



BLAZE

KNIGHTS OF HADES  MOTORCYCLE CLUB

ROWAN HART

BLAZE

KNIGHTS OF HADES

A DEMON MOTORCYCLE CLUB PARANORMAL
ROMANCE

ROWAN HART

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CONTENT WARNING

The Knights of Hades series features demons who've created their own, mostly legal, motorcycle club. They like to ride fast, play hard, and take what they want. There will never be violence inflicted on the main characters from the love interest. This series may have scenes that may be upsetting for some readers.



BLAZE

1

KENNEDY

The engine light started flashing fifty miles ago.

Ten miles ago, the Toyota Mirai started vibrating. Weirdly.

A hundred miles ago, I'd filled up the gas tank while everyone watched, as if they knew... knew I'd killed my mafia don husband and fled.

"Come on," I murmur, glancing in the rearview mirror, my stomach twisting.

Behind me is nothing, just a heat shimmering two-lane road, stretching to brown hills in the horizon. The last vehicle to pass me was almost thirty minutes ago, a long-haul trucker headed in the opposite direction.

If my car broke down, all I had was me—me and the money bag and three changes of clothes I'd fled with.

A month has passed. I've escaped the Santi Pastori for now, but I know they'll catch up with me. It's only a matter of time. Riccardo, my late husband's second-in-command and brother, made it clear on the voicemails he'd left. I've gotten rid of my phone now but he'd made himself clear. I'd been moved up to the top spot of the Pastori's wanted list when I bashed Enzo over the head with the marble figurine of the holy mother, Mary.

Never mind the fact that Enzo, my husband of five years, put his hands on me weekly. When business was rough, he'd rough me around. The first time he'd split my lip, I'd learned that the men of the familia didn't care about their wives and that their wives had been too busy trying to survive to be of any help to me. And with Enzo being the boss, even if they'd wanted to help, they

couldn't have. They were too afraid of him.

I told myself I should be glad he never used his fists, or even worse—forced me to fuck him. Just like he ignored his vows to protect and cherish me, he'd ignored his vows of fidelity. Like everything else, it upset me at first, then I grew relieved that it was one less thing I had to deal with.

Then one day he went too far. I'd grabbed the marble Aphrodite figurine off his desk and swung it like I was back in my high school days on the softball team. I didn't even think about what I'd done next. I grabbed the bag of dirty money off his desk, ran to our bedroom, grabbed a couple outfits, my toothbrush, then booked it out of the city with Hell on my heels.

Clunk.

“No, no, no.”

Gray smoke starts to billow from under my Mirai's blue hood. My daddy taught me enough about cars before he swallowed the end of a gun to know I can't push it any further. Out of habit, I turn the emergency lights on and pull over on the side of the road before killing the engine. The windows are already down, ever since I'd turned off the air conditioning after the engine light started blinking. Now that I'm not moving, the dry, high desert heat invades the interior of the car, and my lank hair starts to stick to my skin. Last I checked, the dash had said it was 94 degrees.

Looking around, there is no one and nothing. The lack of people had been a comfort for the last hundred miles or so. Now, the arid, low rolling hills are intimidating.

Sparse vegetation dots the roadside and the only signs of anything manmade are the weathered, old wire fences. From the way the posts twist and lean, I imagine no one has been out to check them in years, if not decades.

Ahead, the dark asphalt road stretches towards the horizon, seventy miles back, a sign had promised the existence of a small town ahead, but I can't see any sign of it through the heat waves marring my view. I'm crap at guessing distances, but I know there's at least another ten miles to go. At least it's still early morning.

Grimacing, I reach under the dash to pop the hood then slide out of the car.

When I lift the hood, a large plume of dark smoke rushes me. Coughing and waving my hand, I step back until my eyes stop smarting and the smoke clears enough for me to get a look at the issue. It's not like I have any tools to fix it, but my daddy would be rolling in his grave if I didn't at least take a look.

I see one issue right off the bat. There's a massive gouge in the water tank, which accounts for the overheating. That's not enough for the Mirai to shake and blow gray smoke, though. Bracing my hands on the bumper, I try to get a better look. My best guess is something with the transmission. I took this car since I knew Enzo had just taken it that morning from someone who owed the familia, so they wouldn't have had time to put a tracker on it. Looks like the previous owner sucked at regular maintenance.

A rumble of thunder breaks the still silence and I scan the skies. They're clear, but I've heard about the freak storms that happen in this area. The rumble grows louder, and it's not coming from any storm, I realize. It's coming from down the road, the way I came.

I hurry to close the car's hood, letting it slam without care before getting back into the driver's seat. Sweat, not just from the stifling heat, ripples down the back of my neck.

So stupid to come this way. It's the perfect place to get caught by the Santi Pastori. No roads to turn off on. Nowhere to hide. Riccardo or someone will put a bullet between my eyes and dump me on the side of the road. No one will ever find my body.

But I refuse to go without a fight.

Stretching across the center, I open the glovebox. I'd found the small pistol the first night I'd left but hadn't been willing to touch it. What I know about guns comes solely from the media. Better than nothing, though. I don't think it has a safety so I'm careful as I try to conceal it by holding it between the seat and door.

The rumble gets louder, echoing off the undulating hills. Looking in the mirror, I frown as a group of motorcycle riders come into view.

I know motorcycle clubs can be just as dangerous as mafia families, but I

don't know if what I'm seeing is a club or not. More importantly, I don't know if Santi Pastori has told anybody they're looking for me.

"Just ride on past, boys," I breathe out, pressing my back firmly against the hot leather seats. I do my best not to bounce my knee, but the closer the bikers get, the more I want to puke. I eye the black designer tote in the backseat, trying to calculate how much cash I have left and if it'd be enough to bribe them to forget they ever saw me.

Given my fuck-ups and having to pay for everything in cash, I've got maybe a grand left. I don't need to be a mafia don to know that amount of a bribe doesn't get much traction in these circles.

They're a few car lengths away and I bite my tongue to hold back a whimper. They're slowing down.

There's at least a dozen of them, but only four actually stop, two in front of my car, two in back, too close for me to escape forward or throw my car in reverse.

None of them are wearing helmets, and each one is wearing a black leather vest. My eyes lock on one of the ones parked in front of me as he kicks his stand out. The patch on his vest has three stylized dog heads in a chain circle. The words Knights of Hades arches across the top and something in Latin is at the bottom. If he's wearing a shirt, I can't tell since his sculpted bronze arms are on full display along with a tapestry of tattoos I find myself itching to study. As he swings his leg off the bike and he stands to his full height, my eyes widen at how *big* he is.

I'd thought Riccardo was one of the biggest, toughest-looking guys I've ever met, but as this dude turns towards me, Riccardo shrinks to almost puny. The man in front of me is at least six and a half feet tall, if not closer to seven, and he's got the shoulders of a linebacker. His vest is half opened, revealing a chiseled chest bare of anything except more tattoos. His jeans are faded and hug the tree trunks he has for thighs before being haphazardly tucked into half-laced black boots.

When I drag my eyes up to his face, his little smirk tells me I've been caught gawking. But what a face, the not-quite-dead romantic in me sighs. High cheekbones are topped by dark eyes and severe, pitch-black brows. His nose

has been broken at least once, and his lips are full enough to promise sin. There's a strange scar on his right temple that disappears into his hair, which is as black as his brows and cut short. He's too rough to be called handsome, but that makes him all the more intriguing.

He radiates strength and untamed spirit, like a wild stallion that could never be saddle broken.

As he walks the short distance to my driver's door, I catch the shoulder harness I'd missed. It's a stark reminder that this man could be about to execute me. I grip the 9mm in my hand tighter, my nerves returning. If I shoot him, there's no way I'm making it out alive. Not with this many bikers surrounding me.

The other guy in front gets off his bike, but he leans against it, watching me from behind dark aviators. He's wearing a matching vest, but this one's totally open. Around his neck hangs a length of chrome chain. I swallow.

Dangerously Handsome stops at my window and I'm regretting not rolling up my window even halfway. He shoves those big hands of his into his front pockets and cocks his head. "What seems to be the problem?" His voice is smooth, but there's a rasp at the edge of each word.

I can't repress the shiver that his voice sends through me, coalescing right between my legs. This is not the time to be turned on, especially by my potential assassin. I swallow and brave meeting his eyes, reminding myself that I have a gun.

Putting on a smile, I answer. "Engine went out, but I've got a tow on the way."

When he raises an eyebrow, I know he doesn't buy the lie.

"That so?" he asks and looks over at the man accessorized with chains with a smirk. Then he looks back at me. "You might be waiting awhile on that truck. Chainz here is off today, and he's the only tow for a hundred miles."

Crap.

He leans down and grips the car door with both hands. "Why don't we try again, darlin'?"

My nerves disappear and now I'm pissed. Enzo used to call me that. *Darlin'*. I whip up the gun, pointing it at him a little awkwardly.

Without hesitation, Chainz draws his gun from his spot in front of the car, aiming the barrel at my head. I spy in the mirror that the two men at the back of the car have done the same.

Chainz takes a step forward.

"Don't," I say loud enough to be heard but don't take my eyes off Dangerously Handsome, who holds up a hand as a signal to his men. They stop. Dangerously Handsome looks amused more than concerned and it irritates me further. When he meets my eyes again, I speak. "Why don't you guys just head on out of here and forget you saw me. That way I don't have to mess up that pretty face of yours."

His full lips slowly morph into a grin, and I'm struck at how it transforms his face from harsh to beautiful.

"No one's ever accused me of being pretty before," he says and nods at the gun. "Plus, you won't be messing anything up."

The ass.

I narrow my eyes. I've never shot anyone but it doesn't mean I won't. "Don't try me."

He moves fast, ridiculously fast, and in a single moment he's wrapped his much larger hand around mine and the gun. He angles the barrel away from him, then points a finger at a small lever on the side of the gun. "I can try all I want, since you've got the safety on."

He doesn't let go of me or the gun. Let's try this again." He extends his other hand in greeting. "Name's Blaze. You're having car issues, and I spend my time off working at Hades' Garage twelve miles up from here."

"Oh." I tug my hand—gun included—away from his grip and he lets me go. I do my best to ignore the drag of his rough skin over mine. I keep the gun in my lap, but I'm starting to think these guys aren't working for Santi Pastori. "Sorry. I'm not the most trusting. I'm—" I scramble for a name, settling on my middle, as I briefly shake his hand—"Claire. The engine light came on

about fifty miles ago then the smoke started. I was deciding what to do when you guys rolled up.”

Blaze inclines his head towards the hood. “Mind if I take a look?”

Sheepishly, I nod and pop the hood again.

When he turns, Blaze waves at the ones behind me. Without a word, they’re back on their bikes, engines revving before they’re headed down the road. The distance between them and the rest of the group burns away into nothing faster than I’d imagined possible.

Blaze and Chainz disappear from sight as Blaze raises my hood, and I contemplate getting out. This could just be a way to lure me into a false sense of safety, but I’ve watched too many crime shows to fall for that. Besides, my gut tells me that Blaze is just as dangerous as he looks, even if he’s offering help right now.

The two men talk, and the car shakes once or twice, but I can’t understand what they’re saying. It’s not long before Chainz is closing the hood and getting back on his bike while Blaze comes over to my window.

“Looks like you’ve got a couple of issues.” I appreciate Blaze getting right to the point. I focus on the issues of the car and not how attractive he is wiping grease off his hands with a handkerchief. “Water reservoir is shot, and it looks like your radiator blew. On top of that, I’d guess it’s been a few months since you changed the oil?”

My lips pinch and irritation makes me frown, but Blaze seems to take it as being embarrassed, so I’m quick to come up with something.

“It’s a friend’s car, owed me a favor.” I’ll stick as close to the truth as I can. “Guess I should have made sure it was up for a long trip before taking it.”

Blaze watches me and nods before stepping back and gestures to his bike. “Why don’t I give you a ride into town, then Chainz here will come back for the car tomorrow. He doesn’t like working on his day off.”

I freeze, thinking the offer through. The car is dead in the water, so if I don’t take him up on it, I’m stuck here.

A bead of sweat rolls down my temple. The temperature is climbing with the sun and I've got maybe half a water bottle left. Blaze said the town is twelve miles away, and I'm wearing worn ballet flats, black leggings, and a white tank. With my skin, I'll be burned red as a lobster within half an hour.

But if I take him up on the offer, I'll be heading off with two strangers—men who look more than plenty familiar with the guns they carry.

My mom always taught me to trust my gut. The only time hers ever failed her was when she thought the pain in her side was nothing. By the time they caught the cancer, it was too late.

I study Blaze, who's as still as a statue even with the sun blazing down on him, and consider my gut. It'd warned me Enzo was too good to be true, but I'd ignored it. Look where that got me. Taking in Blaze, my gut tells me he's safe... for now. There's something different about him, something I can't quite pin point. I figure a man like him must have as many secrets as he does tattoos.

Looking ahead, the strip of asphalt extends unbroken towards the far mountains with heat waves intensifying by the second. It won't be long before the temperature hits triple digits.

Daddy taught me to not be stupid.

Decision made, I grab the keys. "Let me roll up the windows."

"Don't bother," Blaze says, his words giving pause to my hands. "No one around here messes vehicles. If you're worried, just make sure you have everything."

Frowning but not bothering to argue, I reach in back for my bag. It's not like the car had anything in it before I took it, and if there are as many issues with it as Blaze says, I don't have enough to fix it. Maybe the town has someone I can sell or trade it to. Then, soon as I've got a new car, I'll be on my way again.

I tuck the gun in my bag before tugging it over my shoulder. I absolutely do not think about the wedding ring buried at the bottom.

Blaze opens the door for me as I grab the handle, and I glare at him. He backs

off with a grin and walks to his bike. To distract myself from the view of his great ass, I close and lock the door, waiting for it to beep before heading to the two bikers waiting for me.

Chainz is already on his bike, the engine rumbling, as he watches us with an expression I can't read. Blaze throws his leg over his own bike, which I'm seeing is much bigger than I'd thought now that I'm next to it. When Blaze looks over at me, I shift my weight between my feet, jump when the engine roars to life.

"I've never ridden before," I confess with a yell, hating my insecurity in the face of his easy confidence.

"It doesn't bite," he yells back, his voice teasing. He holds out a hand. "Come on, I'll show you where to put your feet."

A white blur edges into my periphery and I see another trucker approaching from the direction from which I'd come. It's somebody who might know what I've done. Somebody answering the bounty on my head. I grab ahold of Blaze's hand and awkwardly swing my leg over the seat. I yelp when he grips my calf with his other hand, making him laugh.

"Foot here," he instructs and I look down to see him guiding me to a smaller peg than the one further in front. "Same on the other side."

"What do I hold on to?" I ask lamely and he looks over his shoulder at me.

"Me."

I tentatively put my hands on the tops of his shoulders, and he makes a gruff sound. Then he reaches behind me, his arms long enough to grab the top of my ass, and hauls me tight up against him. Before I can protest that, he's moving my hands off his shoulders and around his massive waist.

I haven't been this close to a man other than Enzo for years, even before meeting Enzo.

The top of my head doesn't reach his shoulders, and I can barely touch my fingertips together on his stomach.

He uses his foot to move up the kickstand and without warning, we roar onto

the road just in front of the semi-truck. Chainz falls in beside us. The acceleration pulls a squeal out of me and I cling to Blaze's back, pressing my face against his leather vest. From the sharp, rhythmic movements of his hard stomach, I guess he's laughing at me.

We outpace the trucker quickly and the wind makes the harsh sun easy on my bare shoulders. Like this, all I can smell is the arid desert, clean leather, a hint of sulfur—like a lit match—and something purely masculine.

This is not the time to get a crush, Kennedy Claire. One night and one day to get the car traded in for something else. Then I'm leaving, leaving this town and this dangerously handsome biker behind.

2

BLAZE

Something about Claire is a siren song to my demonic heart. Even before I saw her sweet girl-next-door face, my nature drew me towards the Toyota pulled over with hazards flashing. I'd expected it to be like any other calling—a human whose soul is desperate enough to strike a bargain.

Maybe she is, maybe she isn't.

When she'd pulled the puny gun on me, my cock went half-mast. She's a kitten, but she's got claws. She's also got secrets hidden in those hazel eyes of hers. A demon like me can't resist secrets.

I knew right away she doesn't know how to recognize our kind. I highly doubt a pretty human like her would have been willing to climb onto my Harley Sportster if she knew what I am. Sweet, innocent-looking girls run from us demons. The women who hang around the Knights of Hades clubhouse know exactly what we are. Hell, half of them are drawn to us because we're a motorcycle club and the other half are there because they want the demon.

And I mean literal demon.

When I got a handful of Claire's cute ass as I pulled her flush against me, my pants grew tighter. Then when her tiny hands gripped my leather cut, her pert breasts against my back, my cock went full mast. I raced us down the road towards Devil's Haven—the town we'd taken over years ago—ignoring my erection.

I don't do sweet and innocent. Claire strikes me as the type of girl who wants flower, candle-lit dinners, and a man who'll be gentle as he makes love to her. I don't do that shit. I fuck hard and fast, and any woman I'm with knows not to expect anything once we're done.

Now if only my cock will get on the same page.

We cross into the large town we've taken over. It's sitting at the foot of one of the many desert mountains tucked away near Death Valley. The road snaking through this region isn't even on most of the modern maps. The only people who roll through our town are seasoned truckers and people running from something. And since Claire's not a trucker...

So, what's she running from?

I feel her shift behind me, probably taking in the shops as we slow down through the main street. The rest of the men are likely already split up, some headed to the clubhouse, others to the office, and the rest split between their jobs in town and The Styx, our club's preferred bar.

I take a left towards The Styx, a bit sharper than necessary, grinning when Claire squeaks and clings to me. She's damn tiny compared to me, but she's got strength in her grip. The black leggings she's wearing makes it feel like she's naked while she's pressed up against me, and her bare arms do nothing to dispel the illusion. But a glance down at those arms has me frowning. It's only been ten minutes and her skin's already turning pink from the sun.

If we hadn't been coming back from a ride after a job, she'd still be stuck out there. Demons don't get burned by the sun and 120-degree weather doesn't faze us. A little thing like her could've died, though. The thought pisses me off more than it should.

Pulling up, it's like I'd guessed. Several bikes are parked out front of The Styx Bar. I pull into the gravel parking lot, parking near the back door next to Sydney's Honda Civic. The bar is housed in a two-story building with a weathered exterior, its walls painted in a faded dark blue, giving it a rustic and worn-out appearance. It'd been the run-down headquarters of the MC club that used to run the town, but since we took over, Sydney's done a lot to improve the place. With our help, she gutted the second floor and renovated it into a two-bedroom apartment where she now lives.

The Knights of Hades runs the town, but Sydney runs The Styx, and we know not to mess with the fiery, ball-busting human.

Claire scrambles off the bike, and I hurry to get off, reaching for her. Grabbing her arms, I keep her from falling on her ass, her legs clearly weak after her first time.

“You’ll get used to it,” I tell her. She pulls out of my grip fast, glaring up at me. At least she isn’t about to tumble over into the gravel.

“No, I won’t,” she replies waspishly but drops her gaze to the ground. “Thanks, though.”

I’m glad of the reminder that she’s not going to be riding with me again. If I want a distraction, there are plenty of willing women inside the bar. “Let’s go talk to Syd. She’ll hook you up with a room for however long it takes to fix your car.”

I head for the front of the bar, not bothering to wait for the woman. I hardly know her and she’s getting under my skin. The entrance itself is under a narrow roof that stretches the length of the front; the door is a heavy wooden thing that’s the newest thing on the building. A few of the younger Knights got into a fight, busting down the old one.

Sydney got so pissed, she banned them from her bar for two years. Reaper—our MC president and owner of Cerberus Security—made them pay for and fix the damage, then assigned them all the shit, boring paperwork tasks none of us like doing. He kept them on grunt-work only until Sydney rescinded the ban.

There’s no need for advertisements posted on the outside walls or menus like you find in more popular establishments in the bigger cities. Devil’s Haven has a population of five hundred, give or take. If you live here, you know The Styx menu. It hasn’t changed in decades.

I see the curiosity in Claire’s eyes, though it’s clear she’s trying to hide it, as I open the door and walk in. The temperature plummets thirty degrees. An icy wave rolls over my skin, but it doesn’t bother me. My eyes aren’t affected by the sudden darkness, either. If anything, my vision gets better. I might have escaped the bowels of the Underworld centuries ago, but darkness is still my

friend. The irony that we settled here, in the deserts of Nevada, isn't lost on me, though the Underworld—Hell, Land of the Dead, Kur, whatever mortals call it—isn't just one environment. The celestial plane is like this one but more, with every environment imaginable.

The religious leaders of this world would drop dead if they ever learned that the beings they called angels and demons are actually all the same. The only difference between us is the same as what separates humans: politics. Whichever sect is more powerful, whichever holds more sway over the celestial plane, gets to determine who of us are considered angels and who are demons.

Sick of the constant wars and strife of our home world, the rest of the Knights of Hades and I clawed our way through the ether in search of true freedom. We found this place and motorcycles. Then when we realized we'd need a way to legitimize ourselves in this world, Reaper—our leader—decided we'd offer security services against anything supernatural. One of our first jobs landed us here, in this small town already called Devil's Haven, ironically enough.

The locals had had some issues with some nasty wolf shifters. We cleared them out, then Reaper came to an agreement with the then mayor, a grizzled old man named Red. That was thirty years ago, and now we've got enough of a reputation that we can be picky about what jobs we take. We also charge a hell of a lot of money, part of which we invest right back into the town that's now our turf. When Red died, they tried to vote Reaper in as Mayor. He refused, but they didn't accept anyone else. So now Devil's Haven really is ours, even if it's not on any official paperwork.

I lift my chin to the riders who've claimed our usual spots in the back corner. Three of them are probies, men trying to earn a cut with the Knights of Hades patch. We originals are all demons, but over the years, Reaper's been letting other supernatural outcasts join us. Strength in numbers and diversity and all that bullshit. Two of the probies are shifters, a bear named Sampson and a lynx named Max. The third is a half-blood, the spawn of a demon and human, with the boring-as-fuck name Jon. Chainz is here too, along with Brute, Heathen, and Bones.

Standing at the bar, I rap my knuckles on it, just to piss off Sydney. She's

always behind the bar, unless she's shoving her way between idiots trying to brawl. She's human, but all fire and spite. She sends me a glare, fire in those almost black eyes of hers. She's as consistent as Reaper is when it comes to the clothes she wears. Cut-off denim shorts that show off long, toned legs, ass-kicker boots strapped tight, and a black tank top with some classic rock band logo on it. Sydney's ancestors were native to the area, and it shows with her high cheekbones, bronze skin and ink black hair.

"Why are you at my bar, Blaze?" she demands before turning back to the dirty beer glasses and dishwasher rack.

I lean forward, resting my forearms on the bar. The Styx might look like the typical dive bar, but Sydney runs a tight, clean ship. If I'd wanted a drink, I'd have sat with the rest of the club, so she knows something's up. I jerk my head towards the door, towards Claire. I can feel her moving closer now, wary. Girl's got secrets and trust issues, that's for sure.

"Picked up a rescue twelve miles out," I say.

Sydney's eyes clock Claire, but she doesn't stop loading the dishrack. "That's my business why?"

"Car's going to need repairs." Claire joins me at the bar finally, and I give her a wink. Her cheeks turn pink, obvious to me even in the dim lighting. "Chainz is going to tow it in tomorrow, then it could be a few days. She needs a place to stay."

Sydney loads the rack into the bar's dishwasher with a grunt and then heads our way. She barely glances at Claire, her hands on her hips. "So drop her off at the motel," she says with a sniff.

"Come on, Syd," I cajole. "I wouldn't even make the probies stay there. Ya know Marty hasn't had a customer in the last decade and those rooms haven't been opened in that whole time. I know you got that room upstairs."

"I can pay," Claire says, then clears her throat when Sydney's glare moves to her. "If that's the issue. And I'll only need one night."

I twist, angling myself towards her. This'll be interesting. "Oh?"

She eyes me and I can't help but smirk. Something about this woman makes

my cock come alive. And every time she looks at me with suspicion, I want to tease her secrets out of her. With my lips, my hands, my cock—whatever it takes.

“I’m on a strict time table,” Claire says, keeping her nose up like she’s in some boardroom and not a biker bar. “If the car can’t be fixed by tomorrow evening, I want to trade it in for a new one so I can be on my way by tomorrow night.”

Claire’s voice is stuffy and proud, full of expectations, but the way she holds herself says there’s more to it. I’m not the only one who notices. Sydney crosses her arms.

“You running from something, girl?” Sydney’s eyes pin Claire in place, and Claire squares her shoulders.

“I just want to be on my way by tomorrow night.”

Sydney studies her and Claire doesn’t back down. Lady’s got steel for a spine—Reaper’s the only one who doesn’t eventually cave against Sydney. Whatever the bar’s owner is looking for, she must find it since Sydney nods sharply and wipes her hands off on a bar rag before indicating with her head that Claire should follow her.

“I’ll show you up, then,” the woman says, and I grin. Sydney might be a mean, tough woman but she’s a softy under it all. She gets it from her old grandpa, Red. He raised her ever since her parents were murdered by the shifters that tried to take over the town.

Claire gives me a look but heads to follow Sydney to the far right side of the bar where a swinging door separates the back of the bar. The raven-haired beauty doesn’t spare me a second glance after she leaves my side, and I take full advantage of staring at her tight ass and compact curves before she disappears. My cock is a steel bar in my jeans and I adjust myself with a shake of my head.

Before heading over to the others, I step behind the bar and grab two dark bottles of beer with the label of our club. Cinder, another rider, brews the stuff, and it packs a punch even us demons can feel. When I drop into an open seat, I hit the bottle cap against the edge of the table to pop it open and

take a long drink of the cold, hop-heavy beer.

“Syd’s going to catch you one day and fuck you up,” Heathen says with a grin.

I flip him off. Heathen looks exactly like his road name. He’s seven feet of pure muscle and pagan rage, his entire body covered in blue runic tattoos and designs. His head is shaved, save for the top, which he wears back in a long, single, thick braid. On each side of his skull, he’s got a raven’s head tattooed in knotwork. The rest of the bird wraps down his neck, then the wings fan out over his chest and back. His cut—like the rest of ours—is sleeveless, and he never wears a shirt unless ordered by Reaper, so his tats are always on full display.

Him with those tats and his wild blue eyes always attracts the crazy fucking chicks. And that’s just the way he likes it.

“New chick is something,” Bones murmurs in that quiet, fucking-creepy tone of his. He’s tall like the rest of us, but he’s lean, thin. The fucker’s embraced his gaunt human appearance by tattooing a skull over the tight skin of his face—one reason for his road name. People always underestimate him though, since he looks skinny. But he more than holds his own in a fight. His demonic abilities lean towards the shadows and—the other reason for his road name—the manipulation of bones. If it’s got a skeleton, Bones can fuck with it. “I bet that pussy is sweet.”

My grip tightens on the beer bottle, and I have to resist the urge to smash Bones’ jaw with my fist. Chainz and Brute look at me, but I just take another drink of beer. Claire isn’t mine just because she rode into town on my bike, and Bones has every right to say what he wants. Besides, Bones is all fucking talk.

“Stick with the local pussy,” Brute spits out and Chainz grunts in agreement. “You saw her ride. Woman like that has money and class. She’s probably got a fancy lawyer or broker boyfriend waitin’ for her.”

Brute, despite his name, is the one with the most brains. He looks like his name, with a face only a mama could love with how many hits he’s taken. Ragged, wild blond hair falls to his shoulders. When he’s not on the job, he’s usually got his nose buried in a book or a tablet. The demon hardly gets his

dick wet, too busy researching about the latest technology or some shit. He's the main engineer around here, but half the time he's so busy with his own side projects, he needs me in the shop to handle shit.

"Exactly," I agree with him, and Brute nods at me.

Chainz doesn't say shit but grunts when I remind him I volunteered his tow truck services.

To the rest, I explain what she'd told Sydney.

"Won't find many options around here," Chainz says, shaking his head. "Picked a hell of a place to break down."

Brute's already back on his phone, which looks hilariously small in his big fist. Heathen and Bones have their beers in hand, and Heathen agrees with Chainz.

"You might have something in the junkers behind the shop but nothing that can be up and running in a day," Heathen muses. "Suppose someone 'round town might trade her cars, but she won't get a good trade."

"What's her rush?" Bones asks before taking a long drink to finish his beer. He holds up the empty bottle. "Another round, probies."

The three probationary riders jump up, eager to follow the order. The bear collects the empties and the two others make their way to the bar for more. Bones snickers watching them, no doubt hoping Sydney will come down and find them behind her bar. No one is allowed back there without her explicit permission.

"Won't say." I lift the bottle to my lips, but it's already empty. With a quick look for Sydney, I pop the cap off the other one. "She's got secrets, and it's connected to them."

The rest of them nod. I have a nose for secrets and when people are lying. It's one of the things Reaper uses me for. When a job requires interrogation or teasing secrets out, he sends me in. I get answers no matter what, either with my fists if it's a man or through my charm if it's a woman.

Secrets all have a different taste, and when someone lies or skirts around the

truth, I feel it on my tongue. It's not something I could turn off, even if I wanted to. With Claire, though, I want to taste more than her secrets on my tongue. The thought of burying my head between her thighs has my cock growing again, and I take another gulp of the beer. No woman has ever made me feel this hot so fast. If she'd been willing, I'd have shoved those thin leggings down to her knees and fucked her over my bike, just from spending ten minutes with her sitting behind me, holding on to me.

Like Brute said, she's too good for us demon bikers. She probably doesn't even know we're real, and I don't feel like dealing with her screams if I'm not buried balls deep inside her.

I push back from the table, abandoning my beer. "I'm headed to the shop, see if we got anything in stock that might work for the repair."

Brute follows me and it's only a minute later that I'm back on my bike in the gravel parking lot, making the engine roar to life and rumble under me. The sun beats against my bare shoulders, trying to coax my own flames out to play. I'm tempted to give in, to let this human form bleed away until the truth of what I am is bared for anyone to see. No, not just anyone. Claire.

Shaking thoughts of her from my head, I don't let myself look up to the row of windows on the second floor before I ride out, Brute at my side.

Pretty city girls aren't meant for exiled demons. One good deed isn't going to change that.

3

KENNEDY

“**B**edroom’s up here, bathroom is shared.”

Sydney is a walking example of efficiency as she gives me an abrupt tour of the place she’s letting me stay tonight, thanks to Blaze. I resolutely don’t think about the ride earlier. For the first few minutes of the ride, I was terrified I’d fall off. Once I’d relaxed, all I could think about was how he felt where I was pressed up against him.

Downstairs, the bar looked like the standard dive bar. No windows, scarred wooden tables and chairs, a handful of leather booths along one side and pool tables along the other. Everything was clean, though, and the people seated clearly respect Sydney. There has to be a reason why. She has to be a person worth respecting. So, other than her being the only other woman in the bar, I don’t feel too nervous.

We’d passed through what had been a locked door into a small landing, then up a narrow flight of stairs that had emerged inside a second-floor apartment. Not just any apartment. Sydney’s home. She points down the hall. “That door’s my room. Don’t go through that door. Next door is the bathroom.” She pulls out a keyring that is hooked to her belt. “Here’s the room I sometimes rent out.” She unlocks the door, then swings it open before ushering me in.

Not knowing what else to do, I walked in. Unlike the bar, this room has a row of three small windows that overlook the gravel parking lot and the road Blaze and I rode in on. It’s a small room, especially compared to the house I lived in with Enzo. But it’s big enough to comfortably fit a queen-size bed

with a simple wooden frame and no headboard. It's covered with a plain, sky blue comforter and has two pillows encased in a matching blue. The walls are painted a soft, neutral tone, and the windows are trimmed in white. There aren't any blinds, but there are short curtains that are pushed open to let the afternoon light in.

Adjacent to the bed is a small, compact writing table and chair with a small table lamp. It's the perfect size for working on a laptop, and I can instantly see myself working there, writing away on my book. Directly across from the bed is a low, six-drawer dresser that matches the wooden bedframe. It's got a short stack of white towels on it but otherwise is empty.

"Not that you'll need it, but there's a closet there," Sydney's voice follows me in and I turn towards the narrow closet door. "I've got some stuff in there. Don't fuck with it."

"Of course not," I agree, trying not to be waspish. It's not like I'd have messed with her stuff without the warning. I'm not an asshole.

I set my tote bag on the bed and, with a final look around the room, I give her a smile. "This is great. How much do I owe you for the night?"

Sydney waves my question away. "It'll go on the Knights' tab since it was Blaze who brought you in." She cocks her head and makes a point of looking me up and down. "I don't let none of them boys up here. So if you want to tangle with that demon, you make sure he takes you to his place."

My eyes go wide and I sputter before shaking my head. "Oh, no, that's absolutely not going to happen," I promise her. "I'm—" I snap my mouth shut before I say I'm married. Her eyes narrow again, and she makes me think of a bloodhound who's gotten a scent. "I'm just here until my car is fixed or I can trade it in for a new one."

She shrugs and turns away from the bedroom, probably going back downstairs. "There's shampoo and shit in the bathroom if you want a shower. Not much in the fridge, but help yourself or come downstairs for a burger and fries. I'll kick you out if you eat my sorbet, though."

I don't manage to respond before her heavy footsteps head down the stairs, leaving me alone in the apartment. At a loss, my skin itches and I grab my

bag again and one of the towels from the dresser before finding the bathroom she mentioned. I want to weep with joy when I flick the light on and close the door behind me.

For the last month, I've been dealing with tiny bathrooms with questionable stains and cracked tiles. Half the time, a shower wasn't worth the risk so I'd made do with stale, threadbare washcloths and soapy water to key areas.

Sydney's bathroom won't be in any design magazines, but compared to my recent experiences, it's luxurious. Like the bedroom, the walls are an off-white and the only color comes from the shower curtain, which is printed to look like the Monet painting of water lilies. The sink area is a basic vanity, with space for Sydney's makeup bag tucked to one side and a toothbrush holder.

I lock the door and catch my reflection in the mirror above the sink. Great. I scrunch my face with distaste before shaking my head. It's a wonder Blaze didn't run screaming from me. I've got bags under my eyes, and my black hair is falling out of its bun, giving me crazy-witch vibe à la Helena Bonham Carter. At least I haven't been wearing makeup, so I don't have any black smudges around my eyes, but my lips are in desperate need of Chapstick.

No wonder Sydney hesitated at letting me stay in her place.

A shower won't get rid of the bags under my eyes, but I'll feel like a human again at least. I don't let myself linger under the hot spray despite enjoying the steady water pressure, and after a through scrub and a quick shave of my legs and pits, it's like I'm a whole new person.

Now if only I had clean clothes to put on. My skin crawls at the idea of putting any of my clothes back on. It's been about a week since I broke down and spent two hours at a laundromat to properly wash them.

Deciding to delay the inevitable, I peek out of the bathroom then pad to the bedroom wrapped in the towel. I stop, my hand still on the door, at the brown, polka dotted peasant dress lying at the end of the bed and a pair of underwear and a bralette with a note on top.

Picking it up, I smile after reading it. Sydney isn't so bad, after all.

Dropping the towel to my feet, I pull on the clean panties. Sydney and I are

close enough in size that they fit fine, even if they show more cheek than they're supposed to. She's got more boob than me, though, and I decide to forego the bralette as I pull on the fresh dress with a happy sigh. It's lavender scented but faint enough that it's clearly been a long time since she last wore it. Given the outfit she was wearing, this soft style of a dress doesn't really seem like her.

It has a simple peasant style top with a wide neck and a drawstring in the center, short puffed sleeves, and a narrow ruffle below my hips. Sydney probably fills the top out better, but a quick pull on the drawstring's bow tie fixes that for me, although no amount of tugging will make the dress fall lower than mid-thigh. It's the same type of dress I've seen on city girls aiming for cowgirl chic. All I need are some cowboy boots and a denim jacket to perfect the look.

Enzo would have had a screaming fit if he saw me in this.

The sounds of motorcycles break the silence of the room. I tug the waist of the dress to sit right as I sneak over to the windows, my heart rate picking up. There's no reason I should be hiding, but something about looking down on the parking lot feels illicit. Another biker is there, the big tattooed one that I noticed in the corner with the others. I roll my lips, catching them between my teeth when I see Blaze sitting on his bike.

Heat rolls through me and it's got nothing to do with the sun coming in. Even from this angle, he looks so massive, his thighs like tree trunks hugging the sleek design of his black bike.

A part of me silently prays that he'll look up and see me watching him.

When he doesn't, my shoulders drop and I push away from the window, scolding myself. I cup my neck with both hands.

"Get it together, girl," I say aloud before puffing my cheeks and blowing out a breath. "First, get something to eat. Then see if Sydney will let me use her washer and dryer, then figure out the car situation. Okay? Okay."

Done talking to myself, I head out to do the tasks I've set.

The kitchen is spread along one of the walls, with the sink, oven, and stove all in the same row of cabinets and the fridge tucked in at the end. A long

farmhouse dining table with chairs only on one side separates the kitchen from the rest of the living room. Like Sydney warned, there isn't much but there's enough to make a simple ham and cheese sandwich, and I grab a Coke after a moment's hesitation. I sit at the table to eat since I'm not sure what Sydney's views are on eating at the couch.

When I'm almost done, I hear the door open down below and then hurried footsteps. I swallow my bite just as someone who definitely isn't Sydney comes up the stairs.

"You must be Claire," the cheerful and heavily pregnant woman says as she walks over to me. "Do you do hugs? I'm a hugger."

"Uh, sure?" Before the words are fully out, she's hugging me tight enough I squeak.

"I'm Lacy," she introduces herself when she lets me go. "I usually help Sydney downstairs, but I'm supposed to be taking it easy with the baby and all." She pats her protruding belly.

Where Sydney is all tall hardlines and compact curves with a mean glare, Lacy barely comes up to my chin with the curves of a plus-size model and a cheerful disposition. Her blonde hair is cut in a stylish bob at her chin, and she's wearing denim shorts with a cleavage-baring bright pink V-neck that stretches snug over her large baby-rounded belly. I instantly like her.

"Mind if I sit?" she asks but she's already making her way to the large sofa set in the center of the living room. She sits on the beige thing with an oof that makes me smile, then props her feet up on the black coffee table that's strewn with open mail and a book set upside down to save the place. "My ankles have been swollen since I was nineteen weeks, I tell ya. Sometimes I think letting Cinder knock me up was a mistake, no matter how great his cock is."

Boy, am I glad I wasn't drinking anything when she says that.

Lacy pats the cushion next to her and sends me an inviting look over her shoulder. "Come sit! Oh, before you do, can you get me the pint of mango sorbet? I know she's got one in there, and the baby needs it." When she sees me hesitate, she laughs, and I swear she sounds like sunshine. "Don't worry

about getting in trouble. She's okay if I eat it. Just no one else is allowed."

"Okay," I say, drawing out the response. It takes me a minute, but I'm able to spot the sorbet hidden in the back of the freezer, then I'm sitting next to the tiny but bossy pregnant woman and handing off the illicit goods.

"So, you're the one Blaze and Chainz brought in? Bad luck breaking down out there, but it's good timing. A day earlier or later and the Knights would have missed you." She pries off the top of the sorbet and tries to dig the spoon into the frozen treat, frowning when it's still too hard to cooperate. Lacy keeps talking, though. "Don't worry. Blaze and Brute are ace mechanics. They'll get you fixed right up, even if it takes a few days."

I tuck a foot under me and lean back. The couch might be an ugly beige, but it's definitely comfortable, just like the rest of what I've seen of the apartment. The place is clearly owned by someone who takes pride in where they live. An armchair in matching beige sits beside the couch, a green afghan draped over the back of it. On the wall is a decent-sized TV with the cable system set up in a small entertainment center that matches the coffee table. Windows let in the afternoon light through gauzy blue drapes, and there are a few personal framed photos sitting on the built-in bookshelves which stretch along the wall leading towards Sydney's bedroom. There are books too, but their spines are all facing the wall, so I have no idea what they are since I can only see the cream-colored page ends.

"I'm hoping if they can't fix it tomorrow that I can trade it in for a new car," I say when she looks at me expectedly.

Her brows shoot up. "Well, you probably won't have any luck there," she tells me.

Disappointment tangles with nerves in my stomach.

Lacy gestures around us with the spoon. "Small town like this, we drive our cars till they die, and if we need a new one, we head to one of the bigger cities."

"Damn," I mutter, and she cocks her head.

"Sorry," she says and, to my surprise, she sounds sincere. "But like I said, you're in good hands with Blaze and Brute. So long as the Knights don't get

a job that takes them outta town, it shouldn't take long. Where'd you say you were from again?"

I stiffen and give her a brittle smile. "I didn't. I'm from the East Coast."

"Hmm. I have a cousin who lives out there," Lacy says and digs into the sorbet with a bit better success this time. I don't get the impression she's interrogating me, especially when she launches into a story about said cousin and how Lacy disagrees with every choice they've made.

Lacy keeps up an endless stream of chatter, hardly letting me get a word in. Rather than annoy me, her cheerful disposition and tendency to flit from one topic to the next like a butterfly has me relaxing into the couch, my nerves disappearing. I learn about Cinder, who is her old man in biker terms, apparently. He's one of the Knights of Hades and apparently runs a local brewery called Tartarus Taps. I learn about how there's been no sheriff or police in town since the Knights took over, but that I shouldn't worry since the Knights make sure there's no trouble and if there is, they settle it fast.

Lacy is how I also learn that the town, for the most part, supports the motorcycle club despite them being demons and all. That bit throws me off, but when I try to ask about it, she just shrugs and says, "you know, demons," before taking another bite of the forbidden sorbet and changing topics. Sydney had called Blaze a demon, too. It has to be because they're bikers, right? Upright, law-abiding citizens don't join motorcycle clubs and look like Blaze and the others I saw.

More time than I realize passes and the door at the bottom of the stairs opens again. This time a man shouts up, interrupting Lacy mid-sentence.

"Oi, sunshine, get that sweet ass downstairs or I'm leaving and you'll have to walk to the party."

My hackles bristle at the gruff, demanding tone, but Lacy finishes the sorbet off with a dreamy sigh and plops the empty container on the coffee table, spoon beside it.

"That's Cinder," she says, and a stab of envy hits me at the look in her eyes. She loves the man, even if I want to say fuck you in response to his order. Lacy gets up with a good-natured groan and slips her black flip-flops on

again. “It was lovely meeting you, Claire. If you’re up to it, you should come to the party with us. Sydney is going, too, so you can catch a ride with her. Trust me, if you’ve never been to a party thrown by bikers, you should come. It’ll be insane.”

“Sunshine!” Cinder shouts up again, and I remember Sydney saying she doesn’t let any of the Knights up here. A part of me begrudgingly respects Cinder for adhering to that rule.

“I’m comin’!” Lacy shouts back, irritation tinting her voice. When she turns back to me, her arms open wide, she’s all smiles though. “Hugs!” It’s all the warning I have before I’m crushed in her arms again. Based on her hugging ability alone, Lacy is going to be a good mom.

As quick as she appeared, Lacy’s gone and I’m left in the unexpected silence of the apartment. The sun has moved, and a glance at the oven clock has me surprised. It’s just past seven. How the hell did Lacy distract me that long? The door opens and closes, then steady footsteps come up the stairs. I stare at the empty sorbet in horror, knowing there’s no way I can hide the evidence in time.

Sydney’s eyes lock on me the moment she comes into view, then drop to the sorbet. I brace, waiting for her to yell and kick me out. Instead, she lets out a weary sigh and shakes her head.

“Lacy?” she asks.

Relief hits me, and I nod. “Lacy.” Then I frown. “I didn’t even notice that she talked to me, well, at me more like, for almost six hours.”

Sydney walks by and picks up the empty pint and spoon with a quiet laugh and a shake of her head. She heads towards the kitchen. “Yeah, she’s like that. It’s what made her such a good waitress. I swear she’s got some magic in her somewhere.”

Sydney opens the fridge and pulls out a Coke, cracking it open as she turns back to look at me. “So, she probably told you about the party tonight at the Knights of Hades clubhouse?”

“Yeah,” I reply, getting up and stretching. Wow, somehow I’d stayed in basically the same position the entire time, too. “She said you were going.

Don't worry about me, though."

The last thing I need to do right now is let my guard down and go to a party full of bikers. Even if they don't work in the same circles as Santi Pastori, someone else at the party might. I made mistakes in the beginning that cost me most of the money I'd stolen when I took off. The only way I'm staying alive is by playing it smart, which means no parties full of strangers.

"Oh, no." Sydney shakes her head and points at me. "You don't get it. Lacy said you should come, which means if I don't make sure you at least make an appearance, I'll never hear the end of it. And she'll send some of the probies back to get you."

A chill drips down my spine at the words, even though Sydney doesn't mean it like that.

"Come on," she says, marching into her room and leaving the door open. I follow, waiting just outside her door. "You can borrow a jacket. Shouldn't get too cold tonight since it's spring. And if it does, well, there are plenty of guys willing to help a lady warm up."

The idea of Blaze wrapped around me, rather than the other way around, hits me. It's quickly followed by thoughts of his big hands on my thighs, sliding up to my ass and grabbing hold like he had earlier, only this time his hands are under my dress.

"Yeah, I know that look." Sydney's in front of me again, holding out a black jacket, and she's grinning wryly.

I take the jacket and slip it on. "I don't know what you're talking about," I deny and staunchly refuse to think about Blaze again.

"Sure, you don't," she says, and I hurry back to my room to slide my shoes on.

He'll be there, right? No, it doesn't matter if he is or not. I'm only going to the party because I apparently have no choice. Besides, I'll be gone tomorrow, and I'm sure the party will be like the ones with the mafia men—plenty of women eager for a night with a dangerous man. Blaze will have his pick, and I'll keep my head down.

I've made it this far. I can make it through a party.

4

BLAZE

The sun is touching the mountain ridge behind the clubhouse, painting the desert landscape vibrant shades of oranges and pinks. Sunsets are one of my favorite things about this place. Back where we're from, colors are dull—like the life has been drained from them. It's part of the justification the angels use to call us demons and call our territories hellscapes. They suck the power, the magic and vitality, from our lands and pump it into their own.

The clubhouse is a sprawling adobe-style structure some wealthy settler had built during the gold rush. Now it houses most of the Knights of Hades, with the rest of the members bunking in the more recent metal building in the back. Black banners hang on some of the walls, the image of Cerberus's head in a circle of chains stamped in stark white and preserved from the elements with magic.

Already the party is in full swing, with the sound of engines revving and hard rock reverberating through the desert to create a symphony of violence and freedom.

I lean against one of the adobe walls, beer in hand and a cigarette hanging from my lips, watching the chaos in the main courtyard. Some chick years ago put string lights up between the walls, crisscrossing them overhead. They light the whole area below with a soft, warm glow. A few tables have managed to survive the years, though their position is nomadic thanks to the shit that these parties get up to. Furniture around here never seems to stay in the same place if there's more than five Knights of Hades close. It looks like

someone, probably a chick gunning to become the old lady of one of us, tried to dress up the place with some flowers. I shake my head as Heathen shoves himself up to sit on the top of a table, never noticing the flowers or how he knocks them over.

He's too busy urging the pretty little thing in too short of a skirt up onto his knee. She's been around for a while, even though she can't be older than twenty-two. Her blonde hair is messy, and she's wearing a ton of makeup, along with a bra that pushes her tits right up into Heathen's face. Thinking on it, I'm pretty sure her name is Nancy, or Jenelle, something like that. When she throws her head back, laughing like a hyena, I wince. Yeah, I remember her. Ended up fucking her mouth just to shut her up one night.

Scowling, I breathe in a long drag. Thinking about fucking a chick's mouth should have me excited for the sure to come fun of tonight's party. I haven't fucked anything but my hand since we headed out to California for the latest security job. Yet my cock is as limp as a fucking week-old piece of cilantro.

Other riders fill the courtyard, almost all of them wearing their cuts proudly. No fights have broken out yet, but it's still early. Maybe that's what I need. A good brawl to get the blood going. Plus, there's always a woman or two happy to help the winner celebrate.

"You're in a mood."

My gaze flicks over to Reaper, who's now leaning against the wall beside me. Motherfucker is quiet as death when he wants to be. He's not looking at me and is instead watching the party get going as he lazily brings a beer to his lips.

The demon is handsome in his human form, even I can see it. He's got the rugged looks mortal chicks are drawn to, and I've heard more than one say he's got bedroom eyes and lips meant to eat pussy. I hold back a snort and take a drink of beer around the cigarette. He'd have to give himself permission to relax if he wanted to get laid. Any chick willing to brave his fuck-off aura finds out real fast how little he cares about getting his dick wet.

"Thinking about a fight later," I answer after swallowing, scanning the crowd. Heathen's already paired up with whatever-her-name-is and he gets real bitchy if he thinks he might get cockblocked. Bones and Chainz are out

back near the garage, and Brute is nowhere to be seen, the fucker. I can drag a probie into the ring, let them try to prove themselves in a fight before I remind them what a real Knight of Hades looks like.

Reaper grunts and we don't bother trying to hold a conversation. It's what I like and respect about our president. He doesn't do bullshit, and his eyes miss nothing. He might look all brawn, but his mind is sharp and wicked clever. It's all thanks to him that our escape from the celestial realm was successful. He'd been our captain and saw the way the wars with the angelic bastards were going.

Chainz, Bones, Brute, Heathen, Cinder and I had all fought under Reaper for a century or more. He'd earned our loyalty more than the fuckers who owned the army. One of them being my own so-called father. So when he found the chance to leave, we trusted him. It'd been bloody, violent, and a few times we didn't think we'd make it. But we did, thanks to him taking the greatest risk of stealing the Dark Helm. Once we were here on Earth, he kept leading us, forming the Knights of Hades and building us a new home in Devil's Haven.

"The woman's car is registered to a Michael Donaldson in New York," Reaper says after a few minutes. "Stubs' done some searches, and there's no one connected to him by the name of Claire."

"She's got secrets," I confirm and drop the lit cigarette to the ground, twisting it into the dust with my boot. "Stolen?"

Reaper shakes his head. "No police reports. Donaldson had some deep debts a while back, though, to an Italian family. Given he's still walking, I think he struck a deal."

Shit. Humans and their mafias. I eye my president. "Think she's connected to it?"

Reaper finally looks at me, his eyes the black void of death. "Something went down, and it happened soon after Donaldson would have dropped that car off. The entire area is like a pissed-off rattlesnake nest, and there's been chatter on the dark web. Stubs's still combing through it, trying to get an idea of it. But if she's the one who pissed off that nest of vipers, I want her and that car out of my town. Clear?"

“Crystal,” I answer. I’m about to say more, but Chainz finally shows his face in the courtyard. He’s got his signature chain around his neck but his leather cut is nowhere to be seen. He sets his sight on us, his cloudy gaze hidden behind his large aviators, and as he makes his way to us, he snags a chick under each arm. The brunettes are more than happy to tag along, both of them wearing dresses that barely keep anything covered along with stripper heels.

Not many people travel through Devil’s Haven, but we’ve got a reputation for our parties, and girls like these two often drive in for a night or two looking for a taste.

“Prez, Blaze,” Chainz grunts out his greetings with a sly smirk. “Bones is working on the helo we confiscated from the Jackals back in Cali. He wants to know what you think we should do with it.”

Reaper pushes off the wall with a nod and drops his beer off on a table as he passes by. The Jackals were the group targeting an entire block of supernaturals and their families who’d been trying to blend in with humans. The assholes had some belief of never hiding our natures and the inferiority of humans. We got hired by the neighborhood after they pooled their funds. It wasn’t enough to hire us, but Reaper agreed so long as we could take what we wanted from the Jackals afterwards. We’d have done it anyways, but at least this way no one tried to stand between us and our spoils of war. Bones was fucking giddy at the idea of having a helicopter on hand.

“Come on, ya pissing me off,” Chainz tells me. He’s frowning, but when isn’t he? He drops his hands to each of the chick’s asses, grabbing them tight and making them shriek with excitement. “Let me introduce you to my new friends.” He looks down at the one on his right, dressed in red. More specifically, he looks at her big tits barely staying in the dress.

“I’m Yasmine,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes at me before giggling and running her long, acrylic nails over Chainz’s abs. “This is my twin, Esme.”

“Twins,” Chainz repeats with a grin before turning his grin to Esme’s equally impressive cleavage that’s propped up by her lime green halter top. “Why don’t you cheer up my friend, sweet cheeks?”

Esme gives me a look that’s full of promise and lets go of Chainz to sidle up to me, pressing up against me. Her heels bring her closer to reaching my

shoulder, and she has no hesitation in wrapping her arms around me to squeeze my ass while grinding her hips against me.

“I’m the funner twin,” she says with a wink.

She’s the exact type of fuck I go for. Willing and eager to let me get dirty and use her, so long as she gets to claim she fucked a Knight of Hades later. Hell, she’s got the look in her eye that tells me I could spin us around and fuck her right here in front of everyone and she’d be screaming for me.

And my cock doesn’t give a fuck.

Screw that. It’d better get with the program.

I wrap an arm around her, dropping my hand to her waist and squeezing.

“Is that right?” I’m forcing myself not to compare the feel of her to the brief handful I got of Claire earlier.

Esme reaches for my hand with the beer and guides it to her red-painted lips. She holds my gaze as she makes me tilt it up and she wraps her lips around its long neck, the message clear. When she lowers my hand, she lets a little beer dribble down over her chin and it lands on her tits.

“Oops,” she says without a hint of regret and her twin laughs behind her. I look up to see Yasmine eyeing us like she wants to watch. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d fucked someone in the same room as Chainz. Then a flash of brown amid a sea of bright dresses catches my eye.

Fucking hell. Claire is here.

My cock roars to life and Esme feels it. She grips me tighter to her and then her lips are on my bare chest where my leather cut hangs open. Claire stands next to Sydney and Lacy on the other side of the courtyard, wearing a dress that’s as cute as she is and more modest than any other single chick here. Reaper’s words go right out of my head because all I can focus on is how the desert breeze makes the hem of her dress lift up enough to tease. Her coal black hair is down, and I want to bury my hands in those natural waves.

She looks in my direction, her whole body jerking when our eyes meet. Hunger runs through me, visceral and desperate. I swear it’s reflected in

those whiskey-honey eyes of hers. Her gaze lowers and her face goes blank, any sign of desire disappearing when she sees Esme licking my chest like she's a damn cat and I'm her favorite bowl of cream.

"Fuck," I grunt, then push Esme off of me and back towards Chainz.

"What the fuck?" Esme demands, her face pissy.

I don't give an explanation, shoving past the three of them and marching across the party, intent on seeing that hungry look on Claire's face again. Chainz yells something, and I flip him off over my head.

Cinder walks up to Lacy, a blue plastic cup in one hand that she takes excitedly. His ol' lady is about to pop any day, and it's fucking comical to see them next to each other. Cinder's a giant compared to her, with broad shoulders and a face like granite. He's wearing a black tee under his cut, and his black hair is buzzed close to his scalp. One of his arms is covered in ragged scar tissue. I don't need to see him naked to know the burns cover most of the left side of his body. His eyes are blazing green, and he's an intimidating motherfucker who is absolutely wrapped around the human equivalent of a cupcake.

Still can't believe how hard he fell. Lacy's a sweetheart, though. When her ex came to town, Cinder and the rest of us were there to help her out. He hasn't left her side since.

Cinder looks at me over the heads of the chicks, lifting his chin in greeting as he perches his ass on the table behind him, looping an arm possessively around Lacy.

Lacy looks over, which has Sydney's and Claire's heads swiveling. Claire's face is poised, like the girl next door she looks like, but I see her eyes go past me to where I left Esme behind.

Sydney eyes me, a sly look in her dark eyes. She's already got a beer in hand, one of the demon brews, but the woman might as well be one of us for all the iron and spite in her. "The hero of the day," she drawls, nudging Claire with her elbow. Claire gives her a smile before Sydney continues, one I'd think was real if I didn't have a second nature for secrets and deception. "Next time warn a girl before you go offering up her guest room."

Claire's brows dip inward as she turns back to the prickly bar owner. "If it's really an issue, I honestly don't mind going to the hotel."

"Oh, please," Lacy says with exaggerated exasperation and nudges Cinder over so she can climb up onto his knee. Sydney and Claire shift closer towards the couple, leaving me enough room at the end of the table to join them without crowding Claire, though if I had it my way, I'd crowd Claire until that ass of hers was pressed up against my stiff cock. "Sydney, you know you'd already decided to offer that room the moment you saw her trailing behind Blaze."

Sydney scowls and I grin, shoving my hands in my front pockets. Leaning over to Claire, I mock whisper, "Sydney's all bark and no bite."

"Screw you, fire boy," the woman in question snaps back. "Just ask that president of yours how bad my bite is."

Lacy giggles, snorting and hiding her mouth behind her hand. "When are you going to accept that Reaper wants to eat you alive and finally screw it out?"

Sydney rolls her eyes. "When are you going to accept that you're just seeing what you want to? Sometimes when people can't stand each other, it's because, shockingly enough, they can't fucking stand each other."

"Mmmhmm," Lacy hums while taking a drink of whatever alcohol-free drink Cinder got her.

In the drop of conversation, I get Claire's attention. "Want a drink?" She doesn't have one and it's the only thing I can think of. Well, other than asking if she'd let me have a taste of her. Mouth or cunt, I'd take either.

She hesitates and Sydney elbows her again, adding, "You're only here for a night, live a little. Plus, your car won't be fixed in the morning, which means you don't have to worry about a hangover."

After another second, Claire shrugs and looks up at me. "Fine, I'll have one drink. What are the options?"

I jerk my head back towards the far wall where double doors are thrown open and bikers and partiers are flowing through. "Come on, I'll let ya pick." When she walks past me, I fall beside her, draping an arm over her shoulders.

She stiffens, but I tug her closer until she's pressed up against my side. She's a tiny thing, but damn, she fits nice with me. "Relax," I tell her, giving two bikers a cold stare when they leer over Claire as they walk by. "Here, if you don't have a man claiming you, you're free game."

She scoffs but doesn't pull away. "No chivalry among knights, then?"

"Chivalry is about the battlefield." I steer her around one of the huge leather couches that dominate the open floor plan. "It's a modern idea that chivalry has anything to do with opening doors and being a gentleman. As for the religious aspect, we certainly don't do that shit."

We've kept the foundations of the adobe estate, but when we took it over we knocked out a couple walls until we had a room large enough for club meetings. The ceilings are high with exposed wood beams stained dark from time. The rough-hewn walls are mostly bare, except we've got a few framed photos up, the biggest being a club photo from when we first formed the Knights of Hades. It's got all six of us plus our brand new bikes. Next to that one is another group photo but with a few new faces. It'd been taken in this very room after we officially launched Cerberus Security, a step that turned us legit even though we work in the gray areas the good guys can't.

Large, worn-out black leather couches are angled towards each other and a large, wall-hung flat screen TV- currently playing some pole dancer show. The sound's off, probably because everything is being drowned out by the rock music coming in from outside. In one corner of the room there's a pool table game in progress with a handful of chicks and riders hovered 'round watching. The other side has a well-stocked bar and a long-ass wooden table with beat-up chairs. That's where I guide Claire. With her under my arm, she doesn't have a chance to hesitate stepping back behind the bar even when I feel the hitch in her step.

"Are you a beer or liquor type of girl?" I ask, parking her in the middle of the bar. The other guys usually steer clear if it's obvious one of us is interested in a chick, but there isn't a single one of us who wouldn't take advantage of an opening if we saw it. I plan to make sure no one thinks they can move in on Claire. She's not mine yet, but she will be. At least for tonight. I'd decided that the moment I saw her in the damn polka dot dress she's wearing. Shit, I've never been one for the cute girl-next-door type, but Claire is making me

crave a slice of her sweetness.

Before she answers, I shoot her a grin. “Let me guess—you prefer wine?”

Claire’s nose scrunches up and she crosses her arms, pushing her petite breasts up. She doesn’t even know how much of a temptress she is. It’s refreshing.

“I’m good with beer,” she says, challenge in her voice. “And not a cheap one that’s more water than beer.”

I snort but open one of the beer fridges and grab two bottles of hefeweizens. After popping the caps, I hand one to her and take a long drink of mine.

“Thank you,” she says, too fucking polite, and looks around the room as she takes a small sip. I set my beer on the bar top beside her and rest one forearm on the bar, angling myself towards her. I decide to wait her out and it doesn’t take long. She darts a look at me twice before she gestures to the room with the bottle in her hand. “So this is the wild biker party I needed to experience at least once in my life?”

Following her look, I snort. There are some club bunnies prancing around in barely-there shorts and crop tops or micro dresses, almost all of them wearing high heels and a ton of makeup. There are other club members and some other civilian guests from Devil’s Haven. Every man here has been vouched for by a Knight, otherwise, they’d never made it onto the property. Other than some gratuitous groping, it’s pretty tame.

“Nah,” I shake my head and meet her gaze. “The party is just warming up. Once the sun sets and the bonfires are started, that’s when things really heat up. You’ll want to stick close to me, kitten, else you might find yourself dragged into a dark corner by someone wanting a taste of you.”

To my surprise, Claire doesn’t look offended. She just takes another sip of her beer, those pretty lips of hers caressing the bottle, her dainty fingers holding the neck with care. She cocks her head, eyeing me speculatively.

“And you won’t? Drag me into a dark corner?”

A slow grin twists my lips as my cock throbs at the very idea. I lean in over her, crowding her, and run my knuckles over her cheek. “Oh, I absolutely

will.”

Her whiskey-honey eyes drop to my lips, her own parting on a sweet breath. The scent of wildflowers and lemon cuts through hot desert, leather, and gasoline. I bring my face closer, my knuckles trailing down under her jaw. She sways towards me, and twisted satisfaction curls within me. She wants me. Even if her mind is fighting it, her body isn't.

I move my hand until I'm gripping the back of her neck, my hand big enough to wrap around most of it.

She stiffens, her gaze flying to mine.

A growl rumbles from deep within me. “I've wanted to taste these lips since you tried pulling a gun on me, kitten,” I say, keeping my voice low. A flair of defiance brightens Claire's eyes and I push myself forward and claim her lips with my own. She gasps, and I take advantage of the sweet sound, slipping my tongue into her mouth. She tastes faintly of the citrusy wheat beer, but under that she's all sweetness like I'd guessed.

Claire doesn't pull away, and as I slide my tongue against hers, she submits, melting against me as she tentatively returns the kiss. Never breaking the kiss, I steal her beer and set it aside before wrapping my other arm around her lower back, my hand gripping her hip as her hands land on my shoulders. She's soft where I'm hard, gentle where I'm rough, and my flames dance under my skin.

I turn us, pinning her back against the bar, pressing my hips into her stomach. I swallow her surprised moan and run my hand from her hip to her side, skimming up until I'm cupping her breast. I groan, licking into her mouth, as I feel her hard nipple through the thin material, realizing she isn't wearing a bra. Needing more, I shove my knee between her thighs, finally letting go of her neck to grip her hips and guide her to rock against my thigh. Even through my jeans, I can feel how hot she is.

“Blaze,” she pants, and damn, I love the way she breathes my name.

Unable to resist her soft skin, I run my hand along her thigh, then up higher, sliding under the flirty dress. She tenses, her hands curling around my cut but she isn't telling me to stop. Leaning my forehead against hers, I move until I

can cup her pussy through her underwear.

I groan, dipping my lips to bite and kiss her again at how hot she feels. “You’re so fucking wet already,” I growl out, my hunger for her turning base and primal. “What is it about you that makes me want to wrap these legs around me and bury myself in you?”

Her breath catches, her panties damp, and the tart, tangy scent of her arousal melds with her wildflowers and lemon, drugging me. I need to feel her.

The music cuts off, slamming us back to reality. Claire’s eyes are wide with shock, and I recognize the look too well. She’s about to run. My lip curls in a silent snarl, but then pissed-off shouting has my head snapping towards the open doors. The pool game is abandoned and girls are dumped off laps as men book it outside.

A moment later, Chainz storms in through the doorway without the brunettes from earlier, gun in hand, and when he locks on us, he stomps over. A moan comes from Claire again, but this time it’s pure fear. A ferocious instinct to protect the small woman makes me grab her by the shoulders and move her until I’m between my fellow demon brother and her.

“What the fuck’s going on?” I demand.

Chainz snarls but doesn’t raise the gun. “Ask the piece of pussy behind you. Seems she’s pissed someone off, and they’ve crashed the party. Reaper wants her out front.”

Fuck that. If Claire’s in trouble, there’s no way I’m just handing her over without asking more questions—ordered by Reaper or not. I look over my shoulder. The moment I do, Claire does the last thing I expect.

She turns and runs.

5

KENNEDY

I'm stupid. How could I have thought I'd gained a lead on the Santi Pastori? That I could let down my guard for even a few hours and try to remember what it was like to not be afraid anymore. The moment Chainz told Blaze to ask me about what was happening, I fled.

I have to get out of here, out of this town before whichever thug is here kills me or hurts anyone else trying to get to me. I have no idea where I'm going in this sprawling estate, but I keep turning corners. There's got to be another way out.

"Claire!" Blaze bellows my name from the other end of the hall.

I have to outrun him, too. I might not have experience with bikers, but I doubt they're much different than mafia families. Reaper is in charge, and if he wants me out front, Blaze will drag me out there. By the hair, if necessary, I'm sure. Enzo did that once and it's not an experience I want to have again.

God, kissing him had been unreal. It was like he was consuming me, claiming me so thoroughly there was no chance for escape. Then when he forced my legs apart and cupped my sex... it's embarrassing how close to orgasming I was.

I skid to a halt in one of the empty halls, finally having found a small, four-paned window. Dark desert fills the view beyond, and that's good enough for me. I run my fingers over the window, ignoring how my legs are shaking. I find the latch and let out a burst of air in relief. Sliding the latch to unlock it, I then lift the window open and take a quick look below. Another stroke of

luck that the ground is clear below and no more than four feet from the bottom of the window. I swing my leg through and follow with my hips as my head and shoulders face inward while I maneuver my way out backward, ducking down and biting my lip in concentration as I do.

“Dammit, woman!”

I jerk my chin up as Blaze strides towards me, a frown firmly in place.

Squeaking, I rush the rest of the way out the window and fall into a heap on my hands and knees. It burns, but I ignore it and scramble up and away from the window just in time to avoid Blaze’s sweeping hand. I look over my shoulder as I start to run toward the darkness of the desert, and fear fills my gut at the anger on the massive man’s face. Turning forward, I run faster, not caring where I’m going.

Right now, all that matters is putting as much distance between me and the combined forces of Santi Pastori and the Knights of Hades.

The fear doesn’t relent, and it’s like that first day I ran all over again. Except this time, I’m not in a car with a packed bag and cash. All I have is a borrowed dress, jacket and slip-on flats.

The hit comes out of nowhere, and I scream as someone tackles me from the side. We hit the rocky ground and my teeth rattle from the impact, my vision swaying. I push through it and try to get away from my attacker.

“Gotcha now, bitch,” an unfamiliar man says as I struggle against his hold. I might not be a badass, but I took a couple of college jujitsu classes. I grab his elbow and wrist and hook my foot over his and buck upwards. He’s bigger and stronger and hardly moves, but the second time, I’m scared enough that I succeed in rolling us over so that he’s now pinned under me. I punch him in the face then shove up off of him, running again and cradling my hand to my chest. Punching someone really freaking hurts.

The sound of him getting up is as loud in my ears as the sound of my own breath and I run faster, sparing a look over my shoulder to see how close he is.

I slam into a brick wall that turns out to be another man. Before I can even attempt an escape, he’s got his arms around me. Looking up, I freeze in

shock. Blaze is holding me, but his eyes are literally ablaze and there's smoke and licks of flames coming from his shoulders and head. He brings up a hand, cupping my face, and this detached person I've become notices how his hands literally have black claws.

"Stay behind me." His voice is different, as if he's speaking from deep within a cave, like he's the heart of the volcano itself. His words reverberate around me and fill the desert's emptiness. He's profane, something not of this reality, but I can't bring myself to be afraid of him.

Blaze's eyes lift to look above me and he releases me, guiding me back as he steps around me.

"Think I'm scared of you, freak?" the attacker says as he slides metal knuckles onto each fist, the moonlight glinting off them. His lip is bleeding and satisfaction makes my aching hand worth it.

Blaze strides forward, his arms loose at his sides. He doesn't appear to care that the man, dressed in all black, looks like he's former military, and I'm talking the special forces ones dishonorably discharged for fucked up reasons.

The man bounces loosely, eyes targeted on Blaze and his slow, steady walk forward. "Did you know there's a bounty on her head? Two-fifty Gs, all for a piece of pussy. Another hundred for the car's return. We don't even need to fight. We could split it."

Two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars for me? I gape at the man. No wonder people have been chasing me across the entire country. I get the price for me, but the car? A brand new one is less than that.

"I'll give you one chance to turn around and walk away," Blaze says as he comes to a stop in the moonlit desert, halfway between me and the man. "Fight, and you're a dead man."

The man laughs then spits at Blaze's feet. "After I'm done with you, I think I'll see what makes her pussy worth a quarter of a million."

A rumble fills the night air and I fall back a step, searching for the danger. It sounds like a rockslide, but the hills are miles away. My heart lodges in my throat when I realize it's coming from him, from Blaze. The smoke from his

shoulders is rising like eerie dancing phantoms in the moonlight.

The attacker lunges forward with a roar, his fists clenched tight and brutal focus on his face. Blaze hardly moves, shifting his feet wider, his sinewy muscles coiling with raw power. When the man is within reach, Blaze moves with the grace of a predator. He effortlessly evades the smaller man's attack with an almost ethereal grace. Then Blaze spins and lashes out, slamming his fist into the thug's ribs, drawing an agonized grunt from him and sending him bent over to his knees.

The man gets his feet back under him and launches himself at Blaze again. The fight erupts in a flurry of punches and kicks.

Blaze's movements are precise and powerful, evading most of the man's hits with agility. Once, the man lands a punch with those brutal knuckles to Blaze's stomach, but when Blaze immediately lands a blow that sends the man sprawling in the dirt, I realize he let the hit happen.

The man is able to get back on his feet before Blaze is on top of him, but even I can tell he's getting tired. Blaze doesn't look as if he's out for more than an easy stroll. With fatigue-sapped skill and more desperation, the man throws himself back into the fight. A flash of moonlight reflects from the knife he's just drawn.

"He's got a knife!" I warn Blaze, curling both hands under my chin in worry. I can't stand the idea of Blaze getting hurt to protect me.

Undeterred by the new danger, Blaze attacks in a mesmerizing dance of brutality and violence. Wow, he can fight. And he looks damn good doing it. Watching him shouldn't be making my heart race, but I'm breathing as heavy as I was when he'd caged me against the bar.

Blaze is unyielding, unwavering, his every move precise and calculated. He weaves through the air, their feet stirring up dust around their large forms, his strange shadows and flames trailing behind him like a comet's tail. He strikes faster, harder. The man isn't able to keep up, retreating and blocking what blows he can. With every step, Blaze tightens his grip on victory.

In a crescendo, Blaze captures the man's hand when he tries a last desperate strike with the knife. Blaze's strength overwhelms his opponent, and he

redirects the knife up. I slap my hands over my mouth as Blaze delivers a devastating uppercut with the hand, driving the knife into the soft flesh of the attacker's jaw and into his neck. He lets go of the man, sending him crashing to the unforgiving ground. Blaze stands over him, but the man is dying. His blood is black and silver in the moonlight, his hands digging at the dry dirt, and all I can hear are the wet, strangled gasps. Until he's finally still and quiet.

The dust settles, and the desert is quiet except my breathing. Blaze turns to me, his face the same strange visage. He waits, watching me with those flame-filled eyes, a fire-kissed titan in the night. I take him in, broad-chested, smoke and strange flickers of flame coming from his shoulders and skull. He isn't human. Logically, I know that there are supernatural creatures living among humans but I've never been exposed to them. Or if I had, I never knew.

Sydney's words come back to me, the thing she'd called him

"You're a... demon?" I ask.

"I am."

His voice sends goosebumps down my arms and legs, and I bite the inside of my lip. He's more than ten feet away from me and yet it feels as if I'm surrounded by him. He radiates strength and danger in a way that I wish I could bottle and sell. I'd make a killing.

I look at the dead man again and swallow hard. "Thank you, Blaze." The breeze whispers around my bare legs and I tug my thin, borrowed jacket tighter, gasping when my hand throbs.

"He hurt you?"

Blaze crosses the distance between us in a heartbeat, his face hard. But when he wraps his hand around my forearm, it's a gentle caress. The heat from his hands spreads through the jacket's material and I lean closer, drawn to the comfort of his heat as the desert cools. I must be in shock still, if all I can focus on is how being pressed up against Blaze feels as perfect as sliding into a hot bath. The therapy blogs I read would say I'm compartmentalizing and will probably freak out about Blaze being a demon later when it's safe. Right

now, this demon protected me from a man intent on dragging me back to Riccardo, so my brain is placing him in the “safe” category for now.

“I think I might have broken something when I punched him,” I answer when I find my voice.

Blaze cradles my hand, and our size difference makes so much more sense now. If we pressed our hands together to compare, I don’t think my fingertips would even go past the middle of his fingers. Enzo was bigger than me and he liked to remind me how much stronger he was. Blaze doesn’t lord his size over me, but doesn’t seem to try to make himself smaller for my comfort’s sake. Watching him inspect my hand carefully, the strange flames growing dimmer, I realize his size doesn’t intimidate me because it’s just who he is. He doesn’t seem to consider his size a power against other people, it’s just... him.

Blaze runs two fingertips over my knuckles, my skin scuffed from the punch, and I wince. His eyes meet mine. “You’re just bruised.” He doesn’t lower my hand. “Now I think it’s time you tell me what the hell is going on.”

I try to pull away but he holds on, not letting me go. “I can’t,” I protest, shaking my head. “I just need to get out of here. It’s not safe for anyone.”

“Why?” His voice is normal again and he tugs me against his chest, locking his other arm around my lower back. “What are you running from, Claire?”

At the false name, my eyes water and the control I’ve been trying to keep starts to crumble. “My name isn’t even Claire,” I whisper, ashamed and unable to meet his eyes.

I expect him to push me away, to call me a liar and a betrayer and a bitch. I don’t expect him to rub the back of my hand with his thumb and say, “So, what is it?”

When I meet his eyes, he raises a brow. His expression is still hard, half of his face hidden in the dark while the other half is illuminated by the moon.

“Kennedy. Claire is my middle name.”

“So, Kennedy, why do you have men after you, and why are you driving a car that isn’t yours?”

My stomach drops as if it's filled with concrete, and the urge to run and hide almost overwhelms me. My throat is drier than the desert around us, and I can't bring myself to give him an answer.

He cocks his head when I don't answer. It's not that I don't want to. God, I have the overwhelming urge to spill everything and to let someone else take care of all my troubles. But I can't let anyone have that much control over me, not again. I have no idea who Blaze really is, and I thought I'd known Enzo before he turned on me.

When I remain silent, Blaze sighs and releases me only to turn me back towards the clubhouse glowing a short distance away. His hand is an iron shackle on my upper arm, and I've no choice but to walk with him back to the party. Blaze doesn't give the dead man a second look.

We're silent the whole way back. I have no idea what Blaze is thinking, and he looks completely normal by the time we reach the edge of the clubhouse's glow. I swallow hard as we walk around towards the courtyard, my feet starting to drag.

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

Blaze stops and looks down at me, his face blank. "Reaper decides." He seems to hesitate, then he continues. "If you tell us what's going on, it might change his mind. He doesn't like trouble, but he doesn't like assholes. Well, assholes that think they can get away with shit like hurting others."

He doesn't give me a chance to respond, forcing me to walk again. Not that I can give an answer with how dumbfounded I am. Could these people give me the chance to escape? Even if they did, it wouldn't stop my brother-in-law. Riccardo will only stop coming after me when he's dead.

When I left the courtyard earlier, it was filled with music and laughter in the sunset. Now, as Blaze guides me to the entrance, the air is quiet except for the sounds of crickets and the breeze as it winds through the sparse vegetation and flutters the hanging banners against the adobe walls. When we cross into the courtyard, there's a clear division between the Knights of Hades and three new men, two wearing the same black shirt and cargo pants as my attacker and the middle one wearing an ill-fitting black suit. There's no sign of Sydney and Lacy—or any other woman actually—and the doors to

the room where Blaze kissed me are shut with two bikers standing in front.

Only a few people look at Blaze and me as we enter; one of them is the man in the suit. He grins, and I'm all too familiar with his expression. I've seen it on so many men while I lived with Enzo. Men who are slimy and too confident in their power, the ones who think they own the world and that a woman should lick his boots on command. I instinctively step closer to Blaze, and he squeezes my arm reassuringly. Together, we walk towards the Knights, who move out of our path without ever taking their eyes off the intruders, until we're beside the man I assume is Reaper. Chainz is on the other side of him, but other than a gruff look, he doesn't pay me attention.

"Ah, there she is," the man says, his hands spread wide like a game show host. He looks at me appreciatively and my skin crawls.

Blaze isn't holding onto me anymore, but a part of me wants to hide in his arms. This low-rate thug with a beer belly, thinning hair, and a weak jaw is no match for Blaze and I don't look away. If I did, it'd just make the cretin happy.

The man clasps his hands together in front of himself. "You've had a lot of people worried about you, Mrs. Pastori."

Next to me, Blaze stiffens. I grit my teeth, refusing to let tears form.

The sorry excuse for a man continues. "I've been sent to collect you and your vehicle and return you to your familia. So, why don't you be a good little girl and come without a fight, and we'll leave these fine people to their party."

Tremors hit my legs. I grab Blaze's hand and cling tight. After a second, his hand wraps around mine, possessively.

"She doesn't want to go," Blaze answers for me, and his president looks at him for a long moment and then to me.

I swallow, my throat dry and scratchy, and plead silently with the harsh-looking biker president. Is he a demon, too? Are they all demons? It doesn't matter, I realize in that moment. I'd rather take my chances with a demon motorcycle club than go anywhere with those three men.

Reaper is as tall as Blaze, with olive skin and harsh stubble on his strong jaw.

He's attractive, in a terrifying way. He looks like he could take on an entire mafia family by himself and come out victorious, and while his impressive muscles are a part of that, it's his eyes that turn the air around him to frost. His eyes are a black void, and it's not just the lighting. Blaze's name makes sense, with the fire in his eyes. That connection gives me a theory about Reaper's name.

Whatever Reaper is thinking, I can't tell, but he looks back at the three interlopers without his expression changing.

I decide to call creepy, nasty, make-my-skin-crawl guy Mr. Suit. He frowns. Clearly, Mr. Suit was expecting a different answer than the she-doesn't-want-to-go one Blaze gave him. The two men behind Mr. Suit shift, their hands moving to rest on the guns on their belts. All around me, the Knights of Hades bristle and tension thickens the air. There's no way Mr. Suit's goons would be stupid enough to shoot at the club, right? They're massively outnumbered.

"Now, now, let's not get testy," Mr. Suit says, waving a hand at the men behind him. They don't take their hands off their guns, though. He looks back at me. "Don't be an idiot, girl. The Santi Pastoris want you and the car back, one way or another." He turns his attention to Reaper, who crosses his arms over his broad chest. "She's worth a lot of money. You're a smart man, no doubt. Hand her over and no one needs to get hurt."

I hold my breath, waiting for Reaper's answer.

"She doesn't want to go with you, so she's not going." Reaper's voice is like the toll of a bell, reverberating off the walls with an eerie depth. My soul shivers.

Mr. Suit's expression grows irritated. "You're making a mistake."

Chainz steps forward, rolling his neck. "Time to fuck off."

One of the men with guns throws out an insult in Italian, something about mothers and a goat I think, clearly ready to fight.

Blaze shifts in front of me, still holding my hand. When was the last time anyone put themselves between me and danger? When had I last felt protected in any way? Even being married to Enzo, I've been on my own for

years.

A sharp word from Mr. Suit shuts the goon up before he looks back towards me and raises his voice. “The Santi Pastori are offering a quarter of a million dollars for the safe return of Enzo Pastori’s wife, Mrs. Kennedy Pastori. An additional one hundred thousand will be granted for the return of the car she left with.” He pauses to let the bounty sink in, and fear drifts over me like snowflakes. “Anyone harboring Mrs. Pastori will face the justice of her family.”

He turns and walks away with a jerk of his head, and after his two goons give the Knights a scathing look, they turn to follow him.

“Wait.” Blaze’s voice is like a whip’s crack in the silence and my heart thrashes against my ribcage.

Mr. Suit turns, an expectant look on his face.

Blaze doesn’t move from in front of me, and he still hasn’t let go of my hand. “Your man’s body is out back. You’ll want to hurry if you don’t want the coyotes to get him.”

Mr. Suit stiffens, his soft jaw clenching. It’s clear he’s pissed off and wants to say something, but instead he turns and marches out of the courtyard, goons following.

I don’t dare breathe yet, not when the Knights around me are still tense, waiting. Heated orders in Italian are too distant for me to make out, but then car doors slam and, shortly after, an engine revs then grows fainter.

“Bones, Heathen, take three others and do a perimeter check.” Reaper snaps out the order with cool efficiency, turning to face the gathered men. The two named men break off, pointing at their selection and heading out. “Take care of the body. No evidence.”

The club president’s face is still impassive as he looks at Blaze and me. “You two, my office. Now. Chainz, Brute, and Cinder, you too. The rest of you, keep your eyes open.”

“And the party?” someone asks from the back.

Reaper shrugs. “It’s not the worst thing that’s interrupted a party. Just be on guard in case those fuckers come back and try to make a play.”

Cheers ring out, threats against Mr. Suit mixed in. A moment later, the doors are flung open and music is blaring into the starry night again. Women flow out, most of them looking like nothing happened, and head right back to their biker for the night. Blaze leads me by the hand to follow Reaper, and I grab his wrist with my other, needing to hold on to something. I see Sydney looking at us, Lacy at her side, concern on both their faces. They make their way around the edge of the courtyard, towards the single, nondescript door set in another wall bordering the courtyard.

“What the hell—” Sydney starts as soon as she gets close to Reaper.

“Club business,” Reaper barks out, interrupting her. “Not yours.”

Sydney’s mouth snaps shut, glaring like she’s gearing up to fight. To my surprise, she doesn’t say anything to him and he opens the door as if already forgetting about her existence. She gives me a look.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?” Lacy asks me, and Cinder comes up from behind us and kisses her on the top of her head. I envy the way she immediately melts into him. It’s obvious how in love the couple is.

“You know what club business means. You and Sydney stay inside.” Lacy looks like she’s about to argue, but Cinder covers her belly with his hand. “Please.”

She sends me another worried look before nodding and tilting her head up for a quick kiss, which Cinder gives. She then gives me what I think is supposed to be a supportive smile before looping her arm through Sydney’s and turning them back towards the room with the bar and couches.

A tug on my hand from Blaze has me following him into the warmly lit hallway.

I’m too nervous to take in my surroundings, and Reaper is nowhere in sight. I let Blaze lead me, feeling like the kitten he calls me, scared and ready to bolt or lash out. The other three bikers are right behind us, leaving me no chance to bolt.

As if reading my thoughts, Blaze's grip tightens on my hand, and when I look up at him, he's watching me carefully.

I take a deep breath, trying to ignore his spicy, masculine scent, and arrange my thoughts carefully. Like the times I've been before Enzo and the other underbosses or generals of Santi Pastori, I settle into the submissive, detached mentality that's enabled my survival over the last few years. I keep my eyes on the scuffed but clean hardwood floors as we enter Reaper's office.

Blaze lets go of my hand, and the rest of the men shuffle around the room, the door closing with a solid noise—like a stone being dropped on top of a tomb.

“So, Mrs. Pastori”—Reaper's use of my married name makes me flinch —“why did you leave your family and why do they want you back so badly?”

The last time I was in a man's office like this, I'd finally had enough. Closing my eyes and sucking in a rattling breath, I lift my chin and meet Reaper's black eyes with hard-won grit.

“Because I killed my husband, Enzo Pastori.”

6

BLAZE

My brows rise with Claire's—no, Kennedy's—confession. There's steel in her voice, and I fight to keep the smirk off my face. She's got the wholesome look, but the way she kissed and pressed against me earlier tells me there's so much more to discover. I had to force myself to step out of reach of her when we came into Reaper's office, and the hard look she's giving my president makes my cock twitch.

Reaper's office, situated on the second floor, reflects his no-nonsense and utilitarian nature. The dimly lit room is comfortable for those used to darkness, but others have mentioned an atmosphere of mystery and secrecy. The weathered adobe walls whisper tales of the area's history, and the worn hardwood floor always creaks softly underfoot. Illuminated by an iron wagon-wheel light in the center of the ceiling, Reaper's desk is simple and scarred. He keeps it organized, though, with a file system handling all of the club's security contracts on one corner and his field-grade laptop placed neatly in the center, currently opened and facing the seated man.

More framed photographs of demons and shifters astride motorcycles, many of us in our natural forms, and a faded Knights of Hades banner cover one wall. Another metal filing cabinet and metal shelves storing guns and weapons dominate the wall behind Reaper. There's a single leather couch, worn and beaten, that I know he's spent more than one night crashing on when his past keeps him awake.

Demons have nightmares, too. I know this too well.

“Why?” Reaper asks, unfazed, as he sits straight-backed in his sturdy, brown leather chair.

Kennedy snorts and wraps her arms around herself. I watch closely. I’ll know if she’s still hiding secrets or if she’s lying. As much as I want her, I won’t lie to my president. She’s brought trouble to our doorstep, and I won’t risk my brothers by getting tangled up with a pretty face. The club comes first, always.

“Because he was a shitty husband and I was sick of him beating me up.”

An unexpected vicious need to bring Enzo back to life just to kill him again strikes me. How could anyone put their hands on a woman like Kennedy? I don’t know her, but I know she’s as beautiful inside as she is outside. Her tone is dry, totally disconnected, but her shoulders are square. She’s endured the fires meant to melt her down and has emerged forged into steel.

Reaper looks at me, no more than a second. I give a quick nod. I’m not detecting any lies or further secrets around the subject. My president looks back at her. “And the car?”

Kennedy shrugs, hapless. “I don’t know. I took it because I didn’t think they’d had time to put a tracker on it since it’d been dropped off just that morning.”

I frown and Reaper’s expression matches my own. He looks at Chainz. “Do a sweep of the car. Make sure there aren’t any bugs, and figure out why it’s so valuable. Tear it apart if you have to.”

Chainz straightens off the wall where he’d been leaning, grunting out an affirmative before he sends one last suspicious glare at Kennedy before leaving.

He isn’t gone for more than a heartbeat when Kennedy speaks up, wrangling her hands in front of herself.

I shove my hands into my pockets to keep from acting on my instinct to touch her.

“I don’t want to cause anyone trouble,” she says, stealing a look at me. “Blaze already killed someone, and he could have gotten hurt. I’ll leave town

tomorrow. That was my plan anyways. I don't have a ton of money, but I'll buy a car and you can forget you ever saw me."

"Doesn't work like that," Brute says from his post near the door.

She jolts and half turns, like she'd forgotten the rest of them were in here with us.

"You brought this shit to our town," Brute continues. "You can't just leave us to clean it up."

My lip curls, and I shoot him a glare. "Watch it," I warn.

Brute meets my glare. "You letting a piece of ass you haven't even tapped rile you up?"

I take a step forward. "I said fucking watch it. The dead fucker in the dirt didn't put up much of a fight. Got a nice little warm-up."

A grin full of violence splits his face, and he comes closer.

"It's been a long time since we rumbled. Maybe we should fix that." Brute grabs his cock. "After I kick your ass, I'll get myself a taste of her and let you watch."

Snarling, I charge past Kennedy and grab a defiant Brute by the shirt. My fire is scalding, ready and eager to turn into a blaze.

"Enough!" Reaper doesn't raise his voice, but he does slap his palm on the desk. "You want to fight, do it outside. I'll cut off both of your balls if you fuck up my office."

Brute and I shove off each other and when I head back to my spot, I see Kennedy's reaction, and it douses my rage. She isn't watching, ready to warn me like she had before. She's practically shaking. She's gripping her hands so tight they're white, her head bowed. A quick inhalation lets me scent the fears she's clearly trying to hold back.

Grunting, I turn back to the president, glaring at Cinder, who's watching me and Kennedy too close for my comfort.

Reaper's pinching the bridge of his nose, his forehead screwed up with

irritation. We wait for his response; none of us are stupid enough to say anything to break the silence. After a long moment, he lets out a harsh breath.

“This is what’s going to happen,” he says, and Kennedy looks up at him with a timid expression I hadn’t seen on her yet. I don’t like it. And I hate that I don’t like it. Reaper looks at me, then at her. “You take her back to The Styx. Kennedy, you’ll hole up there until Chainz figures out what’s so damn special about the car. Cinder, I want Knights out on the roads, keeping an eye out for any out-of-towners. I don’t want any of this blowing back on the town. I’ll get Stubs to dig up everything we can on the Santi Pastori. Until we know what we’re dealing with, I want Kennedy to be a ghost and eyes everywhere. Understood?”

A chorus of affirmatives come from the Knights. Kennedy doesn’t say anything but she nods, still not bringing her eyes up to meet Reaper’s.

Reaper gives us all one last look. “Good. Now get the fuck out of my office. I’m sick of looking at your ugly faces. Blaze, you and the girl stay a minute.”

Cinder and Brute head out, leaving us alone with Reaper, who leans back in his leather chair. It’s times like these I think he looks like the heir of Hades, presiding over the realm of the dead. He’s a cold motherfucker and not one to piss off. But he’s loyal and has shown every single one of us that there’s nothing he won’t do to keep us safe. So we’re just as loyal to him.

“You brought problems to my town, girl.” When Kennedy tries to say something, he silences her with a pointed look. “I don’t give a shit if you meant to or not. What’s done is done. Blaze, you took responsibility for her the moment you let her on your bike. Which means whatever happens from here on out is on you, too. You got that?”

I know better than to protest. I dip my head in acceptance.

Reaper’s cold aura thaws the slightest bit. He’ll never be warm and comforting, but Reaper isn’t evil.

“We don’t like men who put their hands on women,” he tells Kennedy, and I see the curiosity on her face. “I don’t blame you for killing your husband, and I’m sure as fuck not going to hand you over to them again. We’ll get them off your back, then figure out what comes next.”

“Thank you,” she says, her eyes shining with tears and sincere gratitude in her voice.

Reaper looks at me and jerks his head towards the door. I take it as the dismissal it is and press a hand to Kennedy’s lower back to guide her out. We’re quiet as we head back down the stairs, and I lead her down the hall to a different exit. The party’s over for both of us.

“You need to grab anything from Syd?” I ask as we walk towards the garage bay where we park our rides.

“No. She gave me a key just in case,” Kennedy answers.

Just in case, huh? Nothing gets by Sydney.

As we walk into the place, I grab the keys from the hook for my truck instead of my bike. It’s a big-ass workshop with a dozen bikes parked in one area, a couple trucks, and now the helo at the far end where I see Bones working away with headphones on. He raises his head and lifts his chin in greeting but goes back to whatever he’s doing on the helicopter.

Kennedy pauses as she takes in the sight of the truck. “We aren’t taking your bike?”

I slap the hood of my dark blue Silverado as I make my way to the passenger door. Opening the door for her, I answer, “Didn’t think you’d want to in that dress. If you wanna wrap your legs around me that badly, kitten, just ask. I never say no to a ride.”

Her cheeks burn red and she scowls. I almost expect her to take a swing as she walks by me, but she climbs into the tall truck without comment. It takes every bit of strength I have to not look at those creamy legs of hers and hope for a tease of what’s under that dress as she does. I close the door harder than necessary behind her before climbing into the driver’s seat.

She’s already buckled in and folding in on herself by the time I pull out of the garage and onto the dusty driveway that leads to the single-lane road into Devil’s Haven. When the lights of the clubhouse are in the distance, I take a look at her. She’s still got her arms wrapped around herself, her shoulders hunched in, and she’s looking out the window into the dark.

I clear my throat, and she looks at me warily. Shit, I'm no good at this. "You doin' okay?"

She snorts and shrugs a shoulder. "About as good as you'd expect."

She doesn't say anything else and I don't like it. I want to poke at her, get her to show her claws again, but I grit my teeth. I don't offer comfort or any cuddly shit. I don't even know her, like Brute said. There's no reason I should be drawn to her like this.

The rest of the drive in is quiet, and the entire way I stay alert in case those jackasses try to get the jump on us. Reaper put me in charge of Kennedy, which means she might as well be a client of ours. I'll keep her safe while we figure out the car or get her a new ride, then she's getting sent on her way. I'm always down to have fun, but it's time to make her off-limits.

Learning why to never mix business with pleasure is a lesson I don't need again. Dark memories try to push in, but I turn my thoughts away and refuse to let them surface.

The main street running through Devil's Haven is empty; all the stores and buildings are dark for the night. Everyone is at home with their families, knowing they don't have to worry about getting their door busted in. The city used to be filled with fear, a place where parents didn't let their kids play out in front of their houses even during the day. The Knights of Hades changed that when we took over, and it's something we're proud of.

Even The Styx is quiet for the night since Sydney is out at the clubhouse. No point in being open since anyone who'd normally be here is out at the party, too. I drive around to the back to the door close to the stairs.

Parking and cutting the engine, I slide out of the truck with intentions of opening Kennedy's door, but she's already sliding out. She looks up at me, the single outdoor light reflecting in her eyes, and I see the walls she's got all around her. A part of me wants to break them down, but it's better to leave them in place. She doesn't need someone like me in her life.

I push the truck door closed, and it only takes two strides to catch up with her.

"You don't need to walk me to the door," she says, her voice barely louder

than the crickets and the buzz of the floodlight above the door.

I shove my hands in my front pockets, looking at her. “Yeah, I do. Reaper put me in charge of you, which means I make sure you’re where you’re supposed to be.”

She scrunches her face but doesn’t say anything. I’m sure she’s used to men who are controlling since she married the mafia, but at least she knows I’m not about to raise my hand against her.

The gravel crunches under our steps and everything looks normal, but suddenly I’m on edge. As a soldier and now biker, I’ve learned to trust my instincts. I put a hand on Kennedy’s shoulder, stopping her as I look around us.

“What is it?” Her voice is cautious but not terrified.

“Not sure yet,” I answer. “Come on.” I let her go but walk in front of her to the door—

except the door isn’t fully closed and I know Sydney isn’t one to be careless, not after what the last motorcycle club did to this town.

“Don’t move.” I grunt out the order to Kennedy before jogging back to the truck. Quickly, I open the door and reach under the seat where my SIG Sauer is, the handgun a favorite of the club. Keeping my sense open, I stride back to her side, checking the magazine out of habit. I pause in front of the cracked door and give Kennedy a look. “Stay right behind me and be quiet. Got it?”

She nods hurriedly.

Gun in hand, I ease the door open. Not a squeak. Sydney takes care of her place. Before me is a tiny entryway that’s dark except for what light bleeds in from behind me. I know there’s only a few feet between me and the inside door that grants access to the hall connecting the bar’s kitchen, office and upstairs suite entrance. My enhanced eyesight lets me see that the door is closed.

Maybe the back door being left ajar is a fluke, but I’m not taking any chances.

I open the inner door. It opens as quietly as the first, but this time there's dim light filling the corridor from the kitchen. That's standard since the closing shift always leaves a light on for the early morning crew.

Listening hard, I don't hear anyone except Kennedy behind me, her breathing shallow and quick. She's sticking close, not running to hide.

I head to the end of the hall to the door that leads upstairs. This one is always closed and locked. I curse silently when I see it open. I turn towards Kennedy, tucking my head close to hers. The sweet scent of her tugs at my gut. "Wait until I'm at the top, then follow. Don't head up until I say it's clear."

"Okay," she whispers, the word shaky.

I want another taste of her lips but I refuse myself, turning instead to climb the stairs. Sydney's got a total ban on any of the Knights being up here. Something happened between her and Reaper, so I figure it's got more to do with him than anyone else. Still, I'm sure she'll be more pissed that strangers got into her place than me going inside to clear them out.

At the top of the stairs, I peer into the living area. The light above the stove on the far wall is on, illuminating a decent part of the room. It doesn't reach either bedroom door, though. The only thing I hear is Kennedy's quiet steps as she climbs up behind me. I gesture for her to wait. She doesn't know the club's gestures, but she gets it. She stops.

I make my way towards a table lamp and flick it on, lighting up the rest of the area. Nothing seems off.

I take in Kennedy, who's studying the room with a shrewd gaze. When she shakes her head, I nod and make my way to Sydney's room. Hoping the difficult woman will forgive me, I enter, gun ready, but find it empty. I turn on a light and clear her walk-in closet before returning to Kennedy.

She's stepped away from the entry stairs towards the couch, and when she catches me heading towards her, she startles. She doesn't make more than a shocked meep, and I have to hold back a laugh. When was the last time I wanted to laugh in a tense situation like this? She glares at me and I make my way to the bathroom. The door's open, and turning on the light is enough to

see it's clear.

The last place is Kennedy's bedroom, and her eyes are wide. Her fear is obvious, but she's holding it together.

My respect for her grows.

Easing open the bedroom door, I don't hear anyone. I push it open the rest of the way and bring up my gun. It's a small room, so unless someone squeezed under the bed, the only other place is the closet, which is open and clearly empty save for all the shit Sydney's got packed in there. In the dim light, I can see Kennedy's bag and shit tossed everywhere on the bed, and I roll my eyes.

"It's clear," I call out and tuck the gun into the back of my pants. I flip on the bedroom light as Kennedy walks more confidently across the living room. When she stops just outside the room, her eyes go wide. I look at the bed again. "I take it you aren't normally messy?"

"I always keep it packed..." In case she has to run. She gasps, her hand flying up to her mouth. She starts shaking her head.

"What?" I peer at the bed then take a few steps to the side. On the pillow is a white figurine of a Greek goddess, except it's got dried blood over half of it. I have a suspicion what it is, and I don't like it. I want to be wrong, because if I'm right, she's in more trouble than we thought. "What's this?"

At my question her eyes tear away from the figurine and meet mine, trepidation in them. Her throat bobs with a swallow. Fuck.

"It's what I hit Enzo with." Her voice is thready, but she pushes on. "Riccardo has to be close," she says, her voice breaking at the end.

I step to her and cup her face, wiping the tear away that drops from her eye. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you," I promise. "None of those Santi Pastori fuckers or anyone who works for them is going to lay a hand on you, got it?"

I wait until she nods before letting her go. It's hard to step away from her. All I want to do is pull her close, because if she's next to me, I know she's safe.

“Assholes from the party must have busted in.” I try to calculate how much time they’d have had after leaving the party. “It’s no secret the Styx is our hangout and anyone could have seen me bringing you here earlier today.”

Fighting back anger, I make myself go back to the bed and, using the edge of the blanket, I pick up the figurine.

“There’s something written on the bottom,” I say and study it. My Italian is rusty, but I recognize a word. “Segnati dalla Morte,” I read aloud and look back to Kennedy.

She’s gone pale and steps up beside me, eyes locked on the bloodied figurine. “Marked by Death.”

A window shatters. I tackle her to the floor as bullets break the other windows and explode into the walls. Kennedy curls up under me, hands over her ears, and I curl my body over her until the shooting stops. I wait another thirty seconds before easing off of her.

“We need to go,” I tell her, urging her up and keeping a hand on the back of her neck. “Keep low.” I draw my handgun again and look into the living room. Hopefully the drapes will keep us distorted enough that the shooter won’t be able to track us. “Let’s go.”

She does her best to run hunched over, keeping up with me until we hit the stairs down. I go first with her right behind me.

“Why can’t they just let me leave, dammit.” Kennedy sounds more pissed than afraid now.

I can’t help the smirk as I look back at her. “Mafia families usually don’t take kindly to the person who offs the boss.”

She scowls at me, and we hit the hallway, picking up our pace. A shadowed figure steps out from the kitchen, raising a gun.

“Shit.” I grab Kennedy and drop as bullets spray where our heads just were. I return fire, hitting the man twice in the thigh and once in the chest. He falls, screaming, to the floor. I don’t wait to check if he’s dead and haul ass with Kennedy’s hand in mine. No one fires on us when we burst out the back door, and we run to my truck. I turn to cover her while she climbs in and the

moment the door closes, I head to my side and get in.

“Stay down,” I bark, turning the ignition and shifting the truck into reverse. I gun it, the wheels spinning and tossing gravel for a second before we fly backwards. The moment we’re turning onto the street, I shift gears, the truck sliding as I change directions. I press a button on the steering wheel and Reaper’s voice fills the cab moments later.

“What is it?” Straight to the point.

A scan of the rearview mirrors doesn’t show pursuers, but I’m not assuming anything. “Someone got into Sydney’s place. Left a message for Kennedy before opening fire through the windows. Not sure how many. Took one out downstairs. We made it back to the truck and we’re coming back.”

“Fuck,” Reaper bites out. “Sending backup now. Think it’s the same assholes from before?”

Kennedy makes a fearful sound, one that from anyone else would have me ready to hunt them down. I want to fight, but not her. I want to fuck up the people following us. I’m becoming more protective over this slip of a woman than a bear with cubs.

“Maybe, but not sure.” I take a sharp turn, the back end of the Silverado swinging wide, but I keep it under control. Another sharp turn down a narrow, sad excuse for a street between two rows of shops has Kennedy grabbing the handle above her door. “I’m headed back to the clubhouse. Headed from Colton’s direction.” Colton is one of the moodiest sons of bitches I’ve ever met, moodier than any of the Knights. He runs the hardware store, and Reaper will know exactly where I am.

“Copy. Drive like hell. The boys are on their way.”

Reaper hangs up and I look at the rearview mirror again. So far it seems like I’ve lost our tails. But I won’t relax until I’ve got Kennedy back at the clubhouse, surrounded by the Knights.

I barely slow down as I get us onto the narrow, two-lane road that’ll take us back to the clubhouse. The high desert night surrounds us, the only light coming from the headlights, the moon, and the stars painting the sky. Glancing over at Kennedy, I can tell she’s just as tense as me.

“So, you didn’t think to tell me you were married once when I had my hand on your pussy?”

Her head snaps to me, a frown creasing between her brows as she glares at me. “Excuse me?” she spits out before crossing her arms. “It’s not like you gave me a chance to say anything with your tongue in my mouth.”

I shoot her a smirk. Her outrage is... *adorable*. Fuck, when was the last time I thought anything was adorable? “Whatever helps you sleep at night, kitten.”

She scoffs, rolling her eyes, and looks back out at the road. At least it seems like I’ve distracted her enough that her shoulders aren’t up by her ears and she’s not looking in the side mirror every few seconds.

Two glowing lights appear ahead in the distance, followed by more, and the tightness in my chest eases. The Knights are here for backup, finally. I really didn’t want to go full demon in front of Kennedy, and that’s what it would have taken to protect her from the assholes shooting at us.

I might not be familiar with the family she married into, but I know mobs don’t give up easily. Reaper will have Stubs on his computer, pulling any information he can find. The demon is a genius when it comes to tech, and while this mafia family on Kennedy’s ass might be good, Stubs is better.

As the Knights race past us, she lets out a long breath and slumps against the seat. A moment later, she’s propping her head up in her hand against the door, like she’s fighting off a headache.

“God, I can’t believe I’ve dragged other people into this.” Her voice is quiet and bitter. “I’m so fucking stupid, thinking I could get away from them.”

Something twists in my chest at the self-deprecation in her words. I want to reach out and grab her other hand, the one that was so small in mine when I’d held it earlier. I don’t let myself, though. She’s leaving as soon as she can, she’s made that clear, and I’m not made for this comforting bullshit. It’s why I’m always clear with the chicks I hook up with. They want to fuck a Knight of Hades, a demon, or just a dangerous man, and I just want to get off and forget about the world for a few minutes. After that, we go our separate ways.

“If you’re worried for us, don’t be,” I say at last as the clubhouse lights appear on the horizon. The party is still going hard and will be for a few more

hours. “We deal with bigger assholes than them on the regular. If they’re that bad, we’ll set you up with a new identity and send you somewhere safe to start over.”

I don’t know why I’m offering this, since she isn’t a client of our security company, but I make the promise regardless. Reaper won’t say no, even if we usually charge a couple grand for the service.

Kennedy opens her mouth to say something, to argue no doubt, but she wisely shuts her mouth and stares out the side window. The cab is silent as we close the distance to the clubhouse. I want to break it, the need so great I literally bite my fucking tongue to stop myself from saying anything.

I’ve already made more promises to her than I’ve made to any other woman. I don’t need to give her the idea that I’m some hero in shining armor, meant to shield and protect her from the darkness in the world.

I am the fucking darkness in the world.

7

KENNEDY

Every part of me wants to sprint into the Knights of Hades' sprawling clubhouse, but I force myself to walk calmly. Blaze lost whoever was chasing us pretty quickly, especially when a handful of bikers roared past us in the opposite direction to back us up. No one is waiting in the shadows to shoot me, and I can't let Riccardo and the Santi Pastori have power over me when they aren't even nearby.

But isn't that what I've been doing? Letting them control my life through my fear ever since that day?

The breath I heave in stutters, and the weight of Blaze's gaze settles on me as he walks with me across the dusty area between the garage and house. He doesn't say anything, but he steps closer. I might be able to stop myself from bolting inside the clubhouse, but I can't stop myself from grabbing his hand and squeezing tight. I staunchly ignore the words he threw at me earlier. Right now, I just need him to be an anchor for long enough I don't fall apart.

The party is still raging, like the interruption and close fight never even happened. Blaze doesn't take me towards the courtyard, though. We head in through a side door that leads to an empty hall. When the door closes behind us, the music is muffled and tension flows off of me like water.

Touching my jaw, I hadn't even realized how tense I'd been. Exhaustion replaces it, and I cover a surprise yawn with the back of my hand. I give Blaze a sheepish look.

His lips twitch, like he's fighting a smile. "Adrenaline crash. Come on, I'll

get you set up here.”

We retrace our steps from earlier and head back up the stairs. At the top, near where Reaper’s office is, a door opens and feet pound.

“Oh my god, are you okay? Reaper told me.” Sydney storms up to us, her eyes wide. She grabs my shoulders, looking me over. The hard-ass woman has disappeared and in her place is a concerned, motherly figure. I recognize the fear lining her face. It’s fear created from experience. I don’t have a chance to answer before she turns to Blaze, eyes narrowing on him. “You were supposed to keep her safe!”

“The fuck do you think I did?” Blaze snarls, his hand tightening on mine like Sydney might rip me away from him. It makes a funny feeling flip my stomach. “I cleared your place and then they opened fire from across the fucking street. I got her out without a scratch, didn’t I?”

I’m pretty sure I’ve got a scratch or two on my knees, but I keep my mouth shut. Besides, I have no idea if they’re from running in the desert or when Blaze tackled me to the floor.

“I really am okay,” I tell Sydney, grabbing her hand with my free one. Her eyes dart back to me, as if searching for a lie. Then I think about the mess her apartment now is. “I’ll pay for the damages somehow. And I’m sorry that Blaze broke the rule of no Knights in your place.”

She blinks at me, before rolling her eyes. “I’m pissed about my place but it isn’t your fault. I’ve got insurance, and the Knights will cover what it won’t.”

“Yeah, but if I’d never stayed there, it’d never have happened.”

Sydney sends me another glare, and I’m pretty sure she’s about to argue. Blaze’s name is barked down the hall, and we all look behind her where Reaper is standing in his office doorway.

“Come on,” Blaze mutters, tugging me past Sydney. To Sydney, he says, “You can crash here and check on her in the morning.”

Sydney looks between us and Reaper but nods. Then, without another word, she heads down the stairs we came up. I can’t raise my eyes to look at the president of the club when we pass him, and Blaze doesn’t stop to talk. A

minute later and he's pushing open a plain wooden door and ushering me inside.

"You'll stay here until we know you're safe, got it?"

Blaze looks like he's guarding the door, as if I'm going to bolt the second I get a chance. I frown. "I'm not stupid, Blaze. I've kept myself alive this long all by myself. I'm not going to try to leave yet."

He looks at me for a long moment, and I try not to fidget under gaze. Or think about how amazing he felt when he had me caged against the bar, his lips and hands on me.

I'd never reacted so... so wantonly before, not even with Enzo, and our sex life had been good in the beginning. At least, I'd thought it'd been good. A heated kiss with Blaze and I'm questioning everything. Hell, even with this adrenaline drop, I'm still highly aware of Blaze at the door and how good he felt crowding me.

I definitely don't need to be thinking about that right now. The last thing I need is to hook up with a biker who is a literal demon. Oh, god, and he killed someone tonight, too. Right in front of me.

A different type of panic grips me. I know Enzo's hands weren't clean, but the familia always kept the women shielded from their business. Maybe if they hadn't, I'd have figured out who Enzo really was a lot earlier.

Not that it would have been any easier to leave him.

I force another breath out and look around at the room Blaze has brought me to. I'm not sure how I can tell, but I know it's his room. The room is proportionate to him, making it feel like a hotel suite rather than just a bedroom in a house. Then again, given how he's gotta be close to seven feet tall and massively broad-shouldered, anything I'm used to would be too small. The bed pushed up against the far wall is big enough to fit two of him, the sheets ruffled and unmade.

A huge dresser is on the wall parallel to it, with its top covered in stuff. Everything from what looks like receipts to some knives and even a gun. Apparently Blaze is the "see a surface, fill a surface" type. My fingers itch to tidy it up. His nightstand is crowded with beer bottles with a huge knife stuck

into its top. To my surprise, there is a book, with a bookmark no less.

“Bathroom is through there,” Blaze grunts, indicating a door with his chin when I look at him. I nod and drop my gaze.

“Thanks,” I say after a long moment. I can’t look at him again. The emotions he causes are too confusing for me to handle right now.

Blaze waits a minute longer before he grunts and closes the bedroom door, leaving me alone. I raise my brows at the goodbye but remind myself I’m a hypocrite since I can’t even look at him.

Looking at his massive bed again, I flee to the bathroom. Shutting the door and locking it, I collapse on the closed toilet, shoving my head into my hands and gulping in air. My chest is so tight, it’s like I’m barely breathing as the familiar dread and panic cascades over me.

Riccardo is never going to stop. I should have thought about that when I killed Enzo. Oh, god, I actually killed him. For some reason, it’s just hitting me. Logically, I knew I killed him but it’s like it’s finally sinking in. The Santi Pastori have caught up with me, and now people who have taken me in and been kind to me are caught in the middle. If I wasn’t such a coward, I’d call Riccardo and give myself over to him. Then Sydney and Blaze and everyone who’s now threatened would be okay.

A sob hiccups out of me and shame overwhelms me. Because I don’t want to turn myself over to the mafia. I don’t want to die. And Blaze, for whatever reason, feels like a safe haven. I don’t know him and he has no reason to protect me, but he has and it seems like he’s determined to keep protecting me. I’m too selfish to give that up.

Scrubbing my eyes with the heel of my palms, I force myself to get up and go to the sink. The single sink counter is as cluttered as Blaze’s room and, in a sign that I’m losing my mind, it makes me huff out a laugh. I saw proof that Blaze is a demon tonight, but right now what I see—toothpaste squeezed in the middle and without a cap, the toothbrush clearly discarded beside it rather than in the holder, and a half-empty bottle of foaming hand soap—makes him human to me.

I splash some cold water on my face, then when I catch my reflection in the

mirror, I use the soap to wash away the raccoon eyes as best as I can. He's already dealing with enough of my shit. I don't need to add looking like a mascara bandit on top of it. I have to use the towel hanging over the bar near the large walk-in shower to dry off, and if I bury my face in it for longer than necessary because it smells like him...well, no one is around to judge me.

Finally feeling a bit more in control, I head back into his bedroom. A part of me wants to snoop and be nosy, but another yawn makes my jaw pop and suddenly, my eyes are too heavy to keep open. So, instead, I make my way to the bed made for a giant. I slip off my flats and let my borrowed jacket fall to the floor, too tired to care about hanging it up. Still dressed, I climb into the bed and tug the blankets up over my head like I'm a little kid needing protection from monsters.

Except I'm not a little kid anymore, and I know blankets won't stop the monsters in my world.



A dip in the bed jolts me awake, my heart climbing up my throat as I fight against whatever is holding me tight.

“Shit, calm down. It's me.” Blaze's voice cuts through my panic just enough that I don't topple over the edge of the bed. I'm still caught up in something and a whine builds in my throat.

“I can't—” I gasp out, struggling again. I realize now I've tangled myself up in the blanket and sheet, but it feels too much like being tied up.

Big, warm hands land on my shoulders. One of them stays there, holding me firmly while the other fists the material and tugs it down and away from my body, releasing me like he's my Sam and I'd been caught in the creepy spider's web like Frodo.

“Breathe, kitten,” he says, his voice a gruff rumble in the dark, and then he's tugging me back until I'm sitting against the headboard. “You're fine. Everything's fine.”

I bring my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them, and lean

my head back, squeezing my eyes tight. I focus on my breathing, trying to settle my racing heart. Blaze shifts beside me, and when I don't sense him getting up, I frown towards him. I can't see him in the pitch black of his room.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He huffs, a suspiciously amused sound before shifting more on the bed. "Going to sleep. Like you should be getting back to."

"What?" I swear my voice breaks. "You—I—we—"

The bed rocks, and I feel his hard glare despite having no idea where his face is. "Oh, I'm sorry. I must have forgotten to tell you that I'm not some romance movie hero where I offer to sleep on the floor. This is my bed, so I'm damn well sleeping in it. If you've got a problem with it, sweetheart, the floor is right there."

I sputter at the harsh words, probably doing a great impression of an annoyed fish. I'm too tired and strung out to deal with this. I throw myself down, rolling to give him my back. "This is ridiculous," I grumble, taking out my frustrations on the pillow under my head. I put as much distance as possible between us, since Blaze doesn't seem to have any sense of personal space.

The bed shifts as he settles, and my eyes are squeezed tight. I'm all too aware of my dress having bunched up until my butt is almost uncovered but I feel like it'd be weird and obvious if I try to yank it down now after making a big deal about putting space between us. Not like sitting here clearly not asleep isn't awkward enough already.

Blaze is quiet in the dark room, his breathing steady. Even though there is at least two feet of distance between us, his warmth reaches me under the blanket and sheets, lulling me back into a drowsy state. When I'd first crawled into the bed, I was too tired to notice anything. Now I'm awake enough to take in the smell of woody smoke, oil, and leather that surrounds me.

I'm smelling Blaze. I press my thighs together, scolding myself about getting turned on by the man—demon's—smell. But...I turn my head a hair deeper into the pillow and take in a deeper breath. He really does smell so good.

It reminds me of my childhood, of the adventures my parents would take me on before they died. Sitting around the campfire, bundled up with hot cocoa in my hands, surrounded by the smell of the woods and the love of my family.

My mom and dad loved each other so much. I'd always wanted a marriage like theirs, and I thought I'd found it with Enzo. Memories, bittersweet, find me in the darkness. My mom laughing as my dad swings her into his arms, turning them in circles as they danced in the living room. My dad showing me how to flip pancakes when I helped him make breakfast on Mother's Day. My mom showing me how to throw a ball properly and my dad doing his best to distract us until we ended up chasing him through the backyard.

I never, ever doubted my parents' love for each other or their love for me.

God, I miss them. I miss them so much.

I try to swallow back the sob bubbling in my throat, but Blaze must hear it anyway.

"You're safe here, Kennedy." His voice is soft, low, like warm silk in the dark. He must think I'm breaking down from earlier. I don't bother correcting him. "You probably didn't see the pictures in Reaper's office, but when I told you we deal with the worst, I meant it. We're not just a motorcycle club. We offer specialized security for people who need help against the worst. It's why I know we can set you up with a new identity. You wouldn't be the first person we've done it for."

I let his words sink in, processing them slowly. I'd been shocked at his earlier offer in the truck, an offer of setting me up with a new start somewhere else, but now it makes sense. If they run a security company like Blaze is saying, maybe I will actually have a chance to get through this without always feeling like I need to look over my shoulder.

Letting out a long breath, I open my eyes to stare towards the wall in the dark. "Thank you," I say after gently clearing my throat. "I just want—" I cut myself off.

The bed shifts and Blaze's hand lands gently on my shoulder, making me jump. But I don't jerk away from him.

“What do you want?” he asks.

It’s not supposed to be a loaded question, but it feels like one. I want Riccardo and the Santi Pastori to forget I ever existed. I want to go back to being the girl with dreams and hope. I want to be able to slow down, god, do I ever just want to be able to slow down for once. And I really want to feel protected, like someone else is strong enough to take on my burdens. Just for a night at least, just long enough for me to actually have rest.

I lean back, looking over my shoulder and take a leap. “Would you hold me?” Words start tumbling out of me, trying to justify or explain why I’m asking this stranger to let me fall asleep in his arms. “It’s just, you make me feel safe and you’ve been keeping me safe tonight, and I know this is a huge pile of shit you never expected to deal with—” My voice breaks on the last word when Blaze literally pulls me across the bed towards him.

“Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?” he asks as he tucks me against his side. I’m stiff as a board, especially when all I feel is bare skin. “One thing about me is I’ll never say no to holding a beautiful woman up against me in my bed.”

He’s somehow got me so my head is using his massive bicep as a pillow, his arm curled around me so he can grip my waist. When I don’t relax, he huffs, which makes his broad chest press against my back and the warm air of his breath ruffles my hair.

“Sleep, kitten,” Blaze orders gently again. “I’m not going to throw myself on you in the middle of the night. When we fuck, you’ll know well in advance since you’ll be begging for it.”

He chuckles at my outraged noise, but his efforts to settle me down work. Combined with his warm heat, I relax against him, my mind settling with the security of his embrace. It isn’t long before I’m falling asleep, Blaze’s fingers stroking across my waist.

8

BLAZE

Kennedy isn't the first woman I've woken up with in my bed. She is the first one I don't immediately wake up and send on her way, though. Usually, when I wake up with a woman, it's after a night of hard fucking and the woman isn't pressed up against me. I sure as fuck am not curled up around them like a damn puppy.

When I'd awoken Kennedy by coming to bed, the sour scent of fear that had rolled off of her as she'd battled with the blankets had filled me with the weirdest urge to let out my claws and shred the damn fabric for scaring her. It took sheer will to tug the blankets free instead and not scare her more. When she asked me to hold her, my mind blanked out. No one has ever asked that of me, let alone told me I made them feel safe.

Working for the club's security agency, it's expected of me to keep clients safe and I'm damn good at my job. But I'm not oblivious to the nervous looks most of our clients give us. We're the monsters hired to keep them safe from even worse monsters. We've just gotten used to ignoring the scent of fear. And like Reaper says, the clients can be pissing themselves in front of us—so long as they pay our fee, we'll do our job and do it well.

The only fear I'd previously smelled from Kennedy was when I leaned down at her car's window, then when the goons were after us.

My bedroom's window faces east, the morning sun's light filtering into the room around the blinds. It gives me enough light that I see Kennedy clearly, still tucked up against me. Her slender hands are curled into fists and nestled

under her chin, her head resting on my bicep, her soft breaths warm against my bare chest.

She's still wearing the too-damn-cute sexy polka dot dress, and sometime during the night, it was pushed up around her hips. Her legs are tangled with mine, her soft core tauntingly close to the steel rod of my dick. My hand had found its way up her silken skin until I'm holding a handful of her glorious ass. I don't move it, telling myself if I do, I'll risk waking her up.

My dick pulses, all for waking her up with me between her thighs.

Kennedy is more than a quick fuck type, though. Tracing the gentle slopes of her cheeks, the elegant ridges of her eyebrows, and her kissable lips, I know she's not the type for me. She deserves a happily ever after and I've fucked so many women, I've lost count, none more memorable than the rest.

I'd remember her, a wicked voice croons. I shut it down.

Kennedy has been running for her life, a bounty on her head from a mafia family, and she's made it clear she wants to leave Devil's Haven as soon as she can. She'd leave today, if we let her, convinced staying on the move is the only option she has.

Before I knew her situation, I'd had plans to get a taste of what's between her legs before we both went our own ways. Now, though, everything is different. Today, she's a client, paying or not, which means keeping my dick under control and in my pants is an absolute.

Pounding on my door sends Kennedy bolting upright, her night-black hair tumbled and wild like she's been debauched.

I roll out of bed, pretending the noise woke me up, too.

"What?" I bellow towards the door while swiping up the jeans I'd shucked before climbing in bed with my own personal sleeping beauty. I feel her eyes on me as I stand, pulling the pants up over my ass.

"Reaper wants us at HQ," comes Brute's rough answer. "Bones has new intel on that girl of yours."

"That girl is in here," Kennedy grumbles as she slides out of the other side of

the bed.

I can't resist looking over as I pull a clean shirt from my closet. My mouth waters at the expanse of her legs and soft curve of her ass before she yanks her dress's hem down.

"Whatever," Brute's voice sounds off through the door. "Be there in thirty or it's your own ass." Kennedy pauses, staring at the door with wide eyes.

I huff a laugh, drawing her gaze. I tap my ears. "Demons, kitten. We hear better than most."

She scrunches up her face, looking so much like a disgruntled kitten that I battle the urge to wrap her up in my arms again. Instead, I yank the shirt on over my head and march to the connected bathroom. "I gotta piss, then we'll head out," I toss back before slamming the door closed.

Kennedy starts to mutter something about males and then cuts herself off. I grin, not having to hide it now, amused with the woman. Dammit. I shake myself, unsettled with how easy this human woman gets under my skin.

Less than ten minutes later, Kennedy is following me into the kitchen of the clubhouse after using the bathroom after me. Even in a rumpled dress and her hair tossed up in a messy bun, she makes my cock hard.

Lacy is in the kitchen pulling out a tray of lemon blueberry muffins from the oven with Cinder hovering anxiously nearby. She maneuvers around the vice president of the Knights of Hades motorcycle club, rolling her eyes at him. When she sees Kennedy and me walk in, she gives us a bright smile. I'm happy for her—it wasn't even a year ago her asshole ex kidnapped her, planning to force her to marry him. Cinder claimed her as his, and all of us in the club chased Eddie down. In the process of killing Eddie, Cinder had shifted into his full-demon form. Rather than be afraid of him, Lacy had embraced him without hesitation.

Now she's just started the third trimester of her pregnancy, and Cinder is driving her insane.

"Kennedy!" Lacy greets before giving Cinder some side-eye. "Can you please tell this man that pregnancy doesn't turn women into delicate glass? I swear, he's more nervous than a mouse in a cat house." The blonde woman

flips the muffin tin so they all slide out onto the counter before setting the tin aside.

I don't hesitate to head to the kitchen island and snag two for myself, getting a grin from Lacy. The pastry's still too hot for humans to eat without scalding, but I take a big bite. Around the bite, I defend Cinder. "Give him a break, Lacy," I say before swallowing. "Not like there's a lot of half-demon, half-human spawn running around. For all we know, that babe might claw his way out of your belly like the kasit fiends." I give a dramatic shudder, eyeing the usually stoic Cinder for his reaction.

Lacy shrieks and throws a wooden spoon at my head, which I dodge with a laugh. "Not helping, asshole!" She spins to Cinder, cupping his scarred face without hesitation. "Don't even think about that. This baby is doing just fine, and I'll have a normal human labor and delivery. Dr. Lane is certain."

Cinder wraps his arms around his much shorter lover, scowling at me over her head. "Yeah, I know," he grumbles. "Just don't like how you're hurting more every day, sunshine. If I knew how uncomfortable you'd be, I'd never have fucked you."

Lacy presses a kiss to his chin, patting his chest affectionately, right over his name and rank patch on his leather cut. "Which would have been a damn shame. Now take the muffins I packed for you and the guys at Tartarus, and this time you'd better share with the prospect. I like him, he's sweet."

Cinder growls at Lacy calling another male—the lynx—sweet. Maybe once Lacy bonds with Cinder, giving her soul to him, he won't be jealous over any small comment. Knowing the surly bastard, it'll probably be even worse.

"I'm serious." Lacy's firm with Cinder before stepping away from him and closer to the fresh muffins again. She puts a couple in a baggie, leaving it open before sliding it across towards Kennedy. "Here we go, honey. Make sure you don't leave them around Blaze or they'll disappear. Fresh coffee in the pot, if you want some."

"Thank you," Kennedy says graciously, tucking a piece of hair that escaped her bun behind her ear. "They smell great. Where are the mugs?"

"I got it." I quickly swallow the last of the first muffin and move around to

the restaurant-sized coffee carafe. With how many of us actually live at the clubhouse, a standard home coffee maker would never be able to keep up. Even with something that can make half a gallon of coffee at a time, we go through at least two an hour. Reaper drinks one all on his own. “Room for milk or sugar?” I grunt over my shoulder as I grab two well-used travel mugs. “Yes, please.”

When I hand her the mug, fierce satisfaction digs into my chest at her grateful smile. I scowl, and her eyes widen before she looks away, holding the mug with both hands. Fuck, now she thinks I’m mad at her.

Cinder catches my eye and raises a knowing brow. I want to flip him off. I’ve told him before that I’m not like him, not made to settle down with an old lady and start a family here in this new realm we call home. I followed Reaper and Cinder out of Hell because I craved freedom. Freedom from expectations. Freedom from people wanting more than I can give. Freedom to be my own demon.

Freedom from my father, though father is a generous term.

Refusing to think about the prince of Hell who fathered me, I head towards the door that’ll take us out of the clubhouse and to where I parked my truck. I don’t wait for Kennedy, knowing she’ll be following me, and the soft falls of her footsteps confirm my assumption.

I wish I could take my bike. My skin crawls with the need to feel the wind around me, the sun’s heat burning into my skin, the engine’s roar drowning out everything, even my own thoughts.

I’d never find that peace if Kennedy’s small body was pressed to my back, her strong legs hugging my own, her hands clinging to my waist. Instead, I’m stuck in the cab of my truck, her taunting scent blending with coffee.

As soon as we’re on the road, I jab the button to roll down the windows. She makes a startled sound, her hand going to her hair where some strands escape and whip around her in the wind.

Good. At least I’m not the only one being attacked by something.

She doesn’t say anything, sucking it up while I grind my jaw and glare at the

road ahead of us as the town comes into view. A part of me is grateful. Another, more insistent part, wishes her husband was still alive so I could kill him myself for trying to put out her spark. A low growl rumbles from me, lost in the sound of the wind as we drive.

Devil's Haven isn't that big, and it's not long before I'm pulling the truck into the asphalt parking lot in front of a weathered metal building. It's a warehouse, repurposed for the headquarters of Cerberus Security, the company Reaper created as the Knights' first legitimate company. The logo matches the patch on our leathers, a massive geometric stylized head of Cerberus in the middle of a chain circle. Made out of stainless steel, it already seems to glow with fire from the late morning's sun. Reaper cut it out and welded it himself decades ago, and it's stood strong ever since.

There aren't any windows, and I can see curiosity in Kennedy's eyes as she follows me towards the double glass doors, tinted dark against the light. My truck is the only one in the front parking lot, but we park our bikes in the garage in the back. I open the door for her, gesturing for her to go inside first, and when I hear the small gasp escape her, I'm glad I did.

Cerberus Security is a point of pride for all of us Knights. Something that lets us choose how we use the skills beaten into us in the depths of Hell. If it weren't for Reaper, most of us would still be bending under the yoke of a prince of Hell, filled with loathing and despair while powerless to do anything other than obeying orders.

When Reaper first bought the place, it was half-full of turn-of-the-century, outdated, broken machinery and other detritus. It'd taken a lot of hard work, salvaging, and months of remodeling. The result was worth it, though. Outside, the corrugated metal siding bears the brunt of the harsh desert, but inside, the walls are heavily insulated and armored before being paneled with pale wood. The building has been divided in half by a wall with a solid metal door in the center. Beyond it is the garage and Reaper's private office; it's also where any gear is kept plus a steep set of stairs to the loft above where Reaper lives.

While the president has a room at the clubhouse, he's always kept a short distance from the rest of us—a holdover to when he was our commanding officer in the armies of Hell and had to order us to risk our lives. Now, as the

boss of Cerberus Security, he won't send any of us in if he doesn't have at least three exit plans. Since escaping Hell, Reaper has never sent us into a situation we couldn't get out of with our lives. That doesn't mean we haven't been sent into some shit-ass situations. It just means he trusts us to have the skills necessary to get the job done and get out. In return, we trust him to not send us into suicide missions or leave out intel.

I put a hand close to Kennedy's lower back, not quite touching her, to prompt her to move deeper into the open building. Directly ahead of us is the huge table we prep at, with large screens along the wall, and the metal door right in the middle of the section. In the back left corner is Stubs' domain, where the demon is currently crouched over his desk, his long fingers flying across the keyboard as his six monitors constantly change. In Hell, he was the one to go behind enemy lines and gather intelligence to bring back to our commanders. Now he does the same, except from the behind a computer screen. With his genius, there's no computer system that can keep him out.

On the right side is the small kitchen set up where even more coffee is brewing and there are two fridges packed full of food. The front of the building, where we are now, is set up to be comfortable for clients with its plush, expensive couches, a huge TV that's currently off, and even a pool table and a few very full bookshelves.

"This is..." she trails off, the silver travel mug loose in her hand as she looks around.

"Not what you expected?" I say with a knowing grin. No one ever expects a rough motorcycle gang to have a high-tech, clean, organized and very professional building. "Come on, let's see what has Reaper scowling deeper than usual."

Reaper, Bones, and Chainz are already at the table, the latter two sitting down in chairs almost too small for our human forms. Reaper stands to the side of the table closest to Stubs' back, his huge arms crossed over his chest as he glowers down at the papers and photos spread across the table. When we get close, I greet Bones and Chainz with a clasped forearm and hit on the back. Reaper only gives me a grunt before turning his dark eyes on Kennedy. I can't read him, no one can read him like Cinder, our VP.

My hackles threaten to rise, and it takes every bit of control I have to hold back a growl. As it is, I grab Kennedy's arm hard enough to startle her and march her a few seats down from the rest, making sure I'm in between her and the president. A bullshit move I'd punch someone else over, choosing someone else over the president. Still, my flames threaten to erupt over my skin if I leave her too close to him.

He's called Reaper for a reason.

I take a seat next to Kennedy, bracing my arms on the table and ignoring Bones' grin, made more macabre from the damn skull tattooed on his face.

The metal door opens. Brute and Heathen walk in before taking their usual spots around the table.

Reaper nods once, uncrossing his arms to place his hands on his hips, squaring up.

Shit, whatever they've found out about the people after Kennedy isn't good.

The briny smell of her anxiety drifts off her, and I spare her a look. She might be nervous, but she's looking at Reaper head-on and not dropping her eyes. A well of pride at her steely determination fills me. She may be human, she may be running from her dead husband's mafia, but she isn't weak.

"You said you killed Enzo." Reaper gets right to it. We all look to Kennedy, who gives him a shallow nod to confirm. "Hate to break it to you, but you're not a widow." He pauses. "Stubs, report."

At the intonement of the demon's road name, one of the large monitors on the wall lights up with very recently captured video stills of a handsome, suave man of about six feet tall. Even under his expensive looking black suit, I can tell he hits the gym. As they switch through, showing him surrounded by obvious guards and meeting with a face-turned blond man in a white cassock in front of a restaurant, I see the evidence of the blow Kennedy delivered. Pity. One inch closer to the temple and he'd have been dead for sure.

"That's impossible." Kennedy's voice shakes, the nerves turning to fear as she presses a hand to her throat.

I can't help it. I reach out, grabbing her shoulder and squeezing, unused to

offering comfort.

“I saw him. He wasn’t breathing.”

“I believe you,” Reaper says. “Bring up the photo, Stubs.”

A single photo, clearly taken from a security video feed in a city, shows Enzo shaking hands with the blond man in the white cassock. This time I see his face. A snarl rips through me, hatred and fury bringing my flames close enough to the surface that I smell smoke. My reaction is mirrored by the rest of the Knights at the table.

“What?” Kennedy’s head is jerking as her gaze jumps to each of us before looking back at the image, her brow furrowed. “Who is it? I’ve never seen him.”

It’s Stubs who answers, spinning around on his chair with ice in his eyes. “A goddamned Light Justicar. And the Santi Pastori are working with him.” He looks at Reaper, whose jaw is granite. “We’ve got bigger problems than a mafia wanting a woman back. Big problems.”

9

KENNEDY

If I weren't already ramrod straight, everyone's response would have me straightening. As it is, I'm swinging my gaze between faces before landing on Blaze.

"What's a Light Justicar?" I ask, confused. It sounds medieval. I frown. "Like the Knights Templar?"

Brute, the massive biker across from me, gives a derisive snort. "They don't have enough honor to be a Knights Templar. The Light Justicars are why King Philip ordered the mass execution of the Knights Templar."

There's an ancient anger in his voice, his cobalt eyes dull as if lost in a memory.

"The Light Justicars are considered a holy order in this realm," the demon—Stubs, I belatedly remember—begins as he levers up off the leather computer chair. He walks towards the head of the table with a strange gait. Curiosity burns at me, but I'm not rude enough to ask. "They were formed when our kind came to this realm seeking refuge from the celestial wars. The beings you call angels followed us—" more growls rumble around me "—determined to eradicate our kind."

"Fucking bastards," Bones mutters, glaring at the table as he rolls something between his fingers. I've seen one of Enzo's men doing the same thing with a coin. I swallow back my surprise when I realize Bones is doing it with a... well, a bone. "It wasn't enough to invade and drain our territories of power. They want every one of those who refuse to kneel dead."

“Regardless,” Reaper says before the anger brewing in the room can overflow. He braces both of his palms on the table in front of him, looking at me and Blaze. “Your husband is the leader of the Santi Pastori family, and Stubs has found a long-standing connection to the Light Justicars. Certain members of the order have been granted healing abilities, and we can surmise that that is why your husband still lives.”

A large hand lands on my thigh, squeezing gently. Blaze doesn’t look at me, even as I slide both of my hands under the table to grip his.

“So what does that mean for Kennedy?” Blaze asks. “If these fuckers are involved, we can’t just set her up with a new identity in another part of the country.”

Reaper looks as grim as his name and dread builds inside me. They already know I’m here, and if it weren’t for Blaze, I’d already be on my way back to Enzo... or dead.

I shake my head. “I can’t go back to him,” I blurt, my heart racing. Sweat beads on the back of my neck, and I’m pretty sure my nails are gouging Blaze’s hand. “I won’t. I’d rather die—I mean it. You don’t know what Enzo will do to me.”

I’ve seen what Enzo does to those who cross him, and I know death would be merciful compared to what he’d do to me.

“He’s not fucking touching you.” Blaze’s fierce proclamation slices through my building panic, sweeping it away and only leaving his resolute certainty. His eyes are hot, making me think of the flames I’d seen in them last night. Blaze turns his gaze to Reaper, his jaw tight. “Right?”

Reaper gives a harsh nod.

I collapse against the back of the chair in relief.

“We aren’t in the habit of handing over innocent people to criminals,” he says. The involvement of the Justicars complicates things and increases the risk, but it’s nothing we can’t handle.”

Reaper looks over at Chainz. “Did you find out anything about the car?”

Right. There was a reward for the return of the car, too. I'd forgotten completely about it.

Chainz grunts, leaning the chair back as he props a booted ankle over the opposite knee. He stretches his arms up, his leather vest opening and revealing an old metal-band tee before he laces his hands behind his head.

"Sure did, prez," he says with a lazy drawl. He inclines his head towards me. "Seems like Mrs. Kennedy Pastori here made off with Michael Donaldson's payment. The floor of the trunk was hollowed out and filled with containers of Rapture. The drug fetches a pretty penny this far away from the Barrows."

I'm vaguely familiar with Rapture, a party drug that is rumored to give normal humans a taste of what it's like to be magical. I've only ever heard about it from those who had traveled to a city called the Barrows, supposedly run by a bloodthirsty, vicious vampire.

"Did you call it into the Nightshades?" Reaper asks, concerned. "As far as I know, they haven't expanded distribution beyond the city."

"Cataloged it all with photos and sent them to Stubs," Chainz answers, letting his chair fall flat to the floor and crossing his arms on the table. "If Donaldson got it through legit avenues, he sure as shit isn't supposed to be using it to pay debts."

Stubs is already back at his computer. Another one of the screens lights up, this time with a grid of photos. Each one is of apothecary-style bottles, filled with an ultraviolet liquid that gives off a glow that reminds me of a black light.

Bones whistles, shaking his head. "That's quite a payment. They must have hoped nobody would find it in the car, with how low of a reward they offered."

"Or they didn't want anyone poking around wondering why a car was so valuable," Blaze suggests. Chainz shoots a finger gun at him, nodding.

"A haul like this is easily worth a million on the streets outside of the Barrows," Stubs says from his computer. "Would have wiped out Donaldson's debt to the familia."

“How’d a small-timer get so much?” Brute muses.

Reaper shakes his head. “That’s not our problem. That’s Ambrose’s. Stubs, send it over to our contacts with the Nightshades and ask them what they want us to do with it. Until then, I want it locked down in the armory. If a single vial goes missing, I’ll kick everyone’s ass. No one speaks a word about us having this shit. This is club business only.”

The men all grunt agreement, and Reaper turns his hard stare on me. For an absurd moment, all I can think is why Sydney seems to hate this guy. He’s actually sexy, in the cold I-can-kill-you-in-between-beers-and-not-give-a-fuck kind of way. He’s as big as Blaze, at the least, and his black shirt with the Knights of Hades logo is stretched across a ripped chest. He’s got a close-cropped beard, and his face is made up of hard lines.

Ice slithers down my spine to fill my stomach. This man, I’m certain, can walk into the Santi Pastori mansion and overthrow them on his own.

“I won’t say a thing,” I swear, my voice dry. He seems satisfied with the answer and finally takes a seat at head of the table. He grabs a legal pad that was hidden under a file folder and clicks a pen, writing something at the top.

“We need to get a bead on who shot up Sydney’s place last night. I’ve had probies over there since Blaze called it in, and she isn’t happy about it.”

He writes something down as guilt curdles my stomach. It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t been there, Sydney’s wonderful home wouldn’t be destroyed. She opened her home to me, and this is what she got. It’s another reminder that everyone who tries to help me gets hurt in the end.

“She’s staying at Lacy’s place,” Brute says before suggesting some sort of security patrol.

“I’ll work with Stubs on pulling the security feed and try to get a face we can run.” Bones stands after he finishes speaking and walks the short distance to the computer bank that Stubs is already working away on.

As they continue to talk around me, discussing protection details and risk assessment, the guilt only grows stronger.

These are strangers, they owe me nothing, and they’re putting themselves in

between me and my past. Even worse, apparently some group whose whole purpose is to kill demons like them may be involved now, too.

Bile burns up my throat, and I push back from the table, drawing everyone's attention to me.

"I—I need some air," I gasp, nausea rolling my stomach. I don't wait, turning and bolting to the front door, bursting out of the building. I keep running along the front of the building until I turn the corner where the empty sidewalk is shaded from the sun.

I lean up against the building, lacing my fingers on top of my head, trying to gulp in breaths, my chest tight with panic.

The world slowly spins around me as the urge to vomit gets stronger.

"Keep it together," I whisper harshly, gripping my hair and pulling it. The sharp pain isn't enough to stop the spiral.

I ruin everything. A dry sob escapes my lips and my eyes burn. Anytime someone tries to help me, it ends in pain—in death.

Sydney isn't the first person to pay for helping me. Imogen, one of the wives I'd befriended early on, tried to give me a place to go when Enzo was in a mood. When he found out, he had her husband beat her. She was admitted to the hospital and I wasn't even allowed to visit her. We were never allowed to be in the same room alone again.

The guy—whose name I can't even remember anymore—in one of my college courses who offered to come over to help me move, Enzo found out and beat him, telling me that the guy wanted to fuck me.

Pain screams in my chest as I relive the worst of my sins, making me slide down the building until I land on my ass atop the hard concrete.

My parents. I'm the reason they're dead. I called my dad, upset after a date with a guy who tried to get more than I was willing to give. It was after midnight, and apparently my mother insisted on coming, too.

Why, oh, why, didn't I just call a cab? Or walk? Or let the guy fuck me? I wasn't even at my best friend's, where I'd told them I was staying the night.

But my dad hadn't sounded angry when I confessed my lie and told me they'd be right there and to keep my phone on me.

Except they never made it. A drunk driver hit them head-on, killing them both on impact. It had been my best friend's parents who came and got me when I realized something was wrong. On the way home, we came across the collision. I just remember screaming as I saw the upside-down and mangled old Subaru Forester my mom had loved.

The driver survived, barely more than a scratch on him, since he was driving a souped-up truck.

No matter what anyone tried to tell me afterwards, I knew the truth. It was my fault they were dead.

Hands grab me, and I shriek, my vision blurry from tears. Instead of being dragged away, I'm cradled against a broad chest. The fight melts out of me as I recognize Blaze's campfire scent. Too lost within my own misery, I missed him approaching. But now I'm in his lap, surrounded by him. He doesn't say anything, just holds me, and that makes my tears come all over again. I don't deserve his comfort, not when all I do is bring pain to people. I'm too selfish to tell him to leave me alone, though.

"Do you want to talk?" Blaze asks, his voice rumbling in his chest under my ear. There's a note of awkwardness, like he's not used to offering such comforts or he dreads that I'll accept.

I shake my head. Not only to spare him but because I don't want him to know my greatest shame.

"How about I take you somewhere?" Blaze asks, and I don't bother lifting my head to look at him before answering.

"Okay." My voice is raspy and hoarse from the tears. I move to get up, but Blaze stands up, lifting me like I'm nothing. I wrap my arms around him as he walks us back to the truck, skillfully opening the door even with me in his arms. As I buckle myself in, I studiously avoid looking towards the Cerberus Security building, shame and embarrassment weighing my shoulders down. They were in there, planning ways to keep me safe, and I ran out and now Blaze is taking me away.

“I feel so ungrateful,” I confess as Blaze pulls out of the parking lot. I’m leaning my forehead against the window, the small town passing in an unfocused haze. “It’s just...” I trail off as we pull to a stop at the red light. It’s just...What?

He grunts. “Thought you said you didn’t want to talk?”

I snort, dry amusement at the question pulling me out of my head enough that I sit up and see where we’re headed just as we pull into The Styx parking lot. He puts the truck into park by the door we’d fled from last night. “Why are we here?”

He gets out of the truck and I follow, cautiously looking at the building across the street. My heart leaps and then settles when I see someone on the roof of the building, then see Blaze raise a hand to them. Security, I think.

Blaze opens the door for me, and I proceed him in.

“I want to take my bike, and I figure you’d appreciate a chance to shower and change,” Blaze answers as he tails me on the way to the stairs. There’s another man at the base of the stairs who looks up from his phone and lifts his chin in greeting. He’s got a Knights of Hades cut on, but the patch on the front reads Prospect.

“Anything?” Blaze asks from behind me.

“All quiet. Sydney headed out with Lacy and some of the Knights for a supply run,” the prospect answers. He’s young-looking, even younger than me. There’s no way this guy is a demon, but he’s definitely not human.

“Bet Sydney loved that,” Blaze mumbles and gives my lower back a light press. “Head upstairs and get changed. I’ll wait down here.”

My feet are like lead but my chest loosens with each step until I can finally breathe again as I reach the upstairs apartment. I expected it to look terrible, like it’d just been shot up. Instead, it looks like repairs are already well underway. There’s less furniture, and a few of the windows have been removed, letting the warm desert breeze flow in. But all the holes in the walls have been plastered and just need to be sanded and painted.

It assuages my guilt enough that I can face heading into the room I was

supposed to stay in. Someone cleaned up the clothes, folding and neatly stacking my sad wardrobe at the foot of the bed. Whoever it was must have also removed the damn figurine that'd conveyed the promise of death. Even without it right in front of me, the sharply scrawled words haunt me. Shaking my head free of thoughts, I grab some clothes. Unable to remember when I last washed all of my clothes, I bring them up to my nose to sniff. I really don't feel like taking a shower then putting on dirty clothes.

I'm met with a crisp, clean scent and I bring the clothes to my chest, hugging them tight as I squeeze my eyes shut. Someone, probably Sydney, washed them for me. Another act of kindness when all I've done is bring danger to their small town.

I won't let Sydney get hurt, I resolve. Her home has already been attacked, a place that is filled with her touch and clear pride. I won't let Enzo and my past take anything more from her. I won't let them hurt Blaze or any of the other Knights either.

I need to stop running, but I don't know how. Maybe, just maybe, an idea will come to me in the shower.

Twenty minutes later, I'm clean and dressed but still idea-free. Knowing Blaze is still downstairs waiting for me, I toss my damp hair up in a bun and double-check myself in the mirror, scrunching my face at what I see. Being on the run has taken its toll after a few weeks, though the dark circles under my eyes aren't as visible as before. The only makeup I have is the mascara and lip stain I'd had in the tote before I ran, so I do a quick swipe of both. It helps a bit, adding some color to my face and darkening my lashes, but what I really need is a good week of sleep.

I'm frankly shocked Blaze is interested in me at all. Even now, I feel as if I look like a hot mess. Especially compared to Sydney and Lacy. Sure, Lacy is pregnant, but I can tell she's the short girl with curves in all the right places and she's genuinely beautiful. Sydney is all tanned skin, dark eyes, and lean muscle with a pure fuck-around-and-find-out attitude. Then there were all the other women at the party last night, especially that one in the skimpy dress that was all over Blaze at one point. He's probably been with countless women, women with more experience than me.

I'm just an exhausted runaway with the mob on her ass, with only sad, worn-out leggings and tank tops. I wasn't even smart enough to take the jewelry I'd gotten as Enzo's wife to pawn off once the money I'd taken ran out.

A sound creaks up from below, making me almost jump from my skin.

"Almost ready, kitten?"

I blow out a harsh breath, shaking my head. I don't know what I'm doing, but maybe with the Knights' help, I'll have time to figure something out.

"Be right there," I call out as I head from the bathroom back to my room. I slide on my black flats and grab the leather jacket Sydney let me borrow. Shrugging it on, I decide to let today unfold however it will. I'll worry about a plan to escape Enzo's reach tomorrow.

10

BLAZE

I don't bother hiding the fierce grin that Kennedy's squeal behind me elicits as we catch air. No one is around to see it as I push my bike faster than I normally would out here in the desert.

When she came down the stairs and followed me to my bike, which I'd had another prospect deliver to me while she was getting ready, she had all her walls up. She'd been stiff sitting behind me, worse than when I'd first picked her up outside of town.

I shouldn't let myself care, but I want the woman who'd kissed me back with abandon. So I push the bike, taking corners sharper and faster than necessary until Kennedy presses herself against my back, her fingers digging into my stomach as she holds on. When the first delighted squeal comes, I feel an unfamiliar relief and sense of victory. The moment I turn off the road and into the desert, it became my goal to yank her out of whatever made her cry this morning. I want more of those squeals as she holds me tighter.

I've had other chicks on the back of my bike before, but none of them felt so right. I didn't give a fuck what those chicks felt, so long as they were up for a good time and nothing else.

The rocky mound I'd been driving us towards quickly approaches, and I take the last opportunity to bank hard as I whip us around it and under the shallow outcropping to earn another delighted squeal. Then I kick the stand out and cut the engine. Suddenly, I'm uncertain about what Kennedy will think. She hadn't asked where I was taking her, and I doubt when she first climbed on

the back of my bike, she thought I was going to take us an hour out into the desert.

She lets go of me and pulls off the helmet I'd insisted she wear.

"Oh, wow," comes her breathless voice from just behind me. "This is amazing."

Another surge of pride fills my chest and I cough, clearing the strange feeling away. I hold out my hand and she takes it, getting off the bike. I follow a moment later and take the helmet from her hands and rest it on the seat.

I busy myself pulling out a cooler from one of the saddle bags and, with a quick glance at Kennedy to make sure she isn't looking, I tuck the SIG Sauer under the back of my shirt, in my waistband. No way I was going to have her pressed up against me and feeling a gun between her legs. If she's with me, the only thing hard she'll be feeling there is my cock.

Except I'm supposed to be protecting her. I can't let my attraction distract me, especially if the Light Justicars are now involved. It's only a matter of time before the assholes we ran out of the clubhouse figure out what we are and report back. It's not like we make our true natures a secret.

"How'd you find this place?"

I turn back to her, cooler in hand, and pause. She's at the edge of the water, back to me, her shoes already slipped off and presenting me with her sexy ass as she pulls her leggings up to just under her knees. My cock, already half-hard from the ride, goes rigid and I swear in my head. She just isn't fair. And the fact that she doesn't even realize how tempting she's being makes it that much more difficult to control myself.

Kennedy stands and looks over her shoulder at me, reminding me she'd asked a question.

I stride forward, a bit deeper into the outcropping before dropping the cooler onto the ground.

"Sometimes we just need to let loose and run through the desert," I say, my voice rough. From the interest on her face, she doesn't realize why that'd be. She's forgotten my true nature already, it seems. "One of those times, we

found this little oasis. It's a good place to come when the world gets too much."

I didn't tell her I was the one who found it, soon after we'd taken over Devil's Haven—on a week-long bender when my own fucked-up memories got too heavy. It's not like I own the place, most of us know about it and come here when we need to retreat. I'd been in full demon form, the flames that gave me my name raging and burning everything within five feet of me.

News had reached us from the region of Hell we'd left behind. My father had put a price on my head, promising wealth and rank for anyone who dragged me back to him so I could fulfill his fucked-up sense of duty.

I've no idea if the reward is still there, but I do know demons and other denizens stopped trying to collect after we kept killing anyone who tried.

I consider the small refuge from the way Kennedy might see it. It's only this close that there's any suggestion that water's here. The pool of spring water is maybe ten feet across, and most of it is sheltered under the rocky outcropping. A small sliver of sandy dirt follows the edge into the shade, the opening too wide to be considered a cave and too open for any wildlife bigger than lizards and snakes to make a home of it. Rough sagebrush and other hardy plants crowd the water's edge in the sun, with two parted breaks where things have pushed through to get a drink of the vital liquid.

Sitting on my ass, I unzip the cooler, hoping the prospect didn't fuck up the food prep. There are a few women who stick around the clubhouse who help us out, even though they aren't claimed by any of us, and it looks like the prospect was smart and went to one of them.

"Did you bring me on a picnic?" Kennedy's voice sounds shocked, and I look up at her with a scowl.

"Do I look like some fancy fucker who goes on picnics?" I grunt out and gesture for her to sit before jerking out the food-filled containers.

She sits about a foot away from me, and I almost grab her by the hips and yank her closer. Instead, I shove a small, cold bottle of wine at her. She takes it before I let it drop to the ground, then studies its white label.

"What? Don't like that kind?" I ask, setting out one of the Tartarus Taps

beers next. “Don’t blame me, I didn’t pack it.”

I feel her gaze on me, but I focus on taking a lid off a container filled with cold slices of rare steak and set it between us.

“No, this is a good one,” she murmurs and then she helps me pull the lids off the other containers. One’s got cut-up strawberries, watermelons, kiwis, blueberries and pineapple. The other has cubes of cheese and at least half a baguette pre-cut for us. Kennedy makes a sound as I scowl at the offerings, and when my gaze cuts to her, a laugh escapes those sweet lips of hers.

“You sure this isn’t a picnic?” she asks, those whiskey-honey eyes of her so bright compared to the blank sorrow I’d seen in them this morning.

I scowl harder, more for show than anything, as I use my keychain to pop the lid off my beer.

“Fuckin’ women and their picnics,” I grumble against the lip of the bottle before taking a long swallow. “Ya want the food or not, kitten?”

In response, she grins at me as she pinches a piece of steak between two fingers and eats it, her tongue darting out to catch the juice on her lower lip.

Fucking hellfire and damnation. My cock doesn’t need any more encouragement, and she doesn’t realize how much danger she’s in.

I bring my feet in, propping my arms on my raised knees, my beer hanging loosely in my fingers as I glare at the surface of the pool. I should never have brought Kennedy here. Should have dropped her off with Sydney or, better yet, with Lacy.

Kennedy stays quiet, shifting until she’s facing the pool, too, the food between us. I do my best to not look at her, but every time she takes a sip of wine straight from that bottle or picks up another piece of food and puts it between her lips, all I can do is grit my teeth and take another drink of beer.

Shit, I don’t even bother trying to eat. If I did and some romance movie shit like our hands brushing happened, my control would snap. I didn’t bring Kennedy out here to fuck her on the ground like some animal. But my cock sure as hell is wondering why not.

The light breeze ripples the surface of the water, the rough bushes rustling gently. I doubt she can hear it, but there are a few lizards skittering across the rocks around us and playful yips of coyote pups in the distance.

My sense of hearing is why I'm comfortable bringing Kennedy out here. I'll hear anyone before they get within a thousand feet of us, no matter how good they think they are.

The peace is disturbed by the rumble of a plane soaring high above. I watch it, the pale vapor trail the only thing marring the azure skies.

"Have you ever flown in a plane?" she asks.

I eye Kennedy, but she's watching the plane above us while rolling the empty wine bottle between her hands. I look back up with a half shrug.

"Never saw the point," I answer. "I don't like the idea of being trapped in a metal tube. I'd rather be on the back of my bike, wind on my skin, in total control."

She hums, but there's no judgment in the sound. Only acceptance at my word.

"I guess it's probably different for me, since I'm human. I used to have dreams of traveling all over the world. Sometimes I'd just fantasize about getting on a plane and not knowing the destination."

The wistfulness in her voice overcomes my struggle to not look at her. I take the last swig of my beer before setting it to the side and crossing my arms over my knees.

"So why didn't you?"

Her gaze drops from the sky to the water, a bitter half-smile on her lips. "Too scared, I guess." Kennedy gives me a playful grin. "Not that someone like you knows what it means to be scared."

I snort, shaking my head. If only she knew how many times terror drove me. I'm more familiar with the feeling than she can ever realize.

A thought strikes me and I eye her again, wanting to see her response. "Does it freak you out, knowing what I am?"

She looks at me again, the hypnotizing ripples on the water's surface having drawn her away, and tilts her head. The smallest line furrows between her dark brows.

“You being a demon?” She doesn't wait for an answer, shrugging. She sets the wine bottle down before hugging her legs to her chest, rubbing her shins unconsciously. “Not really. It's honestly hard to believe, even though I saw the smoke coming off you and the fire in your eyes last night. But you don't look that different than a human.”

I grunt. “Last night isn't what I look like in my demon form, kitten,” I growl, danger infusing my voice. It's not a threat, but she has no idea what I really am. How terrified she should really be of me. “If you saw me in my demon form, you wouldn't be sitting here next to me.”

Kennedy is quiet, her face serious as she studies me. At least she's not dismissing my words, like many would.

“Your name, Blaze, is that because of your demon form?” she asks unexpectedly.

“Yeah. All of us took our names from our forms.”

She nods in understanding, but then her eyes are clouded with confusion.

“What?” I prompt, surprised at my own curiosity about her thoughts.

“It's nothing,” she tries to protest but at my blank look, she sighs and relents. “I just can't figure out what Stubs' name means then.”

A laugh bursts out of my chest, startling both of us. Of the things she could have said, I hadn't thought of that one.

“That's his name because when we were escaping what you call Hell, he lost his foot and part of his lower leg.” My jovial tone disguises the reality of those dark memories.

She snorts and shakes her head, clearly amused at the name that'd started as a joke and then stuck.

Silence returns between us but it feels natural. It's as comfortable as it'd be with one of my brothers. Pleasant silence isn't something I've experienced

with a woman before.

There's something intimate on a deep level, being able to just exist beside someone in the universe.

Kennedy isn't for me. I don't want a relationship that lasts longer than a night. Once we get the mafia and Light Justicars off her back, she'll move on and forget all about me.

Knowing that shouldn't make me as angry as it does.

I stand up, making Kennedy jolt from the sudden movement. I toe off my boots before sliding off my leather cut and dragging my shirt over my head.

Kennedy sputters below me. "What are you doing?"

"Taking a swim," I answer and I make quick work of my belt and jeans, shoving them off my hips and letting them drop before stepping out of them.

"Oh my god," she breathes out, clearly scandalized, and a wolfish grin stretches my lips. I hadn't planned to drop my boxer briefs originally, but I push them down next, making sure they land where Kennedy can see them despite the hand she's holding up to shielding her sight.

Her meep is damn cute.

My cock roars back to life and I shake my head, taking the two strides to the water's edge. I wade in, the spring getting deep quickly, until I can let myself sink under the surface.

The cool water is silk on my skin, the sound of it churning in my ears and drowning everything out for a heartbeat.

As a fire demon, water should feel like an anathema to me. Instead, I've always found a sense of relief when submerged. Maybe it's because I know I'm powerful enough to evaporate the entire spring around me if necessary.

I get my feet under me, the soft silt displaced by my movements, and rise out of the water. I wipe the water off my face, running my hands back over my short hair. Standing in the center of the natural pool, the water only reaches the top of my stomach.

I don't know what makes me turn around and give Kennedy a daring look. "You going to join me, kitten, or are you afraid of a little water?"

When her surprise shifts to determination, I know one thing. I'm a fire demon but playing with the fire between us might pull me into an inferno that'll burn.

Then Kennedy stands up, defiance in those gorgeous eyes of hers, and pushes her leggings down over her hips then the rest of the way. Long, slender legs are revealed. My cock bobs as I remember one of those long legs wrapped around me as I slid my hands up under her dress.

I'd come into the water with the intention to cool off. Instead, I'm holding Kennedy's gaze as she grasps the bottom of her long white tank top with both hands before drawing it up and off.

My gut clenches and balls tighten.

Fuck.

She hadn't been wearing a bra, and, apparently, I'd missed her taking her panties off with her leggings.

Kennedy stands at the edge of the water, a glare in her eyes, completely naked. And I'm just staring at her like an idiot jackass who's never seen a naked woman before.

I haven't, though, not a woman like her. Long legs, stomach soft, small, high breasts tipped with dark pink nipples. A neatly trimmed patch of dark hair at the juncture of her legs taunts me. My cock aches. Just looking at Kennedy is driving me close to the edge, threatening to make a never-touched fool of me by making me spill without first feeling her touch.

She might not be for me, but fuck if I can't resist having her anyways.

Kennedy's posture softens, her arms coming up to cover her pert breasts. Her gaze drops away from me as she rushes into the water, quickly lowering herself until almost all of her body is hidden below the surface.

I can't bear the embarrassment and shame on her face. I cross the short distance between us, my body displacing enough water that it slaps and

splashes at the edges. She barely has a chance to look up at me before I'm in front of her, gripping her chin and lowering my face towards hers.

"I'll give you one chance to get out and get your clothes on again. We'll leave like nothing happened."

I've never taken anything a woman didn't want to give, and I wasn't about to start now.

"What are you talking about?" Wariness fills Kennedy's voice now.

"One chance," I repeat, before those lips of poison and sin capture my attention. I wrest my gaze back up to hers, need twisting inside of me until my voice is little more than a primal growl. "Otherwise, I'm going to fuck your gorgeous body until you're screaming my name."

Kennedy sucks in a breath, but she doesn't pull away.

I wait for one, long, excruciating moment, my eyes locked with hers.

We surge together, our mouths clashing. Kennedy pushes up out of the water even as my arm is going around her, hauling her up against me.

I push my tongue into her sweet mouth, groaning when her own tongue meets me stroke for stroke.

11

KENNEDY

Blaze's kiss overwhelms me, and the feel of his strong arm wrapped around my body makes my heart race.

The kiss is hotter than anything I've ever experienced. Blaze devours me, his tongue dueling with mine, exploring every inch of my mouth. I can taste the bitterness of the beer he'd been drinking, and I moan, kissing him back with everything I have.

Blaze breaks the kiss, but his mouth is quickly on my neck. He nips and sucks, moving lower.

His hands cup my breasts, kneading the sensitive flesh. My nipples are already hard, but when Blaze pinches them between his thumb and forefingers, I let out a low groan and arch into his hands.

Blaze growls in approval.

His hands move down to my hips, and suddenly I'm airborne. Blaze lifts me up, and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist.

Blaze holds me with one arm around my waist, his other hand fisting in my hair. He pulls my head back, forcing me to arch my back and present my breasts to him.

He latches onto one of my nipples, sucking it deep into his mouth. I cry out, and Blaze bites down gently, just enough to send a spike of pleasure lancing through me.

Blaze switches to the other nipple, and I dig my nails into his shoulders.

I can feel his hardness pressing against my core, and I grind against him, desperate for more. My thoughts are melting away, reducing me to nothing more than primal need in seconds. It was never like this with Enzo. Never so all-consuming. So right.

Sex with Enzo was always about his own power. Blaze's power is undeniable. Maybe that's why I feel so powerful in this moment. Blaze doesn't need me to be lower than him.

My hands are everywhere on him, dragging my nails across his broad shoulders as I pull against his hold of my hair. He lets me go, his mouth popping off my nipple to look at me.

I gasp, my stomach clenching with need, as I see the flicker of fire in those eyes. I'm doing that to him. Pushing him to the edge of his control. Gripping his head with both hands, I kiss him again, wild and hungry.

Blaze lifts me higher, his hands going to my ass. His fingers are firm, digging into the soft flesh, and I moan into the kiss.

Before I know what's happening, he lifts me from the water, forcing me to release him, and then he shoves his shoulders between my legs. Water streams down my body, leaving trails of cold against my burning skin. My hands go to the top of his head, fingers grasping the silken dark hair.

Heat rushes to my face as I look down. His face is inches away from my pussy, his hands cradling my ass. His eyes dart to mine, a savage smirk on those devilish lips.

"You're so fucking hot," he whispers softly, "and dripping."

Blaze's tongue darts out, and I shudder as it glides through my folds.

I'm embarrassingly wet, but there's no room for shame when he licks me again. I bite my lip to stifle a cry, my hands clenching his hair tighter.

"So fucking sweet, too."

Blaze teases me, his tongue swirling around my entrance. Every time I shift, trying to bring his mouth closer to where I want it, he moves, avoiding my

attempts.

My frustration grows, and I whimper. Blaze chuckles, and I feel the rumble against my core.

“Tell me what you want, Kennedy,” Blaze demands, his tongue circling my clit, never touching it.

My throat tightens, embarrassed. I’ve never done anything like this. Enzo certainly never demanded dirty talk from me.

Blaze licks me again, and this time his tongue brushes against my clit, the barest touch. “Tell me,” he growls, and this time his teeth graze my clit.

Pleasure spikes through me, and I buck my hips.

Blaze pulls his head away, and I cry out.

“Tell. Me.” His voice is hard, his eyes boring into me.

I swallow, my voice trembling, “Lick me.”

Blaze arches an eyebrow, “Where?”

“My pussy,” I manage.

Blaze darts forward, his tongue lapping against my clit once.

“Where?” he repeats, his breath washing over my soaked flesh.

My face is burning, “My...my pussy. Lick my pussy.”

Blaze rewards me, his tongue circling my clit, harder this time.

My legs tremble, and Blaze growls, “Say my name.”

“Blaze,” I breathe, the sound of his name on my lips sending a shiver through me.

“That’s right.” His tongue slides lower. “Say my name while I eat this pretty pussy.”

His tongue pushes into me, and I jerk, a loud moan escaping my lips.

Blaze’s tongue pushes deeper, thrusting into me. His nose brushes against my

clit, and he tilts his head, his tongue pressing against the front wall of my pussy.

My whole body shudders, and Blaze's hands grip my ass tighter, holding me against his mouth.

Blaze feasts on me, his tongue plunging into me. The sounds of his tongue fucking me fill the quiet oasis and mixed with my moans.

"Gonna let me taste you coming, kitten?" When he says his pet name for me like that, I can't be irritated. His gravelly voice is rough against my folds, taking me to the edge. I'm so close to coming.

I'm panting, and Blaze slides one hand from my ass, his thumb brushing against my clit.

I gasp, my hips jerking, but Blaze doesn't stop. His tongue is merciless, pushing in and out of me faster. His thumb swirls around my clit, and Blaze applies light pressure.

My orgasm hits me, my legs quivering.

I scream Blaze's name, my fingers clenching his hair tight as pleasure explodes through me. Blaze laps at me, his thumb drawing lazy circles over my clit, extending my orgasm.

Finally, I collapse curling over him, my legs no longer able to support me and limp against his back.

Blaze moves me quickly, not giving me any time to recover, groaning as he notches the wide head of his cock against my still pulsing pussy.

"I'm clean, kitten," he rumbles and his words break through my pleasure-haze. "And I can't get you pregnant. Can I—"

"Fuck me," I blurt out, interrupting him. I'm too desperate to be embarrassed.

He growls and pulls me down on his cock even as he thrusts up into me.

My breath leaves me, and I squeeze my eyes shut as his cock stretches me almost to the point of pain. I'm gasping as his cock finally bottoms out inside me, my pussy fluttering around him.

Blaze gives me only a moment, his hands going to my hips. His strong fingers dig into my skin and he lifts me up before pulling me down again, sending the water out in waves.

“So fucking warm.”

I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders as his cock slides nearly free of me before Blaze forces me back down.

“Blaze!”

“Say my name, kitten.” His voice is a low snarl, and I can hear the strain in his voice.

“Blaze,” I moan, his cock bottoming out inside of me.

Blaze’s fingers flex against my hips, and he repeats the motion.

I meet his thrusts, driving him deeper. Blaze growls his approval, his hands guiding me up and down his cock.

Water splashes around us, but neither of us care.

I throw my head back, lost in the pleasure of Blaze’s cock stretching me with each thrust.

Blaze leans forward, capturing nearly my entire breast in his mouth.

His tongue swirls around the hardened bud, and he bites down, the pain transforming into toe-curling pleasure.

I jerk, my hands going to the back of his head, holding him to my breast. I writhe against him, trying to ride his cock even as he keeps fucking me onto him. His hands dig into me, and I want his touch harder. I want to have bruises so that after I leave, I can remember this moment. I’ll know, for at least this moment, I’m Blaze’s and he’s mine.

Blaze releases my nipple, his tongue soothing the bite, before moving to my other breast.

I cry out, pleasure building inside of me again.

“Touch yourself,” Blaze growls.

I reach between us, my fingers finding my clit.

Blaze pulls my nipple between his teeth, biting down, and I scream his name.

Blaze roars, his hands shifting and striding through the water. Suddenly I'm falling backwards. My back hits the cool sand at the edge of the oasis, Blaze's cock still buried inside of me.

I blink, staring up at him in surprise.

Blaze doesn't give me a moment. His hips snap forward, his cock slamming into me.

Blaze grips the outside of my thighs, pushing my knees toward my chest.

I gasp as his cock sinks even deeper, and Blaze snarls, "You're so fucking perfect."

Blaze pounds into me, his cock impossibly hard. My second orgasm is rushing towards me, and Blaze doesn't stop, doesn't slow.

"Come for me, kitten," Blaze commands, his cock driving into me.

My fingers dig into the wet sand, and Blaze shifts, his angle changing.

His cock rubs against a spot inside of me, and I arch my back, crying out his name.

Blaze pounds into me, my second orgasm exploding through me. Blaze roars, his cock surging into me one final time, and I can feel him coming inside of me.

Blaze's arms give out, and he falls against me.

We lie there, his weight pressing me into the sand. Blaze is gentle, his hand stroking my side with his face pressed into my hair.

My breath slowly returns to normal, and Blaze rolls off of me, standing in one smooth motion. My heart dips into the earth below me, and I'm aware of my nakedness. Crossing my arms over my chest, I sit up. My pussy clenches as his seed drips out of me and down my cleft, sending a mixture of arousal and embarrassment through me.

I reach for my clothing, wishing I felt the same confidence I had when I'd undressed so boldly earlier. From the corner of my eye, I see Blaze's quick movements as he pulls up his jeans before stuffing his feet into the beat-up leather boots.

"You take much longer and I'm just going to fuck you again in the dirt, ruining my plans, kitten."

I pause, my underwear halfway up my legs, and slowly look up at him. Blaze is towering over me, a devilish grin full of dirty promises on his face as he watches me, his shirt in his hands.

"Plans?" I manage to choke out. My brain is still too fuck-addled to think of what he could do to me... My tender pussy, however, grows warmer and most definitely has some of her own hopes.

He tugs his shirt on over his head, then swoops down, hooking his hands under my arms and hauling me up until I'm on my feet. My legs are as shaky as a newborn deer's, but he keeps me steady with one arm around me. The other hand goes to my panties, tugging them up for me; he never loses that salacious grin of his.

"Oh, yeah," he murmurs, pressing me closer to him. My nipples, still hypersensitive, ache at the feel of his shirt against them. He presses his mouth to my ear. "First, I'm going to put you in my bed. Next, I'm going to taste every inch of your body. I'm going to slide my cock into that sexy mouth of yours before putting you on your hands and knees. I'm going to fuck you until you can't walk anymore. Then, I'm going to start all over again."

My knees give out; Blaze's hold on me is the only reason I stay upright.

"Sound good to you, kitten?"

I nod my head eagerly, swallowing against my dry throat. "Really good."

He pulls back enough to meet my eyes, his free hand coming up to grip my chin. "Then get dressed quick while I pack shit up. Otherwise, I'm tossing you on my bike as you are, and I'd rather not murder everyone in town for looking at you."

Blaze lets me go as soon as I find my feet and I curse as I struggle to shove

my legs into my black leggings. His low, dark laugh only sends my heart racing faster. It's impossible that I'm so turned on, so desperate for him again even though we just had the best sex of my life. By the time I shove my feet into my flats, I'm pretty sure my shirt is on backwards but Blaze is closing his saddle bag. I practically run towards him and the bike.

"Good girl," Blaze murmurs, throwing his leg over the bike. Then his large hands span my waist as he grabs me before I can climb on behind him. He pulls me to sit in front of him, my ass barely fitting between his legs, and my face burns as he guides my legs over his like he's putting me on display. A shiver runs through me. Then he pushes the helmet on over my head, and my fingers go to the strap like it's already instinct.

As he starts the bike, I shout over the loud engine. "Is this safe?"

Somehow he hears me, and he wraps one arm around me like a band of steel. "I'll never let you get hurt," he promises, his words full of conviction.

If I weren't already loose from the orgasms, I'd melt even further. As it is, I let my head fall back against Blaze's chest, reminding myself that I'm taking today for myself. Taking today to enjoy the pleasure Blaze can bring me. Taking today to revel in feeling safe for the first time in years, despite the danger over my head.

As Blaze takes off back into the desert, I take a deep breath of the dry air, and, for once in too long, I let myself feel. Blaze's body is huge, and inside his arms, I feel protected. With Blaze, I'm safe and, more importantly, I'm free. He doesn't hold me to keep me down. He's holding me because he wants me.

My heart leaps and bounces with the rough ride, a realization dampening the flames I've been dropped into. I could fall in love with Blaze if I'm not careful.

Closing my eyes against the bright sun, I scold myself. I can't do this again. When I met Enzo, I was alone and looking for stability and safety. It's why I fell so deep and, little by little, let Enzo change me and take control of everything in my life. Now I've run from what I did, right into Blaze's protective embrace.

No. I won't let myself make the same mistake. Blaze is temporary—a way to relieve stress. With the Knights of Hades and Cerberus Securities protecting me, I need to remember I'll be leaving as soon as I can—even though the idea of leaving Devil's Haven now sends an ache into my heart.

It's just because I've let myself meet people, I tell myself as Blaze turns us onto the smooth pavement of the long two-lane highway leading back to town. If I'd been smart and kept to myself, Sydney's apartment would be intact. I could have run after being shot at. I don't know where I'd have gone, since the car I'd stolen was broken down, but I'd have figured out something.

Now the entire Knights of Hades motorcycle club is in danger, along with Sydney and Lacy. The thought of something happening to the cheerful, kind-hearted pregnant blonde turns my stomach, and I shudder, desperate to hold back the retch growing in my throat.

Blaze's arm moves against me, interrupting my thoughts, and I grasp his forearm like a lifeline.

"I can feel those thoughts racing in that pretty head of yours." His voice is loud enough to be clear, but with the town approaching, I'm glad he's not shouting. "Maybe I need to distract you?"

I don't have time to wonder what he means as his broad hand splays across my stomach and then slides down until he's cupping me. It was difficult enough ignoring the vibration of the motorcycle under me. Blaze's possessive grip—his fingers pressing into my slick folds, the heel of his palm firm against my still swollen clit—is impossible. My eyes flutter and I force them to stay open. I can't stop the jolt of my hips as my body overrides my brain's refusal.

I consider telling him no. Not because I don't desperately want the pleasure he's proven able to give me, but because it'll be so much harder to keep the walls up around my heart.

As I bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from moaning, Blaze plays me like a master through my soaked panties and leggings. He doesn't let the bike wobble once as he steers us through Devil's Haven and out again, towards the clubhouse. When we're surrounded by nothing but the desert, he slides his hand into my panties, his fingers sliding through my folds. He curls his

hand, sliding his middle two fingers into me.

I moan, letting the wind steal the sound and the rumble of the engine cover the rest of it. Bucking against his fingers, Blaze taunts me with slow, steady thrusts. By the time the clubhouse is in view, I'm practically vibrating with the need to come again. Panic surges as we get closer, along with my desperation. There's no way he's cruel enough to keep me on edge and then stop when we arrive, right?

"Blaze." I try for a growl, but his name is breathy.

He doesn't say anything, and I cry out when his hand freezes.

"Take what you need, Kennedy," comes his order. I'm too close to be ashamed. I thrust against his hand, letting go of his arm and bracing both hands against the warm metal of the gas tank. I don't care how unsafe it is or who might see. All I care about is the orgasm that is so close within reach. I fuck myself on his fingers, sight going blurry as I chase it. I probably look stupid, like I'm fucking his motorcycle, but I don't give a damn.

My orgasm shatters over me, my mouth opening in a silent scream as my vision whites out. Everything disappears, even the loud engine underneath me. All that tethers me to the world is Blaze's hand.

When the fog clears and I can see again, I'm cradled against Blaze's chest again. I meet his eyes, a dreamy smile on my face. His own dark eyes glow like embers, hunger and something else in them. Something there and then gone, so fast I wonder if it was real. Or am I letting my walls down and seeing what I wish was there?

He sits me up, and it's then I realize we're in the large garage behind the clubhouse. Thankfully, we're alone. Holding onto his hand, I slide off his lap and onto my feet. His gaze never breaks as he swings his leg over the bike and stands, our bodies nearly touching. I have to tilt my head all the way back to keep my eyes on his face.

Blaze isn't like Enzo. I know he's safe. Despite being a demon, I *know*, deep inside of me, like some instinct, that he will never hurt me. That with him, it'll be different. I won't destroy him.

I reach for him, the top of the walls around my heart beginning to crumble

and fall.

A door slams open, the clang of it hitting the wall and echoing through the airy garage like a shotgun blast.

I jerk my hand back, stepping away from Blaze and gulp in air.

“Good, you’re back,” Chainz grumbles, and I whirl towards his voice. He’s marching towards us, an actual chain draped around his neck, his dark aviators in place. “We’ve got problems. Stubs and Bones have eyes on the Light Justicars. The Santi Pastori are on their way here.”

12

KENNEDY

The loose relaxation from Blaze's attention disappears at Chainz's words. I curl my fists, fighting the instinct to run. To get back on Blaze's bike and ride as far as I can.

As if he hears my thoughts, Blaze's hand wraps around one of my fists, a silent promise of safety, an anchor in the sudden hurricane of fear within me.

"How long do we have until they get here?" Blaze asks, and I haul my eyes from the ground up to the other demon in search of his answer.

"We aren't sure yet," Chainz admits. I suck in a breath, and Chainz's eyes move to me before going back to Blaze. "So far, they're headed west by car. But they could get on an airplane at any time and be here in hours rather than days. Stubs is on it."

"Is there a plan?" I'm surprised I ask the question, but with Blaze beside me, I feel steady enough to be brave. Fear starts to give way to anger, the same anger that drove me to strike Enzo and run.

"Reaper has us on stand-by," Chainz answers. "Stubs and Bones are on tracking details. Any move those fuckers make, we'll know." The broad demon seems to hesitate, an almost awkward expression on his face before he looks at me. In the stark, fluorescent light of the massive garage, he and Blaze both tower over me, both of them in dark jeans and their matching leather vests. With the length of chain around his neck, the last thing Chainz should appear is uncomfortable. He clears his throat. "We don't let fuckers like them come after women, even if they tried to off someone first," Chainz

says.

I tilt my head, torn between confusion and amusement.

He rubs the back of his neck. “I just know ya might have gotten the wrong impression of me. I’m an asshole—”

“Yeah, we know,” Blaze mutters, and Chainz glares at him.

“But I’m not *that* kind of asshole. Blaze here has claimed you, so I just wanted to make sure ya know I’ve got your back. We all do.”

Surprisingly touched, I tug my hand free from Blaze, who lets me go reluctantly, if his fingers trailing over my skin means anything. I throw my arms around the other biker, hugging him tight despite him going stiff.

“Thanks,” I tell him, completely sincere. I let him go before he can do something, like have an aneurysm and drop dead at my feet.

“What about the town?” Blaze asks, tugging me back to his side and draping his arm over my shoulder possessively. “Lacy and Sydney?”

Chainz snorts. “Lacy had no issue with relocating to the clubhouse, especially with getting towards the end of her pregnancy. Cinder’s working on her to move their binding ceremony up, rather than waiting for the spawn to show.”

I’m not sure what a binding ceremony is, but I’m glad that Lacy will be at the clubhouse with me. I’ve only talked with her a bit—or really listened to her as she filled me in on everything around town. “And Sydney?” I ask, wringing my hands together. The headstrong woman doesn’t seem the type to hide when told.

Chainz snorts. “Reaper sent Brute and Heathen to stick to her side. Better their balls than mine.”

Blaze laughs and nudges me forward towards the door Chainz came through, around the other parked bikes. I stare wide-eyed at the huge helicopter in the back of the garage, toolboxes on wheels surrounding it. “Is that yours?” I ask Chainz, glancing up at him in amazement.

Blaze chuckles behind me, his fingers brushing over the back of my neck, making my stomach clench.

“Ours,” Chainz answers. “Knights picked it up from the last job we had out in California. It’s Bones’ baby.”

I try to picture the demons in their human disguises flying the huge machine, and I can’t help but smile.

“You fly it?” I tease Chainz, unable to help myself. The demon grins at me, his dark sunglasses hiding his eyes.

“Nah,” he admits. “Bones offered to train me, but I’m better at keeping my feet on the ground.”

“Chainz is afraid of heights,” Blaze supplies.

Chainz whirls around, glaring at the other demon. “Am not, fucker.”

I laugh, and Blaze presses his mouth to my ear. “Come on, kitten.” His breath is warm, his words full of promise. “Let’s get inside.”

My laughter dies, and the weight of Chainz’s glare follows us out of the garage, but I relax a bit.

“Do we have to stay inside?” I ask as Blaze leads me around the side of the building. “Doesn’t this place have a pool?”

I’m desperate to get back to the peace I had earlier. Before Chainz’s news. Before the reminder of Enzo and the Santi Pastori chasing me.

Blaze hesitates, then, “Reaper will want everyone close. For safety.”

I lift my chin, meeting his eyes. “I can’t stay cooped up again, Blaze.” I keep the desperation out of my voice. I don’t beg. Instead, I try for logic. “If they’re driving here, we’ll have warning before they show up. If they fly, Chainz said Stubs and Bones will know,” I add before Blaze can protest. “I trust you. I trust the Knights.”

Blaze sighs, running his free hand through his hair.

“Fine,” he grumbles. “But as soon as Reaper tells us, we’re inside. No arguments.”

I nod, biting the inside of my cheeks to keep from grinning like an idiot. I’m not even thinking of the Santi Pastori chasing me or Enzo. “Deal,” I agree

easily.

Blaze studies me for a moment before nodding, and I follow him around the pool deck.

Despite the worry over Enzo and the Santi Pastori, I can't help but drink in the sight of the pool. It's massive—taking up nearly half of the large lot behind the clubhouse. The pool deck itself is simple, made up of cement and surrounded by a short, battered wooden railing. Chairs are scattered around the deck, and a large grill and a bar are along the opposite side. There are no signs there was a huge party last night, not even a single red plastic cup or a random piece of forgotten clothing.

The parties Enzo held for his men at our mansion always took forever to clean up after. Half the time, there were still men passed out throughout the house. I'd have to help the staff clean since the men wouldn't hesitate to take a swing at one of the maids if they were hungover. With me, they'd just grumble before heaving themselves up, smelling like booze and piss, to go find something to eat.

I hated Enzo's parties.

Blaze glances at me, and I realize I'm frowning. He squeezes my hand, and I smile up at him.

"Reaper will probably call a meeting later since we left early," he warns me. "You'll have to sit through it."

I swallow, nervous. Enzo's meetings were usually him and his captains gathered in a room, me sitting on a small chair beside Enzo's chair, and me fetching drinks or whatever else.

"I'll sit wherever Reaper tells me," I answer Blaze, keeping my tone light.

"As long as its you sitting on my lap," Blaze rumbles, stopping at a lounge. "I'm not giving you up."

I ignore the way my heart jumps at his words and the butterflies in my stomach. I ignore the hope in the back of my mind that Blaze might mean his words. I have to remember that this isn't meant to last. I need to leave, even if I'm starting to hate the idea.

Blaze sits on the lounge, tugging me down until I'm curled into his lap. His arm stays around me, and I close my eyes. I can pretend, for now, that this is all real. That Blaze truly wants me and isn't just saving me. That he's not just attracted to me—he's actually starting to feel things.

I ignore the voices in the back of my mind, the ones telling me I'm going to get hurt. That this is temporary. Instead, I relax against Blaze, determined to take today for me.

One day is all I'm allowing myself, and I'm not going to waste it.

Blaze is silent, and I let my mind wander. The heat of the sun soaks into me, and the stress of Enzo and the Santi Pastori slips away.

"I've got you, Kennedy," Blaze's words are soft, so quiet I almost think I've imagined them. I tilt my head back to meet his dark, smoldering eyes, and my heart thuds.

Mine, echoes in my mind.

Blaze's eyes search mine and I freeze, not wanting him to see the hope in mine.

Blaze is silent, and I wonder what he sees. Finally, he brushes a lock of hair from my face, his fingers trailing down my cheek. "Close your eyes, kitten," he whispers, and his gaze is heavy.

My heart skips a beat and my stomach flutters.

I obey, closing my eyes.

Blaze's arm around me tightens, and his other hand cups the back of my neck.

My heart races, and Blaze's fingers stroke the sensitive skin.

His grip tightens, and I let out a shaky breath.

I can feel his breath against my lips and my body tenses, waiting for his kiss.

Blaze kisses me, his lips feather soft against mine.

I sigh, and Blaze's tongue slides into my mouth.

I moan, the sound muffled, as his tongue dances with mine.

Blaze kisses me like no one ever has.

His kiss is possessive and protective, and I melt against him.

Blaze's fingers tighten on the back of my neck, and his other arm tightens around me.

His tongue strokes mine, and I can't help but grind down against him.

Blaze growls into the kiss, and my entire body trembles.

Blaze breaks the kiss, his lips brushing against mine.

I think he's going to say something, something that makes my heart pound. It's impossible, but I want him to tell me he feels the same pull that I do. That I'm not the only one at risk of falling, even though it's so fast.

A memory strikes me out of nowhere. My mother and I lying on the beach while my dad stood strong in the surf, fishing. I'd asked how she knew dad was the one. I'd been twelve and in love with the idea of love, and they'd been high school sweethearts.

She'd looked at me, her face so similar to mine—everyone said I got my looks from her but my personality was all Dad—and smiled. She'd looked back at my dad, and the smile changed, into something soft and full of love. I wanted someone who made me smile like that. I swore then I'd find that person.

Then she'd told me. "Sometimes, it just hits you. Like a lightning strike that sets off a blaze. We met at the homecoming football game, and I knew by the end of the night, he would be the man I'd marry." She wrapped an arm around my neck and hugged me close. "Find your blaze, sweetheart. Don't settle for anything less."

My eyes focus again on the man before me, the red embers from earlier gone but the heat still there in the dark brown of his irises. It can't be a coincidence that my mom told me to find my blaze, and now the man who's sworn to keep me safe and is unknowingly scaling the walls of my heart is named Blaze.

I open my mouth—to say what, I have no idea.

“Kennedy!”

I jolt, pulling away from Blaze’s hypnotic gaze, and turn to see the petite and very pregnant blonde waddling towards me. Cinder follows her like a grumpy shadow, but there’s no mistaking the devotion in his eyes.

Lacy lets him help her down onto the low lounge, grinning when he drops a kiss to the top of her head. She turns her attention back to me, not seeming to even care that I’m sitting in Blaze’s lap.

“I was so glad to hear that you were going to be here, too,” Lacy starts right in, her hands gesturing wildly as she talks. “I know it’s to keep you safe and all, but, damn, I didn’t want to be the only woman here other than the club girls.” Her nose wrinkles in distaste.

I glance up at Blaze, who’s watching Lacy with amusement.

“Club girls?” I ask, and Cinder growls, his arms folded across his broad chest.

“Club girls,” Blaze answers, “are the women who stick around the clubhouse. They party, they drink. Chainz and the boys keep them around.”

“They’re basically strippers,” Lacy adds, her nose still wrinkled before she smiles apologetically. “Honestly, a lot of them are good girls. They just are drawn to the bad-boy image of the bikers. The ones who’ve been around for a while know not to try anything with Cinder, but I’ve had to put a few of the newer ones in their place when they tried sitting on his lap.”

Cinder snorts, and Lacy glares at him.

“They still try shit with you?” Blaze sounds amused, and Cinder rolls his eyes.

“I’m about to be happily bound,” the demon replies. “I don’t give a fuck about them.”

Lacy beams up at Cinder, and the demon softens, his hand going to her stomach.

“How’s the brewery going? Shipment almost ready to go for the Barrows?” Blaze asks, tugging me back against his chest.

I give in, melting against him. It feels right, being held in his arms while talking with Cinder and Lacy. With Enzo, there was never intimacy or belonging. The women couldn’t speak when the men were in discussions. Once, someone had told me that other families treasured their women, but after years with Enzo, it was hard to imagine.

“Shipment is ready,” Cinder answers. “Just waiting on the confirmation from Malachi. Apparently, not even the Nightshade Vampires are more powerful than bureaucracy, and he’s still waiting on some permits. I doubt he’ll have them before we deal with the Light Justicars, so it’s all good.”

Lacy shifts, her hand going to her swollen belly, and Cinder’s eyes narrow.

“You okay, sunshine?” Cinder demands, his voice rough.

Lacy nods, but winces. “Braxton Hicks contractions,” Lacy assures him. “The midwife warned me about them. I want to go back in time and punch this Braxton Hicks. He says they don’t hurt, and he’s fudging wrong.”

I shake my head. “Men shouldn’t ever be able to tell a woman what her body does or doesn’t do.”

Blaze nuzzles against my ear, and whispers, “Even if it’s me telling you that you can come again for me?”

My cheeks flame red, and it has nothing to do with the sun high in the sky. From the choked huff Cinder lets out, I have to assume he heard Blaze.

“Anyways,” Lacy says as she makes grabby hands at Cinder. His hands dwarf hers as she grasps them and he hauls her onto her feet. “I came out to see if you wanted to come and bake something with me? I can’t sit still, and the boys have been begging me to make something for them again.”

I hesitate, looking up at Blaze.

“We’ll stay in the kitchen,” Lacy adds, a knowing smile on her face.

“Go bake,” Blaze urges me, his hand trailing down my side. “I’ll join you in a bit. I need to make some calls to the garage and see if the prospects are

handling everything.”

I nod, and Cinder helps Lacy waddle towards the clubhouse, her voice chattering a mile a minute.

Blaze stands, setting me on my feet and rises, towering over me. “Be careful, Kennedy,” he orders, his hands cupping my face.

My breath catches and I stare up at him. “I will,” I promise.

Blaze searches my eyes, whatever he’s looking for found, and leans down, kissing me hard.

“Go bake,” Blaze repeats, his voice rough. “I’ll be in soon.”

I nod, my heart pounding, and follow Lacy and Cinder.

I glance back once, but Blaze is already on his phone, his brow furrowed.

Inside the clubhouse is cool, a drastic change from the warm desert air.

Cinder follows Lacy, his hand resting on the small of her back.

“The kitchen is this way,” Lacy chatters, waving a hand down the hall. “I was thinking cookies. I have a great recipe. Kennedy, do you bake?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t since I was a teenager.” Enzo wouldn’t allow me to make anything sweet. He didn’t like me making something that could turn me fat.

Lacy stops, Cinder bumping into her with a curse.

“Seriously?” Lacy asks, her blue eyes wide. I shrug, and Cinder scowls.

“My ex”—because dead or alive, Enzo is definitely my ex—“was controlling, to say the least,” I supply.

Cinder’s scowl turns murderous. Lacy looks appalled.

“I know what that’s like,” Lacy says, her voice filled with such hatred, I’m taken aback. She only softens when Cinder touches her chin, turning her to look up at him. She bounces up onto her toes and presses a quick kiss to his mouth, then turns back to me, her happy personality shining bright again.

“So, cookies?”

13

BLAZE

Kennedy's moans are almost as addictive as her taste. It's been a week since I've moved her into my room and my need for her hasn't diminished. If anything, it's gotten more intense.

Her thighs tighten around my head as I suck on her clit, her fingers pulling my hair and her heels digging into my back.

There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

I grip her ass with one hand, and with the other, I ease in two fingers into her slick channel. It earns me another moan as she bucks up, desperate for more.

"Please," she cries out as I release her clit before she can come.

With a wicked grin, I shift my hand enough to press my thumb hard against her tight hole. I pump my fingers into her pussy, increasing the pressure on her other hole until my thumb slips in. The moment it does, I attack her clit, sucking and licking. In moments, she's shattering underneath me.

I lap at her pussy, easing my fingers from her and letting her sink back onto my bed. Fuck. I can't get enough of this woman. When she finally pushes my head weakly, I press a tender kiss to the inside of her thigh before crawling up her body and lying beside her. She's boneless and humming with pleasure as I tuck her against my side, pride and satisfaction coursing through me.

I don't even care that my dick is hard in my pants. If that isn't a sign of how

fucked I am, I don't know what is.

The late morning light leaks in through the curtains, giving me more than enough light to see Kennedy. When I came in, cups of coffee in both hands, to wake her up, I'd been stopped in my tracks by the sight of her in my bed. Her dark hair was fanned out over my pillow as she lay curled on her side. The sheet was tucked up in her adorable fists under her chin but in her sleep, it'd slipped down enough to reveal the sensuous line of her back. It taunted me by covering her ass and the rest of her legs except for the adorable toes of one foot. When had I ever thought a woman's toes were fucking adorable?

She's a burst of goodness and light in my thrice-damned life. Every smile, every kiss, batters some of the ash and brittle darkness from my tattered soul. Kennedy will be the end of me, and fuck if I'm not eager for it.

I'd set the coffee cups down on my dresser—something that's more tidy now thanks to her—and eased into bed with her. I'd kissed my way down her spine, running my lips down her body all the way to her little toes. She'd hummed happily when I kissed each digit, and I'd wanted to thank and curse Lacy for doing pedicures with Kennedy. The red velvet color too perfect to resist. Then I'd made my way back up her legs, determined to turn Kennedy's soft sighs into full-throated moans.

“What time is it?” Kennedy asks now, her voice rough with sleep and pleasure. Her hand slips under my shirt to idly stroke my stomach.

My useless heart shudders again, more darkness falling off like dust. Casual, intimate touch is new to me. Since taking on my human form after escaping the Underworld, my relationships with women have consisted of fucking and leaving. There was none of this lingering in bed together, no soft touches to feel one another, no pressing need to just see her face. And, back when I was still in the Underworld, under my damn father's rule, the demoness he'd chosen for me hadn't even know the concept of gentleness.

I press a kiss to the top of Kennedy's head, breathing in her scent. “Almost noon,” I answer. “I brought coffee.”

“Noon?” Kennedy bolts upright, not caring that she's baring her chest to me, the sheet somewhere down by our feet now. “Why didn't you wake me up earlier? I have to be at The Styx at 12:30.”

“Relax,” I say, reaching for her, but she blows a raspberry at me and scrambles off the bed, rushing towards my bathroom. I laugh, shaking my head, and haul myself off the bed and retrieve the coffee mugs. I follow her into the bathroom, where she’s already got the shower going and is stepping in.

I set one mug on the sink vanity before leaning against the wall to drink my own.

A week ago, the Santi Pastori and their Light Justicar compatriots left their city and traveled west. They stopped two states over, heading into a compound. They haven’t come out since. We’re not lucky enough for the Light Justicars to have killed Enzo and his men. Reaper has been on edge, we all are. Especially Kennedy.

I could try to argue that I’ve been trying to keep Kennedy distracted by fucking her every chance I get, but even if it started out like that, it’s not the whole truth. The truth is right there in front of me, taking a fast shower and grumbling about how I kept her up all night.

I grin into my cup. “Do you want me to apologize for giving you all those orgasms last night?” I ask before taking a drink.

“It’s not fair you’re so sexy,” she huffs out, sounding almost irritated. She shuts off the water and yanks back the shower curtain, a glare in her eyes. “Towel. Please.”

I snag the towel off the rack and hold it out to her. I’m tempted to refuse and offer to lick off every drop of water. My cock is in full support of the plan. But, no matter what my brothers think, I am in fact capable of self-restraint. Kennedy isn’t the only one who has things to do today.

“Any updates?” she asks offhandedly before roughly toweling her hair dry.

“No movement. And, yeah, we’re sure we haven’t missed them.”

She sighs, wrapping the towel around her body. I set my cup down and tug her to stand in front of me before wrapping my arms around her. She drops her forehead onto my chest. With her in my arms like this, I’m reminded how much smaller she is than me.

“It’s shitty, I know,” I tell her, hugging her tight. Kennedy isn’t fragile; she couldn’t be with what she’s done to escape her husband and stay alive. She feels vulnerable, though, like she’s the kitten I call her. And I’m the vicious dog that can snap her in half with a single bite. Instead of that, though, I stand over her, ready to take on the pack of dogs coming for her.

I hated it when my father implied I was nothing more than a guard dog until he deemed to say otherwise. It was just another way he chained me down until Reaper gave me a way out.

For Kennedy, it’s a damn honor to be her guard dog—whether she wants one or not.

I think of a way to distract her. “Want to know why I call you kitten?”

She groans. “I hate that name,” she complains into my chest.

I snort with amusement and run my hands up and down her back. “It’s because you’re fucking adorable, but you’ve got sharp claws and are quick to strike. I like it.”

Kennedy is quiet for a long moment before starting to gently hit her forehead against my pec. “Why do you have to be so—so, ugh.” She cuts herself off. She steps back and sends me a wry grin before making a shooing motion with her hand. “Leave or I’m actually going to be late.”

It’s not as convincing of an argument as she wants, but rather than giving into the unending need to have her, I swipe up my coffee with one hand and turn to leave her be. Unable to resist, though, I give her ass a swat before I step through the bathroom door.

“Hurry your ass up,” I call over her yelp. “I’m leaving in twenty minutes, and if you aren’t on the back of my bike, I’m leaving you behind.”

I stride out of my bedroom, hiding my grin behind my coffee as Kennedy grumbles colorful curses. Clearly, the woman forgot that I can hear her perfectly well.

“Well, aren’t you looking all domestic.”

I drop the grin from my face and narrow my brows at Bones as he heads my

way down the hall. He's pulling on a shirt, yanking it down quickly. Not quick enough before I get a glimpse at the scars crisscrossing his abdomen. We all bear our burdens and our demonic abilities in unique ways, and, for as powerful as Bones is, I don't envy him.

The overly lean demon's powers allow him to control bones. Bones of the dead are easier, but I've seen him exert control over a living being. Not much scares me, but the idea of not being in control of my own body makes me shudder. Fortunately, he can't do it often or over many people at once since it takes too much power and lays him flat out for days after.

His scars are a reminder of how my father didn't care about his soldiers. On a battlefield against other princes in the Underworld or against the angels, Bones had plenty of dead bodies to animate and order back into battle. On more discreet missions, though, Bones would be forced to rip out his own ribs. In his demon form, the bones regrow, but there is always a scar. Not just on the skin.

Bones doesn't like to talk about it, but we've all seen the haunted look in his eyes.

"Don't take it out on me that you haven't been laid in a week." I hit his shoulder with mine as he passes me. "If you got your head out of that helicopter, you could be just as cozy as me with a woman in your bed."

He recovers easily from my shove and laughs, the macabre skull tattoo on his face grinning widely.

I once asked why he got the tattoo, and he'd given some douchebag answer I didn't even bother remembering.

"Who'd have thought that you'd take the fall?" He shakes his head and walks with me towards the massive party room. "What happened to that bullshit you were telling Cinder, about how you're never going to settle down and how one chick can't handle you?"

I lean against the back of one of the leather couches, crossing my arms over my chest. I consider his words before tossing back the last of the coffee. Bones has crossed to behind the bar, the same bar where I'd first kissed Kennedy over a week ago. He grabs a beer despite it barely being noon.

He's right. I'd told Cinder settling down isn't in the cards for me. I still don't know if it is. Kennedy is different, somehow. I've spent more time with her than any other chick I've fucked around with. But she made it clear at the beginning that she's leaving when it's safe.

A growl climbs to the base of my throat at the idea of her leaving. Kennedy will leave, and she'll find some human man that'll make her happy. Another man will explore her body. Will hear the breathy sounds she makes just before she comes. Will get to fall asleep curled up around her and wake up to her smile and messy hair in the morning.

She deserves that. She deserves the whole package of a good man who can give her kids and the white picket fence.

Cinder might have found a human woman willing to gift her soul to his, binding herself to him for eternity, but none of us are stupid enough to hope for the same. What Cinder and Lacy have is special and rare.

Cinder is also one of the best of us. He deserves that happiness after all the shit he's been through.

I know what I deserve, and someone as special as Kennedy isn't it. So I'll be a selfish bastard and take what I can get before she gets in a car and puts Devil's Haven and me in the rearview mirror.

I send him a lopsided grin and shove one hand in my front pocket. "Nah, not falling," I say. "Just enjoying some till the shit blows over. Not like anyone else is around since Reaper's not letting us have parties right now."

An almost silent inhalation from the far doorway has me freezing. I stare at Bones, asking the universe what the fuck I did for this to happen. I don't let myself look at Kennedy immediately, waiting until Bones looks over before lazily following him like I have no care in the world.

The look of hurt in those whiskey-honey eyes of hers is like a punch to the nose, but I can't let myself react to it. She hides it quick, which I'm damn grateful for, since if she didn't, I don't know how long I'd last before getting on my knees and confessing. Confessing that I don't want her to leave Devil's Haven, that I want to keep her at my side.

She's already had one asshole try to control her choices. I won't be another

one.

I'm a black-hearted, selfish demon, but I won't be like him.

"Finally ready to go, kitten?" I ask, aiming for a nonchalant tone as I push off the back of the couch. I cross the distance to the bar, where Bones is still standing behind, and set down my empty coffee cup. Bones looks at me but I take the coward's way out and make a point of walking over to the rack where most of us keep our Knights of Hades' cuts and shrug my vest on. I don't need to see judgment in his eyes. I'm disappointed in myself enough for all of us.

Kennedy meets up with me after giving a small wave and a soft goodbye to Bones, who raises his beer in salute to her. I reach above her head and hold one of the French doors open, shoving down the disappointment as she makes a point to avoid contact as she walks outside.

I shoot a look back at Bones, who's looking at me like I'm a fucking idiot. I flip him off before following Kennedy towards the garage where my bike's parked.

She's quiet as I hand her the helmet I've started to think of as hers and is still quiet when she climbs on behind me.

What happened is a good thing, I tell myself as I steer us out towards the road and to Sydney's. Better she realize what an asshole I am now and save ourselves the grief when she leaves rather than keep acting like I'm some heroic prince charming.

I keep telling myself she won't miss me, grateful that the wind steals her scent away. Now if only I didn't still taste her on my lips.

Unreasonably pissed off now, I open the throttle like I can run away from my own actions.

14

KENNEDY

“Hey, are you okay?”

I startle at Sydney’s hand on my shoulder and let out an embarrassed laugh before running my hands over my hair. “Yeah, I’m good.” I look down at the table I’m sitting at, trying to recall anything she or Lacy said before I zoned out.

I don’t know why I’m so hurt. It was supposed to have been only a single night of fun with Blaze, before the guys the Santi Pastori hired showed up. I’m leaving when this is all done—starting over with a new name and a new life.

So why does it hurt so much that Blaze said he’s just having fun with me because there’s no one else around?

“You can trust the Knights,” Lacy says, assuming that I’m distracted by thoughts of the bounty on my head. She stares down at the slips of papers with names and then the seating arrangement she’s working on. “When Eddie—my abusive ex—showed up trying to get me back, the club had no reason to rally around me, but they did.”

Sydney bumps the pregnant blonde with a bony hip and a laugh before heading past the dining table and into the kitchen. “I’m sure it has nothing at all to do with the fact that Cinder was head over heels for you and too chicken-shit to do anything about it.”

We’re at Lacy’s house for the day, since she insisted on getting away from

the clubhouse to plan her and Cinder's bonding ceremony. From what I've seen so far, it looks the same as a wedding, but from the way the guys talk about it, I know I'm missing something.

Looking around, I can see where Lacy has started to redecorate into a more modern style. She inherited the house from her grandma, and apparently it'd been stuck right smack in the early '80s, paisley couch and doilies included. The rectangular dining table reminds me of my own late grandparents' dining table, the solid oak ones with the embellished legs on each end and the ability to put an extender in the middle and make it longer for the family at holidays. But the rest of the dining room—which had once been done in pink-striped wallpaper, apparently—is bright with white walls and showcases a glass pendant light with silver hardware. Silver curtains with white abstract swirls frame the two windows along the outside wall.

It won't win any interior design contests, and that's okay. The room feels like a home, a place for friends and family to gather around the table for a meal or a board game after dinner. There's even a highchair tucked away in the corner, ready to be used when Lacy and Cinder's baby is big enough.

Lacy laughs, pulling me back to the present, and I smile. I can't not smile when Lacy laughs. I don't think anyone could. Lacy's just that type of person. She's bubbly and full of light, but not in a way that pisses you off. I'm not surprised Cinder calls her sunshine.

"Okay, yeah, but at the time I thought he had no clue who I was," Lacy says before taking the soda Sydney offers on her way back into the room.

The woman is the opposite of Lacy in so many ways, but it's clear the love they have for each other. Definitely the grumpy one in their friendship, Sydney sits down again beside Lacy, sliding another can of soda to me.

"Anyways, Lacy is right," Sydney says while cracking open her can. "I might have my own issues with some of them, but the Knights are good people. Demons." She waves her hand. "Whatever."

"I almost wish they weren't," Lacy grumbles before I can say anything. "Because then I wouldn't be trying to figure out where to seat everyone in this town at the reception."

“Still don’t see why you can’t have it at The Styx,” Sydney says. “I know it’s smaller than the town grange, but people can come and go, can’t they?”

Lacy groans and drops her head back. If she could manage around her large belly, I think she’d have thrown her head down on the table.

“Because apparently a binding ceremony is—” Lacy holds up air quotes without raising her head—“‘too important’ to be treated like a regular party.”

I prop my chin on my hand, my other hand fiddling with my soda’s still-closed pull-tab, and take the opening to satisfy my curiosity. “What *is* a binding ceremony? From what I’ve been hearing I’ve gathered it’s basically a wedding, but it’s clearly not.”

Lacy hauls her head up, groaning like it takes a herculean effort. Her lips scrunch to the side as she thinks about something before meeting my gaze. “So, you know the stories about people trading their souls to the devil in a bargain?” At my nod, she continues. “Some demons actually do bargain in souls, but it’s not every demon. From what Cinder has told me, all demons can take a mortal’s soul, though.”

Sydney nods. “Some use it to be more powerful and others use it in their magic. Apparently, there are a ton of different ways a soul can be used.”

An uneasy ache forms in my chest, and I have to stop myself from rubbing it. The idea of a demon taking my soul is fucking weird and scary. I can’t ever see Blaze doing that, though, strangely enough.

“Anyway,” Lacy picks back up. “A binding ceremony is for a demon and a mortal who are mates.” Before I can ask, she explains. “Humans don’t usually have them, but supernatural creatures do. So vampires, shifters, witches—”

“And demons,” I finish.

Lacy nods, her blonde hair swaying above her shoulders. “And demons. Which is where we get the idea of soulmates from, because that’s basically what it is. Well, a binding ceremony is different for each creature. I only know about demons, because I’m obviously planning one. Demons—and the others—can recognize their mate if they’re a human, even though it’s not as instantaneous. During the binding, I’ll give Cinder my soul to bind with his.

This means I'll basically stop aging, and my lifespan is connected to his."

Lacy's eyes go dreamy while she's talking about the binding. Sydney puts her soda can down harder than necessary, making Lacy and I jump and look at her. She's glowering at the top of the can like it's a pile of dog poop. "Yeah, and if he dies, you die. Also, if there's any prolonged distance and time apart, you lose your vitality. Become a walking ghost. Like all the color has just been drained out of you. Oh yeah, let's not forget how you won't dream, either."

My brows shoot upwards at the vitriol in her voice. I look back at Lacy, trying to understand what I'm clearly missing, but she's looking at Sydney with just as much confusion.

"Well, yeah," Lacy says. "But if Cinder has to stay far enough away, for long enough, that it happens, I know there will be a good reason. I also know he'll come back, and then it'll be like it never happened."

Sydney snorts with derision, turning a skeptical look at Lacy before it melts off her face. Lacy's hurt is evident, and Sydney's shoulders drop. "I'm sorry, Lacy. I know you trust Cinder. This is just my own bullshit issue that I shouldn't put onto you."

The other woman goes to reach for Sydney before pulling her hand back, curling it against her chest. She licks her lips once, darting her eyes to me before back at Sydney. Hesitantly, she asks, "Does this have to do with Reaper?"

Sydney jerks back like she's been slapped and shakes her head. "Nope," she says, shaking her head hard enough her dark ponytail whips around her head. "Not at all. Now, come on, we need to figure out where we're sitting the shifter families so they don't start a fight."

Sydney grabs the seating chart and slides it closer to herself, studying it like it holds the secrets to the universe. Lacy and I share a wide-eyed look before mutually deciding to let the topic drop. There's clearly some history between Sydney and the president of the Knights of Hades, and it's just as clear Sydney doesn't want to talk about it.

The afternoon passes quickly in Lacy's dining room. We get the seating

arrangement worked out as best we can before moving onto the food, then the floral arrangements. Apparently, Cinder has insisted on treating it like a wedding so that Lacy can have the wedding of her dreams.

My own wedding wasn't the one I'd always dreamed about. Looking back, I can see how easily Enzo steered me into the decisions he thought best, though at the time I fully believed he was an involved groom and eager to marry. I thought it was a sign of his love and was romantic. Even when he didn't like my wedding dress, he'd been gentle about it. I'd felt sexy and beautiful, and while he complimented me, he had me try on more demure dresses. The simple strapless white ballgown was beautiful, but it hadn't made me feel like a bride. But with the way Enzo's eyes lit up with approval and him showering me with compliments in Italian, I told myself it was the right dress.

I wish I could go back in time and shake my younger self's shoulders and tell her to run as fast as she can from Enzo.

You do things you never thought you would when you feel like you're in love. I will never make that mistake again.

I can't believe how quickly I forgot those lessons over the last week. I let Blaze blind me, let myself live in this false fantasy of safety with a man who showered me with physical affection. That's all it is, though.

Walking in to hear Blaze tell Bones that what's between us is nothing more than convenience and has an end date is the reminder I needed.

I need to think about myself first. Staying alive and safe is my priority, second only to escaping Enzo and the Santi Pastori. Blaze, no matter how safe he makes me feel, isn't stability. He's not a life—no man is. I need to stand on my own, and that means holding to my promise to leave Devil's Haven as soon as I can.

No matter how much the idea of driving away from Blaze—and now Lacy and Sydney—hurts.

The front door opens, and all three of us look towards the wide doorway that leads into the living room. There, Cinder appears with another biker—Heathen, according to his patch—just behind him.

Lacy shoves up from the table, groaning with a good-natured smile as she meets Cinder halfway, tilting her head back for a kiss. Neither of them seem to care they have an audience as he cups Lacy's face and deepens the kiss with such hunger I have to look away, my eyes burning.

I can't help stealing another glance, though. If a man kissed me like that, I'd consider binding my soul to his for eternity as well.

Heathen clears his throat loudly and shoots me a grin when I look at him. Heathen fits his name perfectly. He looks like a hulking Viking berserker, and I'm kind of shocked that there are clothes that can fit him. His thighs aren't tree trunks, his waist is. Whatever is bigger than tree trunks, that's what his thighs are. He looks like someone was told to carve the biggest, baddest-looking Viking born of nightmares and he's what resulted. His hair is pulled back into a braid with the sides of his head closely shaved. His face almost looks empty where I imagine war paint should be.

"If ya don't cut him off, he's more likely to carry Lacy off and fuck her than remember why we're here," Heathen says, his voice as raspy as someone who smokes forty cigs a day.

"Fuck off," Cinder grumbles against Lacy's lips, but Lacy steps away, her face flushed. She runs her hands over her shirt, tugging it down around her belly, looking at me and Sydney like we'd caught them mid-act.

Sydney's the one who speaks up, while I'm still trying to ignore the yearning consuming me. I want what she has. Blaze's face appears in my mind, but I cut those thoughts off. I'm convenient for him, and he'll forget me as soon as I'm gone. I want someone who would destroy the world to save me.

"So why are you here, then?" Sydney asks as she collects our empty soda cans and empty plates we'd snacked from earlier. "It's earlier than planned."

My eyes go to the antique clock on an end table in the living room. She's right. Despite it being dark, Blaze said he'd pick us up at closer to eight. It's only fifteen until seven. Dread's icy fingers start to close around my throat.

Heathen shoots me a look, and Cinder wraps his thick, scarred arm around Lacy's shoulders, tugging her close to him.

"Stubs detected movement at the compound the Santi Pastori are holed up in

with that Light Justicar bastard,” Heathen explains, confirming my fears. “He said something happened right after a pair of men left the compound but then everything looked exactly the same. Situations like this, we prepare for the worst-case scenario, so Reaper’s calling us all back to the clubhouse. You too, Sydney,” Heathen says, cutting off any protest.

From the look in her dark eyes, I imagine she’d planned to do just that.

“Grab what you need to keep working, sunshine,” Cinder rumbles and lets Lacy go. “Then we’re getting the hell out of here.”

Lacy sends a look to Sydney, clearly telling her friend to not argue, and Sydney lets out a long sigh but nods. She heads into the kitchen from where I hear her taking care of the empty cans and dirty dishes.

I don’t have much to collect since, out of habit, I didn’t bother taking more than my wallet this morning. It’s another sign that I’ve let myself get too comfortable here. If I had to run right now, I wouldn’t have any extra clothes or the small things that kept me feeling human while living between hotel rooms.

“Where’s Blaze?” I ask, following Heathen out of the house. The desert heat still fills the air, but the breeze promises a chilly night. The sun inches closer to the mountains in the west, the moon already halfway into the sky in the east.

“Said he had shit to do at the garage,” Heathen says with a shrug as he walks languidly towards the parked silver Chevy Suburban in the driveway. “He’ll be back at the clubhouse soon enough.”

“Right.” Too comfortable, I remind myself. It’s good that he’s not here to take me back. If he was, I’d be tempted to throw myself at him so I could feel safe in his arms. I can’t rely on anyone to help me, no matter how kind these bikers and women have been.

I make myself think of every person who got hurt trying to help me, holding tight to the familiar guilt and sorrow and letting it wrap around me like a blanket. I even make myself think of my parents, the scene of the accident and the black bags on gurneys.

Everyone who helps me gets hurt. I climb into the back seat when Heathen

opens the door for me, sliding to the middle. Sydney gets in on one side and Lacy on the other. The guys get into the front seat. The women next to me might be relaxed as Heathen drives, but I see how tense he and Cinder are. They're waiting to be attacked at any moment.

Bile burns the back of my throat. It's all too easy to picture it being Sydney in one of those body bags, or Cinder with a sobbing Lacy bent over him.

I shudder and try to let out an even breath so no one suspects anything.

I need to leave Devil's Haven. Not just for me anymore, but to keep everyone else safe. Sydney, Lacy, Cinder... even Blaze.

Because right then, I realize I'm not falling for the demon. I've already fallen, and I'm lying on the ground, aching for him. It doesn't matter if he returns my feelings or not. I'm in love with Blaze, against all reasoning or attempts to resist it.

I won't let him die trying to help me.

By the time we pull off the road and into the large gravel parking area behind the clubhouse, I've got the basics of a plan worked out. Now I need to make sure no one finds out until I'm already gone.

15

BLAZE

I fucking vibrate with the need to do something as I pace the length of the party room in the clubhouse. Only Knights of Hades are here now. No women to keep us distracted, save for the three on their way now. Three women who either have a mate or are spoken for. It doesn't matter if Sydney and Reaper have shit between them; she's more likely to stab him than fuck him. Regardless, we all know to steer wide of her unless we want Reaper ripping apart what's left of us. Because Sydney would fuck us up first.

I have no claim to Kennedy, and that fact threatens to send me full flame. I'm such a fucking bastard and idiot. I should have known it from the moment she pulled that damn gun on me and I inhaled her sweet scent the first time.

Kennedy is *mine*. A growl burns in my gut as I think that, complete certainty weighing down each step. A couple of the other brothers eye me with wariness as I pace past the couch where they sit.

And I sent another fucking male to pick her up. All because I didn't want to face the truth.

"You good, brother?" Chainz drawls from his position leaning against the bar top.

No. "Yes," I snap.

"You sure?" Bones asks and gestures to me. "You're smoky."

I glance at my reflection in one of the mirrored beer signs on the wall, hanging between the Knights of Hades banners. Fuck. They're right. I'm

closer to losing control of my form and going full demon than I realized. I ball my fists, forcing my demonic nature down again.

That's one of the few good things my father forced me to learn. His methods were cruel and torturous, but there is nothing that can make me snap and lose it.

A prince of Hell must always have control, his voice taunts me still, so many years later. If you cannot control yourself, you are nothing more than flesh for the fiends to dine on.

Fuck him. I found true belonging with the unit of demons I was sent to. Reaper was a hard commander, but fair. He sacrificed as much as us in battles. When we knew we needed the Dark Helm to make our escape from that realm, he wouldn't let anyone else risk themselves to retrieve it. We all knew the price he'd pay if he was caught stealing the helm from my father. I'd begged to be the one to do it, but he had simply gripped my shoulder and told me it was his responsibility as our leader. He hadn't hesitated to walk in to the fucked-up palace that'd once been my home.

I'm such a fucking idiot, I think as I check myself in the mirrored sign again. Satisfied I'm not smoking any longer, I shake the thoughts of my father from my head and join Chainz at the bar.

He's holding a beer out to me, the bottle cap already gone. His aviators are pushed up on his head, an unusual occurrence. The whites of his eyes are streaked with black, revealing just how on edge one of my best friends is.

I swipe the beer from his hand and chug half of it, relishing in the bitter hops and slight burn of the demonic beer.

"Better?" Chainz's voice is low as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Not really," I admit, resting my weight on my forearms on the bar top next to him. "I'm fucked."

Chainz snorts, and I look at him through the side of my eyes as he lazily takes another swallow from his own bottle. He looks at me, raising a brow. "Could've told you that when you had no interest in that piece-of-ass basically begging to suck your cock. No free male says no to a blowjob."

I growl but don't disagree. I take another gulp of beer.

Chainz turns until he's facing me, leaning most of his weight on his elbow now. I hook an ankle around one of the bar stools, angling it closer before sitting down. The urge to move is still there, skittering under my skin, but I lock it down.

"She ain't Irenabeth," he murmurs, his voice too low to be heard by any of the others.

My teeth grind together at the demoness's name, the one my father had been intent on mating to me, even as he fucked her. I'd been a fucking fool, too different than my father to realize her true nature until it was too late. She'd convinced me that she would be my fated mate in time, that I was the only one who held her heart.

Then in the middle of another lesson by my "loving" father, teaching me control, I learned exactly who and what she was. I hung from the ceiling by shackles, my body bleeding and broken, my flames nearly extinguished, and he brought her in. Then he fucked her in front of me, over and over, and Irenabeth enjoyed it. She reveled in my anguish at her being used by my father, then my realization of her betrayal.

When I'd been released, I pretended. I pretended I was in on the joke, in on their schemes. That I was under their control, when instead, that day they didn't break me and exert complete control over me.

I'd taken their cruelty and set myself free.

How could I ever think that my feelings for Kennedy could ever be turned on me like that? I know in the tattered remains of my soul that this beautiful, delicate, strong human female is the fated mate Irenabeth tempted me with. Kennedy is a fighter, someone who knows what it's like to be controlled and would never control another.

"I know," I state, standing upright. I meet my gaze in the mirror behind the bar and nod. I turn and look at Chainz, no longer feeling the need to run and breathe fire. He studies my face then nods, clapping me on the shoulder before jerking his head and making his glasses fall into place. Not a full second later, the rest of us are looking at the doorway deeper into the

clubhouse.

Cinder and Lacy walk through, followed by Sydney. My blackened heart stops beating as I wait to see Kennedy again.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

She walks in, her dark hair loose around shoulders left bare by the same white tank top she'd worn when we first met. In fact, she's wearing the same exact outfit as that day, with her long, toned legs hugged by black leggings. My heart stutters back to life, like an engine revving again after years of storage.

Kennedy is looking up at Heathen, smiling and laughing at something he said. I missed whatever it was, but I don't miss how close they are or the way he's looking at her.

Mine.

"Aw, shit." Chainz's voice is distant in my ear, my vision going red around the edges as I move. Someone grabs my arm, but I shrug them off with ease.

Heathen looks up, his blue eyes wide with surprise. He shoves Kennedy to the side—he fucking touches her—and dodges the punch I'd already been swinging.

"Cool it, Blaze," he says, stepping back into the hallway, his hands up ready to defend himself. "I don't want to have to beat your ass in front of your girl."

Heathen may be bigger and broader than me, but he wasn't put through the training I'd been through since a demon youngling.

I snarl, rolling and stretching my neck, readying to pummel the other demon into the earth.

Shouting comes from behind me, but all I can see is Heathen. Heathen doesn't back down, his own lips curling in a snarl.

I leap, flames bursting through the skin of my hand as I swing again. Heathen throws his arm up, blocking it but I'm already moving again. My flames crawl up my arms, eager to be let out for the first time in so long.

Heathen's own form begins to emerge in response, and when my flames lick up my neck to cover my face and reveal the demon I am, so does his. I'm not out of control, not yet. If Heathen wants to live, he'd better submit before I burn the life out of him.

"Blaze!" *she* shouts, her voice clear and sharp in the haze of my anger.

A hand grips my arm again, trying to restrain me, to control me. Snarling, I swing around, yanking my arm free and challenging the new assaulter with a roar.

Kennedy falls backward onto her ass, cradling one hand to her chest. The sight sends a bolt through me, snuffing out every flame in my body. Worse, though, is how the tattered remains of my soul—the one she'd begun to knit back together with her light—crumbles to dust at the fear in her eyes. Its scent—fear—hits me then, something I'd never wanted to smell again. Something I'd never wanted to be the cause of again.

I open my mouth, a pained croak slipping free as I reach for her. She flinches. Anger washes through me anew, this time at myself.

The air drops to freezing, trapping each of our breaths in our lungs. The weight of darkness, of inevitability, weighs me down until I collapse to my knees under it, catching myself on my hands before I'm flattened. Around me, all of my Knight brothers do the same, their eyes wild with a strain they can't hope to win against.

"Enough."

The voice echoes in our skulls, a few of us groaning at the intensity. I drop my head, staring blankly at the worn hardwood floor as I cling to consciousness.

Familiar boots come into view, standing between me and where Kennedy lies on the floor. I try to snarl, but my body refuses to obey.

"Go," Reaper orders Kennedy.

No, I scream inside my skull. But Reaper doesn't let me make a sound.

I'm powerless to do anything except watch her get to her feet and run from

me.

Grief. Pain. Regret. Each one slices through me like a wicked blade for every step away she takes. I did this. I sent my mate running from me in fear. From her mate.

A hoarse keen fills my ears, and it's only when Reaper crouches next to me, jerking my head up by grabbing my chin, that I realize it's from me. He'd lifted his might, his shadow of death from us.

I might as well wrap his cloak around myself and be sent to the abyss. It's what I deserve after harming my mate.

"You need to pull your shit together, Haborym." Reaper's invocation of my true name is still filled with power. My mind shuddering against his will. "The Light Justicars approach."

My nostrils flare. The threat to Kennedy stirs the coals of anger in my chest. I meet my president and commander's void-filled eyes. "She is my mate, sir."

"I've surmised as much," he says. He releases me and stands, offering me a hand. "Be that as it may, this is no time to quarrel with your brother. If you wish to claim your mate, you must first defend her."

I take his hand, needing his help as I stagger to my feet. Despair threatens to knock me down again. "She fears me now," I admit with shame. "My flames hurt her."

Reaper doesn't let me look away. "Then you must go tend to her and apologize. But do not claim her by force. If you do, I'll rip your soul from your body and send it back to your father. Understand?"

It's an unnecessary warning. I nod anyway. I'd rather burn my heart to ash with my own flames than force myself on Kennedy. He shoves me in the direction of my room, and I don't hesitate. The Light Justicars may be on their way to take her from me, but I will not go into the battle before telling her what she means to me.

I follow her scent to my room and force myself to take a few breaths. Then I push open the door, stepping into the room slowly. Immediately, I see she isn't in it and my eyes track to the closed bathroom door from where sounds

of a running sink come. I cross the room, not letting myself look at the bed where the blankets are still messed up from how I woke her earlier.

Ears straining to hear what I can through the door, I rap two knuckles against it.

The sound of something falling is quickly followed by a muffled curse. I wait, even though all I want to do is barge in and see how she is.

“Who is it?” Kennedy calls out. It’s another reminder of her humanity. She can’t scent or hear me.

“It’s me,” I answer, moderating my voice. “I need to see how you’re doing.”

“I’m fine,” comes her instant rebuke.

Shame fills me. I press my palm flat against the door and lean my forehead against it. “Please, kitten.”

If I must beg, then I will beg. I will live on my knees before her for the rest of eternity if she demands it.

How my father would laugh at me now. Ready to beg on my knees before a powerless human female.

Yet there is no more worthy a creature in all the realms than Kennedy.

After a long moment, she pulls me from my misery. “Fine.”

I don’t give her time to rethink. I open the bathroom door. My eyes find her immediately. She’s facing the sink vanity, her injured hand still held under the running water. Her shoulders are tense, but her face is blank in the mirror.

The walls I’d slipped behind over the last week are back up, higher than ever. And it’s all my fault.

“Let me see.” My voice is rough, and she flinches, her eyes closing as her uninjured hand curls on the counter.

I curse inwardly. I’ve never wished before to be an angel, but in this moment I wish I had their enhanced powers so that I could bring peace back to my mate. When I hear the ragged breath she sucks in, I give in to the urge to sink to my knees and sit on my heels.

Even like this, my eyes are level with the bottom of her shoulder blades, but I lower them and wait.

“What are you doing?” Incredulity fills Kennedy’s voice.

I look at her through my eyelashes and raise a shoulder in a weak shrug.

“I scared you. I can never tell you how sorry I am, kitten. But worse, I hurt you.” I drop my gaze to her feet as she turns towards me in the small bathroom. I wouldn’t blame her if she decides to kick me. “Even if you can bring yourself to forgive me, I don’t know if I can forgive myself.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, then she shifts, the sound of water cutting off. A draft of air brushes against me as she reaches for a towel, her hiss nearly silent as she pats her injured hand dry.

“I’ve had worse,” she whispers, cutting off when a growl begins to rumble. Fortunately the sharp, sour scent of fear is there and gone in a moment.

“I’ll kill him for you,” I vow. “Even if you want nothing more to do with me, Kennedy.” I raise my head, tilting it back until I can meet her whiskey-honey eyes. “This I swear to you, my mate. I will destroy Enzo Pastori. He will never hurt you again.”

Kennedy’s eyes go wide with my vow, her lips curled inwards as she bites them. Her heart picks up speed, and I want to kiss her until she thinks of nothing but me.

She holds out her injured hand for my inspection. “I don’t think it needs a bandage. I was more scared than anything, I think.”

Kennedy may well have emptied my gun into my chest with her admission. I swallow back the shame and exert control over myself. I’ve failed her once; I will not fail her again.

“May I?” I hold out my hand, waiting. Giving her the choice. I will always give her the choice.

She hesitates, but I don’t let myself react. Then she offers me her injured hand and, fortunately, doesn’t flinch when I gently wrap her wrist with my fingers. I move her hand, inspecting every inch, even the skin between her

fingers and under her nails. A rush of breath leaves me as I confirm what she thinks is true.

“Nothing more than a minor sunburn,” I say, releasing her hand even if it’s the last thing I want to do. “It should heal up by tomorrow, even without any burn cream.”

She nods, pulling her hand back. She then deftly steps around me and back into the bedroom. After a beat, I rise and follow her. I find her sitting on the end of the bed, her shoulders square and her face directed towards the opposite wall.

Rarely do I ever feel fear, but it’s what I feel when I cross to the middle of the room. I come to standstill in the middle between her and the still-open bedroom door. I grind my teeth, forcing the fear to turn to anger. Not at her, though. At myself, at her bastard of an ex, at my father.

A bitter laugh escapes me, and I feel the weight of her gaze. I cock my head and meet her shuttered stare. “I told you that you wouldn’t want to be next to me if you saw the real me.”

She swallows, my eyes catching on the dip and rise of her throat. “You were right,” her voice is soft but as cutting as a blade. “I think it’s best I get ready to leave.”

I struggle against the snarl threatening to curl my lip. Instead of letting my now rampant emotions reign with chaos in my body, I lock it all down. I wrap my heart in the steel cages my father taught me to weld until I became nothing more than the perfect demonic soldier he wanted.

“Fine,” I tell my mate, my voice cold. “Stay here until someone comes for you.”

I stride from the bedroom, away from Kennedy. She is my mate, but it will always be her choice. As for me, I vowed to destroy Enzo Pastori, and I will uphold that vow.

16

KENNEDY

My heart hurts enough that I have to rub circles on my chest. I will never forget the pain in Blaze's eyes after I told him he was right and that I never wanted to be near him again.

Yes, his demon form had scared me. But it was only for a moment. He'd shook me free of him and roared. When he faced me, all I saw at first was an emaciated skull covered in flames. What human wouldn't be afraid of that in the moment? Then the fear was gone, because he may have looked terrifying, but he was still Blaze. *My* Blaze.

And now I've rejected him.

I remind myself that it's the right thing to do. I need to leave—tonight. That way Blaze will be safe from Enzo and these Light Justicars. Sydney and Lacy will be safe, too. All of them will be.

It's not just selfishness or wanting to stay in Devil's Haven that makes me hesitate. I'm also thinking about what I heard Blaze and Bones talking about. I know Blaze has been with other women. I can't risk us being another game to him, especially not when I know what the consequences will be if Enzo finds out.

It would crush me when Blaze finally grows tired of me—and he eventually would. The fact remains that I've already fallen for him. Falling in love with him was easy. It was inevitable, I think, as soon as he took care of me and made me feel safe.

On top of that, the man has a body that could have been sculpted from stone and a way with words that could convince a saint to sin.

No. I need to leave, and I need to leave now. I'm used to being on the run. I've survived this long without Blaze. I can keep surviving.

I get up, determination settling my shaking bones, and go to the closet. I stored my large Kate Spade tote bag in Blaze's closet, and I shake my head as I pull it back out. It's just another sign I've grown too comfortable here. I need to always be prepared to run.

I shove my few outfits in after making sure the almost grand of cash I have left still remains in the pocket. It won't last long, but I'll make it work.

When my scant clothes are in the bag, I stare at Blaze's shirts hanging in the closet. I hesitate, then grab one and stuff it under my own clothes. This way, I'll always have a piece of him.

Next, I check the room for anything else of mine I need to take. The sheets and blankets are still tangled from when Blaze woke me up this morning, and a wave of heat hits me. If only I could go back to that.

But no. I shake myself, slinging the bag's strap over my shoulder, then check that my wallet is still in the side pocket of the bag. My next move is the bathroom, where I make short work of packing my toothbrush and the small amount of makeup I have.

Nearly ready, I fortify myself with a breath and march to Blaze's dresser. It's tidier than when I first came, mostly because Blaze didn't care if I cleaned it and I needed something to do.

I open the first drawer and take out the black, heavy handgun. It's the same one I pulled on Blaze when I was broken down on the side of the road. After staring at the weapon in my hands for too long, I slide it into my bag.

Then it's time to leave the room—and Blaze—behind.

I'm so focused on my goal and trying not to let myself cry, I miss the sound of voices until I'm almost at the end of the hallway.

"They'll be here soon," Stubs says. I freeze, pressing my back against the

wall and peering around the corner. The bikers have all congregated in the main party room of the clubhouse.

“How the fuck did they get here without us noticing?” Brute demands. “We’ve had surveillance on that compound for days.”

“My best guess is the Light Justicars have some way of cloaking themselves now,” Stubs says with a shrug.

“It doesn’t matter how they got close, just that they are,” Reaper states coolly. I can see why he’s the president and how he was a commander in the demon army. I shiver, recalling how his power felt when he broke up the fight between Blaze and Heathen. “I want all the Knights ready for them. They might have gotten the jump on us, but if they’re hoping to have an easy fight, I want us to show them how wrong they are.”

The Knights shout and holler. My eyes find Blaze, the only one not joining the hype. My will falters at the sight of his blank eyes. He looks nothing like the life-filled man who showed me who I can be again. I did that to him. I snuffed out his flames.

But at least he’ll be alive, I remind myself. Soon, he’ll forget all about me.

“Blaze, Chainz, Heathen, you’ll come with me,” Reaper announces, his voice cutting through the noise of the bikers.

“Yes, sir,” Blaze’s voice is sharp.

I watch as Blaze nods and stands. He’s dressed the same as earlier, his leather jacket tight over his biceps, a black shirt underneath. I bite the inside of my cheek, the urge to run into his arms strong.

I don’t, though.

He’s moving before I can blink, and his footsteps are silent on the floor as he heads towards me. I stiffen, knowing that any moment he’ll see me, that he’ll know what I’m trying to do. If he asks me to stay, I know my courage will fail and I will. I’ll let him protect me. And he’ll be hurt because of me.

Chainz says something to Blaze, making him stop. I take my chance and dart across the doorway, holding my breath as I hustle down the narrow hall. But

it doesn't sound like anyone saw me, or if they did, no one suspects my plans to leave.

I need to get a cell phone. It's the only way my plan will work now that Enzo is so close.

One of the bedroom doors is ajar, and I recognize the off-key, happy singing coming from inside. This must be Lacy and Cinder's room. I peek in through the crack and spy the empty room within. Easing myself inside, Lacy continues to sing, her voice drifting in through the open door to the right. She's in the shower.

Glancing around, my eyes land on her cell phone, connected to the charger on the nightstand.

Silently apologizing to my new friend, I grab it and shove it into my bag. The water turns off, and I race out of there.

I hurry through the dark kitchen. There are no signs of anyone else here. The bikers are all in the party room. No women are in sight, which makes sense. The only women here are me, Lacy, and Sydney. The Knights aren't taking any unnecessary chances.

Another minute and I'm at the door Heathen and Cinder brought us through earlier. Turning the knob slowly, I ease it open as silently as I can. Then I slip outside, closing it just as carefully. A relieved breath rushes from me. It's not even close to the first time I've sneaked out of a building.

Now for the tricky part.

I make myself walk casually across the parking lot. Once I'm far enough away from the clubhouse that no one will hear, I break into a jog. The massive garage has a bay door open, and that's where I head. If the keys are still where Heathen put them, I'll take the Suburban.

When no one yells for me, my pulse eases up and I slow to a walk.

The garage is empty, and I realize Reaper must have called all the bikers inside for the meeting. I need to take advantage while I can. I know if one of them tries to stop me, there's no way I can win.

Heathen's key fob is still hanging in the office and I grab it, breathing out a sigh. It's only half a second of relief, though. Because when I turn around, Sydney is in the doorway, looking as surprised as I feel.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. Her hands are on her hips, and her gaze drops to the fob dangling from my fingers.

"I..." I struggle to find an answer that isn't a lie. "I'm leaving. You can't stop me."

Sydney raises a brow. "Why would I stop you?"

I open my mouth and then shut it. I narrow my eyes, not sure what to say.

Sydney's lips twitch. "I'm not going to stop you from being an idiot, Kennedy." She crosses her arms, pinning me in place with a hard glare. "But I want to know why you're leaving. Despite my issues with the prez, they're good at their job. They'll keep you safe."

I shake my head. "Anyone who has ever helped me has ended up hurt, or worse... dead." I take a step forward, and Sydney falls back, clearing the way out of the office. She doesn't say anything as I walk by.

"He'll follow you, you know," Sydney finally says. "Blaze cares too much about you."

I don't stop until I'm beside the Suburban. I look over my shoulder at her, my eyes stinging. "I'm in love with him, Sydney."

Her lips pinch for a moment then her face softens. "Yeah, I figured as much." Sydney looks out the open bay door towards the clubhouse, the windows glowing yellow in the night.

"If I stay," I continue, suddenly needing to explain, "Enzo will come here and he'll kill Blaze. I can't let him die for me, and Enzo will never stop. At least if I leave, Blaze and you and Lacy and"—I wave towards the clubhouse—"everyone will be safer. He'll move on."

"Doubt it," Sydney says under her breath, but nods. She gives me a shrewd look. "If you don't want Blaze coming after you, it'll take more than disappearing into the night."

Her words are bland, but there's an undertone of pain. I think of how she spoke about the binding ceremony earlier. My brows furrow. "What happened between you and Reaper?"

Sydney's face goes blank and she strides over to me. I think she's about to lash out, but instead she pulls me into a hug with her lean, strong arms. "I don't agree with this," she says softly next to my ear. "But I know what it feels like to need to make your own decisions. To take control of your own life. If you ever need anything, I'm here, Kennedy. You will always be welcome at The Styx."

I throw my arms around Sydney, a few tears escaping down my cheeks as I hug her back. "Thank you."

She clears her throat and pulls away. "If you're going to leave, you need to head out now. Reaper has them all corralled, but any minute now, he's going to have them patrolling the property."

I nod, fighting back the tears. She stands in the garage, watching me as I get into the driver's seat and start the engine. She nods once when I look at her. This is the last time I'm going to see her. I fell in love with Blaze within a week, and in that same time, Sydney became one of the best friends I've ever had.

Swallowing past the ping-pong ball in my throat, I shift into drive. I don't turn on the headlights, not yet at least. I don't want to give any sign that I'm running away.

Only when the clubhouse is growing smaller in the distance do I let the tears spill freely and turn on the headlights.

My heart hasn't broken. I've left it entirely behind. It's with Blaze, whether he wants it or not. In its place is a hollow void. I swear I can feel the gaping wound where my heart once was.

This is all Enzo's fault.

My pain swiftly transforms into anger, which fills the hole inside of me like a broken dam. I hate Enzo more than I ever have right now. Enzo has taken so much from me. I'm not going to let him take any more.

I look at my tote in the passenger seat, where the handgun is barely visible.

I reach over and dig around until I find Lacy's cellphone. Gripping the wheel with one hand, I unlock her phone with the pin she shared this afternoon while planning her binding ceremony. I pull up the call menu and, keeping half an eye on the road, I punch in the number I've had memorized for years.

It rings four times before the voice of my nightmares answers.

"Who is this?" Enzo says.

I shudder, nearly ending the call right then.

"Enzo," I answer.

There's a moment of silence. "Darling?"

I grit my teeth, forcing myself not to react to his endearment for me. "Yes."

"Where are you?" His voice is low, filled with a mix of concern and anger.

"I'm not with the Knights," I reply, making sure he knows exactly who I mean. "I left when I heard you were close."

He laughs, and my stomach knots. It's the same laugh as when he was eager to punish me.

"Off to scurry to another hole, like the mouse you are?"

I grip the wheel tightly. "I'm so sorry, Enzo." I use the submissive voice I relied on for our marriage. "I'm so sorry, Enzo. I don't know what I was doing. I'm ready to come home now. I'll do whatever it takes to earn your forgiveness."

A long moment of silence has me holding my breath. "Good. Because if you're not, darling, you know the punishment for disobeying me."

I squeeze the phone tightly. "Yes, Enzo. Please, Enzo. I know what it's like now to not be with you. I know The Styx, the bar in Devil's Haven, will be empty. I'll go there, and you and your men can come get me? I'm afraid the bikers will try to stop me."

"Don't worry about them." Enzo's voice sends ice down my spine. "They've

got bigger issues to deal with now. If you aren't there when I arrive, I will order my men to burn this entire town down. Do you understand, darling?"

I swallow, nervous but thankful he's coming. "Yes," I say with genuine relief. Even if only half of them come to The Styx, that means Blaze and the rest have better odds. "Yes, I'll be there soon."

He hangs up without a goodbye, and I drop the phone on the passenger seat. A warbling sob has my chin shuddering and more tears spill down. I'm terrified. God, I'm so fucking terrified. But if I don't do this, I'll never be free. I'll always be on the move, looking over my shoulder, wondering if today is the day he finds me.

I readjust my grip on the steering wheel. I'm not running anymore.

And this time, when I pull the gun on someone, I'll make sure the safety is off.

17

BLAZE

I have no control over my thoughts. All I can think about is the fact that my mate, the female I'm meant to spend the rest of my life with, just rejected me.

"Brother, you good?" Brute's voice snaps me out of the trance I've been in since Kennedy told me she wanted nothing more to do with me.

"No, but it doesn't matter," I growl, clenching my fists.

He raises an eyebrow. "It matters to us. We can't have our most badass brother getting distracted out there."

I snarl, a little bit of smoke trailing from my lips, but don't reply. Instead, I take another drink of the whiskey in front of me. The liquor doesn't have the same effect on me that it does on humans, but Reaper will have my head if I get drunk when we know a fight is close.

I slam the shot glass down onto the counter and glare at the rest of the brothers around me. Chainz and Heathen both have their eyes on me. They're worried, but they won't say it—even after I attacked Heathen less than an hour ago. They know how much I'm hurting and can't even begin to understand what this means to me.

Cinder knows, though. I can see the fucking pity in his eyes.

It's not just a broken heart. It's the knowledge that I've found my fated mate and she's rejected me. It's the fact that, as far as I'm concerned, I'm as good as dead. I may keep on living, but a part of me died in that bedroom.

It's the fear of losing the first thing I've ever really had, something worth more to me than my own life, the thought of a life without her.

Reaper storms into the party room where we're all gathered again after a patrol. "Stubs has eyes on them. Ten cars, at least four men in each. Let's go."

Fucking finally. I need this fight. It hardly matters that we're outnumbered two to one, not counting however many Light Justicars that'll be involved. It's not like this is the first time we've come up against them.

I roll my neck, the bones giving satisfying cracks.

"I want everyone in groups," Reaper announces. "You know the drill. Don't get separated and don't die."

The brothers all grunt and yell their agreements, but it's not like we're new at this.

"Blaze, you're with me," he orders, and I fall into line, moving towards the door. Chainz falls in step behind us.

The three of us slip outside and immediately spot our targets' headlights approaching on the horizon. We fall into line with the original demons who formed the Knights of Hades, creating the first line of defense behind Reaper. Only Stubs isn't here; he's back in the clubhouse, making sure any authorities don't catch wind of what's about to go down. Other Knights and prospects slink through the dark night around us. Some climb up to the roof of the clubhouse, lying down into position for sniping. Others, like the shifters, transform into their beast shapes and disappear into the desert. None of them go far, but not even my demonic eyesight can find them when they don't want to be seen.

The SUVs pull off the highway and into the large gravel driveway like this is some friendly gathering. They come to a stop with less than military precision, and I sneer in distaste.

The Knights of Hades have fought side-by-side for centuries, both in this realm and in the Underworld. We may fuck around with parties, alcohol, women and our motorcycles, but when it's time to fight, we are damn good soldiers.

It's why I can already tell we'll win.

The doors open and men flood out, all dressed in various tactical styles, each one carrying a rifle or handgun. My own handgun rests in its shoulder holster under my leather cut, but I won't bother with human weapons tonight.

Tonight, I'll let my true nature reign. Tonight, I'll be Haborym, eldest son of a prince of Hell, soldier under the Reaper. Tonight, I'll personally send these men to my father in the molten depths of Hell.

Reaper's hand twitches. Bones and Brute meld into the shadows at the silent command. They'll be up in the air, ready to offer air support if the Santi Pastori and Light Justicars have a second wave of men incoming.

The last SUV's doors open, and the three figures that emerge have us growling. Even if it were daytime, they'd still shine with eye-watering light.

The Light Justicars. A holy order bent on the eradication of all demonkind on behalf of the angels.

They each wear white cassocks, but despite their non-threatening appearance, these three are more dangerous than all the mafia soldiers around them.

The older one, with silver, neatly combed hair, walks forward, his hands easy at his sides. The other two, a dark-haired man and a blonde-haired woman, follow behind. The woman's steps are slow, and her eyes dart around like she's reluctant to be here.

Any other time, I'd find that interesting. All I know is that she's here to help take Kennedy away, and I will never let that happen.

Another man slips out of the same SUV, almost unnoticed. Unlike the other men, this one wears a neat suit. A snarl rips from me, and I take a step forward. Chainz slaps my chest with the back of his hand, halting me.

"Easy," he murmurs.

"That's that fucker Enzo," I hiss, smoke rising from my shoulders. "I know it is."

"You'll have your chance," Reaper says over his shoulder. "Soon."

I swallow back a protest. Anger and fury at the man fucking *sauntering* up to stand beside the first Light Justicar eating away at my control. I step back into line, but, I never stop staring at the fucker. This is the man who hurt my mate. The man who wanted to break Kennedy until her gorgeous, light-filled soul was extinguished.

My nostrils flare and flames begin to rise from my skin. The heat builds and spreads along my body. The pain of my transformation is a welcomed release of my pent-up rage.

The Light Justicar raises his arms. “Whom do I speak to?”

Reaper crosses his arms, his feet shoulder-width apart. He’s ready to strike at any moment.

“I am the one called Odanatos, though our names do not matter in this realm.” His voice is profound, echoing with the chill of his calling.

Odanatos. Reaper. Deliverer of souls unto eternal death. Devourer of the damned.

The mortal men behind the Light Justicars shift, their anxious and fear-tinted scents carrying to us on the desert breeze. I inhale, as do my brothers, relishing the sour scent. My blood hums in my veins, eager to fulfill their nightmares.

Even Enzo takes a step closer to the Light Justicars, as if that can protect him from me.

“I disagree,” the apparent leader says genially. “I am Father Xavius. I am here with Brother Benedict and Sister Sloan on behalf of this man. He is—”

“We know who he is,” Reaper interrupts him blandly. “Enzo Pastori. You come seeking Kennedy. You will not have her. She is under our protection.”

Enzo’s face goes red. I can see the shade perfectly in spite of the low lighting. The driveway is lit only by the headlights of the SUVs and the floodlights on each corner of the clubhouse roof.

“She is my wife,” Enzo says, like a man used to being feared. “I will have her returned to me.”

Fuck this dude. He talks about Kennedy like she's a possession, not a person with a soul. I clench my fists and bare my teeth at him. The movement must catch his eye because his gaze finds mine. My snarl widens into a vicious grin at the fear that flashes over his face.

"She was no longer your wife the moment you broke your sworn oaths to her," Reaper states dispassionately.

I am not ashamed to admit Reaper's voice is one of the scariest things about his demon form. When he embraces it in full, Reaper becomes something else. Where I am fire and heat, Reaper is simply... nothing. An absence of life, of light. His voice reflects that. Utterly empty of anything.

Enzo goes to say something, but Father Xavius holds up a hand. It clearly pisses Enzo off but the mafia boss says nothing. He steps back and goes to the side of another man. There's enough family resemblance that this must be the brother, Riccardo. The one who threatened Kennedy.

He will die, too. Tonight.

"I know it is difficult for beings of your bestial nature to understand," the asshole starts up with his patronizing bullshit. These assholes really think we're nothing but mindless beasts. "But if you simply hand the woman over, we can put this business behind us. If you do not produce the woman, I'm afraid we will have to take her by force."

My brothers beside me growl and spit at the ground.

"They never learn, no matter how many times we kill their puppets," Heathen sneers. I nod in agreement along with Chainz and the others.

Enough of this. I want to fight. I want Enzo's blood in my mouth. I want to burn his heart from his body.

"No."

Reaper's simple refusal is met with a sigh. Father Xavius angles his face to the side, and Brother Benedict grips the Sister's arm and drags her to stand beside him.

"Do not say I didn't offer peace," Father Xavius says, like he'd have actually

walked away without trying to kill us.

The younger, dark-haired man grips the back of the woman's neck. He shares enough similarities to Enzo and Riccardo that it's clear how the Santi Pastoris are connected to the Justicars. What a charming, fucked-up family.

I find Enzo and frown. He's looking at his cell phone. Riccardo is listening more to him than the Light Justicars. I can't hear what he's saying, though.

Brother Benedict shouts in Latin, and Sister Sloan's body arches as if struck by lightning, her mouth open in a silent scream. Then she straightens, her eyes fogged in white. Light surges out from her, barreling towards us with enough force to pick up dust and debris.

Pain consumes me, drowns me, until I give up every hold on my human form. My fires burn away the pain and my vision clears.

We're all in our demon forms, our abilities to shift taken away.

I throw my head back and laugh, plumes of smoke escaping my lungs.

Reaper raises a shadow-cloaked arm, then snaps his hand forward in command.

We charge the Light Justicars and the Santi Pastori soldiers, death in our hearts.

I seek out my target, only to see the coward climbing into the SUV with his second. I move to leap over the fighting, but a force slams me to the ground.

I roar and leap back up to my feet. Brother Benedict faces me, a curved glowing dagger in each hand. I crack my jaw. First, I will kill this Light Justicar. Then I will hunt the coward Enzo down and rid the Earth of his filth.

18

BONES

Goddamn, I love this baby. Almost more than my bike. Almost.

The job back in Cali was worth every minute, just for this black hawk beauty alone. She's a gem, and I can't wait to see what she can do.

"Fucking hate being stuck up here." Brute's complaint reaches my ears over the loud aircraft. We don't need headsets like humans. "I wanted to get my hands dirty."

I shake my head, but I get it. I used to be like Brute. Eager for battle. After what I was forced to do in the Underworld, the reason why I won't kill unless I have to, whispers from the souls I carry climb within me to become louder than this helicopter is now, that is until I push them back down by force of will into the cold quiet of the darkness.

"You might get lucky," I say over my shoulder. "Maybe we'll need to mow down the mortals. Looks like shit's getting interesting."

We're high enough up that humans shouldn't be able to hear us with the stealth mode activated, or if they can, they can't identify the sound. With our excellent eyesight, even at night, we still have a good view on what's going down in front of the Knights of Hades clubhouse.

"Three Justicars," I call out as the three glowing figures in white cassocks stop in front of Reaper.

Brute growls. "Fucking insulting."

I shake my head, grinning, and catch my reflection in the windshield. The white skull of my face tattoo stretches into a rictus grin. It's an ever-present reminder of my powers. Not that the scars covering my torso aren't enough of a reminder.

"One is a female," I tell him, my eyesight picking out the blonde-haired woman. She seems stiff. Not sure how I can tell from here, but my eyes keep being drawn to her. "Shit's happening."

I look at the other Justicars, then Reaper. Then, like a magnetic pull too strong to resist, I find her again. The brown-haired Justicar is holding on to her, and I swear I can see her screaming. Anger courses through me. Even if she's a Justicar, I can't fucking stand the sight of someone hurting a woman.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe out as a massive tsunami of light bursts from her, heading right towards our brothers. It's so bright, it blinds me even from this high up. Like someone set off a flash right in front of my eyes. Blinking hard, I struggle to see what's going on.

"It's going down," Brute yells, and I hear him cocking the repeater. "Whatever she did, they've all lost their human forms."

A moment later, I see he's right. Then my still splotchy vision tracks movement.

"One of the SUVs is leaving," I say, torn between chasing the single vehicle or staying to provide aerial support.

"Not ours," Brute grunts, the loud gun firing rapidly.

I glance at the fleeing vehicle once more. It's heading for the highway. I can't make out who's driving it, or even if they're male or female.

"Stop fucking firing," I shout back at the demon. "You'll hit Blaze."

Brute curses up a storm, but he must agree since the concussive shots go silent. "We need to take her out. Whatever she's doing is slowing them down."

Fuckity fuck, a bone went up the clock. Brute is right. But we can't get low enough for him to survive the fall without both of us getting hit by whatever

magic the woman is working.

I slam the autopilot and set the hawk to hover. “Take the controls,” I shout as I rip off the harness.

“You’re fucking crazy, brother,” Brute says, but he takes my place at the helm.

I make my way to the open side door of the hawk, gripping the handle on the roof hard as I survey the grounds.

“I’ll get you as low as I can,” he says, but I shake my head.

“Don’t bother.”

I let go of the handle and step into the open air.

Fucking fuckity fuck, a bone goes up the clock. The clock strikes twelve and souls rain down.

I gather the groaning souls that are never far from me, collecting the ones attached to the bones I’ve buried around the clubhouse. My vision goes white as my body changes and twists. White bones launch like missiles from the dirt, their souls screaming in my ears and drowning out the wind of my fall.

My plummet slows, and I’m pushed forward by the skeletal tornado that I’ve commanded to catch me. I don’t need to think about my commands; the souls of every bone connected to mine already know.

I surge towards the female Light Justicar, approaching her from behind.

She whirls when I’m ten yards out and, despite the distance, our gazes meet. Her eyes are milky and cloudy but wide with fear. It stinks and I should enjoy it, but it turns my stomach instead. She isn’t afraid of me. I don’t know how I can tell.

Flames and heat explode to her side.

Holy fucking shit. I watch, impressed, as Blaze grows larger and—devours—the male Justicar.

I feel the moment he dies, his soul being cleaved from his mortal body. Then, before I can be tempted to take his bones, I feel them become ash. Then even

the ash is burned away.

Ripples of white light explode out of the woman, and I throw my hand up in a useless attempt to shield my face. Her body is lifted onto her toes, her cassock billowing around her, her blonde hair glowing with power.

“Shit, he was her anchor,” I say to no one. Her power is untethered and, from what she’s putting out, she could kill us all.

Fucking fuckity fuck.

Encasing myself in bone shards, I push forward against the pulsing light. I have to fight for every step. Every bit of my body screams to flee. But I refuse to let my brothers down. They saved me when I was at my lowest.

Stretching out a hand, I wrap my fingers around her wrist. Her chin slams to her chest, her eyes—now clear and crystal blue—find mine and lock on.

“Please,” she whispers. Somehow I can hear her perfectly, like she’s speaking into my head. “Please don’t let them take me back there. Kill me. Please.”

Her soul touches mine, and I see too much, too fast. I can’t make out any of it. What I know, though, is that this woman is terrified of the Light Justicars.

An overwhelming sense of protectiveness swarms me until even the souls I carry demand I help her. I can’t kill her, though.

Before I can finish the thought, a bone shard darts out and strikes her on the temple. Her magic cuts off as she’s knocked out.

I catch her, cradling her close as my bone carriers lower us to the ground. Looking at her still face, all I can ask myself is what the fuckity fuck have I done?

19

KENNEDY

The Styx's empty bar room is eerie, and I almost wish I'd told Enzo to meet me anywhere else. But I don't know where else I could face my ex down. There are two entrances to the bar, so he and his men can't sneak up on me.

The minutes tick by, and I wonder if he's decided to play a game of cat and mouse. Unfortunately, it'd be all too like him. But this time, I'm a mouse that has teeth.

Then I hear the sound of heavy footsteps and I'm on my feet.

I grip the gun in my bag, the weight heavy and reassuring. This time, the safety is off and I have every intention of using it.

Enzo strides through the entrance to the bar. His expression is unreadable and I wonder if he's expecting a trap. He scans the room before his gaze settles on me. For a moment, I see a flicker of something like relief before he shuts it.

He's a fool for underestimating me, but I'm glad for the advantage.

He takes his place across from me, nodding at me with an air of familiarity that both repels and draws me in. Despite myself, my heart flutters nervously at his presence and I'm reminded of why I ever fell for him in the first place. But this time things are different—I'm not here to be vulnerable. I'm here to fight for control of the situation, no matter how much power he thinks he has over me.

He breaks into a smirk as he crosses his hands on the table and stares at me with an intensity that feels like a challenge.

“You had me worried, darling,” he says, coming to a stop a few feet away.

I keep my eyes on him, not moving.

“Did you call off your men?” I need to know Blaze and the rest are safe. “They wanted me gone, so there’s no point in risking your men’s lives.”

Enzo scoffs. “Those bikers are of no consequence to me. Only you, my darling.” He approaches me, and I have to keep myself from rearing back from disgust. His hand strokes my cheek before delving into my hair, gripping tight until I cry out in pain. He bends down and hisses in my ear. “Did you think you could get away with that stunt of yours? Did you forget who the fuck I am?”

I struggle against his grip, but his other hand wraps around my throat, cutting off my air.

I struggle against his grip, but his other hand wraps around my throat, cutting off my air. He leans in close and I can smell the liquor on his breath. “Do you know who has the power here? Do you think anyone will care if I do what I want with you?”

My eyes widen in fear as he pushes me back into my chair. My heart races as he steps away, and I can feel my control slipping away.

“Please,” I wheeze. “Let go. Let go!”

He pulls away, his eyes wild and dark. “I’m taking you home. And this time, you’re never leaving.”

He grabs my wrist, twisting until I drop my bag. The gun clatters to the floor.

“No! Please!”

Enzo grins and picks up the gun. He puts it into his waistband, then he drags me to the door.

“No, please, let me go!”

I try to yank free, but his fingers are like a vise around my wrist. I twist,

using the moves I learned in my Brazilian jujitsu class to knock his legs out. He crashes down with a curse, and the gun skids away on the wooden floors.

But Enzo is strong... and angry.

He's on me, pinning me down, and his hands closes around my throat. I stare into his hateful eyes. How could I ever have thought this monster loved me?

"I should kill you," he growls. "I should snap your pretty little neck and leave you for those bikers to find."

I can't speak. The pressure of his hands are like a vise, squeezing tighter and tighter. I struggle but it's like trying to push a brick wall. My vision starts to fade.

Then his hands are gone. I gasp, sucking in lungfuls of air. He grabs me by the hair again, and I wrap my hands around his wrist, trying to dig my nails between his tendons. It's useless, though. I scabble against the floor, trying to get my feet under myself or any type of leverage to fight back. Panic is taking over, as much as I try to fight it.

I can't go back to him. I'd rather die.

The gun. It's within reach.

I fight harder, snarling and not giving a fuck when it feels like he's ripping out my hair. Then I'm free. I scramble on hands and knees to the gun. I pick it up and whirl, raising the gun to him at the same time.

Enzo is so shocked, I almost laugh. I don't, though.

Instead, I shoot. Again and again, until every bullet is gone.

Enzo staggers back under each bullet and when it goes quiet, my ears ring. I watch, waiting.

He looks down at his abdomen. Then back up at me.

He laughs.

Horror washes over me.

"You stupid bitch," Enzo wheezes out. At least I've hurt him. "You thought I

wouldn't come prepared? Next time go for the head.”

He rips his shirt open and reveals the bulletproof vest. Then his sinister eyes meet mine, a sadistic glint in them. “I’m going to make you pay for that, little wife. Every last bullet. Then when I’m done with you, I’ll give you to my men. If you survive that, maybe I’ll keep you chained in a crate like the bitch you are.”

Enzo charges me and I howl, fighting hard against him until he backhands me, sending me crashing to the floor, darkening my vision.

He grabs my ankles, and then I’m dragged out the door of The Styx. I’m still too dazed to struggle, my limbs weak and not responding. The concrete is hard and rough against my back.

“Riccardo!” Enzo shouts for his brother. “Where the fuck is he?”

A car door opens, and I manage to roll onto my stomach, trying to crawl away.

“Get back here.”

I let out a sob as Enzo’s hands dig into my skin.

A fierce snarl rips through the air, igniting a spark of hope in my chest. The heat billowing over me only confirms it.

I close my eyes tightly, allowing tears of relief to cascade down my face. I am no longer alone in this darkness.

“What the fuck are you?”

Enzo. He's terrified. My heart pounds against my ribs in vicious satisfaction.

“Your worst nightmare.”

Blaze.

The demon I've fallen in love with. In this moment, I know I need him like I need to breathe. My heart is entirely his, no matter how much I tried to fight it at first.

There’s a flurry of movement and sounds, a grunt and a roar. Screaming. I

can't bring myself to look. Everything hurts. My head is swimming. All I know is that Blaze is here. He came for me. I needed him and he came for me, even after I pushed him away.

I love him so much.

"Kitten?" His voice is the same as that night, when he first killed for me. Like the rumble of a lava chamber. "Kitten, look at me. Please."

I blink and try to focus.

"Enzo?" I can't say more than a whisper, and my voice sounds like the crackling of flames.

"Dead."

"Good," I say and squint. "You came for me."

"Always, Kennedy. You're the other half of my soul," Blaze says, then takes a step back. "I'll leave—"

"No!" My voice breaks, and I reach out for him, not caring if he's in demon form. If being burned is the price of loving Blaze, I'll pay it. Gladly. "Don't leave me."

"I can get Syd—"

Somewhere I find the ability to sit up, fighting back the dizziness. Then I see him. My glorious, gorgeous demon.

He's made of flames and lava and skin stretched over bone. He looks like the end of the world. And I love him.

I fling myself towards him, uncoordinated and weak. I won't make it, but just like I knew he would, Blaze surges forward and catches me.

"Kennedy!" Fear saturates his voice. "I'll hurt you."

I shake my head. "Never, Blaze," I tell him. "You can never hurt me. I love you too much."

I'm right. His flames don't burn me. They lick and dance across my skin, soothing my aches, and comfort sinks into my bones. His flames are the

peace of a warm fire on a winter night, the comfort of a loving embrace, the healing of love.

He looks down at me, his flaming eyes cutting through my blurry vision. He cups the side of my face, his hand—larger than its usual large—is big enough that my entire head fits in his palm.

“I love you, Kennedy,” he tells me. The flames slowly retreat into his skin. “I think I loved you the moment I first saw you glaring at me.”

I grin, probably looking foolish and not even caring. I cover his hand with mine, turning to press a kiss into his palm. “I want you to have my soul, Blaze. My heart is yours, forever, and I want to give you my soul, too. So we can have forever.”

Blaze drops his forehead against mine, a shudder racking his body. “Forever,” he gasps out and inhales.

My chest bubbles, like I’m full of carbonation, and I’ve just been shaken like crazy. Blaze lowers his lips, so close to kissing me. I want to pull away, embarrassed at the strange sensation like I’m going to burp or something. He breathes in again, and the bubbles seem to ease from me. A soft blue light glows enough that I try to look at my own mouth.

Blaze breathes it in. His eyes fly open, the blue light shining through the black of now-human pupils. “Forever, my love. My mate.”

He crushes his lips to mine. I submit to him, feeling him inside of me. Feeling myself inside of him.

I break the kiss. “Did we just bond?” I gasp with wonder against his lips.

“Yes,” he answers, nipping at my lips before grinning.

I want to laugh. Then I freeze. “Oh, shit, don’t tell Lacy and Cinder.”

Blaze throws his head back and laughs. It’s the most beautiful sound in the world.

He shifts, sliding an arm under my knees and the other around my back. He stands, cradling me to his chest, his warm eyes meeting mine.

“Let’s go home.”

I sigh and rest my head against his chest. “Home,” I murmur. “I like the sound of that.”

EPILOGUE

KENNEDY

One Month Later

The Styx Bar looks incredibly romantic, despite being what most would call a dive bar. But the sight has me smiling.

Lacy looks adorable in the flowy, white dress that reminds me of a fairy from children's stories. In fact, she looks so adorable, she even manages to make Cinder look cute as she stares dreamily up into his eyes as they sway to a cover of "A Thousand Years."

Adorable isn't the word one would usually associate with the brooding, scarred demon, but tonight it fits. A hungry wail splits the air, louder than the gentle crooning of the cover artist and the buzzing conversation of the packed bar. Lacy and Cinder's eyes go right to Sydney, who's frowning while holding the infant out towards them as she crosses the dance floor.

Sydney is absolutely not a baby person.

Lacy had gone into labor early, though the shifter midwife assured the new parents that their new son was fully developed. It seems Lacy actually delivered right on time, not that the easy delivery had calmed Cinder down at all that day.

I take a sip of my beer just as the chair beside me scrapes against the wooden floor as it's moved. The scent of wood smoke and motor oil wrap around me like an embrace a moment before Blaze's heavy arm wraps around my shoulders. I lean back into his side, tilting my head towards him for a kiss.

Our lips meet in a slow, sensual exploration. I pull back before it becomes too heated, albeit reluctantly.

“Everything okay at the garage?” I ask, sliding him the fresh beer I have waiting. Blaze had to answer an emergency call from one of the employees at Hades Garage.

Blaze uses the edge of the table to pop the cap off and takes a drink. “Yeah. They couldn’t get the POS system back online, and we’ve got two cars being picked up today. Idiots didn’t even think to try restarting the system and the modem.”

I snort, shaking my head. First rule: if technology isn’t working, turn it off and then back on.

Blaze presses a kiss to the side of my head, and I sigh happily, tangling my fingers with his free hand as I watch the happy couple dance, now with Cinder cradling his tiny son against his chest with one arm and Lacy with the other.

Their binding ceremony was beautiful, and, as we agreed that night, Blaze and I kept our accidental binding quiet. Though from the looks Reaper and the other demons have given us occasionally, I think they suspect. Fortunately, no one said anything, letting Lacy have all of the spotlight. I’ve been more than happy to step into the background since that fateful night.

My eyes drift over the reception, the more understated and intimate reception Lacy had wanted. The Knights of Hades are all in attendance, even the prospects. As the music moves to something upbeat, Chainz, Heathen, Brute, and even Stubs find dance partners from the town. Tonight won’t be as rowdy as parties at the clubhouse, though Chainz has already declared an open invite to a spur of the moment after-party. It’s rather endearing, actually, to see these males—huge men in their human forms—dance with the older residents of Devil’s Haven. Brute is unexpectedly graceful despite his size as he swing dances with a woman who has to be in her early seventies.

The only original member who isn’t dancing is Bones. I find him in the corner booth that the Knights claim as their usual seats. It’s hard to gauge his expression, considering the skull tattooed onto his face. But I’m pretty sure

he's trying not to stare at the blonde woman sitting across the table from him, her chair angled so she can watch the dancing. Sloan had been one of the three Light Justicars who'd confronted the Knights alongside Enzo and his men. She claims to have been an unwilling participant, and Bones believes her.

Understandably, Reaper is taking precautions.

From the shadows in her eyes and how jumpy she is, I believe her, too. I know all too well what it's like to live in fear.

The Pastori were never family, no matter what they claimed. This motorcycle club, made up of demons and shifters, are a family whose bonds can't be broken. And they've welcomed me into their family without hesitation.

I bring the hand holding Blaze's up and press a kiss to the back of his hand, my eyes stinging.

"What's that all about, kitten?" Blaze asks and, before I can answer, hauls me into his lap.

I meet his eyes, so beautiful and expressive, even without flames. "I think my parents would be happy for me," I tell him and have to swallow down a lump. "I haven't felt this settled, this happy since the night they died."

Blaze doesn't say anything, but he squeezes me and I settle into him. Together, we watch our family enjoy themselves. I don't need anything more than what I have, right around me.

"Do you want to dance?" he murmurs after a few minutes, and I shake my head. An idea strikes me and I look up at him, mischievous.

"Can we go for a ride?"

He cocks an eyebrow, his smile full of delightful wickedness. "You ready to get out of here?"

I bite my lip, nodding.

He stands and sets me on my feet. He raises a hand and waves at Reaper. I'd say bye to Lacy and Cinder, but they're caught up in their own world and I don't want to interrupt them. We head towards the back hall, leaving through

the door that leads out back.

I tilt my head up towards the sky, closing my eyes and soaking in the warm afternoon sunlight. The roar of an engine reverberates through me, sending my heart racing, and I open my eyes.

I don't think seeing Blaze sitting on a beast of a motorcycle, wearing his Knights of Hades vest and looking like sin personified will ever not take my breath away.

This man, this demon, is mine—for eternity. And I'm his.

He's holding out the black street helmet towards me, and the side of his mouth lifts in a smirk. "You comin' or not, kitten?"

I hurry across the gravel to him, taking the helmet and tugging it on while rolling my eyes. I climb on behind him, tucking my dress under so I don't flash everyone, and find the passenger pegs Blaze had added.

"Where to?" Blaze asks as I press up against him, wrapping my arms around him and holding tight.

"How about we decide as we go?" I suggest, and Blaze reaches down and squeezes my thigh with affection.

"Sounds perfect."

As Blaze pulls out of The Styx's parking lot, I toss my head back and laugh. Blaze drops his hand back to my thigh before gunning it, sending us racing out of the town. I let go of him, throwing my hands out and reveling in the freedom I've found in this town. I'm not worried about falling, because I know Blaze has me.

He always will.



Thank you for reading! BONES, Sloan and Bone's story is next. Bones and Sloan must navigate a treacherous love as they discover their fated connection, but trust is a fragile thing when secrets and passion intertwine.

[Get it here](#)

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Continue reading for a bonus scene from Sloan.

BONUS EPILOGUE

SLOAN

I sit in the corner booth, watching Bones watch the others dance. The Knights of Hades trust him, and I can tell he trusts them. But they don't trust me, and I don't blame them. I'm not certain I trust me.

Bones is a demon, and I spent almost the last decade hating them. Well, I didn't hate them. I was told to hate them. But now I'm not certain what I feel.

Father Xavius was not a good man, and his Justicars weren't much better. I'm glad to be away from them, but I'm afraid Bones and the Knights are just trading one captor for another. I know that Father Xavius escaped. I know he'll want me back.

I can't go back. Not after I've finally escaped. And it's all because of Bones.

I steal another look at the man--demon, I remind myself. He's intimidating, with the macabre skull tattoo covering his face. There's something about him though.

I shake my head. It's just because he saved me, I tell myself. He didn't kill me when he could have. When I begged him to.

I look away, back out at the dance floor. The Knights of Hades may trust Bones, but they don't trust me. And I'm not certain I should stay here.

But the alternative is far worse.

I shift in my seat, my borrowed jeans too tight and my shirt showing more cleavage than I'm used to. It isn't even showing that much, but after years of

being covered from neck to wrist to ankle, any skin is a lot to me.

Father Xavius would have me killed before letting me wear something like this.

I shiver, but the fear doesn't consume me the way it did. Bones saved me, and I'm free, I repeat to myself.

So long as the Knights of Hades let me go.

Where would I go though? I have no money, no job, nothing. The Light Justicars took me a week after I graduated high school. They'd promised me a scholarship opportunity, and for a kid with an indifferent mom and a string of asshole stepdads, it sounded like the answer to my prayers.

It was too good to be true.

I feel someone watching me and when I look over at Bones again, his eyes meet mine. My heart stops. Literally stops. And then beats double time.

There's kindness in his gaze. Kindness and understanding. I don't know if I deserve either of those. Not after what I was forced to do.

I offer him a smile, which is more like a grimace.

"Do you want to leave?" Bones asks, his voice low and rumbly. It makes me shiver. Strange heat coils in my stomach.

I nod. "Yes, please."

Bones stands and holds his hand out to me. I hesitate, and his brow furrows. But then I take his hand. It engulfs mine, large and warm. Bones leads me out of the Styx Bar. I glance over my shoulder, and see Reaper watching us. An entirely different shiver runs down my spine. Reaper is dangerous, like a predator waiting to strike.

Bones squeezes my hand, and the shiver turns to butterflies. I'm afraid of Reaper.

I'm afraid of what he'll do when he discovers the truth about me.

I have to leave before then. No matter what.



[Read BONES on Amazon here.](#)

or

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hailing from the Pacific Northwest, Rowan Hart is a storyteller who aims to blend passion and the supernatural. With a knack for crafting tales that feature rugged alpha males, strong-willed heroines, and a dash of the paranormal, she keeps readers on the edge of their seats. Beyond her writing, Rowan dives into her ADHD-inspired hobbies and tends to her aptly named "spite garden." Immerse yourself in her captivating worlds at RowanHartBooks.com, where steamy and thrilling adventures await.