out what to say to that.

"On your back, I started Ezra's mark for him. However, since he is currently heavily incapacitated and in danger of losing his hold on his land should the wrong people find out—and they will—I gave you his domain. Once I finish this, you'll feel all of the connections. I wanted you to have your power source and wards well in hand before I dump a powerful realm of Hell in your hands."

"You are doing what!"

"I'm saving Ezra a bunch of trouble and you're doing both of us a favor."

"But... I'm human."

Lucifer shrugged.

“What—?” I did not want to finish this thought, but I had to know. “What happens if we can’t rescue Ezra?”

“Then you’re a new demon prince. Sort of, anyway.”

“There paperwork involved with that?”

The Devil laughed. “No. Not unless you want there to be.”

I sighed. “What happens to his domain when I die?”

Lucifer shrugged. “You won’t, unless you’re killed. Tied into his power, you’re practically immortal as far as the normal human aging process is concerned. Obviously, you can still be killed.”

“The fuck did you say?”

“I would have thought you already knew that.”

“Uh, no. That tidbit must have slipped Ezra’s mind.” I reached up and rubbed my hand over my eyes.

“It is possible he hadn’t completely thought through the implications of what he did to you. Clearly he didn’t know everything when he marked you in the first place.”

“Yeah, you want to give me the rundown?”

“In a moment. I’m designing your mark.”

Mal’s fingers were back to digging into my arm, and I glanced up at him. The vampire stared at Lucifer, eyes wide. He sensed my attention and turned his gaze to me.

I tilted my head in question, and a small smile tugged at Mal’s lips. Right, he would be happy to know he wouldn’t lose me to old age. I’d need some time to process this information before I could really decide how I felt about everything.

Lucifer traced his fingers over my skin, leaving trails of heat as he drew my mark with his finger instead of the marker. This didn’t hurt like when he’d first left his in place, and after a moment he was done.

He pulled his hand back, but I didn’t have a chance to look before he took his thumb and pressed a blade to it. No, I had

no idea where the knife had come from. It vanished again and he pressed his bloody thumb to my stomach.

I had a moment to notice Mal's nostrils flare at the scent of powerful blood before I got punched in the gut by pure energy.

"Fucking hell!" I shouted and curled up around my stomach, almost falling off the table in the process.

Mal caught me as I rode the wave of power that washed through me. My brain kind of short circuited, and I couldn't think for a moment or ten.

I wasn't sure how long I lay there with Mal's hand on my shoulder but finally the brutal wave of power subsided, and my body accepted the magic.

Lucifer had his hand on my hip. I hadn't noticed until now, and I could feel a trickle of my energy flowing into him. After rubbing sweat out of my eyes, I glanced up at him.

He shrugged. "Helping you adjust."

"Thanks," I muttered. "Care to fill me in on the rest?"

"I'll tell you some," he agreed. "So, you recall when Ezra originally bound you it gave you access to his power instead of giving him control over you? This is because of the power in your blood. It subverts that kind of bond. I believe to prevent exactly what Ezra attempted. Though he wasn't truly trying to control you, he just didn't know any better and didn't have a lot of time to think about what he was doing. The mages of old were quite a catch for a demon or angel to bind and control because of all their power, so your ancestors got together and made some sort of ward against the binding that they tied into your genes. I have no idea how they did it, but it's probably just as well. Demons especially are ambitious enough as it is. That is why his bond backfired on him as it did. Obviously, Ezra didn't mind. The mark I put on you last time, and improved upon this time, is just a mark, no binding. This avoids the entanglements of you having access to my powers. I did fancy it up a bit as you suspected, but in reality, I just laid more protections on you than I did the first time, along with giving you permanent access to all of the gates."



“So, I’ve got a fancy Lucifer mark and now a fancy mark of my own that ties me into a well of power like Ezra’s?” I didn’t completely buy that he hadn’t placed some sort of binding on me, but I’d already agreed to his mark what seemed like ages ago, and I couldn’t prove what else he’d done so I just put it out of my mind. It didn’t matter at this point, anyway.

“Yes.”

“And you’re handing Ezra’s domain over to me while he’s incapacitated. He going to notice?”

“Though he can’t access any of his power right now, he will probably notice when I divert it to you.”

“That’s not going to feel good for him,” I pointed out.

“He’ll get over it.” Lucifer shrugged. “I’d say he shouldn’t have gotten himself captured, but he was doing what I bid him to do. It was not his negligence that put him in this position. Therefore, he will in fact gain standing when this is all said and done.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yes. And we will rescue him.” Lucifer’s fingers dug into my hip, letting out a touch of emotion I wasn’t sure he had planned to display. He had to be extremely displeased that Ezra was captured. Probably not as unhappy about it as I was, but still, I was glad he was upset.

“You will be in charge of his source of power, and you will keep it and his domain safe. Once he is rescued, you will return it to him. Simply touching him will do the trick, which I doubt will be a problem for you.”

“No, it won’t be a problem,” I agreed.

“Then he can put whatever sort of mark or binding or whatever will make you two love birds happy on your back and you can fuck to your hearts’ content.”

I snorted. “Okay, great, but aren’t I going to have my hands full with this apocalypse thing? Will I have time to manage his domain, too? I will, don’t get me wrong. I don’t want Ezra to lose his lands or his hellhounds or anything, but I’m here, not

there.” Though I supposed we would be there once they’d finished my designs.

“Keeping his realm simply requires you hold his power for him until he returns. If it gets more complicated than that, I will assist you.”

“Okay.” I let it drop. I’d also noticed that Lucifer had said he would tell me some, which implied that there was still a lot I didn’t know about marks and bindings. That really didn’t surprise me, though.

Mal pushed on my shoulder and rolled me onto my back when I let him. I did like it when my vampire controlled me.

He chuckled as he traced his fingers over the mark Lucifer had placed on my sternum. “Good choice.”

The demon smiled, looking pleased.

“Ugh, what’d he do?” I didn’t believe for a minute that whatever he had done wasn’t ironic in some way or another.

Mal helped me sit up so I could look at my stomach, though my skin bunched, obscuring the design.

Lucifer held up a small mirror for me. Clearly, he was doing the same summoning trick that Ezra did, and I’d started to learn.

I straightened, staring in the mirror for a moment before I burst out laughing. “Okay, yeah, that’s appropriate.” The Devil had basically made a line drawing of a pizza on my stomach, traced an inverted pentagram over it, and then circled it all with lines of script in Demonic I probably could read if they weren’t backward in the mirror. It looked very familiar to the pizza pentagram on my leather jacket.

“I’m so glad you approve.” His voice caressed me again, and I leaned back, groaning as my arousal levels peaked uncomfortably again.

“Damn it, stop that.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he replied his voice dripping with innocence.

“Right.” I leaned back on the table, panting. “How long until the others get here?”

“A few hours yet,” Mal said.

I groaned. I needed some relief.

Mal stroked my shoulder. “Want help with that?”

“I’ve been asking to get fucked almost since I woke up. What do you think?”

The vampire trailed his cool fingers down my stomach.

Moaning, I arched my back, pressing into his touch. If anything, I was even wetter between my legs.

“So now you’re going to have sex on your altar? This really is hitting all the B-grade movie notes. If we hadn’t already stabbed you in the chest and separated your soul from your body, we’d probably hit every single one,” Lucifer said. Perhaps to remind us that he was here.

“Except the demon summoning,” I pointed out through gritted teeth. I wanted him to either shut up and leave, or at least shut up. I wanted my vampire, damn it.

“Sabian will be here soon enough.”

I laughed a little and sighed. “You going to leave us alone to defile my altar, as you call it, or are you going to keep me from this?” The last was said with a grumble and a glare thrown in for good measure.

He opened his mouth as if he were actually going to try to keep me and Mal apart a little longer.

“Out!” I cut him off. “Actually, there’s no reason we need to do this here.” I hopped off the slate slab, curling my toes at the cold stone floor. “You stay here.” I pointed at the demon. “I’m going to try out my new bed.” I grabbed Mal’s hand and dragged him up the stairs. Mayhem stood up from the corner he’d been laying in.

“Don’t smear the ink!” Lucifer called after us.

“You fixed it,” I yelled back.

“Did I?”

My skin tingled and I froze. “Asshole!”

“Wait until after the wards have been fixed.” He came over to the bottom of the stairwell and stared up at me.

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“Fuck you.”

He laughed, a full belly laugh.

I wanted to put my hands on my hips, but they had spent hours designing the sigils and I didn’t want to mar them if Lucifer really had undone the ink fixing spell.

“You have but to ask, Chris.” He leered at me, eyes trailing up and down my naked body.

My eyes went wide, and my jaw dropped. I tried to sputter out a reply but couldn’t think of something appropriately snarky. It was rare that my skill for sarcasm failed, but right now it flat out refused to cooperate.

He flicked his fingers and my skin tingled again. “Wait until the wards are fixed,” he commanded again before turning his back on me and wandering back into the basement out of sight.

I glanced at Mal.

He gave me an “I told you so” look.

Groaning, I tugged on his hand until we were on the main level of my house then I dropped his hand and hugged my arms around myself. Mayhem trotted along behind me.

“I’m going to find my robe,” I muttered.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah.”

“Go take a shower. Your scent is driving me damn near insane. I’ll cook.”

“You’re hiding it well.”

“My control is so tenuous I’m about to try to fight Lucifer if I don’t get to fuck you,” he replied. Though his tone was placid enough I could sense the hard edge just under the surface now that we’d been denied again.

Mal took a step away from me. “Go shower.” He let the strain he felt show in his voice.

“Okay.” I headed for my old room, stopped, and forced myself to turn toward the new room. All of my things were in there now, anyway.

Surprisingly, walking in there wasn’t as difficult as I had thought it would be. Brennan had snatched me from the pizza shop before I’d been able to try to spend the night in my parents’ old room. The changes we’d made when we had cleaned it out had helped tremendously.

I stopped and stared at the picture of the nightstallion racing across the sky that Ezra had commissioned. I wiped a tear from my cheek and muttered imprecations at myself. Chris Price did not cry over paintings.

Soon hot water pounded down on me, and I scrubbed at myself with bodywash. Though I wanted to give in to my needs and get myself off, a small part of me thought Lucifer might actually have a reason for me to wait that was valid. He probably was just being a dick, but a few more hours wouldn’t kill me, as much as I’d bitched.

Finally, I left the water, dried, and wrapped my robe around me. While I wandered to the kitchen, I tried to figure out how quickly the others could arrive. I knew they would be driving fast. Normally it was something like a thirteen-hour drive. I bet they did it in eight, which meant I only had about another hour to wait.

Mal met me in the kitchen with a plate of food. Lucifer had slunk out of the basement and amazingly, Mal had fed him, too.

The demon winked at me when I glared at him.

“So, what are we going to do while we wait?” I sat down at the table, relatively content. I’d missed Mal’s cooking so

much.

Mal glanced over at a roleplaying book that was still sitting on the counter from the last time we'd actually had a chance to game and arched an eyebrow.

“Sure, why the hell not?”

## Chapter 7

### *Price*

Lucifer played a pretty decent bard. I'd give him that. I still wanted to kick him in the balls for keeping me from getting laid. My drunken dwarf character did a bit to distract me from the discomfort, but I was still pretty keyed up.

When Mal straightened a while later, I bolted to my feet and ran to the front door, Mayhem on my heels. I threw the door open, and we both watched until Aaron's black SUV came into view.

After a moment, both Mal and Lucifer stood behind us as the vehicle pulled into the drive.

I was uncomfortably aware of the warm heat from the demon behind me. I supposed I should be grateful the ruler of Hell was interested in keeping me alive, if nothing else. Of course, he needed me to help him defeat Mammon, so there was that. Why the rest? I couldn't think of any reason why he would be hitting on me like he was. Unless he was just trying to make me uncomfortable.

The guys piled out of the SUV, Brennan hanging back as Sabian and Aaron hurried forward.

Sabian cast a wary look at Lucifer before wrapping his arms around me. I melted into his embrace. The incubus surprised me, picking me up and carrying me farther into the house. I gazed deeply into his amber eyes. I never wanted any of them to leave me again.

Lucifer, wisely, gave way to let us get past him. Aaron followed right behind us.

“Were you guys roleplaying?” Aaron asked when we arrived in the living room. Character sheets and dice were spread all over the floor since I no longer had a table up here. Maybe I could talk Ezra into crafting something for me when we got him back.

“Yeah. Had to do something to kill the time. I’m almost all decorated. Just need Brennan’s input.” Sabian still hadn’t put me down, and I didn’t expect that he would any time soon, if given a choice.

Sabian grinned. “I can’t wait to see.” He peeked down at me, as if he could see through the robe I wore.

“Do you not have a table?” Brennan glanced around curiously.

“Uh, not at the moment, mate.”

I glanced at Mal who was shaking his head, his longer hair shielding his face from view for a second as he stared at the ground.

Sabian and Aaron’s gazes both slid toward Mal.

“Let’s get the rest of the warding done. Come on, Brennan. Sabian if you’re going to carry her, bring her downstairs.” Mal changed the topic.

We let him.

Brennan cast one last look at the game spread on the ground then followed Mal, gaze wandering my house curiously.

Sabian purred happily and carried me toward the stairs. I leaned into him, letting his cheerful rumble soothe me. Not gonna lie, I was a little nervous about all of this.



The well of power Lucifer had given me still surged occasionally, though it was settling in.

“What did he do?” Sabian asked as we headed downstairs. Lucifer had already gone down.

“Gave me a well of power,” I replied.

“Good,” Sabian replied. “I can sense it. I just wasn’t sure what it meant.” He kissed my forehead then brought me into the workroom.

He lifted an eyebrow as he saw my workbench aka altar with the blanket on it.

“We were going to defile it with all sorts of kinky vampire sex, but someone is making me wait.” I glared at Lucifer again.

The demon ignored me.

Sabian glanced at me and lifted his other eyebrow. I couldn’t read his mind at the moment, but I could see the questions. I winked at him, and he relaxed a little.

The incubus laid me down on the workbench then ran his fingers down the front of my robe until he got to the tie.

“Can I see?”

Knowing one of the first things he’d see was my mark, I nodded.

Grinning like a kid at Christmas, Sabian carefully untied the belt of my fuzzy robe before sliding the edges back.

As I had thought, his attention fell to my mark first. He looked at it, then up at me, then back at it. “Seriously?”

“I mean, you can try to rub it off, but pretty sure it’s permanent.” I couldn’t help but smile at Sabian’s delighted giggle.

Brennan and Aaron crowded in to see the pizza pentagram on my sternum. The mage snorted. Aaron gave a full-throated laugh.

“That’s fantastic,” Aaron finally said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

Mal traced it with his fingers then lifted an eyebrow when I glanced at him. I knew what he wanted, but did I know how to mark him?

Taking a breath, I let myself sink into the well of knowledge that Ezra had gifted me with. That particular bit of information wasn't floating around in my head. I grunted in annoyance.

“What do you wish to know, Price?” Lucifer came over to my side, the others giving way for the ruler of Hell.

“How do you make marks?”

“Why do you wish to know?” He touched the design on my skin, tracing the inverted pentagram with his finger.

I sucked in a breath, trying really hard not to get excessively aroused again. Especially from his touch.

“My guys want their own ink.”

Lucifer glanced at the others, then back at me. “Perhaps not the worst idea. I will teach you. Let us finish with you first.”

“Okay.”

I sat up and let the robe slip off my shoulders.

Sabian's attention moved from my pizza pentagram up to the more elaborate mark Lucifer had left on my chest. It was very pretty, if nothing else. His reached out and touched it hesitantly before glancing at Lucifer, eyes sad.

“Oh stop, you're breaking my black heart,” Lucifer said with a dramatic sigh, obviously reading Sabian's thoughts. “I'm not taking her away from you. She's way too mean for that. I'd get my ass kicked.”

“Damn straight,” I growled. “No one is taking my incubus or any of my guys from me.”

“I very much doubt even Michael will keep Ezra from you for long,” Lucifer said. “I'm rather counting on that, in fact.”

“You think old Gabriel will do anything?” Aaron asked.

I shrugged out of the rest of the robe and threw it on the ground.

“No, but they have been informed. Okay, Brennan, come here. We must discuss the rest of this.” Lucifer’s voice lost most of its seductive edge as he focused on my wards. “Everyone not directly involved in this process, get out of the way.”

The mage came over to our side. Sabian and Aaron backed off.

Brennan reached out, and after a quick glance at me for permission—which I gave—touched a few of the sigils. He spent some time lightly brushing his fingers across the designs and muttering quietly, working his way over my front, before he gestured for me to turn over.

“What’s this?” He touched the circle on my back.

“The beginning of Ezra’s mark,” Lucifer explained. “It will allow Chris to hold his domain for him while he is imprisoned.”

“I see,” Brennan replied slowly before repeating the process of studying all the designs they’d drawn on me. “Okay, have you thought about the design you will use to hide the markings? Some of them will have to be visible, but her old ones were hidden in knotwork. Something like that would also be useful, though that will ink her body more fully than it was before.”

Lucifer and Mal glanced at each other. Propped up on my elbows, I watched over my shoulder as the three men conferred and came to the conclusion that they had not, in fact, thought of that.

“The wards are well done,” Brennan continued. “I have a few suggestions and then maybe we can work on the design. We should simply do it all at once.”

While they talked, I thought about what the mage had suggested. It wasn’t like my body was covered in runes, but they’d placed the warding sigils in key locations all over my body. To hide them, they’d have to get pretty creative.

Brennan had them move one of the sigils a touch, and they added a bit here and there. Finally, all three of them were happy with the functional part of my new ink.

“Chris, these wards we created will tie into your well of power,” Lucifer said, touching some of the marks on my body as he spoke. “It will take a great deal more than any one angel or demon could throw at you to overload these, even someone of my power level. Nor would your energy be easily exhausted. It could be done, but it would take a very concerted and drawn-out effort. You will be difficult to overpower. This personal shield, as it were, will protect against physical attacks such as bullets, swords, fists, and magical attacks as well as anything as underhanded as the soul leech spell they used on you. Do not simply stand in front of a gun and keep getting shot. Among other things, ricochet is still a problem, and no spell is perfect. It’s designed to give you a chance to get away. There isn’t a good way to put anything more offensive than a repel on here without it being potentially dangerous to your kinky lover.”

I narrowed my eyes at Lucifer, but he shrugged. “It’s true. Unless you want to risk endangering anyone around you should they accidentally bump into you, decide to tie you up for fun, bite you, or any of that, the best we can do for passive defense is work in some repel abilities. If you accidentally throw Mal across the room, it won’t hurt him.”

“Okay, that’s good to know, at least,” I grudgingly admitted, though I really didn’t want to know how he knew about that aspect of my relationship with Mal.

He nodded. “The reason for so many sigils is that protecting against magical attacks is a complicated process especially when you have to worry about demonic powers, angelic powers, fae powers, and standard mage powers.”

“Okay.”

“Any objections to any of that?”

“No, why?”

He shrugged. “Figured it was better to have your permission before I turned these on.”

“Oh, now you’re asking?” I gave him a hard time without any real rancor.

“I asked the first time, too.”

I nodded reluctantly. He basically had. There hadn’t really been much choice, but I could have said no.

“What designs are you going to use overtop of them?” I glanced at my drawn-on skin. I still wasn’t used to seeing it without all the ink, and it was going to change again shortly.

“A combination of your old ink, knotwork, and some other designs.”

“Well, should be interesting if nothing else.”

“Okay, lay down. This is going to be exciting.”

“How so?”

“I’ve never done this before, so we’ll find out together.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, but did as he said, rolling over onto my back and lying flat on the slate slab. I was again thankful for the fuzzy blanket that protected me from the hard tabletop. It was cold down here, and my nipples were hard enough to cut glass. At least I wasn’t getting frozen from the table, too.

Lucifer put one hand on his mark, and the other on mine. He shut his eyes in concentration.

I could feel him gather his energy and briefly wished Ezra was here.

The demon opened an eye and glanced at me. “Soon enough, Chris.”

I nodded and tried to relax.

Lucifer’s energy poured into me. “Fuck me,” I yelped as fire burned through me, darting from sigil to sigil and charging them all with power.

Once the last one filled with Lucifer’s energy, something snapped into place. The only reason it didn’t fling Lucifer

back, even though it was his own power, was because he had anchored into my own well of energy, which kept him connected to me. How I knew that, I wasn't sure, but the magic did respond to him. He was hurting me, and it wanted him gone. I wouldn't have been surprised to see his fingers disappearing into my flesh where he touched my own mark, he clung to me that strongly.

“Okay, I need to tie this into your own power, and then we'll be done.” Hellfire danced in the demon's eyes when he looked at me.

“And you'll show me how to mark my men?”

“Yes.” Sweat glistened on Lucifer's forehead, and he shut his eyes again. I could feel him manipulating my energy and the wards though I couldn't truly follow what he was doing. It was well beyond my abilities. In fact, it might have given Ezra a run for his money. Maybe it was good that Lucifer was helping with this.

“Yes,” he hissed between his teeth. “It is good. Remember that.”

“If I must,” I deadpanned.

He smiled.

“Oh, fuck me,” I cried out as he tweaked the flow of energy through my wards. My energy flooded me, replacing his. It arced like electricity through each sigil, actively chasing Lucifer's away. I practically leapt off the table as spasms rocketed through my muscles. Lucifer caught me before I could inadvertently throw myself on the floor.

“Is she okay?” Mal snapped.

“Yes,” Lucifer said while I trembled in his arms. “She just needs a minute to adjust.”

Mayhem whined from the corner he lay in. I didn't have the energy to reassure him that I was okay.

My body finally accepted the new order of things and stopped fighting me. I went limp, unable to even struggle out

of Lucifer's arms. I lay there, drenched in sweat, languid and exhausted.

"Now, my dear exorcist, you are well protected," he said, the seduction back in his voice full force.

"Thanks," I managed.

"Do you want that new skill tonight?"

"Yeah. You tie me into Ezra's power yet?"

"Think you're up for it?"

I sighed. "Better do it before someone tries to steal it away."

"Very well." He helped me back onto the table, positioned on my stomach this time. "I doubt this will be as uncomfortable for you." He touched the center of my back.

I whimpered as Ezra's power suddenly flowed through me. No, it was not unpleasant at all. It burst through me like a long-lost lover, caressing me under my skin, curling up my spine, heating up my core, tightening my muscles then finally giving me that damn release I'd been denied all day. My vision went spotty as endorphins rushed through me, and I was pretty sure I saw stars as my body responded to the familiar energies.

"No," I finally gasped out. "Not unpleasant." I writhed on the table as my body shuddered with aftershocks.

I couldn't even look at the guys. I wasn't embarrassed, other than that I'd just been thoroughly wrung out by Lucifer instead of them. I wondered if that was why he'd made me wait.

"Are you ready to learn how to do a mark?"

"Not really, but no time like the present, I guess." I could barely talk, but somehow I'd manage this last bit of magic before I passed out on my face.

Lucifer rolled me over on my back and touched his fingers to my forehead, pressing the knowledge into me.

"Oh, okay." I had no idea what possessed me to do it, but I reached out and grabbed his forearm, shaped the magic, and

branded the ruler of Hell's wrist with my mark.

He had about a half second to stop me and either chose not to or couldn't quite comprehend that I was actually putting my pizza pentagram mark on him.

"Like that?" I said cheekily.

Lucifer jerked his arm back and stared at what I'd done to him.

"Yes," he growled. "Just like that."

I lay back on the slate table, still seeing stars and light-headed from what Ezra's power had done to me. I really hoped we rescued him soon. It couldn't feel good to have your power reassigned, as it were. I wished there was some way to let him know what we'd done.

No one spoke for a moment, and I risked looking. Lucifer was still staring at his wrist, disbelief clear on his face.

Everyone else was either staring at him, or at me, or looking back and forth with worried expressions.

"You up for more tonight?" Mal finally broke the silence when nothing drastic happened.

"Sure, mate."

He held out his arm.

"That where you want it?"

"Yes."

"You sure about this?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't."

I grabbed his left wrist and repeated the magic I'd used on Lucifer. This, like what he'd done to me, was a mark not a binding. It joined us and let me claim him visibly without truly giving me any sort of control over him. I didn't think it did, anyway. That was probably what had kept Lucifer from completely losing his shit. When I risked another glance, he still looked at the design on his skin, stunned.



Mal kissed my forehead once I released his arm, smiling happily as he studied the new lines on his wrist.

Sabian scooted forward as soon as I was done with Mal. He pulled up his shirt and tapped the middle of his chest.

I didn't even bother to ask Sabian if he was sure. Every fiber of his being screamed "claim me now." Not that I hadn't already claimed him on more than one occasion, but I knew he wanted this.

Gathering my energy, I pressed my hand to his chest and put my mark on him where Lucifer had put his on me.

Sabian practically glowed with pleasure when I was done. He touched it reverently before kissing me quickly on the lips.

I was surprised when Aaron came over. "Me, too. Please."

"Okay." He chose his chest, as well. Probably wise as he still had to think about hiding it now and again. His mark shone white against his dark skin and his grin let me know how pleased he was at the addition to his collection of white eyes on his biceps and pecs and the wings draped down his back—those were physical manifestations of his angelic nature.

I kissed him, too.

Though Brennan didn't come over to me, I could sense his attention somehow. I glanced over at him. He stared carefully ahead, that blank expression on his face again.

*Fuck it*, I thought to myself. I'd just marked the ruler of Hell, I could mark Brennan, too. I knew he wanted to belong and leaving him out now might damage his trust in me. Though, if he had forgiven me for handing him over to Elsa, even if it was for a nanosecond, he'd probably forgive me this, as well.

"Brennan." I held out my hand to him.

He tilted his head, his eyes widening.

"Yes or no? Your choice."

Fortunately, no one objected and after a moment of Brennan worriedly looking between me and the others, he

hesitantly came to my side. While they didn't object, they hadn't exactly welcomed him, either. Small steps, I supposed.

Brennan put his left arm in my hand.

"Yes?"

He cleared his throat and nodded. "Yes, please." Fear stole the power from his voice, but his tone didn't lack conviction.

Gathering my power, I placed my mark on Brennan's wrist.

When I was done, I met his gaze. "Okay?"

The mage nodded. "Yes, thank you, Chris."

"Cool. Well, now I need another shower and some sleep, etcetera. If we're done, anyway."

"Yes, for tonight we're done with you," Lucifer said. Crap, he sounded kinda pissed, too. "You and I need to have a discussion," he said, voice flat.

"Can we do it later?" I really did not want to have that discussion, but I totally deserved whatever tongue lashing I was in for.

"Yes. If I recall I said we were going back to Ezra's domain for safety."

I waved my hand in the air, arm feeling like a cooked noodle. "There's no way I'm making it to New York after all of that. Not tonight."

The demon chuckled. If I'd had any sense of self-preservation at all, I would have run from the menace in his laugh. "I'll not make you go so far."

I bolted upright as he pulled on his power. The marks on my body resonated with his magic.

"Wait, what the fuck are you doing?"

He grinned at me, expression positively evil, as blackish purple lightning crackled around his hands.

Powerless to stop Lucifer, I watched as he ripped a hole in my wall next to the doorway Ezra had created.

“Your very own gateway straight into Ezra’s domain,” Lucifer said.

“But...”

He flashed his wrist at me.

Right, I probably deserved this.

“They need tokens to use the gate?” I remembered that Ezra had needed one and the original reason for my mark was so that I could get through the gates.

“You marked them. It’s your domain. Until you return it to Ezra, they have access. It’ll be his choice after that. If the gateway didn’t go directly into his stronghold, the rules would be different, but it does and therefore you and he govern access.”

“Okay, well that’s something, I guess.”

Lucifer turned and went through the gateway.

I traded looks with my guys. “Well, okay then.” I sighed and got off the table. Mal supported me while I tried to catch my balance on legs gone to jelly.

Sabian picked up my robe from the ground and handed it to me. Mal helped me slide into it and tie it shut with the belt.

I took a few staggering steps before Sabian scooped me up in his arms again.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Sabian said, “it’s extraordinarily unlikely that anyone who can use gateways will ever find this one.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes.”

“I definitely needed a gateway to Hell in my fucking basement,” I muttered as Sabian carried me over to it.

Mayhem woofed, shifted into his hellhound form, and went through before us. Moments later he popped back through and wagged his tail.

“Guess it’s safe.”

“On the other hand,” Sabian said as he carried me over the threshold into Ezra’s domain. “The hellhounds really like you. I have a feeling they’ll be in and out all the time.”

I laughed. “Guess as long as they are house broke it’ll be okay.”

We emerged on the other side into what I guessed was Ezra’s bedroom. I’d not actually been in it before. At least it wasn’t in his study. It seemed like more demons had random access to that area than they would his bedroom.

In fact, there was probably only one demon who wanted access to his bedroom, and I was going to shank her if she showed up again.

I took a quick look around. The room was relatively bare, same stone walls as the rest of his manor or whatever his home was called. He did have several paintings of hellhounds on his walls. On one wall he had an armoire and chest of drawers. Though not all demons slept much, Ezra did have a large canopy bed. Perhaps all his time spent on Earth had made him want a few of those comforts. The floor was covered in a deep blue rug and mage lights lit the room, giving it a comfortable ambiance. I could certainly spend some time here, and I longed to crawl into his bed and cover myself in his scent, but I wasn’t going to bring other men into his bed. That was okay. I had a perfectly comfortable room not far from here. Though I hadn’t been in Ezra’s bedroom before, I knew mine was on the same floor as his.

I glanced over at Lucifer, who waited by the door as we all piled in from the new portal. As much as I didn’t want to have a gateway to Hell in my basement, at least it was a convenient location.

“You sticking around?”

“For the moment.”

“Kay, see you when I wake up.”

He quirked a dark smile at me then left the room.

“I can’t believe you marked him,” Aaron said once we were alone.

“I have no idea what possessed me to do that.” I buried my face in Sabian’s warm chest.

“He was shocked, that’s for sure,” Sabian said with an amused chuckle.

“Okay, let’s worry about the repercussions of that later. I need sleep. My room, please.” Sabian would also know where that was.

“There isn’t enough room for all of us,” Sabian pointed out as we moved to the door.

“Crap.” My brain was starting to get very foggy. “Can you all sort that out, please? I’ve handled about all I can at this point.”

“Sure,” Sabian replied, voice soothing.

We stepped out into the hallway and were greeted by one of Ezra’s imps. The creature bowed. “Master,” it hissed in Demonic, which I happened to understand courtesy of Ezra.

*Oh shit, that was right.* “Hi, uh, can you find a few bedrooms for my friends?”

It bowed again, clearly understanding English.

“Brennan and I can take different rooms,” Aaron offered. “You three have fun.”

I didn’t even have the energy to make sure he was really okay with that. Shit, I didn’t need to ask. I could tell through the mark. He was totally at peace with that decision.

Brennan also thought the idea was good.

Sabian carried me to my room, Mal and Mayhem following close behind. The imp led Aaron and Brennan down the hall.

“Mayhem, could you see if you can wrangle a few of your packmates to guard the portal?”

He woofed and bounded off down the hallway.

That was the last thing I could manage, and my eyes fluttered shut before Sabian even laid me down in the bed.

Hopefully everyone would be up for morning sex because I didn't want to be denied any longer.

## Chapter 8

*Mal*

A short time ago I'd wondered if I'd ever see my exorcist again, and now she was wrapped up in my arms. The only way I could have been happier is if we were home in New Mexico instead of in Hell, the conflict between Mammon and Lucifer was resolved appropriately, and Ezra were not captured by an angel and ensconced in the Vatican.

Maybe that was asking a lot right now.

Chris shifted in her sleep, her breathing changing. She'd be waking up soon. Sabian laid on his back on the other side of Chris. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he held her as tightly as I did.

Sabian's eyes flickered open, and he glanced at me before smiling down at Chris.

"Thank you for sharing her with me," Sabian whispered.

I grinned. "Thank you for bringing us together."

"It will always be my pleasure," the incubus replied softly. "How do you want to worship her this morning?"

"I don't know if I have the patience for anything elaborate," I admitted. She'd been so keyed up yesterday, and I'd been

smelling her arousal all day and then when Ezra's power made her orgasm so hard I'd nearly lost control of myself. Well, I wasn't going to last long this morning.

Sabian nodded. "I am, as always, flexible, but if I had to guess, Chris will want some instant gratification. Especially after yesterday. You hungry?"

I nodded. At the thought of Chris' blood in my mouth my teeth ached, fangs lengthening. Leaning back, I stared at the ceiling and groaned.

"We can wake her up, you know," Sabian suggested. "She won't mind and she's close to waking as it is."

"If you're sure she won't mind, let's wake her up." I didn't even try to hide the eagerness in my voice.

Sabian grinned then shifted carefully out from under her before pulling the covers down.

Chris moaned in her sleep, trying to drag them back up. She'd be warm soon enough. Sabian was a furnace, especially compared to me.

He pushed up the shirt we'd changed her into for bed and kissed her stomach.

Our exorcist's eyes snapped open, glancing down at Sabian, who was still giving some attention to the skin bearing her mark. She then looked up at me. I knew my eyes had to be completely black and my fangs were out, but she didn't act concerned, just tangled her fingers in my hair and pulled me down until my lips met hers.

Sabian moved lower as I devoured her lips, our tongues chasing each other.

Chris ran her tongue over my fangs and deliberately nicked herself. Groaning at the hint of blood on her tongue, I sucked at it. The delicious explosion of her powerful blood flowed into me, making me almost painfully hard. She dug her fingers into my shoulders, gasping into my mouth as Sabian settled between her legs and went to work. I could only imagine how good he was at that. He could feel her reactions at a level even I couldn't manage.



Shortly, Chris was writhing under me, and I moved lower, kissing along her neck as she cried out beautiful little calls of pleasure from Sabian's expert tongue. I thought he might have pushed a little of his power into her as well.

The scent of her arousal was intoxicating, mixing with the sweat beading on her skin and making it torturously hard not to shove Sabian out of the way, bury myself in her slick heat, and push my fangs into her neck. Soon, but Sabian was still working his magic on her.

She was so close.

I took one of her nipples into my mouth, running my tongue over it and bringing it to an even harder peak. I blew gently on the damp skin before taking it in my mouth again, just as she liked.

"Oh, gods, Mal, Sabian," Chris cried out as her body shattered under us.

It took everything I had not to bite her then, but I wanted to wait. It would be worth it.

Sabian moved out of my way and we both watched while she trembled from her release. Once Chris opened her eyes, I moved until I was over her. She grinned, grabbed my hips, and dragged me forward until I was pushing against her entrance.

"Don't go slow," she ordered.

I grinned back. "As you wish."

Her smile widened, and she pulled me until I slid into her slick heat. Obliging, I thrust into her. I groaned as she surrounded me, muscles tightening already as I slid in and out of her.

Chris wrapped her legs around me, and I couldn't resist any longer. I nuzzled her neck, and she tilted her chin giving me access and permission.

She cried out again as my teeth punctured her skin. I lost myself in the ecstasy of her blood. Chris clamped down on me as she came hard, bringing me over the edge with her.

I couldn't remember a time I'd felt so content. Between the blood, the orgasm, and the urgent moans of pleasure my exorcist made as she moved under me, everything was as perfect as it could be.

I licked her neck to close the bite mark and slowly pulled out of her. We both shuddered as over-excited nerves trembled in reaction.

"I've missed you so much," she said. "And not just for the sex, though that was amazing."

"I love you, Chris," I said softly.

"I love you, too, Mal." She kissed me despite the blood still on my lips.

Sabian was laying on his back purring in pleasure next to us. I glanced at him then back at Chris.

She grinned wickedly, and I rolled off her so she could get to Sabian.

Chris threw her leg over Sabian. His face lit up in delight as she positioned herself over his large cock.

Feeling languidly satisfied, I propped my head up with my hand and watched her mouth open and her eyes shut in pleasure as she slid down his length.

I'd never been in a relationship like this before, but everything about it felt right and I wasn't questioning it. As long as we were all happy, that was good enough for me.

Chris rode Sabian, rocking her hips and crying out as Sabian built her to another orgasm. Sweet hells, she was hot. The ink we'd painted her with moved sinuously as she did, accenting her curves and making the scene she and Sabian created all the more erotic.

Then she was shattering again, stiffening then collapsing on top of Sabian. The incubus caught her, bringing the exorcist into his arms and holding her close while she came down from her high. He stroked his warm fingers down her back, and she groaned.

Sabian wouldn't mind if I joined them, but I'd had a few moments with her, so I left them alone. Carefully sliding out of bed so I didn't disturb them, I headed to the bathroom to start the water so we could clean her up. We could take turns caring for her in the shower.

It wasn't long before Sabian carried a giggling Chris into the bathroom.

"I can walk, you know," she said.

"So can I," Sabian replied. "But if I thought Mal would carry me around, I'd let him."

I burst out laughing. "I could carry you, but it wouldn't be nearly as elegant. You're significantly larger than I am."

"Okay you two, turn your backs. I gotta pee, then we can clean up."

Sabian joined me in the shower, and we turned, giving her a bit of privacy while she took care of her needs.

Once she was done, she climbed into the shower between us.

"How'd I get so lucky with you two?" She touched both of us on our chests and sighed, her expression turning grim. "I feel like we're getting our asses kicked."

"Hmm, can we stave off the impending doom conversation for a few more minutes?" Sabian sank to his knees in front of her. He grabbed the washcloth and some soap and worked it to a lather.

"Sure," she replied, expression easing a bit.

Since Sabian had her body under control, I put a small amount of shampoo in my hand and massaged her scalp. The sides of her head needed a shave again and the bleach had started to grow out.

"You know," I said. "I bet you could do your bleach job with magic now. Might be easier on your hair?"

"Shit, I could do colors," she replied, clearly delighted with the idea. "Maybe once this mess is over, I'll start playing."

I massaged her shoulders for a moment, before shifting her so I could rinse out her hair and put the conditioner in. Whoever had picked out the scents of these soaps had good taste. They melded with Chris' natural scent quite nicely.

"I could seriously get used to this," Chris said as we finished cleaning her.

"I hope you do get used to it," Sabian said. "I'd wash you every day if I could."

I murmured assent.

"I love you both, so much," she said. Her voice broke a little, and I wrapped my arms around her.

"When I thought I wouldn't see you again, that was the worst feeling." She trembled in my arms.

"We all felt the same," Sabian replied.

"Yes, it was a very dark time."

"Did you seriously get in a fight with Ezra?" Chris turned in my arms until she was facing me.

I glanced away for a moment, still embarrassed. "Yes. I'm not even sure I remember what it was about."

"You were hungry," Sabian replied. "And scared for Chris. Ezra was just a convenient target."

I laughed. "Convenient but not easy. I hope I never actually piss him off."

"You don't get to Ezra's position in Hell by being a pushover," Sabian agreed.

Chris ran her hand over my chest, and I shut my eyes, enjoying the sensation.

"You don't get to be a however-old-you-are vampire without being a badass, either," she said.

"True. If I had been thinking clearly, I probably could have held my own for a few minutes, at least. I have wards and such that will counter his magic, but in a straight-up fight there's no way I can take him. Not that I want to try again." I ran a hand

through my wet hair before reaching for the shampoo. I needed to clean up, too.

“Well, let’s hope we can avoid fighting amongst ourselves,” Chris said before planting a kiss on my lips. She turned and pulled Sabian down so she could kiss him, too.

“Agreed.” I quickly finished washing while Sabian made out with Chris for a moment.

“Okay, I’m starving, and I probably need to apologize to Lucifer for whatever insanity possessed me last night.” Chris sighed and shook her head. “Whatever the hell made me do that, I’ll never know. At least he asked me before he marked me. I didn’t even ask.”

“Could he have stopped you?” I quickly soaped myself.

“I think so, if he’d reacted in time.” She got out of the shower and grabbed a towel.

“He’s probably not as angry as he’s acting,” Sabian replied. “Also, he probably could undo it if he wanted to. Don’t let him guilt you.”

Chris grinned. “No, ‘course not, mate. Just, should have asked first. Probably.”

Sabian shrugged. “He’s a demon. I doubt the lack of permission is what’s actually bothering him.”

The exorcist chuckled. “It’s just a mark, right?”

“You claimed him,” I pointed out. “Just like you claimed the rest of us.”

“Well, he’s the one trying to be all possessive of me.” She touched the mark he’d placed on her chest. “Guess it’s turnabout and all.”

Sabian and I shared a glance while Chris dressed. We both shrugged. As long as we got to keep Chris, the rest we could work through. Of course, if we had to fight with Lucifer himself, we might lose, but we sure would try. No one was taking my exorcist away from me again while I was still able to fight them.

## Chapter 9

### *Price*

Food turned out to be relatively easy to procure. It was even tasty. I gave Aaron a quick kiss and said hi to Brennan before wandering off in search of Lucifer. I got the idea I'd have to go to him.

Even if he wasn't actually upset about me marking him, I needed to apologize. I'd done it without permission. While I had no fucking idea why I'd done it, that was still no real excuse.

When I finally found him, he was up on top of the keep, or manor house, or whatever. He had a few hellhounds, including his own, I thought, sitting at his feet. This area was obviously designed to be used as some sort of lookout and a chest-high wall surrounded the outside, allowing me to walk out there relatively safely. Lucifer stared out into the forest that covered much of Ezra's lands.

"Hey," I said, walking up behind him. The hellhounds observed me but didn't interfere when I walked up next to him.

His shoulders tensed, though he didn't reply.

Taking a chance, I put a hand on his arm.

Lucifer spun me around and shoved me up against the wall. I had a second to be surprised before my wards triggered and tossed him back. He didn't go far, probably prepared for that, and it didn't knock him off his feet. Hellfire blazed in the fallen angel's eyes as he stalked forward.

The hellhounds looked between us, ears flat against their skulls. Clearly, they weren't sure who to defend.

"Why?" He got right up into my face, not touching me, but there was barely any space between us.

My back pressed into the stone behind me, and my breaths came short and fast. Lucifer grabbed my chin and tilted my head back, not quite hurting me, though I felt my skin warm as energy flowed into my defenses, ready just in case.

"I have no fucking idea," I replied.

The heat from his body radiated off him, warming me against the chill air. The stone wall he had me pressed up against was cold. It wasn't unlike being held between Sabian and Mal, except a little more extreme, and Mal was a lot cuddlier than the stone was.

"You know, I tried to take it off. I couldn't do it."

"Seriously? Sabian was sure you'd be able to remove it if you wanted to." My heart thudded in my chest. Shit, he really was mad.

"Sabian is incorrect." He let go of my jaw. I'd probably have bruises, damn it. "Take it off." Lucifer shoved his wrist in my face.

"How?"

He pressed his thumb against my forehead and the knowledge appeared in my mind. "Like that," he hissed.

I took his wrist in my hand and tried to do what he'd shown me. I pushed my energy into him, which sparked between us. The combination of him wearing my mark and me wearing his did strange things to my energy as it flowed into the demon.

He sucked in a breath, eyes blazing. "Price—"

“Mate, I don’t know what the fuck.”

What I did know was that something kept me from removing my mark from his skin. I was not comfortable with the way my body reacted to his proximity or the play of energy as it washed through him and flowed back into me. Fucking traitor, I was not attracted to the ruler of Hell. I was not! I practically vibrated with energy when he jerked his arm out of my grasp.

Lucifer grabbed the back of my neck and crushed his lips to mine. My yelp of surprise was muffled by his possession of my mouth. He took advantage of my surprise by pressing his tongue between my lips. I opened for him, my heart racing, hands clutching at the shirt he wore. He shoved his leg between mine and fuck me, but didn’t that feel good.

I moaned, and his grip on me tightened as our tongues danced together. Energy sparked between us. The connections we’d forged blazed as the marks struggled for dominance.

In a quick flash of insight, I gave in to him, letting him command my mouth, my body, my energy. It curled through us before somehow anchoring deeper into Lucifer, effectively making me the winner in our strange struggle, even though I’d given him control.

He broke off our kiss, eyes wide with shock, pupils blown with lust. Hellfire danced in those dark eyes, and he growled, his fingers tightening around the back of my neck.

“It seems I should have heeded my own warnings to Ezra,” he snarled.

“What do you mean?” I gasped, still teetering on the edge between lust and terror.

“Your bloodlines,” he said. “I should have known better than to try to fight you after you marked me. It seems even I’m not immune to the traps your ancestors laid.”

“I—”

“It’s not entirely your fault, Price.” His voice had returned to some semblance of normal, though he still dug his fingers into the back of my neck. “As I told Ezra, there’s a reason



demons don't bind mages with the old blood. I tried. It backfired on me, just like it backfired on him. The difference is, he didn't care." The anger was back.

I shifted slightly in Lucifer's tense embrace, not entirely positive even my wards would protect me if he decided he couldn't live with being bound to someone.

"If you're going to break my neck, could you at least wait until I've rescued Ezra?" I finally managed. We were still pressed together. I was not unhappy about being there. I simply didn't know what he was thinking. His leg still pressed between mine, and I started to feel a little needy.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Chris," he replied, the edge still in his voice. He caressed my jaw with his thumb. "But if you're going to claim me, you'd better decide how deeply you want that to go. I've never been accused of being good at half measures." He leaned forward, breath tickling my neck as he whispered in my ear. "Either claim me or stay the fuck away."

He was gone so fast I didn't have time to point out he'd been the one that had been flirting with me.

I sagged back against the wall, then sank down to my butt. Holy shit, what had I done? No, it wasn't entirely my fault, but I certainly carried some of the blame. I could have told him to fuck off so many times, and I hadn't. Then I'd fucking marked him. Of course, he'd tried to bind me without telling me. Not that I was surprised. He was the Devil after all. And then I'd turned that back on him. I was well and truly going to hell for all of that.

I laughed at that thought. I already was in Hell. I supposed I should just stop worrying about it. What was done, was done. We had other things we needed to focus on. Souls were being stolen. Ezra was probably literally in chains, and we had a demon and an archangel to stop before they triggered the end of the world. A demon with hurt feelings would have to wait. Even if that demon was Lucifer.

Fuck.

I sat on the roof with only a couple of hellhounds for company for almost an hour before I worked up the courage to go inside. Finally, I got up, ran my hand through the long part of my hair, and headed back. I was a little surprised no one had come looking for me. All the same, I was grateful for the time alone.

Of course, Mal was waiting for me when I went re-entered the manor house. He stood, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, staring at the floor.

“You okay?” he asked.

“No.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

He held out his arms, and I folded myself into his embrace. “Do we need to go on a demon hunt? I bet you could exorcise him.”

A laugh burst out of me despite how I felt. “No. It’s not really his fault. Well, kind of, but it’s also kind of my fault. Honestly, we’ve got bigger things to worry about than Lucifer being all butthurt.”

Mal nuzzled my neck. “Butthurt, hmm, that what it’s called now?”

I flushed. I kept forgetting how sensitive his sense of smell was.

He kissed my neck. “Did he hurt you? You have bruises.”

“No, not really. The wards, remember?”

“He put them on. I’m sure he’s got a way around them.”

“Probably. Okay, quick rundown. He tried to take my mark off and couldn’t. I tried and couldn’t. The trick of my fancy bloodlines fucked everything up, and he kind of rage kissed me.” I didn’t even want to think about the rest, so I was going

to push that away for now. “He’s well and truly pissed, though.”

I could feel Mal’s lips turn up into a smile against my skin. “Work to secure your alliances,” he whispered.

I snorted. “Seriously.”

“Don’t do anything you don’t want to do.” He kissed my neck.

“I want to avoid this particular entanglement.”

“You’re already entangled. May as well make the most of it.” He nipped at me, fangs digging in.

“Mmm,” I groaned out appreciatively. “Yeah, but there’s entangled and then there’s *entangled*,” I protested.

Mal nicked me with his fangs just enough to send shivers of lust through me. I was going to need to change clothes. Actually, I could do magic again. I’d use the magic cleaning spell. The energy play with Lucifer had gotten me wet, and Mal was bringing me right back. His tongue flicked along my neck, and he turned us and pressed me back into the wall.

I relaxed into his touch, hooking one of my legs around his and pulling him firmly against me.

“You ever going to object if I get interested in someone?”

Mal chuckled. “Probably eventually. If you were simply out trolling for guys, we might have a discussion. Everyone that’s come into your life has come into it for a reason.”

I tilted my chin, baring my throat more obviously.

Mal rumbled in his throat before he licked my neck. “I just fed from you.”

“Take a little more. We’re going after the fuckers stealing souls. Need you to keep your energy up.”

“You sure?”

“It has absolutely nothing to do with being excessively keyed up and wanting an easy way to get off hard, and

everything to do with keeping you fed, I assure you.” I even managed a deadpan tone.

“Mmm, I could turn Sabian loose on you.” He slid a leg between mine, and I rubbed against him.

“Or I could be a greedy bitch and hit him up later, then go tackle Aaron to the bed, then—”

He sank his fangs into my neck, surprising me.

I didn’t even have time to make a sound before my orgasm was rocketing through me. He’d taken me at my word and hit me hard with whatever it was in his bite that caused the happy good feelings. I sagged in his arms, vision blackening, head swimming. If he’d built me up to the levels needed to get off that hard, I might have shied away from the intensity.

“Yeah, like that,” I finally managed.

Mal chuckled. “Should I apologize?”

“No, mate. Got exactly what I asked for, didn’t I?”

“You did.” He kissed my cheek, still supporting my weight. I was not going to be standing for another minute or two.

We stood there in each other’s arms while I recovered. Finally, I managed to support my own weight, though my legs still felt a little weak. I did manage to cast Ezra’s cleaning spell on both of us, but I needed to lean on Mal’s arm as we headed toward the study.

Sabian and Aaron were already there when we arrived. Sabian glanced at me, arching an eyebrow. I gave him a sheepish look. He grinned in reply. Sabian would have sensed my arousal if nothing else because there was energy present for him to feed off. He didn’t have to be especially close to benefit from my desires.

“Okay, so we gotta stop the bastards stealing souls so we can get Ezra back,” I said. “Any ideas?” I took Ezra’s comfortable office chair.

“We should get Brennan and Lucifer,” Aaron said. “I bet they know enough to help us make a plan.”

I sighed and got up. "I'll find them. You three start plotting."

I went over to the door and threw it open, nearly plowing into Lucifer. Brennan was right behind him. I managed to stop before I crashed into the demon, though he caught my shoulders just in case.

"Was just going to look for you and Brennan."

"You found us." He dropped his hands as soon as it was clear I wasn't off balance. His tone was normal, not overly seductive, but not angry. Either he was feeling better about the situation, or he was still pissed and hiding it really well. I'd guess the latter if I had to put money on it.

"Right." I hurried back into the room, the other two following.

I claimed my seat again, and everyone else made themselves comfortable.

"So, as I was saying, we need a plan." I looked to Brennan. "What can you tell us? We gotta stop this soul stealing shit."

The mage nodded. "They're taking the souls to fuel some sort of power reservoir."

"Where is it?" Mal asked.

Creases marred Brennan's forehead as he thought. "They have some sort of magical connection to the device that allows them to draw from it wherever they are."

"They?" Sabian asked.

"Mammon and Nicki have access to it."

"My old mate has a lot to answer for," I grumbled.

"She will," Lucifer promised.

I shivered at the certainty in his voice. He would know, wouldn't he?

"You didn't have access to it?" Aaron asked.

Brennan shook his head. "I wasn't offered, and I would have declined."

“So we don’t know where it is?” Aaron pressed his hands together.

“The physical entrance is in Hell,” Brennan said. “If it can be said to have a physical doorway. Where in Hell, I do not know.”

Lucifer sighed. “I can give you access to all of Hell so you can search. However, Mammon has closed his borders down tightly. I could get in and out but at this stage, I am unwilling to take that risk.”

“But you’ll risk us?” Mal leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

“No,” Lucifer replied. “Believe it or not. It is also not time efficient to have you search the entirety of my realm. That would take lifetimes. I will send out an army of imps to look. They are not clever beings, but they’ll likely be able to narrow the location down to a searchable area.”

“Are they trustworthy?” I didn’t want them running off to Mammon to curry favor.

“Mammon has no use for imps or many of the lesser demons. It is not impossible, but unlikely, that they will go to him.”

“Okay. Do we know anything else?” I glanced at all the guys.

Brennan shrugged. “It’s likely to be difficult to access, but I don’t need to tell you that.”

“Well, for starters, it’s in Hell,” Mal pointed out.

“Yes. I also think Mammon has been working on this particular project longer than you all have been involved. He likely didn’t suspect his enemies would have access to Hell,” Brennan clarified.

“That’s certainly in our favor,” I agreed.

“Yes.” Brennan nodded.

Lucifer stood. “Until we know where to focus our search, there is not much you can do. Stay here. Stay safe. I’ll be in

touch.” He turned abruptly and left the room.

I sagged in my chair and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I miss the days where I didn’t have to give a fuck about anything but pizza.”

“He’ll get over it,” Sabian said after a moment.

“Hope so.”

“What is Lucifer upset about?” Brennan asked cautiously.

“Errant pizza mark on his arm.”

“Ahh.” An amused smile flickered across Brennan’s face.

“Okay. I guess we wait.” I got up and left. The rooftop was calling me.

Mayhem met me in the hallway, and I trailed a hand over the soft ridge of fur that ran down his back in his hellhound form.

“Hey, buddy. Happy to be home?”

He wagged his tail.

I left my hand on his back as we walked. The creature was so damn tall in hellhound form. I’d probably never know why he’d chosen a Pomeranian as his other shape, but the size difference was a huge contrast. Of course, it was easier for Mayhem to ride on the back of Inferno’s Harley shape when he was puffball sized, so maybe that had something to do with it. I would not have been surprised to find out Mayhem had been thinking ahead.

I let myself back out onto the rooftop and went to the opposite side as when I’d confronted Lucifer. Confronted, yeah, we could go with that phrasing. Certainly not making out with. Nope.

Mayhem leaned against my hip for a moment before putting his paws up on the stone wall and looking out over Ezra’s lands. The hellhound really didn’t need to put his paws up to see over the wall, but it probably was a little easier.

We were surrounded on all sides by a fairly uniform pine forest. Hellhounds called in the distance, and Mayhem tilted

his head, listening. He didn't return their haunting cry with a howl of his own, but whatever he heard pleased him. He wagged his tail and sat, resting his chin on the wall.

"Good boy," I said and scrubbed just behind his horns right where he liked it best.

He rumbled happily.

We stood there listening to the light breeze whisper through the pines and the occasional howl in the distance. It was very quiet here. My experiences in Hell so far led me to believe it was fairly empty. Though perhaps it was simply that the demons hid well. Ezra had mentioned that while his home felt empty, the demons in residence had simply been afraid of me. Except for that succubus bitch or whatever she was.

We enjoyed the relative silence for a long while until Mayhem perked up and looked behind us. He didn't seem concerned, so I turned more slowly.

It was one of Ezra's demons. The creature might have been one of those imps that Lucifer had mentioned. It was short, only about three feet high, with knobby, awkwardly proportioned limbs, and long pointed ears that stuck out to the side of its shaggy-haired head. The whole creature was in shades of brown and would blend into the forest very well. It didn't wear any clothing and had a thick pelt of dark brown fur covering its body, though its limbs were hairless.

"Hello," I said in English.

It bowed and replied in Demonic, "Master."

I hoped Ezra didn't mind me running his show for a little while.

"What do you require?" I wasn't sure how to address these creatures, and I didn't want to be rude, but I also didn't want to seem weak. This was so confusing. At least they weren't forcing me to speak in Demonic to be understood. The language was hard on my throat. I didn't mind that they replied in it.

The imp tilted its head. "I require nothing. Your visitors are exploring the manor. Is this allowed?"



“By visitors, do you mean the people who came with me and Lucifer through the portal?”

“Yessss.” It shuddered with distaste. I supposed Aaron would be uncomfortable for them. I wondered how hell was treating the half-angel.

“They’re allowed to wander.”

The imp bowed again. “Do you have orders?”

“Whatever Ezra would have you doing is sufficient for now.”

The creature bowed again before departing.

I turned back to the wall and buried my face in my hand. “Holy shit, Mayhem. I’m in freaking Hell, in charge of a bunch of demons. I’m an exorcist. This is ridiculous.”

He whined and leaned into me again.

“Hey, buddy. I love you. I don’t regret having you around. It’s just weird to think about.” I gave the worried hellhound a good scratch and he perked up again.

“Let’s go find the guys.”

The hellhound woofed and we headed back inside.

I didn’t have to look hard to find my men. Mayhem led me right to them. They were in some sort of demon armory looking around while a few imps stared at them uneasily. The guys stared back with similar uneasy expressions on their faces.

A shadow rippled along the wall, coming in my direction.

I shivered, reminded myself I had protections and was the master here, and stood my ground.

The demon crawled out of the shadows and slithered across the floor. It looked like a mobile oil slick. The thing flowed past my feet before coalescing into a tall willowy form that was vaguely humanoid.

Mayhem didn’t seem worried, so I watched as it bent at the waist. Maybe bowing?

“Master,” it hissed in Demonic. “Does the armory please you?”

“What did it say?” Mal asked warily.

“It asked if the armory pleased me.” I shot Mal a desperate look. I didn’t know the right answer.

Sabian whispered in Mal’s ear. Mal glanced around before shooting me a thumbs up.

“Yes, the armory pleases me.”

“Good,” the creature drew out the word as it answered. Then it collapsed in on itself and splashed back to the floor before sliding away.

I took a deep breath.

“Sabian, when I had Ezra’s mark we could communicate telepathically. That ability doesn’t seem to have returned with my marks. I can sense you all and it’s getting easier to interpret that. Mayhem brought me here, but I could tell we were on the right track the whole time. I’m not reading anyone’s thoughts, though. Don’t get me wrong, that’s completely fine with me. I’m just curious if you know why that is.”

Sabian pointed, and we all followed him out of the weapon-filled room. “I suspect it has something to do with the differences in his powers verses yours. He’s a demon prince. Mind reading comes with the territory. You got a heavy dose of that since you were tied into his powers. Right now, you’re just tied into his energy. The mind reading might come back when you mark each other after we rescue him.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course.” He grinned at me, then glanced at Mal.

Mal and he had some sort of conversation without speaking.

“Let’s go see some of the work rooms. Ezra isn’t much into occult type practices, but he’s got a few demons who work for him that are. I’ll show you. I think I know where they’re at.” Sabian gestured, and the two of them left me and Aaron alone.

“That wasn’t completely subtle,” Aaron said. “But nice of them to give us some alone time.”

I laughed. “Yep.” I hooked my arm in his, and we went in the opposite direction the incubus had chosen. “How are you holding up?”

Aaron shrugged. “Not terrible, considering. This place has a weight to it that is bearing down on my shoulders and my mood. I suspect being a half-angel in Hell is just going to be like that.”

“I imagine so. We can ask Ezra when we get him back. Maybe he knows of a way to make it easier on you.”

“Hopefully it’s not too hard to extract him from the Vatican.”

I chuckled, a little menace in my voice. “If they try to keep me from him, they’ll get all sorts of trouble they didn’t want. Ezra taught me a lot of spells I’m still assimilating.”

Aaron smiled down at me. “Yeah, they won’t know what hit them. How are you?”

“Well, I marked and bound the ruler of Hell. He’s pissed at me. I’m on the run from angels and demons. One of my men is trapped and he has no idea that Lucifer didn’t just hang him out to dry. We’re searching for some sort of weird soul battery, and we have to figure out how to disable that. Oh, and we’re like actually in Hell.” I shrugged. “It could be worse,” I admitted. “At least I feel better than I have in a few weeks, and I’m now well protected. I have you and Mal and Sabian.”

He put his arm around me and pulled me against his side. “I’m always glad to be at your side.”

“Thank you.”

“So, what are we going to do while we wait for Lucifer to get back to us?” Aaron glanced around, and I could tell his question was genuine, not a sly suggestion that we go have sex. However, I’d been thinking of having my way with him, anyway.

I grinned at him. “I have some ideas.”

Aaron turned his attention to me, took note of my expression and raised his eyebrows. “Oh really?” His eyes lit up with interest.

“Why do you think they left us alone?”

He chuckled. “Point taken.”

“Where’d they have you sleeping last night?”

“Just down the hallway from you. Want me to show you?”

“I’d like nothing more at the moment.”

“Right, one room tour it is. Once you’ve seen it, what do you want to do?” He grinned, teasing me.

“I don’t know, maybe a physics lecture. I could use a good nap.” I elbowed him gently.

Aaron burst out laughing. “I don’t know, I might be able to make it interesting enough to keep you awake. Particle interactions are always a fun topic.”

“Mmm, I’d like other types of interactions, thanks.” My half-angel was a physicist, a chess coach, and a sports coach. All sorts of sexy nerd.

“Whatever you desire, Chris.”

“Excellent.”

We went up a few flights of stairs back to the level my bedroom was on. A handful of hellhounds guarded the way but didn’t react when we walked past.

Aaron’s room was two doors down from mine. Both my room and Ezra’s room had hellhounds on guard outside them. I imagined more were on the inside of Ezra’s room and probably on my house side of the portal. Hopefully they didn’t wander too much. Oh boy, what if Darius came by while I was gone?

“What? Something just made you chuckle.” Aaron squeezed my hand before opening the door for me.

“The hellhounds are very much on guard. I was just imagining Darius coming by when we aren’t home. We

haven't disguised the portal and I'm quite certain it has hellhounds standing guard on the far side."

"Oh." Aaron laughed. "Let's hope no one comes by."

"Yeah, that could be a rude awaking for them."

Mayhem woofed softly and lay down by the doorway while I followed Aaron into the small room they'd given him. We walked past the entrance to a human-style bathroom, I peeked in, and continued to the main bedroom area that was hotel-room sized. It contained a good-sized bed, a chest of drawers, and not much else. Like my room, it was lit with globes that might have been mage lights.

"Cozy."

"I don't need much. Glad they had something for us humans, though."

"Ezra might have made some modifications once he started hanging out with me. He seems to have a knack for interior design."

"New career path for him, should he decide to get out of the demon prince gig."

"I'll let you suggest that to him."

Aaron grinned. "No."

That got a full-throated laugh out of me. "Okay, fair."

Aaron and I had gotten comfortable with each other in the fay lands, but he was still new to this, so he shot me an uncertain look.

"We don't need to do anything elaborate here," I said. "Let's just have some fun. Then we can wander a little more. Find dinner, see if Lucifer's imps have gotten back to him, and carry on until we have a solid location to search."

"Okay. Do you think he'll get back to us that quickly?"

I shrugged before pulling my T-shirt off. "I think that he won't delay. We need to end this."

"We do."

Aaron's gaze trailed over my body. "Nice ink," he said, reaching out and brushing his fingers over some of the designs, before dragging them across my own personal mark on my stomach. "Suits you."

"Thanks. I like it. Felt strange not to have anything on my skin. It's been years since I had an undecorated body."

He roamed my skin with his hands, unhooking my bra and letting that slide off me.

I interrupted his exploration to help him pull off his shirt.

"I do like this," I said as I feathered my fingertips over the inverted pizza pentagram I'd put on his chest. The white markings stood out against his dark skin, matching the eyes that had already been on his pecs.

"I do, too." Aaron caught my hand in his and held it against his chest for a minute. "I was so afraid we'd lost you."

Shutting my eyes, I took a deep breath and leaned against him, letting his solid presence anchor me. Inexplicably, tears welled behind my eyelids.

"Have you taken any time to process any of this?" Aaron caressed his fingers over my bare back, holding me close. I leaned into his warmth and rubbed at my face.

"What do you mean?"

"Chris, everything you've been through, now and in the past, is super traumatic. Hell, you died, twice, basically. The only reason you are still here is because a demon possessed you the first time, and Death himself saved you the second."

I sighed. "Yeah, I know that, mate."

"Right, but have you spent any time dealing with your feelings?"

"Uh, how?"

Aaron sighed. "I'd say we should go see a therapist but finding someone who would believe you enough to help work through everything would be tough."

"Naw, I'm okay."

“You’re not okay,” he insisted as he wiped some moisture from my cheek.

“What choice do we have, Aaron? We have to stop the people stealing souls. We have to rescue Ezra. We have to stop Mammon and Michael. We just gotta keep going full speed ahead until we’re in the clear. Promise, we’ll take a long vacation on a white sand beach when we’re done.”

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “Okay.”

I got the idea we weren’t done with this topic, and I was sure Aaron had a point, but I had no idea what to do about it. Especially with the challenges we still faced. That white sand beach was sounding pretty good, though. Hell, just a week making pizza in the kitchen at my pizza parlor sounded amazing. I hoped they were doing okay without me.

Aaron shifted us around until my legs were against the bed, then he lifted me gently and sat me on the edge. He knelt between my legs so he could look at me.

“We’ll just take it a day at a time until we get a minute to slow down. How about that?”

I managed a smile. “Sounds good.”

He ran his fingers along my cheek, and I leaned into the touch. “You know, if you’d rather cuddle we can do that, too.”

“I’m greedy, let’s cuddle after.”

Aaron caressed his fingers down my neck before tracing my collarbone. “As you wish,” he said with a grin.

Pleased, I let him lay me back on the bed. Aaron spent time worshiping my breasts with his tongue. He dragged his hands down my sides while he rolled one of my nipples between his lips.

“That feels so good,” I said. One of the things we’d figured out was that Aaron enjoyed feedback.

His fingers found the snap on my jeans, and he flicked that open before hooking his fingers in my pants and tugging them down my legs.

I was glad to have them off but sad that his lips had left my skin. He stood and his hands went to his fly.

“Yes, more nakedness,” I encouraged him.

He did one of his angel tricks, glowing and going translucent for a moment. When he stepped forward he essentially left his clothing behind, and it fell to the ground.

“That’s so convenient,” I said.

“Yeah, makes getting undressed fast.” He climbed onto the bed and guided me farther back before rolling me over.

“Good?” he asked.

“Sure.” I put a pillow under my chest, got my knees under me and stuck my butt up in the air.

Aaron ran his fingers lightly over my skin, again tracing some of my ink, before working his way back down. He gently rubbed at my clit until I was grinding against his hand, mewling slightly with pleasant frustration.

“Tease,” I muttered when he pulled his hand away.

“You’re impatient,” he gently chided me.

I couldn’t argue with that, so I didn’t try.

He caressed my ass again before cupping my pussy. “You’re so wet,” he murmured.

“I’ll be dripping in moments if you’d be so kind as to slide a couple of fingers in,” I begged.

Aaron chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t you forget it.” I gasped as he slid a finger inside me and stroked. I hadn’t been wrong. It didn’t take much for him to get me leaking.

Aaron worked his other finger in and flicked his fingers until he found the spot that made me squirm and cry out his name while he built me toward what promised to be a fantastic release.

He slowed his rhythm, and I practically rammed myself backward onto his hand, begging for more.



“So impatient,” he said again and reached under me, cupping one of my breasts as he went back to work on building me back up again.

I was so close I was keening when Aaron backed off. I turned and glared at him.

He was grinning. “Oh, did you want something?”

“Fucker,” I muttered.

That just made him laugh harder. He relented, however, working those talented fingers inside me until I was back to making that keening sound again.

“Feels so good,” I managed to get out just before I crashed into my release.

“Feeling you clench around my fingers feels so good,” Aaron countered, voice low and sexy with lust.

“Know what would feel even better?” I moaned as he stroked me gently, almost too sensitive for that.

“Your vibrator?” he teased.

“Something nice and large to clench around, like your cock.”

He groaned and slid his fingers out. Moments later, he pressed his cock against my entrance.

“Ready?”

“Mmm, nice and slow, right?”

He chuckled. “I could try.”

“Please don’t.”

Aaron pushed into me, making me cry out as super sensitive nerves tingled.

My half-angel grabbed my hips with his big hands and held on as he slid in and out of me a few times just to make sure I was ready.

I was reduced to gasping moans and couldn’t form a coherent word. Aaron stretched me in such wonderful ways,

and I knew he was going to give me a fast and hard ride as soon as he felt I was ready for him.

Sweet, sweet torture ensued as he tried to stay slow long enough to tease me, but he lost patience quickly enough. I felt him tense before he increased his speed until he was pounding into me.

I gasped out small cries, vision swimming as another orgasm built, heat pooling deep in my core, breasts tingling as my muscles tensed, and then released into an intense orgasm.

Aaron stiffened moments later, panting for breath as his release took him.

We stayed there for a minute, letting our bodies relax before he slowly eased out.

Then he pulled me into his arms and cradled me against his chest as we lay on the bed together.

I didn't want to get up to clean myself, so I cast that excessively handy cleaning spell.

Aaron grunted in surprise, but he figured out what I'd done pretty quickly. "Handy trick."

"Yeah. Now we can cuddle longer."

"As long as you want, my exorcist."

"Mmm, forever, angel of mine. I love you, Aaron."

"I love you, too, Chris."

# Chapter 10

## *Price*

A soft knock on the door woke me out of a light doze sometime later.

“Chris?” It was Sabian.

“Yeah?”

Aaron stirred.

“We’ve got more information from Lucifer’s imps.”

“That was quick,” Aaron mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

“Be there in a minute, mate.” I rubbed at my eyes before reluctantly sliding out of Aaron’s embrace. I took a minute to freshen up in Aaron’s bathroom and he did the same, then we headed back to Ezra’s study.

Everyone else, including Lucifer, was there. He glanced at me before looking away, expression carefully neutral. I sighed and settled into an empty chair.

“We believe we’ve located the area that contains the soul battery,” the ruler of Hell started. “It’s surprisingly not in Mammon’s territory. It’s in Lott’s old territory, which means it’s now in your domain.” He looked at me.

I shivered and hoped to all that was holy...unholy? that I could give all of this back to Ezra very soon.

“Makes it easier to get to, I guess.” I shrugged.

He nodded agreement. “This one will guide you.” He gestured to another one of those short brown demons with the gangly, knobby limbs. I’d been right, they were imps.

“Signal me when you’ve found the exact location. I wish to see it for myself.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “How?”

His brow furrowed and his eyes glinted with hellfire. “Use one of your marks.” With that not quite helpful information, he got up and left, leaving the imp behind.

It bowed to me. “Master, when you are ready.”

“Thank you. Give us a minute.”

It nodded, and I glanced at Mal. “So, have any thoughts on weapons? Because I’m fresh out.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.” He rose smoothly to his feet and came over to me, holding out a knife. “This one probably should stay in Hell, but I think it will be useful to you down here.” He handled the blade by the sheath.

Curious, I took it and slid the blade out of the leather encasing it.

“Oh...yeah, this absolutely needs to stay in Hell.” I raised my eyebrows as I read the spells etched into the blade. The steel itself was blackened and the Demonic characters written on it glowed with their own orange light. This was a nasty piece that would make a mess of a lot of different creatures, including demons. “Where did you get it?”

“From the occultists. I figured you could use it, however, since you’re tied into all sorts of demonic energy right now.” Mal made that sound like it was completely normal.

I just accepted that he was correct, stood, and slid the sheath onto my belt.

“Here are a few plain knives that you can probably keep with some arm sheaths, and here’s my jackknife you can throw in your pocket.” Mal handed me a few more knives.

“Thanks.”

I took one of the knives out of the arm sheath and tested its feel. Then I made sure I knew how to open and close the folding knife before letting Mal help me put the sheaths on my arms.

“Sabian can barely use a knife so he’s going to be our cheerleader and lookout. Brennan’s magic works down here. Aaron comes equipped with a holy weapon, which is going to do impressive things if he has to pull it on a demon, and I picked up a sword and a few knives along with some occult tools. They will also get left in Hell because there’s no way I want to use them in my normal practice. I, however, haven’t lost all my best tools.”

“Hey, I killed a demon with it.” I wrinkled my nose and mock glared at him. He referred to the really nice ritual knife he’d made me that I’d ended up using to stab the shit out of Lott. That had destroyed the blade, but it had also allowed me to kill the demon responsible for murdering my family.

“I know. I’m not mad. I’ll make you another one. Right now, these tools will serve us well down here.”

It occurred to me that as long as I knew where these weapons were, I could summon them to me, even from Ezra’s domain. I would leave them here, but if I really needed them, I could access them. I’d certainly jumped on the waterslide down the slippery slope of being involved with demons. Oh, well. At least I was trying to save lives and not stealing souls or anything.

“So, we’re as ready as we can be?” I looked at everyone and they all nodded. “Okay.” I wanted my leather jacket. The one with the inverted pizza pentagram on it. The one that had inspired Lucifer when he’d designed my own personal mark. It had saved my butt so many times, but it was MIA. I couldn’t even remember what had happened to it.

Putting that piece of clothing out of my mind, I gestured for the imp to lead the way.

We headed out of the study and made our way through the manor house until we were outside. Inferno awaited us there. He snorted and stomped the ground.

“Hey, buddy. You coming, too?”

He tossed head, acting annoyed that I’d even asked the question.

Mayhem trotted along behind us.

I went ahead and mounted Inferno, then I wondered how we were going to get there. The last time either Ezra had transported us, or the spirit horses and my nightstallion had transported us.

“You can do the same group teleportation Ezra could while we’re in his realm,” Sabian said. “At least while you have access to his power.”

“Oh, okay.” I looked at the imp. “Can you tell me where we’re going in a way that will make it so I can teleport us there?”

It bowed before describing a wide, deep valley with a black river running through the middle and pink granite mountain ridgelines on either side. The rock was exposed, no topsoil in evidence and nothing grew there.

Somehow, probably the magic of being tied into Ezra’s domain and power, I knew where that location was and how to get us there.

“Okay, everyone hold on to your butts,” I muttered.

“That quote is not from the eighties.” Aaron smirked at me when I glanced at him.

“Yeah, well, just because the eighties was the perfect decade doesn’t mean the nineties didn’t have some gems in it.”

Everyone else just stared at Aaron and I like we’d grown horns and were speaking in tongues.

“It’s from a movie,” I grumbled then shut my eyes, concentrating on the location we needed to go to. I did have to use Ezra’s well of power to teleport us. The ability did seem to be tied into being the ruler of this domain.

Energy rippled through me and expanded to include everyone gathered around. I felt it surge and then we were standing on a relatively level part of one of the mountains the imp had described.

“Hey, it worked,” I exclaimed after checking to make sure everyone had made the trip with me.

We made a quick scan of the area, but for the most part we seemed to be alone. I could sense some presences in the distance. Likely demons, probably Ezra’s. Mine currently. Damn, that was weird.

What caught my attention was a floating void that hovered over the valley seemingly suspended between the two ridgelines. It was just a vast nothing in my vision, which actually made it really hard to look at.

“What the hell is that?” I pointed.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Sabian muttered.

“Sabian, what is it?”

“It’s a soul trap,” he answered. “Basically, it’s designed to hold the worst souls for eternity. Once a soul goes in, it doesn’t get back out. Ever.”

“Yeah, so how much you want to bet that’s where the battery is?”

Sabian sighed. “No bet.”

“Okay, let me summon Lucifer, and we’ll see what we can figure out.”

“So, now you are summoning demons?” Aaron teased me.

“Ugh, yeah, I guess.” I groaned and slid off Inferno’s back. He nickered and I pet his nose.

I didn’t shut my eyes this time, just focused inward. Because I didn’t want to keep reminding him of the mark I’d

placed on his arm, I tried to deliberately use the one he'd placed on me.

*Think we found it, mate.*

I didn't get a reply, though I had the sense that he'd heard me. Moments later, Lucifer appeared at our side. He looked out over the valley, eyes widening slightly. "Well, that's problematic."

The ruler of Hell walked to a nearby ledge and sat down, dangling his feet over. Hesitantly, I joined him. The ledge he had chosen was a sheer drop that would kill me if I fell. Well, maybe my wards would save me. Maybe not. Still, I sat down next to him, though I sat cross-legged instead of dangling mine over the edge.

"Are we screwed?"

"No. I know there is a solution. I need to think for a minute." He leaned back on his hands and stared at the void.

The others gathered behind us, and we sat there while Lucifer contemplated our problem.

Finally, he ran his hand through his hair and gave me a little side-eye.

"What?"

He smirked. "Guess it's a good thing you marked me."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Otherwise, we probably would be fucked. Soul traps are designed so that once a soul goes in, it never comes out. The thing is, once *anything* goes in, typically it doesn't come out."

"How'd they build a battery in there, then?" I asked what I thought was an obvious question.

"Until the traps are activated, you can safely go in and out of them. That one is active. They probably built everything they needed, set up their conduits, and then activated it."

"How are they getting the magic out?"



He shrugged. "I don't know how their conduits are bypassing the barriers. Obviously, they figured something out."

"Yeah. Okay, so you're still not filling me with warm fuzzies. Can we defeat this battery from out here?"

"That would be too easy, Chris."

I shivered. The seduction was back in his voice. "Figured."

"It won't be hard to get in. Inferno can fly you out to it, then you just step into the void. To get a soul out, it would need to be solidly anchored to this side, and I do mean solidly."

I sighed. "What do I have to do to get solidly anchored to this side?"

"You already did it." He flipped his arm and showed me the pizza pentagram on his forearm.

I sat on my hands so I wouldn't reach out and touch him. He, like Ezra, had mastered the casually dressy look, and I absolutely loved it. Dark slacks, dark red dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves, one button undone at the top. I was seriously trying not to notice how hot he looked right now, and I was seriously failing.

"Well, good thing, then. So, I have to go alone?"

I could feel the objection from the guys through the connection I'd formed with them. I probably could have felt it without. They hadn't said anything yet, but they were all practically screaming that there was no way I was going anywhere alone ever again.

"Mayhem can go with you and safely return. Inferno is a possibility. I don't know about the others." Lucifer frowned, thinking again. "Because they've already introduced weakness into the barrier because they are pulling magic out of it somehow, I'm more confident that it's possible. I'm just not sure how difficult it will be."

"I'll go," Brennan said immediately. "If you are certain you can get Chris out, and you believe she can get me out, I'm

willing to take the risk and I'm the most expendable here.”

“None of you are expendable,” I growled.

Brennan glanced away when I twisted around so I could see everyone, though I caught a hint of a pleased smile on his lips.

“Brennan will be the most useful to you,” Lucifer said. “And I don't think it wise to risk anyone needlessly.”

Sabian cleared his throat. “Can she summon me out of there, if she can't pull me out through my mark? She is both my master through Ezra's power, she knows my true name, and I wear her mark. Not to mention, you're also my master. Between the two of you—”

Lucifer nodded. “That would be an acceptable level of risk.”

I ground my teeth, but they were right, I needed backup. “Okay.”

“And clearly I cannot tell you what to expect once you're inside. Brennan will likely have to disable the device.”

“How do we free the souls?”

Lucifer tilted his head as if he hadn't considered that. “I'm not sure that we can. It is certainly not my primary concern.”

I narrowed my eyes, and he held up a hand. “Let me confer with Azrael. One moment.” Lucifer vanished.

I climbed to my feet and went over to my guys. Mal put his arm around me, and I leaned into his solid embrace, trying to ground myself.

He tightened his grip and kissed my neck, sending my pulse speeding. “You're adorable when you're trying to behave.”

I snorted.

“I don't know, I kind of thought she was going to vibrate off the edge of the cliff for a minute there,” Aaron said.

“Lust isn't as tasty as love, but I'm certainly feeling ready to take on whatever we are going to face in the soul trap.” Sabian winked at me.

“Fuckers,” I muttered and looked over at Brennan.

There were little creases around his eyes and a gleam in them that made me think he had something to say, though I doubted he was comfortable enough to give voice to any snarky thoughts he might be having at the moment.

I gestured. “Go ahead.”

Brennan shook his head, though he was positively grinning now—for him, anyway.

I rolled my eyes and pulled away from Mal. “You are all assholes.”

“We just like to see you blush,” Mal replied.

Inferno snorted, for all the world like he was laughing. Just to be on the safe side, I flipped the nightstallion the bird.

He nickered.

“Even your nightstallion agrees.” Sabian shrugged. “Just fuck him and get it over with.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Here?”

The incubus kicked the ground with his foot. “I hear granite is highly abrasive. I’d suggest somewhere more comfortable.”

Before I could unleash the snark on Sabian, Lucifer reappeared amongst us.

Sabian bowed his head but none of the rest of us owed him any subservience, and Aaron stifled a chuckle.

“What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” I bit out.

He raised an eyebrow and gave me a knowing look.

Right, asshole could read minds. I flipped him off, too.

Instead of getting offended, he chuckled. Damn it.

“Got an answer?” I snapped.

“Yes.” He held out a small pendant. “Azrael says if you can get them out of the battery, they’ll be attracted to this necklace. It will act similar to a soul trap and keep them inside. Then

they should be able to come out with you. If not, we'll have to leave them behind. At least they won't be alone. That's the hardest part of the soul traps, the isolation. They're reserved for the darkest, most dangerous souls, and we don't come across them very often."

I held out my hand.

Lucifer ignored my hand and stepped behind me.

When I twisted to see what he was doing, he gently pushed on my shoulder so my back was to him again.

"You have to wear it. I'll put it on for you. The clasp is tricky."

"Fine."

The warmth from his body heated my back as he stepped even closer and reached in front of me with his hands. He took both ends of the necklace and managed to gently run his knuckles along my neck where he took extra time fastening it, being sure to brush his fingers against the back of my neck when he did. I was sure if I'd had long hair, he'd have found some excuse to play with it.

Of course, he was creating the effect he was going for. My heart pounded in my chest, and I barely took a breath until he stepped away. Lucifer knew it, too. I avoided looking at him.

"You're certain you can get Chris out?" Mal asked.

"As certain as I can be without having tried it. I do not want to risk her any more than you do. I'm simply not sure we have any other options."

"Okay, let's do this thing before someone notices us," I said.

Mal pulled me into his arms for a kiss. I opened for him, letting him express his worry with a kiss that had my toes curling and my heart thundering.

Aaron pulled me close once Mal released me and I melted into his sweet kiss and hugged him tight.

"You two be careful," I said.

“Us? You’re the one walking into a soul trap we might not be able to get you out of,” Aaron replied, disbelief in his voice.

“Eh, I’m too stubborn to get trapped in something like that. We’ll be fine.”

Neither Mal nor Aaron laughed at my joke, and I sighed. “I’ll be careful.”

Brennan and Sabian followed me to the edge where Lucifer and Inferno waited.

The ruler of Hell put his hand on my shoulder, the heat from his touch almost blazingly hot. I wouldn’t have been surprised if my skin stayed slightly red under his touch for a few minutes after.

“Chris, be careful.”

I really couldn’t decide if I preferred when he was hitting on me and calling me Chris, or pissed off and calling me Price.

“I’ll do my best.”

“You have a shit track record so far,” he answered. “Do better. We may not be able to save you a third time.”

I shuddered despite the heat from his touch, though I managed a snarky reply. “Hey, at least if I die you’ll see me again.” I tried for a cheeky grin.

He quirked a smile. “I would be very surprised if I did, despite your involvement with us. Your heart is still in the right place.”

“Oh.” I frowned. “Well, there goes all my afterlife party plans.”

That got him to chuckle. “Be careful.”

“I will.” I made the mistake of meeting his gaze. The faint lines around his eyes and creasing of his brow made me think he was not nearly as confident as he sounded.

“You can get me out, right?”

“Yes.” A hint of hellfire flickered in the depths of his eyes.

“And I can get them out?”

“Probably.”

I pursed my lips and glanced over at the void, on the verge of telling everyone I was going by myself.

“No,” he said. “You are not going by yourself. If I didn’t have to stay here to anchor you, I’d go with you.”

“Really? Isn’t that a pretty big risk?” I looked back at him, very aware of how close he stood. How inviting his lips were. I almost leaned in and kissed him, but no, I wasn’t going to start anything. So far, he had made most of the advances. So far, I could live with that.

“I created the damn things. I’m sure I’d find a way to break it.” He clearly wasn’t listening to my thoughts just then because he didn’t react to my errant thoughts about his lips and how much I wanted to press mine to his.

“We should get going then.” I wrenched my thoughts away from the sexy demon and turned toward the void. Lucifer tightened his grip on my shoulder before letting go.

I almost turned back toward him. No. I had enough men.

“How are we going to do this?” I glanced at Inferno.

“Go with Brennan, Inferno can come back for me,” Sabian said, sounding subdued.

I mounted the nightstallion and held out my hand for Brennan. Moments later, he was sitting behind me, and Inferno launched himself into the air.

Apparently, I was getting used to this method of travel because I barely reacted to the leap from a cliff. I stayed focused on our goal and hoped like hell that Lucifer could pull me out of there when we were done. Not to mention me being able to pull my men out.

Mayhem joined us in the air moments later, and shortly we were hovering next to the void.

“Brennan,” I said, unable to help it when my voice broke. “Are we really doing this?”

He put his hand on my arm and squeezed before leaning his chest against my back. "It'll be okay," he said.

"Okay. I'm just going to jump then. I guess."

Brennan wrapped his arm around my waist, said a few words, and then we floated off the nightstallion and across the small gap between Inferno and the soul trap.

"Inferno, thank you, buddy."

He nickered.

Mayhem came to my side and together the three of us pushed through the black walls of the void.

# Chapter 11

*Sabian*

Watching Chris, Mayhem, and Brennan disappear into the void just about killed me. I glanced at Mal. His eyes had gone black, and his hands were clenched into fists. Aaron had shoved his hands in his pockets and stared intently at the soul trap.

Inferno touched down near me. I walked over to the nightstallion. Before I could mount, Lucifer came over to me.

“If anything happens to her—”

“I’m far more interested in keeping her in one piece than you ever will be,” I snapped, my fear making me bold.

Lucifer’s eyes flashed with anger, the hellfire burning in their depths flaring. “Perhaps,” he replied tightly. “Perhaps not. Regardless, we may not be so lucky as to save her a third time.”

“Then let’s hope your wards are as good as you say they are.” I had no idea why I was irritated with Lucifer. I actually didn’t have a problem with his interest in Chris now that he’d said he wasn’t going to take her away from me.

He narrowed his eyes but nodded once and stepped away.



It was probably only my connection to Chris that had allowed me to survive that bit of insolence. Tangling my fingers in Inferno's flaming mane, I mounted and held on when he leapt off the cliff.

Shortly, we hovered next to the soul trap. Crossing my fingers, I hopped up so that I was crouched on Inferno's back. I gave the nightstallion a quick pat before leaping into the void.

Something slammed into me as I came out the other side before I could even begin to look around.

The ground bit back as I landed, tearing at my skin and smashing my shoulder.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, mate." Chris scrambled to her feet and crouched in front of me.

I got to my knees and finally had a second to look around. I had no idea what the inside of a soul trap normally looked like, but this one had the appearance of a lab. White shiny walls, drop ceiling with florescent lights, and concrete floors. A corridor opened before us.

"What the fuck is that?" I stared as a shadow detached itself from the wall and flowed toward us.

"We were hoping you could tell us," Chris panted as she cast a shield in front of us.

The shadow flattened into a narrow blade and zoomed straight toward us as if intending to slice us in half.

It fractured into several smaller blades when it slammed into the shield. These pieces melted back into shadows and sank to the floor, disappearing.

"There was only one," Chris said tightly. "Every time we defend ourselves, it breaks into more."

Brennan had just repelled a similar attack from two of the things. Mayhem was currently crouched behind the mage.

“It’s not magic,” Brennan said. “There’s no spell for me to disrupt.”

Something tickled my memory, but I couldn’t quite place it. “I don’t know what they are.”

“Well, I don’t like them,” Chris replied.

“Let’s see if we can keep ourselves shielded and keep moving,” Brennan suggested.

“I always wanted to see what it would be like to be stuck in a hamster ball,” Chris muttered.

Brennan frowned. “What?”

“If we’re shielding ourselves in a bubble, it’s like being in a hamster ball.”

The mage blinked a few times as if trying to figure out what was wrong with the exorcist before finally shaking his head. “Sure, okay.”

I chuckled.

“At least I get the sexy incubus in mine,” she continued as she included me in her hamster ball shield. Mayhem stuck with Brennan for now.

Brennan didn’t reply.

The weird blade shadows threw themselves at the shield again and again until they fractured into microscopic sizes. Still, they hovered around us in a cloud like gnats and crashed against our shields.

Chris eyed them warily. “Not positive, but guessing getting hit with a cloud of those knife shadow things would end the Price bloodline right quick.”

I shuddered at the thought.

I was paying more attention to the cloud of deadly shadows than the surroundings, so it surprised me when the walls disappeared as we came out into a large open space. Wrenching my attention away from the things attacking us, I looked around.

The room occupied a couple of stories worth of space in height though the ceiling was nothing special. The walls were the same white of indeterminate material, the floor the same concrete. There were no decorations or interruptions on the white of the walls, except where three other hallways branched off. One opposite the hallway we had come down and two perpendicular to us. It was as if someone had created a room from magic and forgotten most of the details. Or maybe they'd had no reason to add details. The air was obviously breathable, but it smelled stale.

The only interesting thing in the room besides my exorcist were four stainless steel pillars in the middle of the room. Hanging in the center of the pillars was a white glowing orb.

“That it?”

Brennan studied the objects for a while before nodding. “It looks like they have magic tied into each of those pillars. One is for incoming, one for outgoing power, one for defense, and one for containment. If I’m reading the sigils and energy signatures properly.”

“What’s that etched on the floor?” I took a step closer, though I stayed well within Chris’ bubble.

From where we stood at the edge of the room, it was difficult to make out the details, and I was impressed that Brennan had been able to figure all of that out.

“I need a minute to study the object more closely,” Brennan said.

“Are there any traps?”

“Other than the things trying to slice us to ribbons?” Brennan glanced around, studying the walls and the floor for any sign of traps.

“Yeah,” Chris grumbled.

All of the small flecks of black that were attacking us raced backward then zoomed forward all at once.

Chris’ shield rippled, and she diverted her concentration fully to maintaining it for a bit.

We moved forward as close as we dared, and Brennan studied the sigils etched into the ground. Chris' shoulders went rigid with tension, and she shuddered. "Yeah, those are in Demonic."

"Correct. I cannot read the language, but I do have some ability to read the magic. Give me a minute and then we can confer."

I massaged Chris' shoulders while she swore under her breath at the cloud of gnats slowly becoming harder and harder to see.

We all flinched when a loud clap of sound pressed against us.

The shadow thing had reformed into a single solid object, and it slid around the outsides of the walls, staring at us.

"Maybe it's got some intelligence in it," Chris muttered.

"Oh! I think that's a soul guardian."

"What the fuck is that, mate?" Despite her annoyed tone she leaned back into my touch.

"They're beings normally only found in purgatory that protect the souls while they are vulnerable to something that might want to consume them. There are plenty of things out there that like to eat souls."

"That's fucking terrifying," Chris replied.

"Yes. I'm not so sure I'm better for having that knowledge," Brennan said dryly.

"Sorry. You're not going to like this next bit, then. The only way to defeat them is to get them to turn solid. They only do that right before they attack."

"Uh. Great." Chris pinched the bridge of her nose and muttered something about pizza.

"Yes. So how do you defeat them when they're solid?" Brennan glanced at me.

I shrugged. "I actually don't know. I just know you can. Your magical weapons would probably do it, Chris."

She nodded. “Probably, going by the spells etched into the blade. But how to get it to stay solid?”

“It gets better,” Brennan added. “These appear to be both complicated traps and complicated containments. I’m not sure if we can undo this while we’re under attack from the guardian.”

“If anyone can figure it out, it’ll be you two.” I tried to be encouraging while trying to remember if I knew anything else about the guardians.

“Can you reach your demonic boyfriend and ask him if he knows?” Brennan asked distractedly. He studied the sigils again.

Chris reached out and touched me. “I can reach Sabian. I’m completely cut off from Ezra, and Sabian already said he wasn’t sure if he knew more.”

Brennan glanced up again, one eyebrow cocked. “I meant Lucifer.”

Chris flushed, gritted her teeth, and took a deep breath as if trying not to snap at the mage. Brennan, for his part, smirked at her before looking quickly away. I wasn’t even sure if she noticed his expression.

I squeezed her shoulders, digging my fingers in and trying to ease her if I could.

“I’ll try,” she finally said before shutting her eyes and turning her attention inward.

She went rigid, and a tremor shivered through her. “No. I cannot, and I seriously hope he can actually get us out when the time comes. I’m not feeling confident at the moment.”

“We’ll figure something out,” I assured her. “I don’t think he would have sent you in if he didn’t feel certain he could retrieve you.”

“I sure as hell hope so.” She glanced up at me, her eyes glistening.

“You’ll get us out, too.” It wasn’t hard to figure out what was on her mind with that look.

Chris sighed, shoulders slumping. “We’re on our own for now.”

“Think, Chris,” Brennan said. “You know a ton about the occult. Anything about making the unknown, known? A spell that brings shadows to light? We can adapt my magic with your occultism.”

“You don’t think your spells will be enough on their own?”

“I’d feel better with a collaboration. I have a few ideas for both this and the spells laid into the ground, but you are far more familiar with demons and demonic magic than I am, despite my involvement with Lott and Mammon.”

Chris shook her head and sighed again. “Yeah, seem to be becoming an expert.”

While I knew she didn’t mean anything specifically against me by that statement, I couldn’t help but feel she’d be happier right now if I hadn’t come into her life.

“Hey.” She took my hand. “I’m not upset about having you or Ezra in my life. Or Mayhem or Inferno. It’s just a lot to take in right now. I wouldn’t change anything. It’s just strange to be so up close and personal with all of this.”

“You are an exorcist,” I pointed out.

She frowned. “Yeah, I am, aren’t I?” Mind clearly moving to another track, she turned and looked at the shadow thing lurking on the wall, then back at the sigils on the floor.

“In theory I know how to do a summoning. I know how to do bindings and banishings. What if we lure it into a banishing circle, trap it, you make it physical, and I try to exorcise it?”

Brennan frowned. “But where would it get sent? If nothing can escape, this creature is probably just as trapped here as we are.”

“I really hate the way you say that.” Chris rubbed her hands together.

“Sorry,” he replied.

“You’re probably not going to lure it into a banishing circle. Not easily,” I said. “Unless we have bait. You exorcise demons without solid forms. Can you banish the shadow into the containment circle?”

“Yes, then I could use the spell to make the unknown, known. I think that will work on this creature. Then we can kill it with your spelled knife.” Brennan nodded. “I think this will work. I even have the things we need. It’s a simple enough spell on my side and you just need chalk, right?”

“We’re missing something,” Chris said, crossing her arms and frowning in concentration. “Banishing, at least the way I do it, isn’t that precise,” she continued. “I could try to summon it into the circle, but I don’t really know enough about it, to call it.” She shrugged. “I have an idea, anyway. You said you had chalk?”

Brennan fished in his pockets and handed Chris a couple of sticks of chalk.

“Okay, I’m going to try the exorcism route first. Sabian, can you move into Brennan’s shield?”

“Sure.”

Chris moved so that her bubble touched Brennan’s. He expanded his to encompass both of us and then Chris dropped hers so I could move over next to the mage. The black shadow on the wall twitched but didn’t try to attack us.

My amazing exorcist reformed her shield and moved out of Brennan’s. Then she moved around in the room, back toward the walls where there were no etched sigils and studied the floor until she found a spot she liked and started drawing.

I watched the sure strokes of her hand as she put down the necessary markings for the containment circle. Once she had finished that, she stood in the center and drew a continuous chalk line, pivoting gracefully at the center point of the circle.

Chris carefully backed out of the middle and studied her work before nodding to herself.

“Sorry if this doesn’t work,” she said before standing and dropping her shield.

Brennan and I both yelled and Mayhem leapt out of the bubble as the shadow turned edgewise and zoomed toward Chris. Even Mayhem wasn't fast enough. The thing crossed the edge of the containment circle, and I felt it snap to life.

Both the mage and I flinched as it slammed into the side closest to Chris and split in half. Chris didn't budge until Mayhem tackled her out of the way a moment later.

Brennan dropped his shield and ran over to her side. "I could have done that," he practically shouted at her.

"Not asking someone to take a risk I'm not willing to take," she replied and climbed to her feet.

Brennan backed up, jaw clenched, but he didn't refute her.

"You're allowed to argue with me, you know," she said as she turned back to the creature attacking the walls of its prison. It fractured again and again, as it had before.

"Can't we just keep it in there while we work?" I asked.

"I'm not confident it won't find a weakness. If it were a demon, yes we could." Chris eyed the creature. "Is it a demon?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "So what's next?" I moved over to her and took her hand. I needed some reassurance that she really was okay.

"Now Brennan does his thing, and we see if we can make it solid. Then we try to kill it, I guess. Feel kind of bad about that, really." Chris shrugged. "What else can we do?"

"Nothing." Brennan dug in his pocket and pulled out some incense and a lighter. I watched as he lit the stick and waved it around the circle before dropping the stick to the ground and putting his hands together as if he were saying a prayer. He slowly separated his hands while he chanted in the fay tongue. A red glow built between his hands, brightening to orange when he stopped.

"I will have to break the containment," Brennan said. "Be ready in case it gets out. Perhaps you should put up your shield again."



I noticed Chris didn't do what he said, instead drawing her spelled knife and standing ready at his side.

Brennan gave her some side-eye but didn't argue.

I felt completely useless. So far, I hadn't managed to contribute anything useful to this mission, but I wouldn't have wanted Chris to come alone, either.

The shadow had finished fracturing and melted back into its single form, watching and waiting for its time to strike.

Brennan pushed his hands into the circle, breaking the containment. A demon could have slipped out easily, but the creature didn't seem to realize the barrier had a weakness.

It did flash toward Brennan's hands. The mage released the spell and jerked backward before he lost his limbs.

The orange magic crashed into the shadowy creature as it darted forward.

It twisted, writhing as the magic surrounded it. Finally, the orange light vanished, and the black shadow melted to the ground and lay there, as if exhausted.

After a minute, it stood, rolling to its feet bonelessly before it turned a nightmare visage upon us.

"Holy shit," Chris breathed. "I think I preferred the other version."

Brennan didn't reply, but his eyes were wide. Me? Well, I'd seen a lot of scary shit living in Hell, and this currently hit the top ten scariest things I'd ever seen. Chris dying and almost dying were the top two.

Mayhem growled.

The creature, still all black and now even more difficult to focus on, as if it were made of the same void material as the prison we were in, now had silvery teardrop-shaped eyes that stretched down its face and a silver slit of a mouth with row upon row of dagger-like fangs that it bared at us. Something dripped from those teeth. The concrete sizzled where it hit the ground. It had a semblance of arms that ended in dozens of sharp daggers.

The hair on the back of my neck rose and I remembered part of my job was lookout. I glanced behind us. “Fuck, guys, there’s more.”

Brennan acted fast, surrounding us in a protective shield before we were sliced into ribbons.

“How many of them are there?” Chris asked.

“Four, I think. One for each hallway,” Brennan replied.

“Let’s hope there aren’t any more.” I managed not to whimper, but it was a close call.

The other three surrounded the one we had trapped. One of the other shadows sank to the floor then rose up in solid nightmarish form before leaking the venom from its mouth on the sigils Chris had drawn.

“Fuck me,” she exclaimed as her containment barrier dropped and the soul guardian escaped.

As one, they attacked our shields.

# Chapter 12

## *Price*

Sweat broke out on my forehead as I threw up a shield inside of Brennan's. The soul guardians, two in that weird ass shadow form and two in the terrifying solid form, went to town on his magic. I got my shield up just as his splintered under the onslaught.

"Well, this is cool." I racked my brain for something to try. The only thing I could think of was to treat them like demons and try to exorcise them. If it worked, they'd be returned to purgatory. If it didn't, we'd figure something else out.

Nothing was supposed to be able to get out of the soul trap, but Mammon had already introduced weaknesses with his conduits in and out for the souls and the energy they produced for him. I just had to hope it was enough.

"If by cool you mean terrifying," Brennan said, though his tone conveyed none of his feelings.

I glanced over at my mage. He definitely had that shutdown expression on his face again. Guilt at dragging him into this warred with knowledge that he'd been involved before I met him.

Sabian put his warm hand on my back, probably touching me just to be touching me, and Mayhem whined as he turned, trying to keep all four of them in sight at once.

“Here goes nothing,” I said. I held the ritual knife in my hand as I prepared myself mentally for an exorcism. I hoped the skin-crawly feeling I got from the knife was in my head and not actually an effect of trying to do this using demonic tools. A few deep breaths and I slid into the proper mindset. For a moment it felt so good to be here, doing something that was as familiar to me as breathing, that I just stood with my eyes shut and enjoyed the sensation.

“I have the shields,” Brennan said, interrupting my moment with myself.

“Okay.” Trusting him to hold them, I dropped mine and focused fully on getting rid of these creatures.

*“Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus, omnis satanica potestas, omnis incursio infernalis adversarii,”* I intoned.

Sabian groaned. That is what I had forgotten.

He must have sensed my hesitation. “Keep going. If you actually banish me here, I’ll end up home and I’ll meet you at Ezra’s. Otherwise, it’s just uncomfortable.”

I gave him a thumbs up and focused on the energies I called from inside myself with my ritual words.

Sabian shuddered as I worked my way through the incantation. He didn’t fight me, otherwise his presence might have been distracting. The creatures shifted around restlessly, attacking the shields as I chanted.

*“Libertate servire, te rogamus, audi nos!”* I managed to hang onto Sabian, barely—which gave me some hope that if I could get out, I could get him out, too. Two of the spirit guardians slipped through my grasp, but I did actually manage to banish the two who were in solid form. They fought, but I’d banished more difficult demons recently and I had a lot of extra power stored up.

“Hey, I did it!” I was happy for about a half a second then the other two wailed, and by wailed I don’t mean cried or

howled or did anything else even remotely earthly. No, they took up a sort of banshee shriek that pierced through me. I clamped my hands to my ears and fell to my knees, certain my very bones were going to fly apart.

Somehow Brennan kept the shield up. After a moment another barrier snapped into place, sheltering us from the eardrum shattering cry.

I hadn't even noticed Mayhem's howl of agony until he stopped, whimpering a few times before falling silent.

"Ow," I said, just wanting to collapse in on myself and heal from that assault. I glanced over at Brennan. He was on his knees but looked relatively chill. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yes. I have a great deal of practice casting magic under difficult circumstances."

"Ahh, right. Well, I'm not grateful for your experiences, but I think you just saved our butts, so thanks regardless."

Brennan smiled.

"Sabian?" My incubus was curled up on the floor behind me. He'd been there before the spirit guardians had attacked us.

"I'll survive."

Twisting around, I put my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

He put his hand over mine.

I pet Mayhem on the head. The hellhound purred, and I thought he was okay.

The remaining soul guardians prowled, and while I felt like I had managed to banish the other two, I wasn't a hundred percent confident that I hadn't just sent them back down their respective hallways.

"Now we get the other two to solidify and do it again?" The strain in Sabian's voice hurt me, but he wasn't objecting, and it had worked once, it would likely work again.

"Yes," Brennan said.

I climbed to my feet and offered Sabian a hand, but he waved it away. "I'm just going to stay down here."

"Sabian—"

"It's okay, Chris. You're not hurting me on purpose, and it's what we have to do. I'll be okay."

I glanced at Brennan, but the mage shook his head. "We have little choice."

"Fine. Okay, Brennan, do your thing."

Brennan prepared the spell again. This time when he pushed his hands out of the shield, I cast one on the inside, just in case.

The mage released the spell and jerked his hands back just as one of the guardians darted around the side of the shield.

Brennan hissed and clutched his hand to his chest while the orange glow tangled with the shadow.

"Are you okay?" I tugged on Brennan's arm. He let me have it.

"It's bad," he said. "I'll have to heal it before I can do the other spell."

"Fuck, mate." The wound was deep. It had cut into half of his hand. Fortunately, he wasn't missing fingers, but bone and tendon had severed, leaving several of his fingers useless.

"How long will that take to fix?" I twisted my hands together, feeling helpless to stop the blood pouring from Brennan's wound.

"Long enough that you should begin your exorcism again. I can maintain the shield and heal myself." His breath came in short, pained gasps, but somehow he remained calm.

"Mate, I don't even want to know how you have those skills."

"It's not as complicated as it sounds when you have practice," he replied quietly.

“If I hadn’t already shanked that bitch, I’d be going back to kill her.”

Brennan nodded. “I appreciate the thought.”

He was smiling faintly as he held his hand, blood dripping through his fingers.

“Get yourself taken care of. I’ll see to this.” He was losing a lot of blood and acted completely unconcerned about it.

Brennan knelt and turned his attention inward. Sabian had sat up but was still on the floor.

“Ready?” I asked the incubus.

He grinned. “I was born ready to be exorcised by you.”

That startled a laugh out of me. “I love you, Sabian.”

“Love you, too, Chris. Now get rid of this thing for us. This place is making me twitchy.”

I winked. “As you wish.”

Sabian’s grin lit up his face.

Centering myself, I brought myself back to the necessary mindset for the exorcism.

The incantation flowed from me as easily as my sarcasm did and I was able to grab a hold of one solidified spirit guardian.

The other one went nuts as I reached the midway point of the exorcism. It threw itself into the shield again and again, fracturing into smaller pieces as it tested Brennan’s shield.

To Brennan’s credit, the shield didn’t budge, though sweat beaded on his forehead.

I continued with the incantation, trying to ignore the chaos of the other guardian. It was probably screeching, but we were still shielded from that, as well. How much could Brennan do at once? I was feeling a lot less bad about getting my ass handed to me when he’d captured me a few weeks ago.

Just like the others, the soul guardian fought me, but with an extra push of energy I banished it away from here.

“Chris,” Brennan gasped.

Acting on instinct, I threw up a shield just as Brennan lost hold of his.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be. You did fantastic. Now finish healing that wound before you bleed out. Sabian, you okay?”

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t sound okay, and he was pale and sweating, but he was still with us. One more to go.

The strain of all the casting on top of everything else that had happened recently was telling, though. My thoughts were wandering, and that was never good during an exorcism. It was getting harder to maintain the shield, and fingers of pain radiated from my temples.

Brennan climbed back to his feet, covered in blood. However, he flexed his hand and nodded. “I’m okay.”

“You sure? If you need a few minutes, I can give it to you.”

Brennan shook his head. “Let’s get this creature taken care of. Then maybe you should feed your incubus before we tackle the spells around the soul battery.”

I glanced at Sabian. He certainly needed some fuel. “Yeah, I’ll see what I can do.”

That perked Sabian up a bit. “I’m okay, Chris. Really. Do what you need to do. This sucks, but I’m still glad I came.”

“Yeah, me, too. We probably wouldn’t have noticed the other guardians until it was too late if you hadn’t spotted them.”

My incubus grinned. “Glad I could help.”

“Okay, we need another plan to get that spell out of our shield. Clearly the guardian is on to that trick, and I don’t want you to lose a hand.”

“That would be a great deal more difficult to heal,” Brennan agreed.

“Could you heal that?”



“I’m not sure.”

“Well, I guess I’m glad you haven’t had to find out.”

Brennan shuddered, emotion briefly breaking through his stoic demeanor. “I will shield my hands as I push it out this time.” He chanted, not showing any hint of his earlier distress.

Once the ball of energy turned from red to orange, he pushed his hand through the shield again. This time when the guardian attacked, it hit his hand and fractured. Brennan quickly pulled his hands back into the shield, and the orange magic tackled the guardian.

This one fought, slamming itself into the shield over and over again, as if breaking apart repeatedly might save it from the same fate as its companions.

So far none of the others had returned, so I assumed I’d been successful with them.

It took longer, and Brennan began another chant, feeding the spell more energy, before it finally overcame the guardian’s more ethereal form. Its scream overpowered the protections in my shield, and I clapped my hands over my ears. Brennan reinforced me and the pain eased. The nightmare creature threw itself onto my shield slashing and tearing.

Knives of agony sliced through my temples, and I lost my hold on the shield.

“Fuck!” I threw myself between Brennan and the enraged spirit guardian, praying for all I was worth that my wards saved my ass.

Both Sabian and Brennan yelled, “Chris!”

Mayhem bellowed, trying to intercept the creature but it was too fast and slammed into me.

The resulting explosion of energy tossed me back into Brennan and hurled the spirit guardian away.

“Thank fuck that worked,” I gasped.

Brennan groaned, and I rolled off him. “Sorry.”

“I’ll survive,” he muttered before casting yet another shield around us.

The soul guardian staggered up from the ground but didn’t immediately attack.

Mayhem growled at me, turning his back, and lashing his tail along the ground like an angry cat.

“Sorry, buddy.” I climbed to my feet.

The hellhound huffed.

“I’m with the hellhound,” Sabian said.

“I’m warded,” I protested. “Brennan isn’t. Unless you’re upset that I dropped the spell. In which case, I agree, too.”

Brennan surprised me when he wrapped me in his arms. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I melted into his embrace for a moment, and I could feel Sabian’s anger softening. Mayhem, too.

“Okay, last one.” I pulled everything I had left into me.

The air around us trembled as the guardian glided toward us. Brennan threw up his hand and chanted, trying to reinforce his spell.

Having an idea of what the creature was up to, I pulled my knife, planted myself squarely in front of the guardian, and waited for it to charge.

After a moment, it did. Brennan’s shield disintegrated as the creature charged through. It came at me, dagger-tipped hands reaching for me.

At the last second, I ducked under its reach. Rolling, I came to my feet, and buried my knife in the thing’s gut, my misspent youth coming in handy. I wasn’t a fighter, but I’d been in plenty of scraps from running my mouth in my younger years. Come to think of it, not much had changed.

It didn’t try to dodge, probably hadn’t thought I’d be a real threat, and the shriek of rage as the magic on my demonic knife burned through it felt like it rattled my teeth loose in my

skull. Dropping the knife, I curled into a ball and covered my ears.

Something clamped down on my leg and yanked me backward, saving me from another field test of my wards as the spirit guardian stabbed the ground where I'd been trying to hold my eardrums in place.

Mayhem laid his huge form on top of me, protecting me as best he could while the spirit guardian writhed in agony.

“Brennan, can you blast Mayhem with some energy?” I said. “Get him charged up? A little hellfire goes a long way.”

Brennan nodded. “Ready, Mayhem?”

The hellhound knew what I wanted and hopped off me, though he stayed between me and the danger.

Brennan hit him with a blast of cool blue energy. Mayhem absorbed it, and a glow built in his eyes before lighting up his chest.

The spirit guardian was in rough shape, but it looked like it might be ready to fight again.

Mayhem roared out hellfire, and yep, that did the trick. The creature staggered back, burning where the hellfire touched it, going up like a piece of paper, body turning to ash and falling to the ground, before disintegrating.

“Why didn't we start with that?” Brennan mused.

“They move too fast,” I pointed out. “As powerful as the hellfire is, it's not a quick weapon. Also, I'm pretty sure it was a combination of attacks that took this last one down. I really hope they're gone, because I'm just going to lay here for a minute or two. The ceiling looks nice.”

“You should feed your incubus,” Brennan suggested.

I rolled over on my side and looked at Sabian. He also laid on his side, eyes slightly unfocused as he studied me.

Trying not to groan at the effort—I didn't want Sabian to misinterpret my reluctance to move as me not wanting to make out with him—I got to my feet and came over to him.

“Sabian, are you okay?” I knelt next to my incubus.

“I am, Chris. Fending off three exorcisms, even with your help, took its toll. I will be okay in a few minutes.”

I glanced at Brennan.

“Do what you need to, Chris. You’re not going to bother me. I will keep watch.”

“Sabian, what would be best for you?”

He grinned. “I’m not in as bad shape as when you first found me, or when you rescued me from Lott, but I’m always happy to have a taste of your love.”

“I think I can handle that,” I said as I leaned over and pressed my lips to his. He reached up and pulled me to him. I gave myself to him, tangling my legs with his, pressing against his warmth, and letting the love I felt for him flow between us.

The tug of my energy flowing into the incubus was not unpleasant, though I wasn’t used to feeling it when he fed from my emotions. Probably something to do with me marking him.

We kissed for a while, running our hands over each other, and thoroughly turning each other on. Conscious of both our circumstances and our audience, I didn’t slide my hands under his shirt, didn’t explore those sculpted muscles. I wanted to, but getting naked with my incubus was probably not the best idea at the moment.

He broke off our kiss and chuckled, clearly catching that thought. “Later.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Are you feeling better?” His color was vastly improved if nothing else.

“Yes, thank you.”

The brief interlude had done me some good, too. I got back to my feet.

Brennan shot me a quick smile before turning his attention from our perimeter to the sigils surrounding the soul trap.

Sabian concentrated on watching our backs while I joined Brennan.

“Can you read these to me?” he asked.

“Yep.” I spent a few minutes translating all the Demonic as best as I could into English.

After I finished, Brennan rested his chin on his hand and thought. “The outer two rings are defenses. The inner two are containment. I don’t think the last two rings will be difficult, and the outer two are certainly not going to pose the same issues that the spirit guardians did. Let me dismantle this. I will let you know if I need assistance.”

“That fight was tough, do you need any backup? I have a lot of energy stored up.”

“I will ask if I do.”

I set myself to watching as Brennan slowly wove a spell around the sigils in the outer defensive ring. There was no way I could have done what he was doing. At least not with any degree of finesse. I probably could have brute forced my way through it, but his method was way better.

After a few minutes, the energy fled from the defenses. They were now simply inert symbols.

“Yeah, that was way easier than the guardians.”

“I suspect Mammon and whoever else set this up did not expect anyone to get past the guardians. These are cursory.”

“Probably not,” I agreed.

It took him longer on the containments, but not by much.

“Okay, now what?” We stared at the glowing orb.

“Honestly, I think we need a bit of the Price brand of magic here,” Brennan said.

“Say what?”

“Break the pillars,” he clarified.

“Oh!” I laughed. “I can do that. Any particular order?”

“Start with the defensive one.” He pointed. “Then the outgoing conduit, the incoming, and then the containment one.” He indicated each pillar in turn.

“All right, one round of destruction heading our way.”

I didn't fail to notice that Brennan gestured for Sabian to step back. Mayhem stuck by my side, but he was able to absorb energy damage.

Digging into my well of knowledge from Ezra, I selected a spell designed to break things and pulled on my energy. Though I was tired from the fight with the guardians, chaotic destruction was up my alley.

The spell shaped easily in my hands, and I aimed it at the first pillar.

The result was everything I could ever have hoped for. It erupted into an explosion of silver shards, and a loud clap of released energy. I threw up a quick shield to protect Mayhem.

“Well done,” Brennan said.

For some reason, praise from him went a long way toward making me feel all warm and fuzzy. “Thank you.”

The other three pillars went just as quickly, with similar results. Cautiously I approached the glowing orb, pulling out the necklace Lucifer gave to me. Not knowing what else to do, I leaned forward and touched it to the orb.

That was apparently the right answer because the light flowed from the orb into the pendant until the glow had completely transferred. I slipped the necklace back under my shirt just as the ground trembled.

“Okay, we need to get out of here,” I said.

“Hopefully your boyfriend can tell it's time to pull you out,” Brennan said.

I didn't bother correcting him, barely keeping my feet through another quake. Hoping this was the right thing to do, I shoved a whole bunch of “get me out of here” energy into the mark Lucifer had placed upon my chest.

It warmed, and after a moment, I felt a tug, like something pulled at my very center. It wasn't enough.

"Oh, fuck," I muttered.

Brennan's worried look was the last thing I saw as Lucifer gave a powerful yank and jerked me out of the soul trap.

The sensation of flying through the air was not consistent with the absolute lack of anything but blackness in my vision. Before I could panic, the hillside flashed into existence, and I crashed into someone's arms.

"Oof," Lucifer grunted as he inadvertently cushioned my fall with his body.

I scrambled to my feet and stared at the soul trap. Crackles of red lightning worked its way around the surface and even without knowing much about the things, I could tell it was breaking apart. I doubted that would be good for anyone inside.

I turned and offered Lucifer a hand when he didn't get up right away. He accepted, his hand warm in mine. My skin tingled at his touch. I let go, but he moved behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, leaning on me.

"Are you okay?"

"That took a great deal of effort, even for me. I will be okay."

"Fuck." If that had been difficult for him, I was so fucked.

"You should hurry, Price," Lucifer said from behind me.

Mal's shout of pain, and the sound of a nighstallion screaming in fury had me turning away from the soul trap.

"Oh, fuck," I said again.

# Chapter 13

## *Price*

A legion of demons bore down on us, crawling up the side of the mountain we were on like a sea of horror. Lucifer had clearly paused in helping to hold them off to retrieve me. Aaron swung his holy sword to devastating effect. He was in next to no danger from the demons currently attacking us. Mal, however, was on slightly more even footing with the creatures, though he was holding his own despite the blood staining his shirt. Whatever wound he had suffered didn't seem to be slowing him down. They were holding a narrow pass between two jutting peaks, but even I knew the demons were climbing up and over. They'd surround and overwhelm us soon enough.

Inferno dashed back and forth, crushing demons beneath his hooves and breathing out hellfire, burning them away. The nightstallion seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Do two things. Get your men out of there, and summon your legions to help us. Put out the call first.”

“How?”

Lucifer tightened his grip on my shoulders and took a deep breath, seeming to try for patience. “Yes, I realize you are not actually one of my princes,” he said instead of snapping at me.



“Use your connection to Ezra’s energy and yell ‘help.’ That will do it.”

“Really?”

“We do not have time to argue. That is the simplest, and you don’t have to worry about saving face. Yell for help then summon your hound and your men so we can get out of here. I will help you.”

I did what he said, turning my attention to Ezra’s energies and shouting for help really fucking loudly. So loudly that I felt Lucifer flinch. I guess he would be tied into his prince’s energy.

The result was almost instantaneous. Demons of the slightly more friendly variety flooded onto the plain.

“Why didn’t you get my legions here?” I glanced over my shoulder at him.

“Later, Price.” He twisted away from me, looking at the demons attacking us.

“Right.” I turned back toward the fracturing void and called Mayhem to my side with all my power and a small boost from Lucifer. His power flowed into me from the dual marks we shared.

The hound popped into existence with a surprised yelp.

“Good boy.” I rubbed his ruff briefly before focusing on Sabian. “Sabianamon, come to me now!”

It took a lot more effort on my part and a great deal of assistance from Lucifer, but my demon appeared next to me.

“Thank the abyss,” Sabian said, sinking to his knees at my side. He wrapped an arm around my leg, much like he had when we had first met and he’d begged Darius to let him stay.

“Yeah, now for Brennan.” I gritted my teeth, not nearly as confident in my ability to call a non-demon to me. Even with Lucifer’s help.

“You can do it,” Sabian said.

“I have no choice,” I reminded myself, and sank down into the connection I’d forged with the mage and the elven version of a bond I’d forged. I wrapped my energy around that and the memories I had of him and the way he made me feel and yanked as hard as I could. Lucifer’s energy blasted through me as he aided my retrieval.

It almost wasn’t enough, but after a panicked moment where I threw everything I possibly could at the summons, Brennan crashed into my arms much like I had into Lucifer’s, throwing me back into the demon. We overbalanced, Lucifer again keeping me from hitting the ground with his body.

I stared as the void broke apart. Then with a painful clap of energy, it sucked back in on itself like I imagined a black hole might until there was nothing left.

“Holy shit,” I breathed out, clutching Brennan.

For once he had no ounce of tension at the contact, and I could feel through the bond that he needed me holding him at the moment. He’d probably never say it aloud, but that was the most afraid he’d been in a long time. Lucifer made no objection to the awkward position we were in, though I had to be making it hard for him to breathe.

Mayhem bellowed and lunged away from me. I twisted around in time to see him tear a demon’s throat out.

“Shit,” I swore. “Lucifer! We can leave any time!”

Brennan scrambled to his feet and hauled me to mine. I pulled Lucifer to his feet, and he sagged against me.

“Shit, mate. Are you okay?”

He nodded and took a deep breath. I held him while he pulled on his power.

Seconds later, my vision blurred and then all of us were standing in a large room. Lucifer sagged against me as I looked around, while holding the ruler of Hell up on his feet.

“Where are we?”

He perked up and glanced around, eyes going wide moments before pain lanced through my back. No, that wasn’t

my pain I felt, that pain came through one of my bonds.

Lucifer gasped, blood bubbling on his lips. Through our connection I could feel something tugging at his essence or whatever it was that passed for a soul in demons.

“Fuck!” I shouted, yet again. I was *not* letting someone steal him away. I grabbed hold of him through our dual marks and yanked. My claim was stronger than whatever was trying to drag him away, and I staggered backward with the force of it.

Lucifer’s body fell to the ground, lifeless. I lifted my eyes, staring in shock.

Mammon, holding a familiar-looking dagger dripping with demon blood, stood there grinning. “How kind of you to leave me a tool that can kill a demon this powerful,” he said. “You even gave me enough time to add a little trap on it. I guess I’ll take him in exchange for all the souls you stole from me. Probably a fair trade.” He grinned. “Not only did you give me the tool I needed to kill him, you weakened him enough that I could pull you all off course. How very thoughtful of you. It’s almost enough to make me forgive you for stealing away a valuable asset.” His gaze turned to Brennan for a moment.

I buried every thought I had as deeply as I possibly could about the fact that he didn’t actually have Lucifer, instead filling my mind with all the rage and terror of the last few weeks.

*Get us out of here before he figures it out.*

*But— I was so shocked I couldn’t even think.*

*Go! He’ll start by torturing your men, and then you, and then he’ll have everything.*

How I managed to layer that conversation under the screaming I was doing in my head, I didn’t know, but Lucifer was right. I pulled on my power and Ezra’s power, grabbed my men, my nightstallion, and my hellhound, and jerked us out of Mammon’s grasp and into Ezra’s study. It was a tight fit with the stallion.

*Go, get out of Hell, now! As soon as my power doesn't transfer to him, he'll know, and he'll be coming.*

“Let's go!” I shouted and sprinted for the door.

No one questioned me as we burst through the doors of the study. I slammed into the opposite wall, I was running so hard. I managed to get turned and ran for the portal Lucifer had made in Ezra's bedroom. Hellhounds raced with us as we ran.

“Mayhem, call all your buddies. I don't want to leave any of you in Hell right now.”

I sent out a thought using Ezra's power, letting the demons know they needed to hide, that Mammon was coming, and that I would be back for them and we would regroup. I hoped that didn't fuck over Ezra in the long run, but I didn't want anyone getting surprised.

*Amazingly compassionate toward a bunch of demons.*

*Asshole, they're currently my people. Gotta protect them as best I can.*

He didn't reply.

We burst into Ezra's bedroom. “Go through the portal now! This time I really do have to go last.”

For once, none of the guys questioned me. They just ran through, followed by a larger number of hellhounds than my house was going to comfortably hold, but I had to get them safe. Mayhem stood with me. Fortunately, the hellhounds were efficient, and they were through in short order.

I could feel the energy in Ezra's domain shudder. Mammon had figured out something had gone wrong. He could not know I had Lucifer in my possession.

Mayhem followed the last hellhound through the portal, and I went last. Once we were on the other side, I flicked open the pocketknife Mal had given me and slashed a sigil in my palm. Once the blood flowed, I pulled Lucifer's power through my hand and flung my blood at the portal. It sealed with an audible snap. It was still there, but now only beings literally

bound to me would be able to pass through, and I doubted even Mammon could break that lock.

Of course, now the hellhounds were stuck here, but for now that would be okay.

*Price, I'm sorry,* Lucifer said before trying to take over my body.

*Oh, hell no,* I snarled. I'd been possessed once before, and once was enough. I was a damn exorcist. No way was anyone, even the ruler of Hell, shoving me out of my own body. I pulled on my well of power that he'd given me, pulled on Ezra's power, and finally stole some of Lucifer's, and shoved him down hard.

His anger burned through me, but I met it with my own.

*You can hang out, asshole, but you cannot have my body. Not like that, anyway.*

He fought, but ultimately, I won. I had too many ties into his power and enough of my own that he couldn't currently overpower me. If he hadn't been exhausted from earlier, maybe he could have, but as it stood, I was stronger.

"Chris!" Someone was shaking my shoulder.

I groaned and looked up. I'd ended up on my hands and knees.

"Mal," I gasped as my limbs gave out and I collapsed to the ground.

My vampire gathered me up in his arms and waded through a sea of hellhounds.

Even though I was exhausted and emotionally worn out, I could see the humor in the situation.

"What are we going to do with them all?" Aaron asked Sabian as Mal carried me past.

"Feed them and keep them safe. They'll help keep us safe," Sabian said quietly.

The hellhounds shifted obediently out of the way.

“Remember,” I managed to slur, “you all have to be housebroke.”

Mayhem woofed as if amused.

“Hope that means yes,” I said.

“Chris, are you okay?”

“No, mate. Think I’m going to past the fuck out.”

“Lucifer—”

“I have *nothing* left, Mal. We can deal with everything else later. We’re as safe as we possibly can be here. Only place safer might be a church, and I don’t think most of us are welcome there. Let me sleep, please.”

“Of course, Chris. Alone?”

“No, not alone.”

*We are going to talk.*

*Later, mate. I’m done.*

I drifted off after that. I trusted my guys to figure out what needed to be done without me. I was vaguely aware of someone tugging my boots off. I hoped they got the rest of my clothing off, too, but at this point I could have been sleeping on spikes and I wouldn’t have cared. The cool wash of Brennan’s cleaning spell tingled over my skin. Damn that was thoughtful, or maybe I just was that stinky.

After that, I wasn’t aware of anything while my body pulled me into a deep-ass sleep that might let me recover some of my ability to cope with the next level of horror that we’d managed to discover.

# Chapter 14

## *Price*

Sometime later, Lucifer pulled me into that same white blank space that Ezra had used to communicate with me when he'd possessed me.

"You could have grabbed my body," he said, arms crossed. He was dressed in that same deep red dress shirt I'd admired a small eternity ago, and black dress slacks. Hellfire danced in his dark eyes and his face was as scarily handsome as ever.

"Uh, sorry." I sighed and ran a hand through the long part of my hair.

"I am not sure you could have," he finally admitted. "Thank you for saving me. I regret trying to possess you fully."

I frowned at his word choice. "Regret or you're sorry?"

"Regret. It has put me in a rather strange position. I'm not in possession of you at all. As before, your bloodlines cause infinite problems for us demons."

"Wait? What is this then? Didn't I pull you into me?"

"Yes, and believe me, I'm grateful. You essentially saved my life."

"You're welcome." I hugged myself.

“Yes, if we make it out of this you will be richly rewarded.”

“I don’t want a reward. I just want this to be over.”

Lucifer came over and wrapped his arms around me. “You possess me. You have nearly complete control over me at the moment. Please do not abuse that power.”

I took a breath and, inexplicably, burst into tears. This was just too much.

“I just want to make fucking pizza and fuck my men and not give a fuck about anything else,” I sobbed.

He didn’t reply, just held me while I cried, which was really more than I had ever expected from someone who ruled Hell.

Finally, I cried myself out and just let him hold me, feeling wrung out.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said.

“For what?” He replied, surprisingly tender.

I looked up, shocked, and he gently wiped tears from my cheeks. “Crying all over you.”

“You don’t have to be strong all the time, Chris.”

That brought more tears to my eyes, but this sob session was significantly shorter.

Lucifer bent over and kissed me, his tongue lightly touching my lips before he leaned back, tasting my tears.

I didn’t apologize this time, though I felt like I needed to.

“My dear exorcist, we’ll get through this. I’m not dead, merely inconvenienced. You and all your men are still alive. Mammon may have won this round, but the war is not over yet. We took his battery. We took Brennan. We just need to regroup and plan our next attack.”

“We need to regroup and rescue Ezra.”

“He may have to wait.”

“No. The next thing we’re doing is getting Ezra. No negotiation. If nothing else, he’s powerful. We do not want



him in Mammon's hands. Can you imagine what he'd do with that kind of leverage over me?"

Lucifer, still holding me, took a breath. "Okay. You're right. Next we'll get Ezra."

I nodded, leaning into him and resting my head against his chest. "I'm sorry."

"For what this time?"

"He got my knife. He used it on you. I dropped it when I killed the soul guardian."

Lucifer skimmed through my memories of the fight against the guardians, and I felt him stiffen. "If I'd had any idea he'd put a soul guardian in there, let alone four, I would not have sent you in. We would have figured out a different way." His arms tensed around me, almost painfully tight. "Don't worry about the rest. We'll work through it."

"Are you certain?" Why I needed to make sure he wasn't mad at me, I didn't know. The guilt I felt right now tore at me.

"None of that, Chris Price. You didn't do anything wrong, and you saved my life." He cupped my cheek and caressed his thumb along my jaw. "I'm going to kiss you now, and then you're going to wake up and we're going to make a plan to save Ezra. Focus on the next step. Let me worry about figuring out how to take back Hell. While you're in possession of me, we haven't lost the fight. He can't access my powers, which means he doesn't rule. He'll be able to fake it for a while, but eventually he will be defeated."

I knew he was trying to reassure me, but I still felt awful. So awful that I almost didn't remember that he'd told me he was going to kiss me until his lips met mine.

This time he wasn't rage kissing me. This time there was passion, desire, heat, and abyss help me, I wanted it. I opened for the ruler of Hell, letting him command my mouth. For a moment, I thought about taking charge of the kiss, but I'd taken away control of almost everything else from Lucifer, I could let him have this over me.

My hands wandered down his strong back, the material of his shirt silky under his hands.

He rumbled in pleasure as he cupped my ass with one hand and cradled my cheek with the other.

The thing about being in this blank space was that it was essentially all in my head, which meant I didn't need to break off to catch my breath. We kissed until clothes were going to start coming off if we didn't stop. Just because it was in my head didn't make it any less real, if my experiences with Ezra were anything to go off of.

“Chris, you should wake up now. We've got a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it in.” Lust had thickened his voice, and he cleared his throat. “If we go too much further, I'm going to have to apologize to your men later, and I do not like apologizing for anything.”

His comment broke through my guilt over giving Mammon the tool he needed to take out Lucifer and brought a smile to my lips. “Yeah, awkward conversation. So, I accidentally banged the ruler of Hell while he was stuck in my head. Sorry, guys.”

Lucifer chuckled. “Let's not make it an accident if we do, hmm?”

His words spiraled through me, pulling a gasp from my lips. Before I could come up with a sarcastic reply, I was no longer in the blank space. Instead, I was blinking sand from my eyes as I tried to climb back into consciousness.

Amazingly, I felt okay once I was sort of awake. I'd expected to be sporting a massive headache, if nothing else.

I'd also expected to be cradled between Sabian and Mal or curled up with Aaron. I was pressed between two men, but my arms were wrapped around Brennan, and Sabian was spooned around both of us. Mayhem, still in hellhound form by the weight, had laid across my legs. Another hellhound—probably Lucifer's—lay across the end of the bed.

Brennan wasn't awake yet, and I made myself keep still. He'd had a difficult day yesterday, as well.

“Good dreams?” Sabian whispered in my ear.

“Kind of,” I admitted.

“Wait.” He rolled me onto my back and stared into my eyes.

I’d been trying to keep from waking Brennan, but that had done it. I could sense him come awake in that very subtle way he had. He finally took a few deeper breaths and turned to face us. Sabian still had me pinned to the bed as he searched my face.

“What?”

“You’re not possessed?”

“Nope.”

“But...”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Long story, and we’ve got a lot to talk about. More importantly, we need to rescue Ezra before Mammon tries to use him as leverage.”

Sabian nodded. “Okay.”

I pulled him to me and kissed him thoroughly. Lucifer didn’t even squirm, that I noticed. He was probably lurking very deeply. I didn’t get the idea that he was a voyeur.

“Brennan, are you okay?” I asked once I’d had my way with Sabian.

The incubus purred as he held me.

“Yes, Chris. I hope you don’t mind me taking the place of one of your men. They wanted you to have a mage protecting you while you slept.”

“Brennan, you are one of my men.” I reached for him, and when he didn’t flinch away, I touched the pizza pentagram I’d marked his arm with.

He didn’t reply, going still, watching me warily. When I didn’t say anything else, he shook himself lightly and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I keep expecting some sort of follow up.”

My heart broke for him all over again. “Can I hug you?”

He thought before nodding.

“You can always say no, Brennan.”

“Thank you. Yes, please hug me.”

I wrapped my mage tightly in my arms, and he clung to me. Once I felt his grasp loosen ever so slightly, I let him go. I was almost looking forward to the day he felt comfortable enough to tell me no, but I could also sense that he actually wanted it this time.

“Ezra did a really good job on this bed,” I said after I climbed out of it.

“He did,” Sabian agreed.

I looked around the master bedroom. We had redecorated it something like a lifetime ago, but this was the first time I’d been able to sleep in the new bed. My gaze landed on the painting of the figure riding the nightstallion across a demonic landscape. Tears pricked my eyes, but I suppressed the emotion. We were going to get him back.

A hot shower was calling my name, and I headed for the master bathroom. Even after all these years it still felt weird to use it. Especially since I’d practically sealed the room away for most of the time my parents had been gone.

Still, once I was in the shower, the hot water pounding into my muscles from the massaging showerhead distracted me from the lingering discomfort of using my parents’ room.

*Do you know how you’re going to get into the Vatican?*

“I figure Darius owes me a favor or three. He’s a renowned exorcist. Maybe he can get me in.”

*A reasonable plan. What then?*

“Demand they return Ezra to me. If not, burn it all down.”

*I would caution against literally burning it down. There are things contained there that should not be unleashed.*

“Then they’d better give up my demon prince.” I leaned my hands on the shower wall and let the water run down my back.

*Hopefully they will see reason.*

“So, what are we going to do about you?”

*After we get Ezra, we need to defeat Michael, defeat Mammon, and then figure out how to return me to my body.*

“Would think you’d want to get back to it sooner than that.”

I could feel him shrug under my skin. The feeling was familiar from when Ezra had possessed me.

*There are advantages to my current situation.*

“Yeah, like what?”

*I’m surrounded by powerful men that would die to protect you, and your wards are not an inconsiderable advantage, not to mention you are considerably more powerful than any human has a right to be.*

“And you’re not badass enough on your own?”

He chuckled. *Not at the moment, apparently.*

“You seem to be in an awfully good mood considering the circumstances.”

*I could be well and truly dead, or worse, at Mammon’s mercy.*

“Instead, you’re at mine.”

*There are worse places to be,* he replied.

“I would not be nearly so calm about this if it were happening to me,” I muttered.

*You already have a track record of not abusing Ezra’s power. Oddly enough, I trust you, Chris. Also, I am not completely defenseless. If you were about to do something truly regrettable, I could probably incapacitate you long enough to get you to see reason.*

“Really?”

Tendrils of pleasure coiled through me, promising so much more.

His voice lowered seductively as he said, *Really.*

“Yep, that would do it. Thought I was in control of you?” I tried really hard to ignore the needy ache that had formed between my legs.

*That doesn't mean I can't affect you.*

“Noted.” I groaned, my arousal not diminishing despite my wishes. “Damn it.”

He chuckled before his presence retreated.

“This is going to be like a repeat of having Ezra hanging out in my head, only apparently he's not going to object if I try to get laid,” I muttered to myself.

*No objection. It's easy enough to hide away.*

I didn't reply, just finished washing and dried off. I hung the towel and headed out into the bedroom.

Brennan, Aaron, and a whole bunch of hellhounds waited for me.

Unlike Brennan, who didn't react to my nudity, Aaron let his gaze roam over me while I headed over to the dresser to dig out some clothing.

“You know, you'd think I'd be used to the smell of brimstone right now, but that's a lot of hellhounds in the house.” I wrinkled my nose.

Aaron chuckled.

“I'll work on an air freshener spell,” Brennan promised.

“Please tell me Mal is cooking?”

“Mal is cooking,” Aaron replied.

“For real?” I paused in pulling on my purposefully ripped jeans and glanced at Aaron.

He grinned. “Yes.”

“Thank the gods.”

It didn't take long for me to finish dressing. I headed for the kitchen and once again wondered how we were going to feed all the hellhounds. They took up a lot of room in their hellhound shape, and they had stashed themselves everywhere a hellhound could possibly fit.

Mayhem trotted up to me, a big old doggy grin on his face. He sure was happy about something. I rubbed his ears and behind the curl of his horns, just as he liked.

“Buddy, do you have feeding your friends under control? What do we need to do, get a whole cow?”

He woofed.

*They can eat anything Mal can cook for now.*

“You know, the grocery store isn't warded,” I muttered.

*No, but you are.*

I rubbed at my forehead and waded my way through the hounds and into the living room and kitchen area.

Mal looked up from the stove. “Hope pancakes are okay with everyone.” He glanced at the hellhounds, too.

“They'll be fine with whatever.”

Mal studied me for a long moment before coming over to me. “Are you okay?”

I sighed. “Better than last night.” I folded into his arms.

“Any idea what we're going to do?”

“Get Ezra.”

He nodded. “Okay. Then what?”

“Well, we need to do a lot of things. First, I need to stuff my face with your delicious”—I winked at him, and his eyes widened—“pancakes.”

Mal cleared his throat. “Then what?”

“Then we need to call in a priest.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Maybe an archangel, too.”

Mal frowned.

“Azrael is technically an archangel.”

“Ahh. Excuse me, I need to flip a pancake.” He headed back for the kitchen while I filled my plate from his stack. It was quite a stack, too. Of pancakes. *Geeze, get your mind out of the gutter*, I thought to myself.

While I was shoving food in my face, the others joined us.

“Did someone help Inferno get out of the basement?” I finally remembered that he had been with us there.

“Yes, he’s out front. So are a large number of hellhounds. Your neighbors are getting an eyeful,” Sabian answered.

“Well, hopefully if the cops show up, it’ll be Darius’ friend and we can just say we got overrun with demons.”

Aaron chuckled.

“Hey, can you get Azrael here? I want to hand off these souls.”

“Sure.” Aaron pulled out his phone.

We all stuffed our faces while Mal continued to cook. Then we took turns handing out pancakes to the hellhounds. Once we had completed that task, we settled in the living room.

Just as I was about to launch into the plan for rescuing Ezra, someone knocked on the door.

The resulting howl as something like a hundred hellhounds took up the call was deafening.

“Quiet!” I shouted, not sure what else to do.

That got everyone to hush, and I rubbed at my ears. “It’s the cops, isn’t it? Tell me it’s not the cops.”

“No, but I imagine they’ll be on their way after that sound explosion,” Aaron said.

“Great,” I muttered sarcastically as I headed for the door and looked out the window before I opened it. Maybe I was learning something from nearly dying twice. Of course, I



wasn't entirely pleased with who stood on the other side of the door.

That the hellhounds who had been outside were all glaring at Gabriel with teeth bared and hellfire lighting up their chests improved my mood a little. The angel's obvious discomfort made me even happier.

The hounds inside joined the angry rumble. Darius stood behind Gabriel, eyes wide.

"Uh, Chris?"

I chuckled.

"Adversary," Gabriel said to me.

"Not my name, mate," I replied.

That surprised the child-like angel, the first hint of real emotion I'd seen from them. They took a closer look at me, porcelain-smooth brow furrowing.

The rumble of a sport bike got about half of the hellhounds to look toward the driveway, ears perked.

"This is a lot of hellhounds, Chris," Darius said.

"You're telling me."

Before long, Azrael and Cáit rolled up on their sport bikes. Azrael, the angel of death, and Cáit, the descendant of the original War, were more than welcome. I needed Darius here, but why was Gabriel on my doorstep? I supposed I'd find out in a few minutes.

*I'm sure they're here because of what happened to me.*

*Probably.*

I stepped out of the way and gestured for Gabriel and Darius to enter. A few moments later, Azrael and Cáit had come up to the doorstep.

Cáit glanced at all the hellhounds then back at me. "Getting a collection?"

I shook my head. "Apparently."

Azrael studied me. "Twice?"

“Naw, mate, only once.” I assumed he was talking about being possessed.

“Ahh, yes, now I see. Very interesting.”

I took off the necklace full of souls and held it out to him.

“Thank you. I will see to them.” Death accepted the souls. When he took the pendant, he went translucent for a second.

Before I could ask him if he was okay, he solidified, and the pendant was gone. I arched an eyebrow at Cáit. She shrugged and I decided it was probably just one more strange thing about the ancient being.

They followed me into the overcrowded house. Brennan must have come up with some sort of air freshener spell because the brimstone was no longer overwhelming, nor was the smell of dog. In small doses it was fine, but with however many hellhounds were in my house now, it was too much.

I was definitely using magic to clean up after all of them. Or Ezra was, because we were getting him back as soon as we could get to the Vatican.

*You can make a portal there with my powers.*

*Excellent.*

“Okay, so, we’re gathered here today to figure out how to rescue Ezra because that is our top priority,” I said once everyone had settled in the living room.

“Our top priority must be restoring Hell to its rightful owner,” Gabriel objected.

“Yeah, can you imagine what I’d do to get Ezra back if Mammon gets his hands on my demon? I’ll tear all sorts of shit apart that probably doesn’t need to be broken.” I glared at the angel.

“He’s one demon,” Gabriel said.

“And I’m one possessive-ass human with the entire power of Hell at my disposal.” I narrowed my eyes.

“I concede your point,” Gabriel replied after a long pause.

My guys all stared at me. I ignored them for the moment.

“So, Darius, conveniently, I need you to get me into the Vatican.”

My old friend raised his eyebrows. “I’m not sure if I have that kind of influence,” he finally said.

“You’re a famous Catholic exorcist. You don’t think you can get an invite?”

“I will assist,” Gabriel said.

“Well, cool then. How soon can you make this happen because apparently I can portal there.”

“What is your arrangement with the Adversary?” Gabriel eyed me.

“Keep each other alive until we can kick Mammon’s ass, then help him get back where he needs to be.”

“Wait, are you possessed again?” Darius stared at me.

“No.”

“That is the entirety of your agreement?” Gabriel tilted their head.

*Mate, did we actually have an agreement?*

*Keeping each other alive is good enough for me. You did promise not to abuse your power over me.*

*Right.*

“Yeah, basically.” I shrugged. “Why?”

“Most in your position would have demanded quite a lot in return.”

“Once I get Ezra back, I’ll have everything I need. Why would I ask for more?” I didn’t mention what Lucifer had already done for me just in case it wasn’t supposed to be general knowledge.

“You are a strange human,” Gabriel replied.

“I think I’m going to take that as a compliment. Okay, so get us into the Vatican. If Michael and whoever else is there

doesn't give Ezra back, I'll take him. Next plan will involve kicking Mammon's ass. Anything else?" I stared at Gabriel, making it clear I was asking them.

"No. I simply needed to verify that the Adversary was not in any additional danger. Very few of us wish to see control of Hell fall to someone else. Especially someone like Mammon."

"I like how you call him by his name, but you call Lucifer Adversary." I made it clear I didn't like it.

Gabriel stared at me like I'd grown my own set of horns.

"Fine, whatever. Get us into the Vatican. Darius, come back here as soon as you have the invite. You can tell them we're in the area. I can get us there quickly."

"Do you need me for anything else?" Darius glanced around at the mass of hellhounds.

"Unless you're looking for your next sorta-canine companion, I'm probably good."

"All right, Price. I'll be in touch." Darius stood after a glance at Gabriel. The angel joined him and Mal got up to show them out.

The hellhounds were still staring at Gabriel, but they'd relaxed some of their aggression.

"Right, so, Lucifer isn't dead?" Mal asked when he returned.

"Nope. Mammon tried to steal his soul or whatever it is that demons have, but I'm a stubborn bitch and hung on. So, basically, he's riding along with me now. Not possessed, though."

"It is fortunate that you were able to take Lucifer on as you did," Azrael said. "It would have been a bit tragic if Mammon had gotten a hold of him."

"Understatement, Azrael," Cáit said with a sigh. "What else do you need from us?"

"I needed to hand off the souls. If you have any other suggestions, please let me know. Otherwise, I think we're

done. You're obviously welcome to stay."

Azrael glanced at Cáit. "No, we are working on some of the fallout from the stolen souls. It would be best if we get back to it."

"Thank you for coming." I stood and walked them out, then returned to my guys.

"So you're not possessed," Mal came over to me and stared into my eyes.

"No. I'm not possessed." I didn't bother to clarify the rest. I suspected that the less I shared, the happier Lucifer would be later.

"What's the plan when we get to the Vatican?" Sabian changed the subject.

"I'll go in with Darius and Mayhem. If they hand Ezra over to me, we'll simply return and go on with our lives. If they fight me, I'll do whatever I need to." It seemed simple enough to me.

"You're not going by yourself," Mal objected.

"I'm not taking any of you back in there." I crossed my arms.

"I will go with you," Brennan offered.

"No. I'm not alone. I'll have Darius. I'll have Mayhem. I have the ruler of all the demons riding along in my head. I need you all to stay here."

Mal clenched his jaw but nodded. After a moment, the others reluctantly agreed.

"Great. What else do we need to talk about?"

"What's next?" Sabian asked.

"After we get Ezra, we need to go after Mammon and Michael. I'm tired of being reactive. It's time to take the fight to them. Somehow."

"Sounds reasonable," Aaron agreed.

“Cool. Okay, we’ve got an unknown amount of time to kill.  
How about a game, Mal?”

# Chapter 15

## *Price*

Motivated archangels work fast apparently. Hours later Lucifer was walking me through making a portal using his powers.

It was almost like the clichéd image where the guy was helping a woman learn to do something. He'd use it as an excuse to get close and put his arms around her. Except not only did Lucifer wrap himself around me, but I was also pulling his energy through my entire body and damn was it intimate.

Sabian gave me a knowing look. I flipped him off.

Heart racing, and not from fear, I shaped Lucifer's power just as he directed.

*Very good*, he whispered into my ear as the portal snapped into place.

Shivering, I clenched my hands into fists as heat coiled through me. His praise was almost as erotic as the flow of energy washing through me. *I don't know if I want you to stop or not.*

He chuckled. *I know.*

*Fucker.*

I held the portal while everyone filed through ahead of me, though Mayhem stayed at my side.

I'd won the argument about going in with just Darius and Mayhem, but I hadn't managed to convince them to stay behind completely. Sabian was the only one of my men remaining behind, and he only stayed to help manage the hellhounds. Brennan was still convinced I should take him, and I was considering it, but there was no way I was taking Mal or Aaron into the Vatican. They'd taken that risk once, and there was no way they were doing it again.

*What's this going to be like for you?*

*I'm an angel, Chris. It'll be fine.*

I snorted. *Hardly.*

*Technically, I am.*

I conceded his point as Mayhem and I stepped through the portal. I let it snap shut behind me.

The humidity slapped me in the face, and I shamelessly used the spell Ezra had taught me to deal with temperatures.

"You three be careful," I said to Mal, Brennan, and Aaron.

"Promise," Aaron replied.

"You be careful," Mal said.

"Do my best."

He smiled. "Do better."

The vampire pulled me into his arms, pressing his lips to mine. It was a relatively chaste kiss, especially for him, but I'd already been turned on, and the desire to shove him into the stone wall of the alley and do naughty things to him was high.

Aaron also claimed me for a quick kiss, and Brennan surprised me with a hug before Darius and I headed out onto the street.

Lucifer gave me directions, and I headed toward the entrance to the Vatican.



“Chris, are you okay?” Darius asked once we were relatively alone.

“Sure, why?”

“You’ve been through a lot recently.”

I shrugged. “Sometimes you just gotta keep going, Darius. There’s no point in stopping to worry about it. I can stress out later when this whole thing is done. Be a good time to go on a bender or something. Have lots of naughty drunken sex and hide from reality for a while. Maybe I’ll just make a bunch of pizza.” I miss my pizza shop a lot right now.

“If you need someone to talk to—”

“You’re probably not the first person I’ll go to,” I interrupted him.

“I know, Chris, but I know people you could talk with.”

“Priests? I can see that now. Yeah, I’m sleeping with a few demons, got a hellhound. Oh, and I kissed Lucifer himself, and I liked it. Will a couple Hail Mary’s absolve me of my sins?”

Darius shook his head. “I suppose at least you have friends in Hell.”

“Apparently if I do manage to get my ass permanently handed to me, I’m unlikely to end up there. My heart’s been in the right place, after all.”

“You think so?” He sounded genuinely curious.

“I have it on fairly good authority, in fact.”

“I don’t even know what to make of that information.”

“Well, I guess take it as you will, but I’m not interested in seeing a priest.”

“I was actually going to suggest a therapist, but the same problems apply. You won’t really be able to talk about what you’ve experienced.”

“No, it probably wouldn’t go well.” Though I was relatively focused on the mission, I did look around a little bit. I’d been to Rome once years back and not much had changed.

We reached the main gate and Darius skipped the line, leading us to the gates. Mayhem trotted along behind me doing his invisible dog trick.

A few people looked pissed until they saw that Darius was a priest. Then they basically ignored us. I might have gotten a few extra looks, but it didn't really matter.

Darius handed a card to the guard at the gate and after a quick glance at it and then a longer one that lingered on me, the man let us through.

We were supposed to wait for an escort, but as soon as the guard went back to his duties, I headed for the Papal Palace. Darius hurried after me.

“We probably should wait for our escort.”

“Why? I came for Ezra. I know where he's at. I'm not interested in giving Michael time to hide my demon away.”

Our escort met us part way, looking a bit harried. He was an older priest. I didn't even pretend to remember the Catholic hierarchy, but Darius made a respectful bow and addressed him as bishop. Seemed kind of high level for an escort, but whatever.

The bishop gave me a horrified once over—I'd found my leather jacket, and I was wearing it much to Darius' dismay and Lucifer's amusement. He finally turned back to Darius, and they engaged in a quiet conversation while the bishop tried to steer Darius toward another building. He hadn't appeared to notice the Pomeranian-shaped hellhound trotting along at my side.

I refused to be steered and set off at a strong pace. I could sense Ezra through Lucifer's connection to his princes. Soon I'd be able to sense him with my own connections.

“Miss,” the bishop said in heavily accented English. “This way, please.”

“I came here for one reason, mate. That reason is in that building.”

He made the mistake of grabbing my arm. I put him on the ground with some half remembered martial arts and continued toward my goal.

Darius choked out an apology.

*You're not going to try to negotiate at all, are you?*

*They're giving me Ezra one way or another. I want my demon.*

That he didn't object probably should have made me pause, but the hell with it.

*I think I'm going to enjoy this, Lucifer said after a minute. I do recommend you use your energy to shield your hands before you touch anything. My presence might trigger some exciting reactions otherwise.*

*Good call.*

"Chris, seriously?" Darius caught up to me.

"Fuck them," I replied. "They have to know why I'm here. Michael knows who I am, and I'm sure he sensed me the moment I crossed into the Vatican."

A couple more priests hurried out of the building, all trying to stop me. I pushed past them, using the power Lucifer had gifted me to liberally increase my strength, shove them out of my way, and even break open a locked door.

Eventually they figured out they couldn't stop me. One even tried with a holy artifact probably designed to repel demons. Heeding Lucifer's warnings, I shielded myself and grabbed the ornate staff out of the dumbfounded priest's hand and threw what was probably a priceless object at Darius.

He managed to catch it and hand it off to one of the other priests. After that, they all trailed behind me as I marched through the palace like some sort of bizarre-ass parade.

*Do you know Italian?* my passenger asked me.

*Not that well. I can read it, but spoken Italian is difficult for me.*

*They've decided to let the angel handle you. I'm sure they mean Michael.*

*Yep, not surprised. Any advice?*

*Try to avoid a direct fight with him.*

*You've got my back, right?*

*Of course, Chris. Invisible fingers slid down my spine.*

The last set of doors between me and my goal flew open as I blasted them with energy. The room beyond was some sort of receiving room or study, I supposed. I didn't spare it much attention other than to make note of any potential obvious weapons. I caught a fair number of energy signatures that made me think there were various objects of power laying around.

A man sat in a throne-like chair, wearing all white with a bit of gold trim that accented his golden hair. He would have been handsome, with a square jaw, strong nose, and piercing eyes, but the absolute arrogance and disdain totally killed any hint of attraction I might have had otherwise. A massive sword leaned against the chair next to him.

At his feet lay Ezra, bound much like Mal would have tied me up, but without all the sexy fun and safe words. The rope holding his arms had a golden hue and had obviously burned the demon where it touched exposed skin. He looked to be unconscious and didn't stir at my not-so-subtle entrance.

Red filled my vision for a moment. I managed to remain calm, possibly with demonic intervention, but it was a close thing.

*"You will release Ezra now. I'm only asking once."*

Michael—there was no one else it could be—simply tilted his head as if not expecting a human to make demands of him. *"You should kneel before your betters."*

I felt the power wash over and around me, but my wards, Lucifer's presence, and a whole host of pissed off rage let me ignore his command with ease. The priests behind me fell to their knees.

Mayhem growled, shifting to his hellhound form.

I pointed at Ezra.

Michael's lips curled into a malevolent smile.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled on my power.

*You're going to attack him directly, aren't you?*

He'd told me not to. No one would expect me to have the audacity to attack an archangel. Seemed like the best course of action.

Lucifer's presence wrapped around me again, pouring his energy into mine, and helping me shape an unfamiliar spell.

*It won't kill him. We probably don't want to go that far yet, likely can't on holy ground.*

Taking what the demon offered, I unleashed the powerful spell straight at the archangel.

He bolted upright and threw out his hands just before the spell impacted, managing to get some sort of shield in place.

My spell, currently red laced through with crackling black lightning, came up against his bright white energies. I poured more energy into it, and Michael took a step backward, nearly tripping on his throne as he moved around it to back away.

A small scuffle broke out behind me, but Mayhem and possibly Darius, handled whatever was going on back there.

I moved forward, and Michael retreated. We kept this up until I reached Ezra. Michael stood across the room from where he'd started. The angel had left his sword behind, probably confident it was safe.

I was tempted to test that theory, but now wasn't the time. Maybe I should have brought Aaron along.

Sweat beaded on my brow and still I pulled energy.

Michael started to look worried, especially after he glanced at whatever had become of the priests behind me.

"You cavort with demons. You are the worst kind of sinner," he snarled.

“Hey, mate, I’m not the one trying to start the bloody apocalypse. Maybe you should be slower to throw stones.”

“The apocalypse will cleanse this realm of evil like yours,” he hissed.

*Well, there’s the proof we need. We can show Gabriel this memory.*

*Well, cool. Not what I was going for, but glad it worked out.*

*Try this,* Lucifer said, sounding exceptionally entertained. He altered a section of the spell slightly.

It melted through Michael’s shield and zapped the archangel.

Yelling in surprise and anger, Michael vanished.

The magic I’d poured against his shield suddenly had no more resistance and it shot forward, sinking into the walls of the Papal Palace.

The ground trembled.

Lucifer chuckled.

*Yeah, what’d we just do, mate?*

*Something we should not have. There will be consequences later. Right now, let’s rescue Ezra and get the hell out of here.* He sounded way too happy about something, but honestly, I just didn’t care.

I knelt next to Ezra, looking around for a cutting tool. Those ropes needed to come off now.

The only thing handy other than a few knives stashed around my body was Michael’s sword. He’d left it behind.

Laughing, I shielded my hands and grabbed the thing. The holy weapon was only marginally uncomfortable through the shielding, and I carefully touched the edge to the first rope binding Ezra’s arms.

It cut through the binding like a hot knife through butter and shortly I had my demon free.

*Should I keep this?*

*I want to say yes, just to piss Michael off, but there's no point.*

*There is too a point.* I gestured toward the tip of the blade.

*Black abyss that was terrible. Rescue your demon and leave the bad jokes to someone else.*

I laughed, though my concern for Ezra muted a great deal of my mirth. I let the blade fall to the side and knelt next to my demon prince. He wasn't moving, though I could still sense him through Lucifer's connection. I rolled him over onto his back and pressed my hands to his face.

Ezra's skin was cool to the touch, and he didn't respond. I'd expected his energy to transfer back to him immediately, but I still held his domain.

*What do I do?*

*He's badly depleted. Let's get him to your home and then we can get him back on his feet.*

The palace shuddered again, some of the books falling from the shelves.

"Darius, help me with him," I snapped, looking over my shoulder.

Mayhem held the priests back from me, and they were all glaring at Darius. One of them said something angry sounding in Italian.

"You have brought demons into the house of God," another chastised Darius in English. "There will be consequences."

"If it makes a difference," Darius said, "I was commanded by an archangel."

That caused a stir. While the priests were arguing amongst themselves, Darius came to my side.

"Well, that may have cost me my job," Darius said as he got a shoulder under Ezra's arm and helped me haul the unconscious demon upright.

"I can always use help making pizza," I grunted. Ezra was heavy when he was unconscious.

Lucifer helped with magic, and with Mayhem in the lead clearing the way of angry priests, we hurried through the building, half dragging Ezra between the two of us.

The courtyard was complete chaos as we burst outside.

“What’d you do, Price?” Darius stopped, forcing me to come to a halt, as well.

*Many things that were rightfully locked away have escaped. We may have to deal with this in the future. Time will tell.*

“Uh, think I threw the cell doors open,” I replied aloud, watching as priests and a few nuns ran about, some holding crosses, others just trying to get away, as swirls of malevolent energy chased them around.

The devil hanging out in my head was laughing his ass off. *I should not be enjoying this as much as I am. There’s going to be literal hell to pay later.*

“May as well enjoy it now.” I sighed.

“Enjoy what?” Darius frowned at me.

“Sorry, that comment was not intended for you,” I explained.

“Right, how is it having the Devil himself hanging out in your head?”

“Eh, could be worse, I guess. At least he’s not a self-righteous prick like Michael.”

That startled a laugh out of my friend.

“Let’s get out of here before any of that mess decides we look entertaining.” I headed for the wall and Darius, still supporting some of Ezra’s weight, kept pace with me.

The ground shuddered hard enough to throw us to the ground. A deep crack reverberated around us.

I looked over my shoulder, and the entire Papal Palace had broken like a toy down the middle.

“Oops.”

“Fuck, Price, remind me not to piss you off,” Darius said.



“Yeah.” I climbed to my feet and pulled Ezra up.

Darius got under his other shoulder again, and we hurried to escape holy ground before we had to deal with any of the shit I’d unleashed.

It would have been a lot harder to escape without Mayhem. The hellhound efficiently cleared our path.

We pushed through the crowd. Mal, Aaron, and Brennan met us outside the walls.

“What did you do?” Aaron stared up into the sky while Mal took Ezra from us, easily lifting the demon into a rescue carry.

“Later! We need to get out of here!” I shouted.

We sprinted for the nearest alley while people ran around screaming or stared, phones recording the chaotic lightshow of escaping creatures that appeared over the walls surrounding Vatican City.

Fortunately, the chaos was so interesting that no one paid us any attention and the alley was deserted.

I didn’t even need help from Lucifer this time to rip open a portal to my front yard. Mayhem stayed back with me while everyone piled through. I followed and snapped it shut behind me.

“Well, the news should be interesting later,” I gasped as I fell to my knees, a wave of exhaustion tearing through me.

Darius helped me to my feet, and I used Mayhem for support as I staggered inside.

Mal already had Ezra laid out on the bed in the master bedroom by the time I got there.

I hauled myself up on the bed and sat on my knees next to my unconscious demon.

“He doesn’t look good,” Brennan said.

“No,” I agreed. “Okay, what do I do?”

*You need to get his domain to transfer back to him.*

“You said all I had to do was touch him.”

*I did not expect him to be this badly drained. Start by pushing his energy back into him. See if that works.*

Pushing away the fear that I'd waited too long to save Ezra, I gathered the threads of his energy and shoved them into the demon.

His body recognized the energy signature and welcomed it, but it didn't transfer the power of his domain like it should have.

"Damn it," I muttered.

*Just keep it up.*

I shifted so I straddled Ezra's hips and leaned my hands on his chest, pouring his energy into him. Painfully slowly, the energy transfer brought life back into my demon.

*There we go, Lucifer whispered. Keep it up. I'm going to pull us together so we can talk. He may not realize what's going on.*

Moments later Lucifer and I were standing back in the blank space. Ezra still lay on the ground, though I thought he might be waking up.

"I think this is the first time I've been warned first." I went over to Ezra's side and knelt next to him. "Ezra, you need to wake up."

His eyes fluttered open, but the normally endless depths were dull, and no hellfire flickered there.

The demon frowned then glanced between me and Lucifer before staring back up at nothing.

"Well, I'll give you this, it's a new tactic at least," he grumbled.

"Ezra?"

He turned his head until he looked at me again but didn't speak. Maybe he thought he was still captured.

"Ezra, you're free."

I was still pouring energy into him, though I wasn't sure if he knew it or not yet. I glanced back at Lucifer for help. He shrugged.

"How can I convince you?" I leaned back and pulled my shirt off. Then I took Ezra's hand and brought it to my sternum where Lucifer had branded me with an inverted pentagram and a pizza.

That caught Ezra's interest. "That is convincing."

"Right, what angelic assholes would think of that?" I slipped my bra off and pressed his hand to Lucifer's mark.

"It's different than the last one."

"I *improved* on the design," Lucifer said.

"Yeah, then he gave me my own mark. Then they massively improved my wards. He also placed your domain in my hands so that it wouldn't go to hell while you were captured. I may have not been the best choice." I sighed. "Sorry."

"What happened?" He had moved so he was leaning on one elbow now, his other hand still tracing the marks on my skin.

"Well, we raided some of the nastier weapons in your arsenal and then we busted up the soul battery. We had to fight off a few soul guardians and I lost a particularly potent knife in the process."

Ezra's hand twitched at that. Apparently, he was familiar with how hard soul guardians were to kill, as well.

"We escaped but not really. Lucifer got shanked with the knife I lost, and Mammon thought he had captured him. I'm a stubborn bitch though, and we stole away with Lucifer's spirit or whatever it is that demons have. And then we went after you."

"I feel like you're leaving quite a bit out. How did you overcome Mammon's powers?"

I glanced at Lucifer again, so he pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and showed the mark I'd put on his arm.

“Cheeky little shit marked me,” he admitted ruefully. “Fortunate that she did. Allowed me to pull her out of a soul trap, and it allowed her to save me from Mammon’s trap.”

“Okay, I’m nearly convinced. I can’t even imagine Michael making that tale up.”

“Well, here’s the rest then. I kicked Michael’s ass and did some really bad things to Vatican City including breaking loose a whole bunch of really nasty things they had sealed up there, but I got you out.”

He smiled. “There’s no way Michael could make something like that up.”

“So, let me give you your power back because I made a mess of your domain when we fled. I did manage to warn all the demons there was incoming and that we’d be back, but I have no idea what happened once we fled.”

Ezra’s eyes shuttered and he nodded. I could feel the sadness radiating off him.

“There are currently at least a hundred hellhounds shitting in my lawn, though. So I hope you are ready to do some more magical house cleaning.”

“What?”

“I wasn’t going to leave your dogs behind to get killed.”

His jaw dropped, and he shifted to sit up. “Thank you, Chris. That means a lot to me.”

“I kind of like them, too. Oh, and there’s now a portal to Hell in my basement. It goes into your bedroom.” I’d been right. He’d been upset about the thought of losing his hounds.

He sputtered.

“It’s locked right now, though.”

“What else did you do while I was incapacitated?”

“That about cover it?” I glanced back at Lucifer.

“Near enough.”

Ezra took a deep breath. “Okay, let me see if I can figure out how to take my powers back from you.”

He got to his knees in front of me. The warmth was back in his hands, and he cupped my cheeks before pressing his lips to mine.

I crushed him to me, unable to contain myself any longer, and for a time we just kissed.

“I was so afraid I’d never see you again,” Ezra said. “And then when I felt the connection to my domain snap, I wasn’t sure I’d ever escape. I thought I’d been abandoned.”

“Like I’d leave any of my men in the hands of the enemy?” I pressed against him, doing my best to meld our bodies together in spite of physics.

“No, you wouldn’t,” he said when we broke apart.

“No, but I really don’t want your domain, so please take it. I have enough paperwork with the pizza shop.”

He chuckled. “Okay.” I felt Ezra reach, but he still couldn’t take the power from me.

“It’s her wards,” Lucifer finally said. “I may have done too good a job there. We need to truly wake, and you need to mark each other, then the power will transfer naturally.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

Ezra tilted his head. “You’re going to let me bind you again?”

Reluctantly I shifted backward, wanting to show him my back, but not wanting to leave his arms.

He let me go and I twisted. “We even left you a spot. Lucifer started it so I could take over your job, slacker.”

Ezra chuckled. “Well, okay then.”

“He also gave me a well of my own power, so I don’t need access to yours, if that changes how you want to do the binding.”

“You could simply mark her and let her mark you instead of going for a full binding,” Lucifer said.

“You did a full binding,” Ezra pointed out.

“Yes, and it was a fortunate mistake. I did not heed my own warnings to you and found myself in a similar trap, although it may have saved my life.”

Ezra glanced at me and arched an eyebrow. I didn’t manage to hide my blush and his other eyebrow rose.

“I see.”

I gave him a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

“No need.” He kissed me on the forehead. “Okay, let’s get back.”

Lucifer pulled us back into our own bodies—well, he was still chilling in mine—and I opened my eyes. I was still straddling Ezra, and I watched as he looked around, seemingly trying to convince himself he was free. What had they done to him? Nothing good, that was for sure.

Mayhem hopped up on the bed along with another hellhound with pointed horns. That hellhound bellycrawled up the bed until he was at Ezra’s side. My prince gave the hound a few scratches before turning his attention back to me.

“You two okay now?” Mal asked from the doorway.

“Yeah, Mal. Think we’re good.”

“Okay. I’ll let the others know Ezra is awake. Take your time.” He winked.

I grinned at my vampire before turning my attention back to Ezra.

“You really broke me out of the Vatican,” Ezra said.

“I went to Hell for Sabian. I’d have gone to Heaven itself to rescue you. Why wouldn’t you think I’d come for you?”

“I wasn’t even sure you were still alive.” He sighed. “I’m sorry. I knew you’d come if you could. I just didn’t think you’d be able to defeat Michael.”

“Well, I had all the power of Hell at my disposal along with yours and mine. It wasn’t exactly a fair fight. I don’t think he expected me to unleash Hell in the Vatican.”

“If you’ll let me, I want to see those memories.”

I grinned. “Of course, Ezra.”

“I suppose I should just mark you since Lucifer has you bound.” He twisted his lips, looking upset about something.

“What’s wrong?”

He shrugged.

“Ezra, there’s enough shit going on in the world right now I can’t fix, but whatever you’re upset about I probably can. Tell me. Please.”

He placed his hand on my chest over Lucifer’s mark. I wore clothing, but I was sure he could see the lines of power that made up the design, anyway.

“I had hoped you would still be mine—ours—but—” he shrugged.

*Tell Ezra he’s being an idiot and kiss him, mark him, and give him back his damn power so I can go hide while you fuck,* Lucifer grumbled.

“Ah, a message from on high. Or is that down low?”

*Low probably, though direction is purely subjective.*

“Well, a message from the other resident of my head. You’re being an idiot.”

“I am?”

“You know, as bad as you were about the idea of sharing me, your boss seems fine with it. Also, we’re not sleeping together.”

“You’re not?”

I sighed. “No.”

“That’s not going to last,” Ezra declared.

“Uh, well, um.” I cleared my throat. “Right, but you and I can still fuck, and I intend to have my way with you here shortly, if you want. We need to do the energy shit first, though.”

“I—”

“Ezra, it’s okay. I’m still yours. I will always be yours. You did neglect to tell me that the binding you did made me the next thing to immortal, but I guarantee you Mal is ecstatic about it. Sabian, too.”

“I... hadn’t even considered that.” He sighed. “What do you want from me?”

“Ezra, unless you don’t want me tied that closely to you, bind me like you did before. I’ll mark you and we’ll see how that works out for us.”

“I’m surprised Lucifer kept your mark.” Ezra scooted back so he could sit up.

“He couldn’t get rid of it.” I grinned. “I was very naughty while you were gone.”

“I can see that,” Ezra replied. “What should we do with a naughty Chris?”

“Bind me.”

He arched an eyebrow and gave me a sly smile. “How literally do you want that?”

Lucifer made a gagging sound in my head, and I burst out laughing.

Ezra looked surprised, and I shook my head and pointed at my skull, hoping he would get the point or read my mind or something.

“Let’s finish our energy work. Someone wants to not be in the room with us.”

“Yes, my liege,” Ezra murmured, and for the life of me I couldn’t figure out if he was talking to me or Lucifer.

We managed to focus, though I could feel Ezra’s attention wandering as he studied my body after my shirt and bra were



off. I lay on my stomach and his hands warmed my skin where he traced his fingers from ward to ward.

“He bound you before he did the wards, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to need to mark me first. I need a way through your protections.”

“Okay. Where do you want it?”

He touched the center of his chest. I tugged his shirt off with his help and ran my fingers lightly over the soft hairs on his torso.

“Ready?”

“I want nothing more than to be possessed by you, Chris Price,” Ezra said.

My heart melted into a mushy puddle in my chest. This time Lucifer didn’t ruin the moment with a snarky comment.

I pressed my hand to Ezra’s skin and placed my mark.

That opened up all sorts of connections between us, and Ezra’s power snapped back into him without him having to bind me first.

He fell backward, eyes unfocused as he absorbed the energy I’d accidentally thrown at him.

*To be fair, Lucifer said. I had actually thought you’d mark him right away.*

*I still don’t know what made me mark you without permission, Lucifer. I wasn’t going to do it to anyone else without asking first.*

*I’ll accept your sort of apology.*

*Thanks, now sod off so I can get laid.*

He chuckled and buried himself deep. I honestly had no desire to find out how much he could sense when he did that.

Ezra finally recovered from having his power thrust back into him and he focused on me. The universe-containing

depths were back in his eyes and the faint flicker of hellfire had returned.

“You look a lot better,” I said.

“I feel better.” He studied me. “I don’t have to bind you, if you don’t want me to.”

I flipped over onto my stomach. “Do it now.”

“Mmm, I like it when you tell me what to do,” he practically purred.

“I know.”

His power burned through me as he bound us back together.

“An exorcist with two demon bindings,” he said, leaning over me. “Whatever should we do with a creature like that?”

“Make love to her?” My voice cracked a little at the request and Ezra was silent for a moment before he pressed his lips to the back of my neck.

“I’d like nothing more,” he replied tenderly.

Though Ezra usually liked to work up to things with a little more finesse, neither of us had the patience for that right now. We both burned with the desire to be joined in every way possible, to reassure ourselves that the other was still alive and still theirs. We would hopefully have years and years to work on our skills with each other’s bodies.

Our remaining clothing practically flew off us. As soon as we were naked, I tangled my fingers in Ezra’s curls and tugged his lips to mine. Our teeth knocked together in our haste, but neither of us cared, crushing our lips together until I was sure I’d bruise.

We kissed until I was gasping for breath. Then Ezra trailed his kisses down my throat, getting me to arch up off the bed as he nipped gently at my neck.

I grabbed his hips and tried to drag him to me.

“Let me worship your body first,” he insisted.

“Okay,” I relented.

Ezra's love came through our bonds as he teased my nipples with his tongue. He didn't spend long in any one area, simply exploring my body with his tongue and his lips and his fingers, touching me in all my favorite spots briefly as if to reassure himself that nothing had changed before moving on to the next spot.

I let him explore, immersing myself in his love and his tenderness while he explored my body. Ezra worked his way toward my clit, finally putting his talented mouth to use there, bringing my climax crashing through me.

Satisfied I was ready for him, my prince shifted until he pressed against my entrance.

I dug my fingers into his back, and he slid into me, filling me and nearly shattering me again when he thrust hard.

We didn't talk, content to sink into our connection, feeling each other from the inside and the outside as we made love.

Our first round went quickly, but Ezra wasn't ready to be done, and neither was I. We'd never be ready to be done with each other, and so we spent hours touching, exploring, and reconnecting before we finally cleaned up and passed out in each other's arms. The world might be a mess, but for a little while everything was right in mine.

# Epilogue

## *Price*

We spent the next week recovering as much as we could from the chaos of the last few weeks and dealing with a huge number of hellhounds roaming my property.

Brennan had set up some magical shields to keep their baying in, and curious eyes from seeing that anything was amiss.

Darius was summarily kicked out of the church and was probably going to get excommunicated if we couldn't fix everything before the priests got their act together. They did have their hands full at the moment dealing with the chaos I'd unleashed in Rome. I felt a little bad for Darius, but it was possible we'd be able to fix things for him once we kicked Michael's ass for good.

Since he no longer had a place to stay, Mal had set Darius up at his place in downtown Santa Fe.

Speaking of Rome, the news reports for the last week had been highly entertaining for a few days while people speculated as to the nature of the incident that had rocked Vatican City.

We'd unleashed some horrors that would need to be contained at some point, but first we had to stop Mammon and Michael.

I was still avoiding the pizza shop, but I had called and checked in with everyone. Aaron was still on leave from work and his parents were still hanging out with Azrael and the other riders. I wondered if they would ever forgive me.

We were all more than ready for life to get back to some semblance of normal.

“We need to go on the offensive,” I said one morning about a week after we had rescued Ezra.

“I think you are right,” Mal agreed.

“We should target Michael first. We have to get Gabriel to see that Michael is behind the angelic side of the plot because we’re probably going to need their help to put Michael out of action,” I said.

“And then we need to figure out how to lure Mammon out in such a way that he is vulnerable to attack,” Brennan offered.

“Yes.” I leaned my elbows on my new dining room table, courtesy of Ezra. “I just wish I was good at planning these types of things.”

“If you were, you’d be in a different line of work,” Aaron said.

“True.” I ran my hand through the long part of my hair and sighed.

“First step,” Ezra said. “Get Gabriel in on taking out Michael. We need to get him out of the way first. I don’t think Mammon actually wants the apocalypse. He just wants Hell. Big picture wise, we have got to stop the apocalypse.”

*I agree,* Lucifer said in my head.

“Boss man agrees with you,” I said to Ezra.

“How do we get Gabriel to show up?” Sabian asked.

“Maybe Darius has their number?” Mal suggested.

Just then the hellhounds took up their deafening cry alerting us with no uncertainty that someone was at the door.

“What would the odds be?” Mal got up from the table, pushed his way through the sea of hounds, and headed for the door.

Minutes later he returned with the child-like angel in tow.

Ezra stopped the hellhounds’ defensive growl with a quiet word.

“I believe we need to talk,” Gabriel said, and sat themselves at the head of the table.

“As long as we’re talking about a certain archangel with a giant stick up his ass,” I said.

The smile the angel turned on me melted my bones to jelly, and fear roiled in my gut.

“I thought we could start with what you did in the Vatican.”

“I did what I had to.”

“Yes, and the consequences will be far reaching.”

“We know.”

Gabriel inclined their head. “Very well. That mess can be cleaned up later. Yes, I am here to speak of Michael and what we can do to stop his bid for war.”

“Good. Let’s get started.”

The archangel bowed their head and laid out a plan that was both brilliant and terrifying.

It was possible we wouldn’t survive long enough to take out Mammon, but we’d stop the apocalypse if it killed us.

I shared a glance with all my men. They nodded, and I looked back to the angel.

“Okay. We’re in.”

The End

## Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading my reverse harem tale! More is coming soon! Reviews are so very important, especially to new authors and are greatly appreciated! Even a line or two will do!

## About the Author



Dakota has two passions in life: writing and cinnamon tea. Tea so strong she ought to be able to see her future when she drinks it, and the writing? Well, she hopes it makes you see stars when you read it. She creates reverse harem romance novels filled with things that go bump in the night. That handsome werewolf walking down the street? The suave vampire you're just dying to get a taste of? You'll find them enraptured by charming, smart ladies ready to make those bad boys work for their affection. When not writing, Dakota can be found on the back of a horse out on the trail or tending the animals on her farm.

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