

# **Cursed**

## **The Thrice Cursed Mage, #1**

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# Chapter 1

The sound of punishing hydraulics snapped me from sleep. My eyes shot open, but I couldn't see much of anything through the closed lids of the dumpster. The stink of rotten eggs and festering meat filled my nostrils, turning my stomach as I struggled to find my bearings but succeeded only in burying myself further beneath gobs of slimy debris. I reached out, trying to claw my way through the plastic trash bags piled on top of me as the whole world shuddered up and to the left, covering me in dirty diapers, rotten tuna fish, and moldy cheese.

My right hand lashed out with a mind of its own, trying to grip on the inside of the steel dumpster as it began to tilt, dousing the back of my neck in warm, sticky fluid that smelled of rancid beer. Bile rose up in my throat as my fingers scrapped against the paint-chipped metal, desperate for purchase that would not come.

The sound of a garbage truck's crushing hydraulics filled my ears, reverberating deep down in my gut as a snake of fear twisted inside. I tried to scream, to cry out for them to stop as gravity, the bitch that she is, began pulling me toward my inevitable demise.

The lids beneath me fell open then, smacking against the metal side with a sound like a gunshot. The sudden glare of sunlight was nearly blinding, but it was the flash of a trash-filled pit that threw me into a panic. I scrambled to grab onto something, anything that could arrest my fall before I tumbled into the gaping maw of the trash truck.

As my feet cleared the edge of the dumpster and my fingers slid off the metal, a wave of rancid, curdled milk crashed against my face, filling my nostrils with fetid goo and cutting off my air supply. Without thinking, I opened my mouth to suck in a breath before my lungs exploded. Milk spilled down my throat, and while I tried to curse in rage and horror, the only sound that came out was a hoarse, bubbling gag that would never be heard over the noise.

Even if I could have managed to cry out, there was no way for someone to hear me scream over the roar of the punishing hydraulics destined to compact me into pulp. Not that it mattered. If I survived the fall into the metal jaws below, I was going to be pretty damned dead about a second later when the automated press punched my teeth through my brain.

If the driver saw me now, it would probably be too late for him to stop his truck from killing me. As the dumpster upended itself, I fell backward, scrabbling against the metal like a pathetic lizard as the lower part of my body cleared the edge. My heart hammered in my chest like a goddamned bass drum as I tumbled ass over elbows. My right hand shot up, reaching for one last desperate handhold. A stream of crimson light, so bright it was blinding even over the sunlight streaming into the alley from above, burst from the tattoos emblazoned on my arm.

With that last desperate lunge, my fingertips brushed at the edge of the heavy plastic dumpster lid, and I jerked to a stop that damned near dislocated my shoulder. A howl of pain ripped from my throat as I hung there, trash cascading down around me from the dumpster like rain from a hideous, disgusting storm cloud.

As I hung there, watching the metal jaws of the compactor crush the trash into the back of the truck, part of me marveled the driver hadn't seen me. The other part of me was thanking any and all gods for letting me live, even though I wasn't sure how that was possible. I ought to be dead.

I craned my head upward, shielding my eyes from the still falling trash as best I could. My right arm was as black as pitch. Scarlet symbols I didn't recognize glowed with feverish light across its entire length, but what was even weirder was how my fingers clung to the heavy plastic lid like I was Spiderman. I mean, hey, I'm not complaining because I was pretty sure I'd been about to die in a hail of old beer bottles and half-eaten sandwiches, but still, it was a little weird, especially because the rest of my skin was so pale I could have blended in with a milk display.

Before I could begin to figure out what the hell was going on, the dumpster began to tilt back the other direction. Momentum and gravity took turns slamming me into the metal belly of the dumpster before the lids fell back into place, leaving me shrouded in darkness. My hand released its grip on the lid, and I fell against the steel bottom hard enough to make my teeth rattle in my skull. Agony shot through my back as a sickening crack of my spine against metal filled my ears. I lay there, struggling to breathe until well after the dumpster was back on the ground.

I was tempted to lay there and rest for a while, to try and figure out what the hell had happened, but what if I passed out? Sure, I'd somehow survived this time, but I might not survive the next time. Besides, the idea of being covered in garbage wasn't exactly appealing. In the unlikely event people who regularly dumped trash in here decided to glance inside first, they would probably notice me taking a nap inside and call the cops. I was pretty sure I wasn't exactly friendly with the police. Call it a hunch, but I don't think cops looked kindly upon people who slept in dumpsters.

With all the willpower I could muster, I crawled to my feet and pushed the heavy black lid open. The sunlight greeted me like a punch to the face, and I was forced to look away and cover my eyes with my black hand. Thankfully, the tattoos along my arm weren't glowing like they were radioactive anymore. I gave myself a moment to get used to the brightness before pulled myself over the metal lip. Even though I tried to land gracefully, I wound up collapsing onto the cracked asphalt. It hurt, but at least I was out of the dumpster.

I pushed myself to my feet, intending to walk off my recent debacle like a badass. Then I was going to go home and get myself a nice warm shower. I stopped mid-step. There was just one problem. I didn't remember where I lived. Hell, I didn't remember anything other than my name. Mac Brennan.

## Chapter 2

My hands flew to the pockets of my black slacks only to find them empty. I pulled them inside out and stared at the white fabric in disbelief for a lot longer than I cared to admit before I managed to summon the will to push them back inside. My hip pocket revealed even less since it was a pocket in decoration only. Why the hell was I wearing pants with decorative pockets? I glared at it in disgust until I began to feel ridiculous for staring at my own ass.

A sigh escaped me as I ran my left hand through my dirty blond hair and nearly had a heart attack when it came away wet. I pulled it back down and stared at the scarlet goo running down my fingers. My clothes were plastered to my body with too much blood for it to be good. Panic raced through me as I began patting myself down, looking to make sure all my parts were in the proper places.

A couple seconds later, I was relieved to find all my bits were where they should be. While I was covered in blood, among other things, it wasn't mine. That didn't bode well, and that was ignoring how this bit of knowledge didn't terrify me as much as it should have. Was I used to this sort of thing? I hoped not.

I searched my mind, trying to figure out the reason for my current state but found myself finding only fog. Man, I was worse than Jon Snow. I really did know nothing.

In the end, it didn't really matter. I needed to find a change of clothes and a shower because if someone saw me like this, I was going to be facing a lot of uncomfortable questions I couldn't answer. I was pretty sure the whole amnesia defense didn't work very well when you were found covered in blood.

Unfortunately, I had no funds, and I needed to figure out why my damned arm was blacker than the hair on Lucifer's ass. I stopped, my breath catching in my throat as I slowly raised my right hand and stared at it. In all the excitement, I'd sort of dismissed my blackened flesh, but now that I wasn't about to be crushed to death in a trash compactor, I found myself wondering about it.

I wasn't sure how much of my flesh was covered in the strange inky darkness, but as I unbuttoned the cuff of my shirt and pulled it up to check, all the flesh I could see was black. My heart began to hammer in my chest as a wave of panic swept over me. I reached out, trying to steady myself against the side of the dumpster. I took a deep breath in a mostly failed attempt to calm down. How had my arm had gotten this way? Had I done this to myself? Even if I had, that didn't explain the strange red symbols tattooed in startling relief over my blackened flesh.

Earlier, when I'd been about to fall to my doom in the dumpster, I could have sworn my tattoos had glowed, but they weren't now. I trailed my fingers over the symbols. My skin felt normal enough. Maybe I'd just been hallucinating due to adrenaline and circumstance? That had to be the case, and if it wasn't, surely there was some other explanation. Maybe they'd been painted with glow in the dark ink or something. Hell, for all I knew I was an actor and the black arm and tattoos were just some temporary thing done by the makeup department so I could to play a part. It wasn't like I could remember getting them, or even what had happened to me last night.

That in itself was really unsettling. Why couldn't I remember anything and why did I have no ID or wallet? Had I gotten mugged and dumped in a dumpster, or worse? I needed to find out what happened, but I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like the answer to that question. I took another deep breath and this time it helped me calm down a little. I needed a plan, something to focus on so I wouldn't go bat shit insane trying to remember what happened. Finding clothing and money seemed like an easier thing to deal with than my weirdly-colored arm, and right now, I needed to focus on things I could accomplish.

I looked down at myself, trying to decide if walking out of my tiny alleyway would gather too much attention from passersby. It was probably going to be a coin flip since I was wearing a black trench coat over a bloodstained white button up and black pants. I looked like the type of guy who had walked into an office building and opened fire screaming about water cooler injustices. This fact was punctuated by the red tie hanging limply around my neck. Still, if I buttoned up the trench coat, I'd no doubt be able to cover the blood making my shirt stick to my body. As far as plans went, well, it was a plan.

A moment later, I was out in the sunlight and sweating from the heat. I smelled like days old garbage and blood. Not the world's best combination, especially when combined with my sweat. It made the need for a change of clothes and a shower leap several more levels of importance. Every second I walked around like this increased the likelihood someone would call the police to report a guy splattered with blood was walking around in a trench coat. They'd probably shoot first, shoot second to make sure, and then ask questions third in that given scenario. I knew I would. Hell, I probably had.

Thankfully, just across the street was a strip mall with a laundromat. I glanced around, noted the cars speeding down the street and made a mad dash across the four-lane street. I hit the center divider just as a blue Civic sped by, missing me by inches. Evidently, the driver had decided I'd either get out of the way or get under the tires. For drivers to be that sociopathic, I must be in a major city like Miami or Los Angeles. Why couldn't I have woken up in Oregon? While I had no recollection of driving in any of those places, I was pretty sure the Oregonian drivers were awesome in comparison to the one who'd tried to turn me into a road pancake.

I flashed the Civic the bird only to see the driver throwing his own one fingered salute in my direction. Jackass. I shook it off and studied the two lanes in front of me for a second. Satisfied all the cars were too far away to run me over unless they tried really, really hard at it, I sprinted across the remaining stretch of street like I was the roadrunner fleeing Wile E. Coyote. Meep, meep, bitches.

The gods must have been on my side because I reached the curb without becoming roadkill. My chest heaved from the effort. With my hands on my knees, I sucked in a breath or seven. I wasn't sure why I was so tired since I appeared to be in relatively decent shape, but then again, I'd just ran all out for fifteen feet. I needed to get my ass on a treadmill stat.

A smirk crossed my lips. I'd have to put cardio on my list. You know, right after finding out why I woke up in a dumpster covered in blood. Still, I probably had a gym membership I never used like every other person I didn't remember knowing. Did I have friends? A girlfriend? Children? Was there someone wondering why I didn't come home last night?

I needed to stop thinking. It was bringing up too many questions I didn't have answers for. The only thing I had was fog where memories should have been. It wasn't nearly enough, and I could already feel frustration starting to set in. If I kept it up, I was going to go into a tailspin fast. That wouldn't help.

No, what I needed was to follow my two-step plan. Get clothes and a shower. It was simple. I felt like I could handle that. I made my way across the sidewalk with purpose and stepped through the yellow flowers marking the divide between the parking lot and the outside world. A moment later, I was passing the only two cars in the strip mall, a red convertible and one of those black kidnapper vans. Hopefully neither of their drivers would be inside the laundromat.

With that happy thought, I pushed open the heavy black framed glass door and found myself staring at exactly no one inside. It made me wonder briefly how places like this even stayed in business. It wasn't like it was attached to an apartment complex where expenses were mostly covered by rent and the change collected was like extra profit. No, this place was off on its own. That meant people used it a lot. People who couldn't afford things like washers and dryers.

Great. I was in the poor section of town. I didn't have a problem with poor people or anything and wasn't exactly worried about getting mugged. If someone tried something, I was going to go with the whole "beware my demonic hand" thing while making scary faces. No, my sense of unease came more from distaste. As I stared at the spinning, rumbling dryers, I knew I was going to steal myself some new clothes provided I found anything even remotely my size. I was robbing poor people. I might as well have been a banker.

With that ugly thought, I began pulling open dryers, looking for stuff I thought would fit me. It didn't take long for me to find a navy blue polo that had clearly been washed one too many times, a pair of tan khaki pants, black socks, and even though it hurt me deep in my soul, a pair of red boxer briefs. Yeah, that's right, I was going to steal another man's underwear. For all I knew, this wasn't a new low point in my life, but it sure as hell felt like one.

I stuffed the pilfered clothing under my arm and moved toward the bathroom in the back. When I'd stepped in here, I wasn't sure if they'd even have a lavatory, but hey, apparently today wishes were horses. Once inside the restroom, I locked the door so no one would bother me while I changed. Since there wasn't any good place to hang up my stolen clothes and I was loath to put them on the floor of a public bathroom, I stuffed them on top of the faucet and prayed they wouldn't fall in the sink. I turned on the hot water and much to my surprise, nothing came out.

"Swell," I muttered in a voice that had smoked one too many cigarettes and chased it with one too many shots of cheap whiskey. "Double or nothing the cold works."

It did. Cold water splashed out of the faucet and struck the cheap ceramic bowl in a torrent. So they'd shut off the hot water, probably to keep people from bathing in here. Cheap bastards. Well, I'd show them. I stripped off my clothes and flung them next to the pathetic black trashcan in the corner. Yes, it was a little gross taking them off since they were stuck to my skin with sticky blood. It was even worse because they left slimy streaks of crimson across my body.

Once I was naked, I stared at myself in the scratched mirror above the sink. I had one of those douchebag faces you'd see on a tennis court at an expensive

country club attached to a guy named Chet. It was the kind of face that begged to be punched. Someone else must have thought so too because my right eye looked like it'd been on the wrong side of a fist, and my nose was crooked just enough for me to know it'd been broken at least once. My cheeks were covered in at least a day's worth of stubble and my blond goatee was streaked with dried blood and curdled milk.

The rest of me wasn't much better what with the cuts, scratches and bruises. My ribs were an ugly shade of yellowish purple, and as I touched them with my index finger, a stab of pain nearly made me cry out. As far as I knew, I wasn't a doctor nor had I played one on TV, but nothing seemed to be broken. Maybe the bruising was my body's way of telling me not to go getting my ass kicked. I instantly agreed with its sentiment.

Whoever had put me in the dumpster hadn't been kind, and not being able to remember why it happened was really starting to piss me off. Why had someone left me in a dumpster with no form of identification and no memory?

Still, I had to admit it was possible those two things weren't connected. Maybe it was a simple mugging that had no connection to me having no memories. It wasn't like I'd searched the alley well. Maybe if I went back, I'd find my wallet, sans money and credit cards, on the ground somewhere? I needed to check as soon as I cleaned myself off. A surge of confidence shot through me.

"All I need to do is go back to the alley and find my wallet," I told myself, trying to ignore the possibility that my wallet had been in the dumpster along with me and was now in the belly of the garbage truck that had tried to eat me.

I pushed it out of my mind and plunged my hands into the freezing water, desperate to wash off the smears of blood and the stink of hot garbage. The sensation was hard to describe because while it should have been cold enough to turn my skin blue, it felt more like lukewarm bathwater. Maybe the room was just chillier than I'd thought and the comparison was messing with my mind?

There were no goosebumps on my naked body though, and I didn't feel particularly cold. It was curious, but not as curious as the dark tendrils extending out from my right shoulder. They reminded me of slowly spreading rot. It was like a promise of things to come. None of them good.

That's when I freaked out and started scrubbing at my flesh, trying desperately to get the ink off my skin. The blood and grit came off pretty quickly, but the darkness remained behind, stubbornly clinging to my arm. Whoever had done this to me had sure made it tough to get off.

I stood there scrubbing my flesh raw until the draining water ran clear. I let out a slow breath as cold water ran down the back of my neck and decided I needed to get myself a real shower with warm water. So far, I'd just assaulted the darkness with cold water and soap so cheap it couldn't even get the gunk out from beneath my fingernails. That wasn't going to do the job on this black stuff. Whoever had done this, didn't want me getting it off easily. I wasn't sure why that was the case, but it would probably make perfect sense once I figured out who I was and what was going on.

"I just need to get out of here," I mumbled to myself before I pulled on another man's underwear. If stealing it had been a low point, this one was five feet under. I bit my lip to keep from cursing in frustration and put on the rest of my

permanently-borrowed clothing. I hadn't found a belt or shoes so I was forced to use my old ones. Thankfully, the cheap black leather loafers and matching black belt were easy enough to clean off with paper towels and soapy water. I'd still have to trade them in, but for now I was confident they'd withstand cursory inspection.

In a fit of neighborliness, I gathered up the remnants of my bloody clothing and dumped it in the trash instead of leaving it on the floor. That done, I began moving toward the door, intent on letting myself out of the place. Something behind me grabbed ahold of the back of my neck and jerked me backward so abruptly, I nearly fell on my ass. I spun, fists raised, but the only thing I saw was my trench coat sticking out of the trashcan even though I was pretty sure I'd put it on the bottom. It was pristine which was somewhat surprising since I didn't remember cleaning it off.

Before I realized what I was doing, I'd pulled it free of the garbage can and slung it on. Something about wearing the heavy black coat felt like coming home. Perhaps it had sentimental value my lizard brain wouldn't let me ignore. That must have been it.

I probably looked ridiculous standing there in a half-tucked blue polo, a black trench coat, and khaki pants several inches too long for my thirty-two inch legs, but hey, maybe I was going to go scare children at the local Walmart after I figured out who I was. I had no memories after all, so who knew what I was supposed to be doing right now?

With that thought still fresh in my mind, I unlocked the door and stepped out into the laundromat to see two hulking men in tank tops beating the shit out of a five-foot-nothing woman.

## Chapter 3

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I yelled at the thugs trying to stomp a mud hole in the girl's ass.

The two brutes glanced at me from across the laundromat with black as mud eyes. The dismissal plastered across their faces made me angry in a way I couldn't quite explain. Clearly, they didn't see me as much of a threat and that was unacceptable. I stepped forward with the sudden desire to show them exactly who the alpha male was in here.

The guy closest to me was bigger than his compatriot and had skin the color of coffee spoiled by too much cream. His bulk seemed to overflow out of his sweat-stained white tank top, making me think of someone who had probably played sports in high school, but had since let an extra layer of years build up over his muscles. He turned his shaved head back toward the brunette, ignoring me. A surge of rage exploded in the back of my brain.

Something reptilian and angry lifted itself up from the recesses of my mind as I took a step forward, my hands clenched as my eyes zeroed in on the woman's raven-colored hair still clutched in the thug's meaty fist. The beginning of a bruise in the shape of a handprint was evident on her left cheek and blood dribbled from



her swollen lips and down her chin. Blood was spattered all across the cheap tile floor of the laundromat.

The thug holding her raised his other hand like he was going to slap the taste out of her mouth even though I was standing right there. I guess he didn't care about witnesses. Well, I'd make him regret that. I took another step forward as a red film of rage filled my vision.

"What have we here?" his compatriot, a tattooed white gorilla with a face like a bulldog and a military buzz cut said. He raised one dark eyebrow as he watched me cross the room. "Some kind of hero?" He cracked his massive neck before sniffing at the air hard enough for his industrial-sized nostrils to flare. "Trust me, she's not worth it, pal. Best hurry on your way."

"I'm not a hero," I said as a glimpse into my past zipped across my mind. The girl was different, and the guy beating her had been her boyfriend, but the circumstances had been otherwise the same. I'd done something to the guy. I stopped mid-step and reached for the memory, grasping for it with mental hands, but it slipped through my ethereal fingers and disappeared into the winds, leaving me with a faded picture of me covered in the guy's blood.

"Good to know. If you're smart, you won't be here long," said the dark one in a bored tone. Then, like I wasn't there at all, he smacked the tiny brunette hard enough for the sound of it to reverberate through the room before tossing her across the cheap linoleum floor.

She bounced once and slid to a stop at the booted feet of the man's partner. Her trip left a crimson snail trail in her wake. They'd really have to have done a number on her for that to happen. That realization made me want to tear them in half, to show them what it felt like to be beaten to a bloody pulp. It was one thing to ignore me, but it was quite another to beat the crap out of a woman who probably weighed less than a hundred pounds soaking wet.

My eyes snapped from the brunette on the laundromat's floor to the bulldog-faced thug coming toward me. His arms were covered in tattoos of babies being skewered on spikes and other evil shit, and while something told me I should be scared, I just wasn't. Not even a little. I wanted him to attack me, to give me an excuse to end him.

Instinctively, my right hand tightened into a fist, and I could have sworn I smelled the faintest hint of rotten eggs and swamp gas. Not only that, the temperature seemed to creep up a couple degrees as I took my own step forward to meet the bruiser's charge.

"The fuck you think you're gonna do here, pal?" The bulldog's mouth curled into a snarl as he reached out one hand to stop me. I walked brazenly into it so his palm was pressed against my chest. The man's eyes narrowed as he glanced from his hand to my face. "Newsflash son, you don't want to save this girl. She's not worth it."

My vision went red with rage as everything inside me screamed for me to tear him apart. A snarl tore from my lips, and without thinking, I grabbed his wrist with my right hand and twisted while stepping in closer so I could throw my entire bodyweight into the movement. His wrist snapped in my grip as he came crashing down to the floor. He slammed into the linoleum, and his forehead bounced off the ground with a wet smack. I gave him a kick in the face just to make sure he

wouldn't be getting up. It felt so good, I did it again. What can I say? If it feels good, I do it.

"You should just go away now, unless you want to cuddle up next to your friend." My voice was way more confident than I had expected as I smiled congenially at the other guy.

He stared back at me in a mixture of rage and horror, and the sight of it made me get all warm and fuzzy inside. I'm not sure why seeing his shock made me feel better, probably because he'd been beating on the girl. At least I hoped that was why. If not, I was probably not a very good person, and I was really hoping that wasn't the case. If I wound up being some kind of dick bag, maybe I was better off forgetting my past.

The guy snarled by way of reply and lunged at me, crossing the ten feet between us in the blink of an eye. I stepped calmly under his lunge and caught him across the throat with my right forearm. The force of the blow reverberated down my arm as I stepped around and kicked his legs out from under him while using my bodyweight to drive him into the ground.

He collapsed flat on his back, gasping for breath that wouldn't come as I calmly got to my feet and stepped past him. I probably should have felt bad about nearly crushing his windpipe, but I didn't. They'd beat up a woman, and while I wasn't sure if my mama had raised me right, I still felt pretty pleased with myself for saving the girl. If a couple of dirt bags got their asses kicked in the process, I wasn't about to shed tears over it.

I paused and took a deep breath on the way to the girl. Had I really just rationalized what I'd done in a rage-filled haze under the cover of chivalry? Hell, for all I knew this girl was a mass murderer, and I'd just saved her to kill again. Even if she was innocent, what right did I have to play judge, jury, and executioner? I pushed the thought out of my mind. If saving her turned out to be a problem, it was one I was okay with having.

I spun on my heel and dropped down next to the two downed thugs and searched through their pockets, hoping to find something nefarious on their persons that would let me ignore the guilt suddenly prickling at the back of my neck. I found exactly what I was looking for. Along with about fifty bucks in cash, brute number one had a loaded 9mm Beretta pistol with one of those nifty fifteen-round magazines that was illegal in California now.

Either these guys were holding illegal weapons or had been grandfathered in. I was pretty sure it was the former and not the latter. Either way, the weapon was mine now. Asshole tax and all. I stuffed the gun into the waistband of my khakis before making my way over to the dryer I'd pilfered earlier. I tossed the cash inside. Hopefully, whoever I'd robbed would feel a little better about it now.

The woman was sitting up, watching me with a look on her face I couldn't quite identify. It was part relief, part excitement, and part something dark and afraid. That look told me she hadn't ruled out the possibility of me coming after her next.

"Are you okay?" I asked, moving across the laundromat and offering her my left hand. I wasn't sure if she was one of those "I don't need a man's help" girls. For all I knew, she'd be pissed at me for saving her when she'd totally had those thugs right where she wanted them. Still, I wasn't going to stand there and wait for her to get up without offering. I wasn't a jackass.

“Yeah, thanks,” she said, and her husky voice rolled over me like velvet and rich cream, sending little shivers down my spine. The reaction startled me so much, I nearly dropped her when she grabbed my hand.

“Don’t mention it,” I replied, straining to keep the excitement from my words as I pulled her to her feet.

She nodded once and shook the hand she gripped, mischief in her eyes. The heat of her touch melted across me like warm butter, making my knees go weak and my breath catch in my throat. What had she done to me? How was she doing it? And could she do more?

I tried to speak, tried to say anything at all as she released my hand and finger brushed her dark hair out of her face. Even with the busted lip, she was beautiful. Not in the ridiculous Hollywood way either. No, she was the perfect girl next door. Only, the way she looked at me, gave me the feeling that not only would my mom like her, but I’d like what she did when the two of us were all alone together.

She was curvy, sure, and her tanned skin would be the envy of anyone, but her face was just a touch flawed. Her nose was a little too big, and her teeth were a little too crooked. Rather than mar her though, those deficiencies served to ground her beauty and make her seem real.

“We need to get out of here before those two bozos recover.” Her full ruby red lips quirked into a smile. “Thanks for saving me.” She gave me the once over and bit her lip, letting it drag free of her white teeth. “I’m not sure how to thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said, shaking my head and shoving my right hand in my pocket. I’m not sure why I did it, but I didn’t want to have to go explaining why one of my arms was black as pitch.

“I normally don’t come to this laundromat,” she said by way of an explanation I hadn’t asked for. “I normally use the one in the basement of my apartment, but it’s been on the fritz and you know how it is.” She moved over and began gathering up the spilled basket of laundry a few feet away. “They say only death and taxes are absolute, but I don’t think the people who say that have to deal with laundry and dirty dishes.”

Before I could stop myself, I knelt down next to her and began helping her put the clothing into the basket. As I dumped a pair of socks with red racing stripes down one side into the blue plastic basket, she wrinkled her nose at me.

“Mister, not to be rude or anything, but I just washed these, and you smell like the inside of a dumpster.” She smirked at me, her blue eyes full of humor. “I’d appreciate it if you don’t touch any of them. I really don’t want to have to wash them all over again with people like that around.” She nodded over my shoulder toward the downed thugs.

“Fair enough,” I replied, moving back from her as heat filled my cheeks. Was I blushing? No, that was impossible. I didn’t know much about myself, but I was reasonably sure Mac Brennan didn’t blush. “I did wake up in a dumpster this morning.” I shrugged and my cheeks turned their temperature up a notch or two. The jerks.

She stood, holding the basket of clothing to her chest and stared at me very hard. “Why did you wake up in a dumpster?” The words came out of her mouth slowly, like she had weighed the question and wasn’t sure if she really wanted to know the answer.

"I'm not sure." I looked at my shoes because they were suddenly very interesting. I'd missed a spot of blood on my right toe or gathered a new one. I kicked at it with my left shoe, trying half-heartedly to smudge it off before I stopped suddenly, not wanting to draw her eyes to it. "I have no memory. The only thing I know is my name."

"I can't imagine what that's like," she replied, and I couldn't quite understand the tone of her voice. It almost seemed like she was questioning what I'd said. To be fair, I wasn't exactly a reliable source and my story was ridiculous. I mean, how many people wake up in dumpsters with no memory and crazy kung fu skills?

"It sucks because I'm sure I was supposed to be doing something. I have this feeling something important is slipping through my fingers with each passing second." I let out a slow breath.

"Have you tried going to the police?" she asked, taking a step backward away from me. At first I thought she might be afraid of me, but as I stared into her eyes, I questioned that assessment. It seemed less like she was afraid of me and more like she just wanted to go. It made sense. She likely had things to do.

"Not as of yet." I glanced back at the thugs. Neither of them were moving. Good. The last thing I wanted was for them to get up and force me to knock them out again. "As silly as it is, I've been trying to clean myself up since I woke up in a dumpster." I tugged on the waistband of my pilfered khakis trying to pull them up a little bit. It was no use, they were still dragging on the ground. They'd do for now, but eventually I was going to wear holes in them. I had half a mind to roll them up, but then I'd look like the big box store version of Huck Finn wearing loafers. No, that wasn't happening.

"I know I'm going to regret this," she whispered like she was talking to herself before meeting my eyes with her own, and for a second I got the feeling she was trying to read my thoughts. "But would you like to come back to my place and shower? Then I can drop you off at the police station."

"I don't think I can accept that," I said as she turned and sashayed toward the exit. I felt almost guilty for bothering her. Okay, I lied, I felt really guilty. Maybe I didn't need to go with her, maybe I shouldn't get her involved at all? I did have a strange devil arm, after all, and she seemed too nice to involve in that weirdness. Besides, I likely just had to do a Google search on my name, and I'd find my social network profile. If not, there was always the phone book. How many Mac Brennans could there possibly be? While that might only give me a phone number and address, it likely wouldn't take long to track them all down. Surely one would be me.

"Then don't come," she replied, a smirk in her voice. "Continue standing there smelling like last week's garbage."

"Wait," I said, calling out to her as she shoved open the door and disappeared through it without so much as a backward glance. Without thinking, I sprinted across the room and pushed through the door. She was only a few feet away. She shot furtive glances in both directions, reminding me of a mouse searching for cats. Satisfied no one was coming, she crossed the parking lot so quickly her white running shoes were practically a blur on the asphalt.

"Lady, stop, please. I accept your offer," I yelled, and this time her shoulders stiffened. She'd clearly heard me, but other than that small reaction, she didn't

acknowledge me as she approached a beat up red Dodge Neon. She unlocked it and put the basket on the roof of the car before turning to me.

“Okay,” she said and that scared look flashed through her eyes for a second. It made me feel like a jerk for accepting her offer, and if I’d had any other plan, I’d have turned around and walked away. The only problem was, I had nowhere to go, and her offering me a shower and a ride to the police station sounded infinitely better than wandering around a town I didn’t remember.

“Thank you,” I said, allowing my gratitude to flood into my voice. “I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” She nodded before opening the back door of the tiny car and tossing the basket on the backseat. “Now let’s go. I want to be back home by 2PM. That gives us four hours.”

“I don’t think it will take that long. I’ll take a quick shower,” I replied, walking up to the passenger door as she slid into the driver’s seat.

“You never know,” she said, reaching across the car and unlocking the door for me. “You might be one of those girly men who needs conditioner and body butter.”

## Chapter 4

Aside from being small, her apartment was rather nice despite everything inside looking like it’d come from thrift stores and clearance bins. All of it had personality to it, suggesting she’d put thought into everything from the green table with yellow legs to the gray couch with pink zebra-striped throw pillows.

A movie poster of Alan Rickman dressed as Severus Snape hung front and center above the couch. Hanging next to it were pictures of the actor in his various roles, and my eyes immediately locked on the one of Hans Gruber falling from the top of the Nakatomi building. “Yippee ki yay!” was written on it in golden ink followed by a signature I couldn’t make out, but since a similar John Hancock was on the Galaxy Quest photo beneath it, I was inclined to think it might be the man’s autograph.

“Well, someone has an obsession,” I said, tearing my gaze from the photos to find her a few feet away, old takeout bags in her hands as she tried and mostly failed, to clear off the cluttered space. A flush filled her cheeks as she stood there red-handed.

“Call me old fashioned, but it just isn’t Christmas until I see Hans Gruber fall off Nakatomi Plaza.” She shrugged and deposited her refuse into a trashcan stylized like R2D2. “And if you disagree, you can leave.”

“You know, when I was little I watched Die Hard a bunch of times.” I shrugged, not sure how I remembered it, but the memory had sprung into my mind when she’d mentioned Nakatomi Plaza. “Every night for an entire summer, I laid in my bed and watched John McClane take out terrorists. I was never much for surfing, so that was my own personal Endless Summer.”

“Well, good then,” she said, letting out a little sigh of relief before shaking herself back to reality. “The shower’s over there.” She pointed behind me, and I

glanced over my shoulder and saw a closed door that looked even cheaper than the threadbare carpet.

“Alright,” I said, turning back toward her. She had another armful of trash. Evidently, she didn’t clean very often, but judging by the look of the place, it seemed like most of it may have been from the night before.

“I’ll try to find you something to wear. My ex left some of his stuff here, and he was about your size.” Even though I didn’t know her well, a wistful sadness seemed to fill her as she said the words.

Before I could respond, the door directly behind her burst open and a boy about eight years old with dark bedraggled hair stepped out into the living room.

“Mom, you’re home!” he squeaked, rushing toward her before stopping suddenly as he caught sight of me. “Who is that?” He pointed at me, accusation and confusion filling his tiny face.

A look of panic burst across the brunette’s face before melting into an expression of horror. She spun on her heels, still clutching the takeout bags and stared at the boy in disbelief. “John, why are you home?” She looked him up and down, taking in his Spider-man T-shirt and blue jeans like they were out of place. “And why aren’t you in your uniform?”

“A water pipe broke at school so they had to send us home because there was no more running water.” The boy shrugged. “So when I got off the bus, I came up and changed. They said they called you.”

Embarrassment filled her cheeks as she dropped the bags onto the counter and snatched her battered black purse off the table. She opened it in a flurry and pulled out a small pink phone and stared at it.

“Christ,” she muttered, punching in some buttons on the phone and holding it to her ear. While I couldn’t make out the words, an automated voice droned from the device. A moment later, she pulled the phone away and stared at the boy.

“Can you go to Emily’s for a little while? Mommy has some errands to run.” She stared at him apologetically, and I felt like the worse kind of slime simply for existing. “We can go get iced cream when I get back, okay?”

The boy looked at her for a long time before sighing loudly. “Fine,” he grumbled before glaring at me like it was my fault, which it probably was. Then he trudged past me toward the door, pausing only to snag a Transformer that looked like Optimus Prime off the counter.

The door opened and closed behind me, but even still I could hear him walk only a few feet before knocking on another door. It opened, there were some muffled words. It shut.

“Emily is my neighbor. She’s an old widow and watches John sometimes when I’m at work,” the brunette said by way of explanation, her cheeks still filled with cherry-colored embarrassment.

I waved my hand, trying to dismiss her sudden need to explain herself. Truthfully, I felt pretty horrible about being here, and now I was basically forcing her son to have to go stay with a neighbor. If I’d done the smart thing and left to look for my wallet in the alley like I’d originally planned on doing, she would be able to spend time with her son now.

I still wasn’t quite sure why I’d come with her. Part of it was that I really wanted to try getting this black stuff off my arm. If a shower didn’t work, my next bath

was going to be in a vat of paint thinner. The other part was a little more complicated because I couldn't quite explain it to myself. Since the moment I'd seen her getting beaten up by those guys in the laundromat, I had the urge to protect her. It was silly, especially since I didn't even know who I was, let alone who she was, but there it was.

"You don't need to explain yourself to me." I turned toward the bathroom. "I really appreciate this, by the way. I'll be out of your hair in only a moment." I shot her a grin. "I mean, if I was a good person I'd just leave right now, but have you smelled me?"

She wrinkled her nose even as relief spread across her face. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Then you know a shower is something I can't refuse," I said, and she smiled, and it was like someone turned on the sun. My heart leapt in my throat, cutting off the oxygen to my brain as I stared at her for almost as long as it would take for the moment to stretch into awkwardness. Even though she had a kid, I'd be lying if I didn't briefly entertain an idyllic fantasy with a white picket fence.

I pushed the thought away, suddenly embarrassed to be thinking about her like that and made my way into her cozy bathroom. With the door shut and locked behind me, I reached past the Transformers shower curtain and turned on the water so it could heat up while I stripped off my clothes. It was a little weird because I wasn't sure where to put my dirty laundry. In the end, I opted for dropping it in a pile behind the door.

As I stepped into the warm spray of the shower, a euphoric feeling overcame me. I'd never expected a shower to make me feel this much better, but then again, I couldn't remember spending the night in a dumpster before. As I watched dirty brown water circle the drain and disappear, I tried to content myself with what little progress I'd made.

It was hard to do. I was really no closer to finding out who I was despite an insatiable need welling up in me, demanding I do something. I just didn't know what. It was possible the police would be able to help me, but I was reasonably sure things were going to get more complicated before they got better. My best case scenario was that someone had filed a missing person's report for me, but I didn't have especially high hopes.

For all I knew, I'd only disappeared last night, and I was pretty sure the police didn't begin looking for people until at least a day had passed. No, it was more likely, they would have no information about me whatsoever. It was even more frustrating because I had a niggling feeling in the back of my mind that time was of the essence.

"What if I find out who I am, and it's too late to use to do anything?" I whispered into the shower spray as I tried to scrub the blackness off my arm, but it was as stubborn as ever. I was starting to worry it was permanent, but that didn't make any sense. Why would I have made my one arm as black as pitch on purpose? The tattoos I could sort of understand. People got tattoos all the time, but I'd never heard of anyone tattooing their arm to be black as coal.

"Why can't I remember why I have this stuff on my arm?" I growled in frustration a few minutes later. As I said the words, a sense that I was being watched filled me to nearly bursting. I spun in a slow circle, but seeing no one, I

poked my head out of the shower. No one was in the bathroom either, so why did it feel like someone was boring holes in my back?

“Hello?” I asked, somewhat louder, but no one responded. I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. I ducked my head back inside the shower and grabbed a handful of shampoo with a name I couldn’t pronounce. The smell of lavender filled my nostrils. I worked it into my scalp as quickly as possible. Even if there was no one watching me, I was suddenly all showered out.

I had just finished rinsing and was about to shut off the water when a knock on the door made me leap out of my skin. I crashed into the wall and stood there, chest heaving and heart hammering.

“I’m going to leave the clothes for you by the door.” The brunette’s voice carried through the door surprisingly well, making me wonder how thin the door was.

“Yeah,” I said, shutting the water off and snatching a towel of the rack.

“I think there’s a spare toothbrush in the drawer.” Then, before I could thank her, the sound of her retreating footsteps filled my ears.

“Thanks,” I called, trying to figure out what had happened, before deciding to shrug it off. I wrapped the towel around myself and stepped out of the shower. I found the toothbrush right where she said it would be. It was one of those free sample ones the dentist gives you for being a good boy.

I’m not sure if I can properly explain how good it felt to brush my teeth. My mouth had tasted like an ashtray mixed with heaping tablespoons of vomit and blood. Now it didn’t. Ecstatic didn’t even come close.

I opened the door, intent on snatching the clothing she’d left by the door, but as I opened it, she saw me with only a towel wrapped around my waist. The mug in her hand slipped from her grip, crashing to the floor and spilling dark, steaming liquid across the carpet as horror filled her face.

“Get out of my house right now!” she screamed, pointing at my right arm and backing away. I had half a moment to look at myself in confusion because I wasn’t sure why she was so upset. Then I saw my arm and everything sank into place.

I held up my hands in a “whoa, there” gesture. “Look, let me explain,” I said even though I had no idea how I was going to do that.

“I don’t want to hear your lies!” Her hand went to the drawer next to her as she jerked out a revolver big enough to leave a tennis ball sized exit wound in my body. “Get out right now and don’t come back, Cursed!”

## Chapter 5

“Look, just let me get dressed and I’ll leave,” I said, hoping against hope she wouldn’t just shoot me where I stood. Still, it was a little weird, right? Her just pointing a gun at me and calling me cursed. The way she said the word made it seem more like a description for a demon or monster and less like I’d had a curse put on me, but what the hell was a cursed? Clearly she knew about me, which I supposed was good even if it did have her pointing a gun at me. All I needed to do was get her to help me a little more.



“Don’t make me regret helping you,” she snapped, glaring at me with something dark and menacing in her eyes. That look told me in no uncertain terms that she’d shoot me if I so much as blinked the wrong way. “But since you are one of the Cursed, I’m pretty sure that’s impossible!”

“I won’t make you regret it. I promise.” I slowly knelt down and picked up the clothing at my feet, but as I moved to head back into the bathroom, she stopped me with a wave of the gun.

“No, dress where I can see you,” she said both her gun and gaze unwavering.

I was about to argue, but decided against it. What good would it do? She was right to be cautious after all. I did have the Beretta in my trench coat, and while I didn’t want to shoot her, I would if it kept me from getting shot.

“Okay,” I said, dropping the towel to the ground and standing there in my scar-riddled birthday suit.

A blush filled her cheeks, and for a split second she looked away before realizing what she was doing. I must have unconsciously taken a step toward her in that time because when she looked back at me, a snarl was on her lips. “Step back to where you were. I will shoot you if you move so much as an inch toward me.”

“Well, this is officially the least fun time I’ve ever had being naked next to a beautiful woman,” I replied, trying my best to lighten the mood. It didn’t seem to work so I busied myself examining what she’d given me to wear. A white button up, tan pants, a pair of smiley face boxers, and dark gray socks with little black kittens stitched onto the cuff. The socks made me smile until I remembered they came from her ex. Still, it wasn’t like I had a lot of choice. It was either wear these clothes or go back to my smelly, blood-spattered Walmart uniform. I put it on. It fit surprisingly well.

“Great, you’re dressed. Get out!” She gestured toward the door with one hand while being careful to keep the gun lined up on the center of my chest.

“Can I ask you something?” I said, dropping my hands to my sides in an attempt to appear less threatening. It was hard since you could still make out the black skin of my demonic arm through the thin white fabric.

“No,” she said before letting out a sigh and softening a hair. “What?”

“Why do you keep calling me cursed?” I said, trying my best to stare through her eyes and into her thoughts as I asked the question. It was no use. A mind reader I was not.

“Your arm marks the kiss of the Devil. I’m not sure for why.” She shot me a sad look that made my heart skip a beat. There was so much sadness in that look it made my chest hurt. “Get going.” She gestured toward the door again.

“I just need to get my coat,” I said, still trying to process what she’d told me. My arm had the kiss of the Devil on it? What the hell did that mean?

“Okay,” she replied. “But if you try anything, I will shoot you so many times even your demonic fairy godmother won’t be able to bring you back again. Understand?”

I nodded, and moving slowly, so she wouldn’t shoot me for making sudden movements, grabbed my trench coat. The moment I touched the dark fabric, I felt better. There was definitely something going on with the garment, my demon arm, and the girl. I just couldn’t put it together. I tried to think about what it could

possibly be, but as I reached into the mists of my memory, the only thing I could grasp were fragments of light and sound. Sadly, those were of little help.

“There, you have it, now go,” she stated flatly, gesturing toward the door for perhaps the millionth time.

“Alright. Thanks for the shower.” I smiled at her and slung on my trench coat. I looked like Castiel from *Supernatural* minus the tie. Awesome. “I don’t suppose you can tell me anything else?”

“I can tell you to leave again,” she replied, gritting her teeth. Normally, the look on her face would have made me back off, but what other choice did I have. If I didn’t get information out of her, I was back to square one.

Leaving like this wouldn’t help me find out who or what I was. I’ll be honest, the thought of putting everything together was slightly less appealing than it had once been since I now knew a devil had marked my arm. I was pretty sure what I found out about my past wasn’t going to be puppy dogs and sunshine. Maybe I didn’t really want to find out. Maybe leaving now would be the smart play, and it had the added benefit of keeping me from getting shot.

But I was Mac Brennan, and evidently, I liked to do things the hard way.

In one quick movement, I had the Beretta out and pointed at her. “As soon as you fill me in on what you know about me, I’ll get out of your hair. I promise,” I replied, while making sure I kept a respectable distance between us. If I needed to, I could still leap into the bathroom.

“Mother fucker,” she cursed before glaring at me hard enough to make my insides twist in guilt. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you.”

“You don’t have to trust me, just help me out.” I wiggled the fingers of my right hand, even though I wasn’t sure it was my best play. “Just tell me what you know about my arm, and I’ll be gone. I wasn’t lying when I said I woke up with no memory.” I carefully put my gun down on the carpet. “See I’m a nice guy.”

Her eyes tracked my movements, and when I stood back up, she let out an explosion of breath but didn’t lower her gun. Several seconds that seemed so thick with tension I could have spread them across toast passed between us.

“I’m going to hold you to that, Cursed.” She shot me an angry look. “If you knew what you were, you would understand my apprehension.”

“Fair enough,” I replied as she looked me over, probably trying to decide if I had any other hidden surprises. “What am I?”

“That’s all you have to say for yourself?” she asked, her features softening into a resigned sadness that made me feel like I’d just told her I’d lost the rent money gambling but would never do it again, and even though she knew it was a lie, she was willing to hope it was true. That this time would somehow be different. It made me feel like the worst piece of garbage ever, and while I had no idea what her previous dealings with Cursed had been, I resolved to try my best to make sure this time would be different.

“I’m not sure what else to say.” I tapped my temple with my right index finger. “No memories.”

“You really don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?” she asked, but it didn’t sound like a question.

“I’m not sure how I could make that more clear,” I replied, letting out a breath I hadn’t known I had been holding. “My name is Mac Brennan, and I woke up in a dumpster this morning. Other than that, I have exactly zero memory.”

“Well, that makes sense,” she said like it totally made sense even though I was pretty sure it made no sense at all. Something about the way she looked at me next made me think she knew a lot more than she was letting on. That made me instantly wary of her. I resolved to be more careful in the near future and glanced at my Beretta. Maybe I would be shooting her after all though that would make saving her a little pointless. Besides, I had promised to leave, and she still had her revolver pointed at me.

“Care to explain why it makes sense?” I said, unable to keep the peevishness out of my voice. “It’s been a rough morning.”

“Because otherwise you’d remember you made a deal with a devil to get that arm.” She gestured at me with one copper-nailed hand. “That’s what the black skin means. The red tattoo on your arm is where the demon signed its name on your flesh. It was branding you so everyone else would know who you made your deal with. You’re a modern day Faust. Congratulations. Hope it was worth it.”

I suddenly couldn’t breathe. Had I seriously made a deal with a demon to have my arm turned black as pitch? On purpose? Why the hell would I have done something like that? Whatever it was, I was sure it was important. Too bad I couldn’t remember why. Frustration crept up the back of my neck as I stared down at my black hand. No one would get something like this unless they *really* needed it. “What if I don’t believe you?”

“Yeah, because an arm like that is normal? I mean, day-glow tattoos? All the rage.” She shook her head in annoyance. “Look, I bet when you used your power, you smelled sulfur.”

“Power? Sulfur?” I replied feeling like a dumbass as I looked down at my arm and tried to make sense of her words. “What’s sulfur even smell like?”

“You know, rotten eggs, swamp gas. That sort of thing? That’s the smell of demons, of your cursed magic.” Her lips compressed into a thin smile. “I’ve never seen tats like yours though. They speak of ancient power. I’m guessing it was a pretty powerful demon who gave them to you. I’ll bet he wanted something pretty important to give you power like that. Something like, oh I don’t know, all your memories. I mean Jesus H. Christ, I’m not an expert. This kind of shit doesn’t happen every day.”

Her words made a bead of cold sweat drip down my back. I had smelled rotten eggs when I’d clung to the inside of that dumpster and again when I’d fought the thugs in the laundromat. Either she was super observant and pushing my buttons in just the right way, or I really had bargained away my memories to a demon in exchange for power. No, not just a run of the mill demon, but a super-powerful demon. Awesome. The day was starting to look up. You know, in the whole baring its teeth and getting ready to leap at my throat sort of way.

## Chapter 6

True to my word, I left without accosting her further. It was the gentlemanly thing to do after all. Especially since I'd promised her. What good was a man's word if he then went and broke it? Not much.

It didn't help that I was starting to get the feeling I hadn't exactly been the world's nicest guy in my former life because "hello, demonic tattoos." If what she'd told me was true, I was essentially tainted by evil and had to start making up for it now.

Still, I'd sold my soul for a reason, and I was just dying to figure out why I'd gone and done it. Surely, there had to be a good reason because just the idea of doing it filled me with abject terror, and somehow, I'd actually followed through with it. Maybe it had seemed like a good idea at the time, but it stunk of desperation. It was the kind of thing someone would only do as a last recourse. It made it even more important for me to find out why I'd become a modern day Faust because in most versions of that story, things didn't end well for him.

The reason itched at the edge of my consciousness like a cut inside my mouth I couldn't stop tonguing. So first thing was first. I was going to find a library or a computer and Google myself. If that didn't work, I was going to strongly consider hitting up a police station to see if I'd been reported missing. I'll admit, I was hesitant to approach the police, especially because of my whole demonic arm thing. Everything told me such a move would prove unwise. What if I had warrants or something? No, it'd be better to go the easy way before going the potentially impossible to escape from way.

"Mac, wait," the brunette called from the doorway to the apartment building. I turned on the sidewalk outside her building and stared at her in disbelief. Why had she come down here after forcing me out at gunpoint?

She stood there, breathing hard. Most of her body was hidden behind a door that looked like it had gotten kicked in one to many times by the police. That and the building's peeling paint made me wonder what part of the city we were in. Definitely not the better part, that was for sure. Still, it was definitely not my problem.

"Yeah?" I said, noting her distinct lack of a gun when she emerged and how she had changed into a gray knit sweater with a kitten on it and jeans. Well, those were positive developments.

"I just wanted you to know a couple more things." She stepped out from the doorway and moved onto the sidewalk, but didn't approach further. It reminded me of the way people acted around feral kittens. "I Googled that name you gave me on my phone. The most notable Mac Brennan is a bicyclist who looks nothing like you. The other Mac Brennans don't look anything like you either. It could just be that you have stayed off the grid, but I think Mac Brennan might be a fake name." She bit her lip and looked away from me as her words sank in. The one clue I had might be worthless. Why then would the name be stenciled into my brain? It made no sense.

Then again, just because the almighty Google didn't know anything about Mac Brennan didn't mean it wasn't my name, it just meant the internet gods had neglected to keep tabs on me. That still left the police. With any luck, someone had called looking for me. Sure, it was a long shot, but I had nothing else.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I replied, trying my best to smile at her. I wasn’t sure if I succeeded. “You didn’t have to do that, it was exceedingly nice of you.”

“That’s not the only reason why I stopped you.” I held up my hand to stop her from talking, allowing the sunlight to play off my blackened flesh. My skin seemed to absorb the light itself which was a little weird. I tried to put it out of my mind, but I couldn’t. I was cursed, someone who made a deal with a demon in exchange for power. If she helped me more, she would be putting herself, and her son, in danger. Even if I ignored the possibility that I’d hurt them myself, who knew what was coming out of the woodwork to find me? No, I couldn’t let her help me. It was too much of a risk.

“You don’t have to do this. You don’t owe me anything.” I turned to walk away. She had a kid after all. My Faustian situation was no place for a single mother with a young child. The best thing I could do for all of us was leave.

She shot me a grin that made me stop in my tracks. “I know someone who might be able to help you.”

“You know someone who can help me?” I asked, taking a step toward her. The amount of hope in my voice scared me a little. “Who? How?”

“Someones. They know a lot about magical stuff.” She gestured at my arm. “They can probably help you out, but if you ask me any more questions about it, the deal is off the table, capiche?”

“It isn’t like I have a lot of options, and I really appreciate the offer,” I replied, letting out a small breath. “But I’m not sure I want you involved. You’ve got a son, and you’ve already done more than enough.”

“I’m a grown woman. I make my own decisions.” She leveled a steely glare at me. “I’m willing to help you this one time, and admittedly, it’s mostly to get you far away from me. The sooner your stink is across the city, the better.”

“Well, that’s something I can live with,” I said cocking a wry grin at her. “Self-preservation and all.”

“I’m glad you’re okay with me basically wanting you as far away from my son as possible.” Her face was set in resignation even though I was pretty sure a smile was threatening to break across her lips.

“Who me?” I put my right hand to my chin in mock horror and stared at her. “Surely you don’t mean me. I’m a great influence on small, impressionable children. Why I think I can even make balloon animals.”

She probably said something in response, but that was when someone smacked me upside the back of the head with a baseball bat, so I missed it, opting instead to collapse to the ground in a flurry of splintered wood as my vision went dark and hazy.

I lay there trying to orient myself to my new horizontal reality on the sidewalk as a pair of size fifteen work boots stepped over me and stopped a few inches away. The scent of wet dog filled my nostrils as I pulled in a ragged breath that tasted of blood. The world wouldn’t top spinning. The world’s a bitch sometimes. I settled for letting bloody saliva trickle out of my mouth. Sometimes compromise is necessary, be the willow and all that.

“Get the fuck over here! Now!” the guy I’d clotheslined in the laundromat snarled at the brunette. That didn’t make a lot of sense. I’d hit him hard enough to practically crush his windpipe. He ought to be in a hospital, if not unconscious.

He shouldn't be standing here outside her apartment after braining me with a Louisville Slugger. Well, screw him then. Next time I was going to do something a lot more permanent.

I tried to look up at the brute, but he moved out of my frame of vision. Even though I wanted to do it, I couldn't make my gaze follow him. Just trying caused nausea to swirl in my belly, leap up my throat, and smack into the back of my teeth before slipping from my lips in a pathetic, bloody dribble. I guess there wasn't much inside me to come out. Good, I'd hate to have to get yet another pair of clothes.

"You curse way too much. A simple please would go a long way," the brunette said before her words were interrupted by the smack of his hand on her face. The sound made me shudder in commiseration as she fell into my view, one hand gripping her cheek. Her copper-colored nails a sharp contrast to her white skin.

"Bitch, you breathe too much. Shut the fuck up before I fuck your shit up. It'd be easier if you just came along all quiet like." The guy grabbed her by the hair and hauled her to her feet. "Causin' all this trouble, makin' me hit you." He shook his head and pushed her past me, unconcerned by my sidewalk-strewn form. Well, that was a big mistake. "You should know the deal by now. What Ricky wants, Ricky gets."

Ricky? Who the hell was Ricky and what did the brunette have to do with him? Did she know these two guys? It was starting to seem like it based on how quickly they'd found us. I had no idea how that was even possible unless they already knew where she lived. Maybe she was into more than she was letting on. After all, she did know about my arm and what it meant. It didn't seem like the type of knowledge someone learned by accident, and hadn't she just said she had friends who could help me? No, there was more to her than met the eye.

Unfortunately, that meant I needed her to help me, especially since I had no idea how to get in touch with her friends if I let this guy take her. Besides, hadn't they learned their lesson already? She was under my protection. I'd have to make that fact crystal clear.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world, my fingers wrapped around the pistol I'd stolen from him earlier. As he marched the girl away from me, I fired three quick rounds into his back. They hit him center mass, pitching him forward in a spray of blood and thicker bits. I half-worried one of the bullets might have gone all the way through and struck the brunette, but I'd tried to angle my shots to keep that from happening.

The woman pulled herself from his spasming grip and sprinted toward me, her white shoes slapping the concrete loudly as the thug collapsed to the ground. Only, he didn't fall in the way he should. He had one hand on the sidewalk in front of him. His face was twisted into a snarl, and a low guttural howl exploded from his lips. I watched in amazement as the blood gushing from his back slowed to a trickle and stopped. Well, that sucked. No wonder my clothesline of doom had done little to stop him.

"Get up!" the woman cried, grabbing me by my arm and pulling me to my feet before I could figure out how I was facing some guy with Wolverine's healing factor in real life. My entire world spun on its axis, and the gun slipped from my hand and hit the ground with a clang. Thankfully, it didn't go off.

The bullets pushed out from the thug's puckered skin and hit the cement with a dull clang before wounds in his flesh closed up like he'd never been hurt at all. He pushed himself to his feet with a grunt and turned to glare at us, but mostly at me. His muscles corded and strained against his flesh as he took one jerky step toward us, giving me the distinct impression things were writhing beneath his flesh. What the hell was he?

Fear wrapped around me, rendering me practically immobile. I'd never seen anything like this before, hadn't even thought it was possible. What the hell kind of thing gets shot and not only shrugs it off, but magically heals? I was screwed. There was no way for me to fight something like this.

His fingers opened and closed like he was fixing to wrap them around my throat and choke the life out of me, which while disconcerting, was nothing compared to the look in his wolfish, amber eyes. I don't know how I hadn't noticed them before, but as the brunette tried to drag me away, those eyes made everything very clear. If we ran, he would chase us, and he would enjoy it. No, running was death. The only way to win would be to face him head on and grab the bull by the horns.

I shoved my panic down deep, and even though I knew it might be the last thing I ever did, I shoved the brunette away. His eyes met mine and a horrific snarl spread across his face. I tried to step into a fighting stance, but given the sidewalk's sudden propensity to rock back and forth beneath my feet wound up being able to do little more than stand there. Somehow, I managed to hold out my right hand and curl my black as pitch fingers toward my body.

"Bring it." The words had barely left my lips when the thug charged. My shoes lifted off the ground as he drove one ham-sized fist into my stomach. My right hand lashed out anyway, seizing his wrist as red light flared from my skin and spilled out the cuff of my trench coat.

"Sorbeol!" I cried, and the word exploded from my lips like a gunshot. Energy surged through me, rippling up out of his flesh and flowing up my right arm like I'd gripped a live electrical wire. The man's face twisted in agony before melting like running candle wax. He lashed out with his other hand, seizing my wrist and trying to pull my hand away from his arm. I barely felt him.

The musky scent of wolf filled my nostrils as I inhaled a breath that somehow steadied me on my feet. Another surge of adrenaline burst through my veins, bringing with it visions of the full moon. My knee shot out, catching him in the crotch and doubling him over as I released my hold on his wrist. Instantly, his melting face froze in place, reminding me of oozing metal being doused with liquid nitrogen.

He slumped forward onto the ground as I grabbed him by the ear with my right hand. His skin blackened beneath my grip, and the smell of burned flesh filled my nostrils. With about as much effort as it would have taken to pick up a used Kleenex, I lifted him into the air by his ear. Admittedly, I was half-surprised his own bodyweight didn't tear it straight off his body. Then again, I'd just seen him shrug off some gunshots so there was that. Well, I had something a little more permanent in mind this time.

Power I didn't know I had roiled up inside me, filling me with strength as I stepped forward and flung the huge man directly into the path of an oncoming work truck. The white, three-quarter-ton pickup smashed into the guy with so

much force, it hurt me to watch. The truck slammed on its brakes, sending its tires skidding on the street in a burst of smoke that carried the scent of burnt rubber, but it was way too late for it to matter.

Guilt and fear swept up over me as I caught sight of the panicked workers inside. I'd just thrown a guy into his truck with my demon enhanced arm, and I had no idea how I'd managed to do it. As much as I'd hoped she'd been wrong about the whole deal with the devil thing, I was starting to think maybe she was right after all. Maybe I really had traded my soul to a demon for power. How else could I explain what I'd just done?

"We should go before Tall, Dark, and Heals-gunshot-wounds gets up and tries to kick your rather nice ass once again," I said, feeling more energized than I had since I'd woken up in the morning. My arm had faded back to its non-radioactive mode, but whatever it had done when I'd grabbed the brute left me feeling pumped. I needed to run a marathon or lift some weights. Hell, I needed to get into another fight.

I was pretty sure I'd gotten a concussion when the thug had used my skull for batting practice but somehow, grabbing him had healed me. I wasn't sure how that'd happened, but I wasn't keen to try it out again if I could help it. Gift horses and all that.

The girl shot a glance at the still skidding truck and smirked even though that didn't seem like the proper reaction. Shouldn't she have been horrified by what I'd done? The thug was underneath the huge vehicle somewhere, no doubt twisted into a mangled mishmash of flesh, and while I had no way of knowing if he'd be getting back up, maybe she did? Judging by her lack of concern, he would be. That worried me, but not nearly as much as I was about his friend. If the two were anything alike, I did not want to be here if he decided to make an appearance.

"I agree," she said, glancing past me toward the parking lot of the building as the sound of sirens filled my ears. I watched her shoulders sag a little as she took one last look at the pickup. "Come on." Her words seemed to come out of her like they were made of razor blades and shrapnel.

"Thanks," I said as I scooped up the Beretta and followed behind her. Part of me hoped her friends would be able to fill me in on why cherry light spilled off the tattoos on my blackened arm like a fourth of July firework when I'd grabbed the brute accosting her. The other part of me hoped I hadn't just deposited a boat load of trouble on her doorstep. If I had, I wasn't sure I'd be able to make up for it.

## Chapter 7

"Maybe I should go alone," I said as the other minion from the laundromat threw open the door to the black van I remembered seeing in the parking lot of said establishment and glanced around. His eyes locked on me like a heat-seeking missile, and he charged like a bull.

The big guy crossed nearly the entire block lot in the time it took for me to leap into her Dodge Neon. Fortunately, the brunette had completely ignored my safety and stomped on the gas before I'd landed, sending us screaming across the



asphalt in a spray of smoking rubber and gravel. It was almost like she didn't value my safety. Nah, couldn't be.

The car fishtailed as she swung it hard to the left, turning onto the street amid a blare of car horns. A black Buick barely missed our taillights as she swerved onto the street and gunned it. I would have been scared out of my mind by her reckless driving if the thug wasn't nearly on top of us. His face was twisted into a snarl as his legs pumped like pistons, propelling him toward us with inhuman speed. Even though he was on foot, he'd be on us in a moment. I wasn't sure how he was so fast, but I wasn't going to wait around and ask him.

I leaned out the passenger window and popped off two quick shots. While the first one missed him by a hair's breadth, the second one caught him in the right knee, destroying cartridge, flesh, and bone in a spray of crimson. His leg gave out in an instant, and the big man tumbled head over heels with his own momentum before coming to lay face first in the street.

He tossed a murderous glare in my direction moments before a jackass in a Mercedes swerved around the stopped work truck from earlier and took him out like this morning's garbage. The driver didn't even stop to see what he'd hit. Hell, he didn't even so much as glance in his rearview mirror. I guess his phone call was a little too important. A sly grin crossed my lips. Thank God for douchebags in nice cars.

I spun back around and placed the gun on my lap, partially surprised no one cared about the macabre scene behind us, but then again, we were already half a block away. The brunette swung us hard to right, taking us down yet another busy street and gunned the engine. It roared beneath us like a demon of Hell and shot forward as she nimbly bobbed and weaved between cars.

"Yeah, so I'm starting to think that maybe those guys aren't just random muggers. Care to explain what's going on?" I asked, absently stroking the barrel of the Beretta with my fingertips. Something about the movement was strangely calming. Was feeling up a gun really my nervous tic? If it was, I had serious problems.

Either way, I had no good reason for why I'd stroked the gun. I wasn't planning on shooting her, but hey, it'd been an interesting morning thus far. Maybe I did things like that. My name was Mac Brennan, and the sky was the limit.

She shot me a glance which was a little disconcerting because she was drifting like a street racer in a car older than the movie that'd made drifting popular and barely missed an eighty-year-old lady crossing the street.

"The werewolves have been trying to get me to go see their alpha for a while now. They don't understand no means no," she said with a straight face, albeit angrily.

"Wait, did you say werewolf?" I asked, barely believing the words coming out of my mouth. It sounded impossible, but at the same time, I did have an evil hand tattooed by one of Lucifer's buddies. In a world like that, werewolves didn't seem that implausible.

"Yeah, those two meatheads, Dimitri and Jock, were werewolves. They're lower in the pack, not omegas but not up to beta status either. I'd be surprised if they were even in the middle of the pack." She shrugged.

“And they were after you why?” I said trying to decide how I felt about that. Assuming she wasn’t lying about their status, I’d just fought two dudes capable of shrugging off gunshots, and they’d been the pansy werewolves. The idea of them sending their “more adept at kicking my ass” friends to find me because I’d helped her didn’t exactly instill me with a sense of kittens and lollipops. Maybe helping her had been a poor idea. The last thing I needed was to get my ass caught up in a supernatural turf war. That kind of thing could make a memory-addled bloke dead. Fast.

“They are under the impression my ex left me something of incredible value.” She glanced at the rearview mirror before changing lanes into oncoming traffic to go around a trash truck. “They would be wrong.”

“Why don’t you just tell them that?” I asked, pretty sure I was only seconds from dying in a car accident the likes of which would shake the very planet.

“I have. They don’t listen. That’s one of the reasons I’m taking you far away.” She shot me an apologetic look. “The werewolves have no doubt caught your scent in the laundromat.” She flushed harder. “To be honest, I’d hoped you’d lure them away from me for a while, but they found us too quickly for them to be tracking you by smell.”

“So you wanted to use me as bait for werewolves?” I leveled my best “slow the hell down” gaze at her. “Then why did you offer to let me shower at your place? You should have sent me on my way right then.”

“You saved me and got all bloody. I felt bad about it, okay?”

I let her words sink in for a moment. She knew people who might be able to help me. But she’d wanted to literally throw me to the wolves to buy herself time to escape. That was definitely a negative mark against her. Still, she had copped to it. She hadn’t had to do that...

“Okay,” I said, fastening my seatbelt. “But I’m warning you, if this is some kind of double cross, I’m going to be pissed.”

“Look, if big strong you really wants to leave petite little me behind because you’re too scared to come meet my friends, here’s your chance.” She stomped on the brake, sending us skidding to a stop outside a convenience store boasting the largest drink on the planet for an inversely proportional price.

“No, I’ll meet your friends, although I’m starting to think saving you was a bad idea,” I told her, letting annoyance fill my voice. “But it’d be nice if I didn’t have to beat up more people.” Even as I said the words, I was pretty sure they were pointless. I’d known her all of a couple hours, and I’d already shot a couple guys.

It wasn’t like I was opposed to beating up the guys chasing her or anything. It was more that I needed to find out who I was, and I had the strangest feeling she wasn’t telling me the whole story. Which was smart of her. If she had told me everything she knew, I’d have left right now. As it stood, she had leverage.

Part of me wanted to leave anyway, but I needed answers, and at the moment, she was the only one giving me answers. Man, was I a sucker. Hopefully, her inevitable upsell wouldn’t be more than I could handle.

## Chapter 8

Half an hour later, I found myself staring at a rundown bar with a sign above it that said "Jack's" only the J was half torn off so it mostly just said "ack's." The rest of the place wasn't much better. Its cinderblock walls were covered in black and green graffiti and rusty bars covered the two big windows in the front. Only one of them had glass, but the view within was blocked by an ancient black sheet with a faded picture of a girl with bat wings riding a broomstick. The other was covered by a piece of cracked plywood held together with more graffiti and duct tape. To say I had high hopes for this place was an overstatement.

"Lovely place but don't you think we should find somewhere a little more inconspicuous to park?" I asked as she unfastened her seatbelt and got out of the car in one smooth motion. "We could park in the back instead of right in front."

I wasn't sure where we were exactly, but it didn't exactly feel safe leaving her super conspicuous cherry-red car out in front of the world's most decrepit bar. If the werewolves didn't find us, her Dodge would get boosted within seconds, even if it was a Neon.

"Jack's is a magical refuge. If the werewolves come here, they won't be able to do a damned thing while we're inside." She shot me a devilish smile that made both good and bad chills run down my spine. Even since she'd told me I was bait, she'd made an effort to be nicer to me. I suspected it was because she felt bad about using me as bait.

"So what? They'll just kill us when we leave." I stared at her hard, trying to figure out why she thought hiding in a place known to be a magical refuge was a good idea. If I'd wanted to get someone inside, I'd have just set the place on fire or something, forcing my prey to run out while I waited on the roof of the supermarket across the street with a high-powered rifle, but then again that was just me and I was Faust incarnate.

Still, something niggled at my mind. I'd had a plan to take her out within a second, and not only that but several more. How could I have looked at this place for only a breath before having thirty different ways of getting someone inside, magical refuge or not? That wasn't exactly normal. It made me wonder what I did before my deal with the Devil.

We stood in front of the bar for a moment longer, and I got the feeling something was making her apprehensive. Was she nervous about me meeting her friends? Maybe they weren't too kindly to the Cursed. It was entirely possible.

"What's wrong?" I said when she glanced from me to the door of the bar and back again with a strange look in her eye for the third time in as many seconds.

"You're missing something," she said, getting to her feet and walking toward me rubbing her chin. "Oh, I know." She spun around and began rummaging in the laundry basket in her car. A moment later, she reappeared with a bright red power tie. "You need this!" Before I could stop her, she had it around my neck and expertly knotted.

"What do you think?" she asked, taking a step back to survey her handiwork, even though I couldn't see the tie since I was wearing it. Then she blushed again. "Oh, you can't see it, huh." She turned me toward the side-view mirror.

“I think your ex must have been John Constantine,” I replied, pulling at the tie. Why she had washed a tie and also decided I needed to wear it was strange to say the least.

“When he let me go, it was like he let life itself slip through his fingers,” she said, staring off past me into a memory I couldn’t understand but was incredibly uncomfortable sharing with her. She must have realized it too because a second later she looked away, her cheeks practically scarlet with embarrassment.

“Sorry,” she squeaked, wiping at her face with the back of one hand as tears filled her eyes. “Let’s go.” And with that, she darted through the door, leaving me all alone on the sidewalk by myself.

“What the hell?” I asked the empty air, but it didn’t respond. I suddenly felt bad for making the joke even though it wasn’t like her ex was a fictional demon hunter or anything. Demon hunter, maybe, but definitely not a guy from a DC comic. It irked me. And while I didn’t know much about myself, I was pretty sure I was the kind of guy who shot things that irked me. I touched the butt of my gun for a second before pushing the thought away and adjusting my jacket so the weapon wasn’t showing.

It was time to meet her friends and get some answers, and even though I wasn’t going to be doing either of those things outside, it took me another couple of minutes to make my way to the door.

“What if I don’t like what I find out?” I whispered to myself, hoping against hope I wouldn’t later decide I should have taken the blue pill. Then I cashed in some manliness points and opened the goddamned door.

The inside of Jack’s was surprisingly well-lit in the antiseptic hospital sort of way. Fluorescent lights set into the ceiling cast sterile white light across the concrete floor. A couple of pool tables made of polished oak and covered with tournament grade Belgian Simonis cloth sat toward the back of the room. They must have cost ten times what the building had cost. Each.

The wall behind them was filled with pool sticks, but they were covered in so much dust, I got the distinct impression no one ever used them. With tables like that, most players probably brought their own pool cues. Those were not the type of tables designed for frat boys on a beer buzz. No, those were serious tables for serious players.

An Indian man, feather not dot, dressed in faded blue jeans, a white chamois shirt, and a tan snakeskin cowboy hat stood next to one of the far tables. He chewed on an unlit cigarette as he studied the pattern of balls laid out on the green cloth. I didn’t see anyone else near him. It made me think he might be playing by himself. He bent down, leaning across the table and aiming his stick at the cue ball.

The cue stick itself was a marvel. Sleek black wood with a crimson Chinese dragon emblazoned along its length. Better still, it looked like the guy knew what he was doing. As his muscles bunched, the stick exploded in his hands like a rocket, smashing into the cue ball with a thunderous crack. The poor cue ball struck the blue two ball, sending it careening into a corner pocket.

The cue ball, now misdirected by the two, struck the rail hard before spinning in an arc that let it kiss the orange five before dying abruptly in the middle of the table. Somehow, all of its momentum transferred to the five which shot off like a

bolt of lightning, banking off the upper rail before dropping in the center left pocket.

The guy looked up at me, caught me watching, and tipped his hat. "Like what you see, partner?" he asked, his chapped lips twisting into a grin. "I got plenty more where that came from if you're man enough."

"Nope, I'm not a pool player," I replied even though I had no idea if it was true or not. Something told me it might not be since I could identify the make of the cloth on the table with only a glance, but either way, now was not the time to be distracted by billiards.

"Too bad. I didn't peg you for a woman." He shot me another grin to let me know his words were all in good fun and turned his attention back to the table, his cigarette all but dangling from his lips.

Instead of marching across the room and belting him across the face in an effort to show just how manly my fists were, I scanned the rest of the room. There wasn't a single television in sight. The top half of the walls were painted sky blue and were completely bare. The lower half of the walls were covered in that overbearing white vinyl stuff used in places that expected to get sprayed down. I traced my eyes along the floor and, sure enough, found a drain in the center. So they did expect to hose this place off. That was curious and somewhat troubling. How many pool halls needed to get sprayed down?

A large oak bar that matched the tables encompassed the entirety of the left wall. In front of it, a smattering of mismatched stools with names like "Butch" and "Oliver" stenciled onto their colored vinyl seats filled my vision. Bottles of various liquor filled the shelf behind the bar along with a smattering of weird trinkets that didn't seem to fit together very well. An old wooden Indian sat next to a green army man and a model tie fighter.

The brunette sat in the far corner, elbows on the bar with her head in her hands. She was no doubt waiting for the old man behind the bar to finish wiping out his beer mug with his stained white towel. From the look of things, he didn't even know she was there, but I was reasonably sure the smirk on his wrinkled face was due to the brunette's slowly simmering rage. I got the distinct feeling they'd done this particular dance many, many times. It made me wonder what the status of their relationship actually was, and if that was the reason for her reluctance outside.

"Mac," she said, shooting me a little wave. It was a little weird because we'd been separated for all of thirty seconds. Had she thought I was going to leave her this close to meeting the people she swore could help me?

Before I could take even a step toward her, the old man turned abruptly and shot a lopsided grin at me. His dark hair was clearly a dye job, identifiable partially because he looked to be in his seventies and partially because the new growth along his sideburns was white as snow. I didn't really see the point, but then again, my hair was pretty light. If a bit of silver speckled it, no one would be able to tell. Besides, I looked like I was in my late twenties or maybe early thirties. I wouldn't have much gray to hide anyway.

"Can I get you something?" he asked, voice like a rough leather strop being pulled across a knife edge. He moved along the bar in my general direction, and

the brunette shot the back of his head a glare that could have melted glass. It made me immediately glad she hadn't turned it on me.

"What do you recommend?" I replied, my mouth practically salivating at the idea of drinking something. I was so thirsty I'd have drunk pretty much anything, even light beer.

"Real men wet their whistle with whiskey." He raised an eyebrow to me. "But if you're one of those yuppie pussies, there might be some Michelob Light in the back room somewhere. Want me to go fetch you one along with a little pink umbrella?"

"So no Zima then?" I asked, and the look of horror on the man's face was worth a thousand words. "Whiskey is fine," I added before he could recover, almost relishing the thought of the amber liquid in a glass with a couple cubes of ice. "You'd better leave the bottle."

The old guy shook off his shock and turned to the counter behind him, grabbing a dark, dusty bottle with no label before snatching a glass from some unseen place. He set the glass down in front of one of the empty stools and poured a heavy dose of dark liquid inside. His lips separated into a wry smile that revealed a few missing molars along the sides.

"Here you go, tough guy. One Zima." He set the bottle down beside the drink. "I'll leave the bottle here. Don't go making me regret it. I swear to the Holy Mother herself, if you wind up spitting whiskey all over my bar, you'll be mopping it up with your face."

Before I could reply, the brunette stood up abruptly, making her chair skid backward across the concrete floor with a sound like nails on a chalkboard. "If you guys are all done being macho assholes, maybe we can get this show on the road. I need to get back to my son."

The old guy glanced at her like he was seeing her there for the first time. "Sera, how nice of you to drop by. Didn't see you there." His gaze flicked from her to me and back again. "Is the dumbass with you?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Sera let out an exasperated breath. "That's why I'm here. I was attacked Duane. The werewolves are getting more serious about their advances. The Cursed saved me, but he doesn't remember anything before this morning. I thought you might be able to help him."

The old bartender glanced back at me and gestured toward my drink. "Guess that one's on the house. Thanks for saving my girl." His girl? What the hell did he mean by that? Was he seriously implying he was dating the brunette even though their age disparity could be counted in half-centuries?

"Just give the wolves what they want and call it a day," the Indian from the back called before a thunderous break sent billiard balls flying across the table in front of him. "It's not like you won't enjoy it."

The brunette, who I was assuming was named Sera, puckered her lips like she'd just sucked on a lemon. "Can it, vampire. When I want your opinion, I'll pull out your tongue and smack it against the bar." She slapped the oak with one hand for emphasis. "Whatever sound it makes will doubtless be smarter than the shit you're spewing now."

Laughter filled the back of the room, and I suddenly got the feeling I was standing in the middle of a family squabble. That was a little crazy because she'd

called the Indian a vampire. The sad thing was, I didn't know if she was joking or not. I mean, I'd just fought werewolves, why couldn't vampires be real?

"So what do you want me to do? Make a tea? That might help him with his memories," the old guy, Duane said, turning his back to me and moving toward Sera with quick, purposeful steps. Without warning, he reached across the bar and snatched up her hand. "I could go talk to Ricky. We go back a ways. Could have a talk about how the pups are acting. They might back off."

"We both know they wouldn't be bugging me without their alpha's express permission." Sera let out another sigh, and I was starting to think she might be able to medal in sighing if it were an Olympic sport. "No, Ricky is definitely putting them up to this. I just don't understand why the wolves are working with the Stars and Moons. Ricky's never been one to involve the pack in human business before."

"Whoa, let's all hold up a second and tell me what's going on. Maybe I can help. As it stands, I'm barely following your conversation, and that's no good for me," I said, sliding onto a red stool with the name Biff written on it. To be honest, I wasn't sure why I'd offered to help. Everything inside of me was screaming at me to get them back on track with the whole magic memory tea thing. That was the selfish part of me though, and something told me if I started listening to that part of myself, I wouldn't last long in a world I was woefully unprepared to face.

I snatched my whiskey off the bar as their eyes turned to me. I ignored the heat of their stares and tossed back the liquor in one quick swallow. The liquid burned the back of my throat in a way that was both familiar and comfortable despite the drink being three parts paint thinner and one part horse piss. Whatever this stuff was, it had been set here as a test. I wasn't sure if I passed or not, but since I didn't wind up spitting it across the bar, I was giving myself seventy-thirty odds.

"You don't even have a memory," Sera replied, giving me a long, appraising look. "You might think you're tough because you beat up some wolves, but Ricky, the alpha, is another story. Werewolves aren't the sort of things you piss off unless you're packing serious heat and have a death wish."

She had a valid point, but I never let little things like being sensible stop me. At least, I didn't think I did. The werewolf I'd fought before had been scary, so much so, that I wasn't sure how I'd won. That said, I had the distinct feeling I could beat them. I wasn't sure why, but I knew, just knew, if I put my mind to it, I could stop the werewolves from attacking her.

I tilted the bottle to my glass and refilled it, making sure I doubled what Duane had poured for me. Then, like I was a badass who didn't actually like to taste things, I swallowed the contents in one gulp. It made me a little sad because I would have liked to sip the whiskey, but this stuff was probably used to fuel jets. It didn't want to be tasted, and besides, that was hardly the point. It must have worked because Duane nodded approvingly.

"You see these marks?" I pulled up my right sleeve, revealing my black, tattooed arm. "They mean I'm a bad ass. So why don't you let me in on why the wolves are really after you."

"You don't know that for sure. For all you know, the demon you talked to is some low level imp. Besides, we're not here so you can be El Macho and save me from an evil monster. We're here so Duane can make you one of his special teas—" The rest of her words were cut off in an explosion of sound and debris as one of

those big silver tanker trucks people use to haul dangerous liquids burst through the front door in an explosion of glass and debris. Flames poured from the cab like someone had lit a bonfire inside. It ripped open as it jackknifed, spilling a metric ton of its contents across the floor.

The horrible smell of gasoline filled my nose as I flung myself over the bar. My shoulder crashed into Duane, knocking both of us to the cement as black smoke billowed up against the ceiling in a way that let me know the second that gasoline caught fire I was as good as dead.

## Chapter 9

I threw my arm up to ward off the impending blast of fiery death from the tanker truck's inevitable explosion while Duane clung to me. His wiry hands gripped my trench coat like it'd somehow save him from certain doom. Clearly, he knew something I didn't. Before I had a chance to untangle myself from the old man, the room erupted into a fireball of debris that deafened my ears and reduced the world to a high-pitched fuzzy ring.

We were pitched backward under the force of the concussion as shrapnel punched into the shelves above us. I smacked into the wall beneath the shelves with enough force to drive the breath from my body. The bottles above us exploded, raining down bits of burning glass and flaming liquor onto our bodies. I struggled to draw in a breath as I scrambled to my hands and knees, but all I succeeded in doing was scalding my lungs.

Flame was everywhere. The ceiling and walls all around me were rippling with sheets of golden blue fire. The air was a wash of heat and death, burning my chest from the inside with each superheated breath I took. Blinding crimson light burst from my outstretched right arm as I tried to shield my face from the din. The arm of my trench coat glowed gold then silver, then bright "eyes of the Devil himself" red as a wave of force rippled out from my forearm. A tornado of hellish energy sucked the flames out of the room itself while flinging the remains of the tanker truck, along with most of the shattered room, back from whence it came.

The truck's crash outside sounded far away and distant, like my ears and brain were shrouded in cotton. Sweat covered my body in an instant as the room went dark and hazy. I tried to push myself to my feet anyway, but just that tiny effort made spots dance across my vision. Duane struggled under me as my trench coat faded back to its normal sooty black color and my tattoos winked out like someone had unplugged a string of Christmas lights on a dark night.

The room swam again as I gripped the edge of the charred bar and used all my strength to hoist myself onto my feet. I'd been wrong. It only seemed like the fire had gone out. Half the damned bar was still on fire. It just looked like someone had sliced a pie piece shaped hole in it. Sunlight streamed in through the front wall as the fire on either side of the slice tried to retake the room. Fortunately, there seemed to be some unexplained line in the sand that kept the flames from crossing. Had I done that when I'd thrown the tanker truck out of the bar?



Before I could find an answer to that question, a horrible thought made my guts twist in horror. I swung my gaze toward where Sera and the vampire had been. I didn't see them behind the bar. Duane was on his feet now, sprinting in that direction as a veritable firestorm of heat and death swept across the rest of the room. I wasn't sure what the old man was going to do when he reached the fire, but if my arm had saved me once, it could damned well do it again.

I leaned heavily on the bar with my left forearm and reached toward the fire with my right hand. My fingers splayed outward as I tried to will my arm to put out the rest of the fire. Something shifted across the back of my mind, reminding me of a lazy cat opening one eye to blink at me before going back to sleep.

Another wave of exhaustion hit me like a baseball bat to the skull, and I collapsed against the bar struggling for breath. I sucked in a gulp of air that was mostly smoke and my lungs revolted in a fit of coughing. Through my teary eyes, I could see Duane was nearly to the fire now, and I half thought he was going to leap into the din to look for Sera. Whatever the old man's relationship to the girl was, it went well beyond simple friendship.

Even if I could remember my past, I had a hard time thinking I'd leap into a fireball to save someone. Then again, I'd supposedly traded my memories to a devil for enough power to magically throw a tanker truck several feet. Hopefully, I'd had a good reason for doing so and not just because I was a power hungry schmuck. Not that it mattered right now. Moral high ground wasn't a lot of use to the dead.

I forced myself to take a step toward the fire as a black form began to take shape within the raging inferno. It wasn't that tall, standing only six feet or so, but it had enormous bat wings jutting from its back and a couple of horns that would make any stag proud. The creature had one wing wrapped around something slung under one of its arms as it walked purposely toward us through the fire. I wasn't sure what it was, but it sure as hell seemed like a demon.

Despite the heat, cold sweat ran down my spine. Was this the demon I'd made a deal with? Was he coming to collect now? Oh God, did that mean I'd died? I didn't feel dead. I couldn't be dead.

Instead of running away, Duane fell to his knees sobbing. "Thank God!" he cried, clasping his hands in front of himself as if thanking the Almighty which was altogether crazy given the circumstances. I struggled toward him, hoping I could reach the old man in time to save him from the beast when it reared back and threw something through the flames.

Sera burst through the wall of fire and hit the bar with a wet sounding smack. Steam curled from her clothing, but from what I could see of her skin, her burns were little worse than a bad sunburn. As I stood there like an idiot, she rolled into a fetal position. Whatever that thing in the fire was, it had saved Sera. Maybe it was on our side?

That thought had barely coalesced in my mind when bullets exploded through the blown out front of the bar. I fell, mostly because my knees gave out on me as I tried to whirl around. Hot lead tore into the shelves, the walls, everywhere. Whatever bottles had avoided being turned into slag, shattered under the onslaught. Duane pulled Sera off the bar, and they landed on the cement in a heap. Black smoke poured from a few random spots on his body, but the look on his face told me the wounds didn't much bother him. It was a little surprising

since normally bullets bothered people, but like the werewolves, Duane seemed to just shrug them off.

The thing in the fire jerked under the hail of bullets but didn't fall. A howl of rage that made the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up exploded from the fire, and just like that, the flames around us died.

The vampire stood there in full on "creature of the night" mode. Huge black bat wings were extended to their full wingspan, making him seem like some kind of demonic archangel. Horns the color of blood jutted from his forehead, making his cowboy hat slide backward on his head. His white chamois shirt was perforated with bullet holes, but instead of bleeding, golden ichor dripped from the wounds. The damage didn't seem to bother him at all, or if it did, he kept it from his face because his lips were curled into a bemused smile.

I barely had time to let that sink in when a couple dozen slack-faced guys wearing midnight blue robes emblazoned with yellow stars and orange moons stepped through the blown out entrance of the bar like they were being controlled by one single entity. Their eyes were far off and distant as they pointed their machine guns at the vampire in unison. I stared at the wall of MP5s and AK47s in horror. Vampire or not, how was he going to survive enough bullets to cut a building in half?

Instead of fleeing, the vampire calmly looked down at the wounds perforating his otherwise flawless form. He flicked his wrist disdainfully. Bullets tore out of his flesh in a cascade of golden fluid and flew outward at the men. Cultists dropped without a word, not bothering to scream or cry out as their own bullets cut them down.

The vampire smiled, his white fangs flashing in the dim light filtering into the building. The wounds on his body were gone. In the time it took me to blink, there was no trace he'd been hurt at all. I wasn't sure how he had managed either of those tricks, but the sight of them made my blood run cold. A horrible feeling filled me from the tips of my toes to the top of my head as I watched him saunter toward the cultists without a care in the world. If he was so powerful, why the hell was he playing pool in a back alley bar?

Heedless of the vampire's previous attack, the remaining cultists opened fire, filling the room with hot lead. Fortunately for us, the bullets never made it more than a couple of feet from their guns. The creature of the night waved his hand dismissively. The bullets stopped, hanging there in midair like they'd been caught in invisible gelatin.

"You dare defy the sanctity of Jack's?" the vampire asked, and as his voice shook the room, I got the distinct feeling he wasn't actually talking to the cultists, but someone else entirely. He took an angry step toward the cultists, purple light spilling off his skin like rainwater. "That is against the accords and shall be punished accordingly."

The bullets flew back en masse and slammed into the men before ripping themselves out of the men so they could bury themselves back into the cultist's flesh over and over again. His onslaught continued until the Stars and Moons were nothing more than a mishmash of flesh, bones, and blood.

My stomach lurched from the sight, and the whiskey I'd consumed earlier threatened to come back up as I turned toward Sera and Duane, my mouth agape.

“What the hell?” I whispered, unsure if my words could even be heard over the ringing in my ears.

Sera glanced at me and cocked one delicate eyebrow into the air. “He’s teaching their master a lesson. If he tries to take me in here, the vampire will defend me.”

“Your condition is acceptable,” said a voice that summoned images of erupting volcanoes and brimstone. The room dropped fifty degrees in temperature, and my next breath came out in mist as a horrified look flashed across Sera’s face.

She tried to say something, but as her mouth opened, her words were drowned out by the sound of something striking the vampire. The center of his chest ripped open, exposing his ribcage to the fresh air in a shower of golden blood. The vampire collapsed forward onto the cement, his weird demonic form melting away like it had been made of ice.

Duane sprinted toward him, but by the time he reached the fallen vampire, the creature was back to normal. A slow, methodical clap filled the air as Duane pulled the vamp from the pool of gilded slime.

An Asian man dressed in a several thousand dollar suit stepped up to the entrance of Jack’s, his right, black as pitch hand smacking against his tanned left one. Sickly green light spilled from the edges of his right cuff as he surveyed the bar with eyes the color of storm clouds. His scarred lips curled into an amused smile that filled his eyes like he was in the happiest place on earth sans crowds when he saw me.

“So Sera has recruited one of us to her cause,” he said, nodding to me. “I beg you, brother, for your own sake, stay out of this one. Whatever she has promised you, my master can make it seem insignificant in comparison.” He licked his lips and something dark swam behind his eyes. A momentary sense of fear flashed through me, but in the time it took for me to suck in a breath, profound rage exploded through me, reaching out and filling me up like I had been an empty glove suddenly occupied by a hand willing to wield it.

“You dare take something from me?” I said, only my voice wasn’t quite my own. It sounded deeper, darker. “You should know better.”

The light in the man’s eyes faded, reduced to the color of dirty nickels in the span of a second. Fear filled his features as he shook his head, desperate to hide the reaction. When he looked back at me, his momentary hysteria was gone, but I could still smell the stink of panic on him. It was just below the surface begging to come out.

“You may have a powerful master, brother. But I sense you are still a pup. Do not test me. I have been at this since before Columbus tried to find a secret trade route to India and landed upon this continent’s shores,” he said, staring at my arm intently. It gave me the feeling he wasn’t talking to me alone. Evidently, he wasn’t expecting an answer because he nodded to himself. A surge of confidence seemed to melt across his features, reminding me of a junkie getting his first fix. “You do not scare us.” He licked his lips.

In the time it took for me to blink, the guy had crossed the room. He stood over Duane, who in contrast, lay flat on his back with his eyes far off and distant. With catlike grace, the man leapt over the bar and swept Sera into his arms, nodded once to me, and vanished. I don’t mean he sprinted out or anything. I mean one

moment he was there, and the next he was just gone, leaving only a faint hint of sulfur in the air.

“Fuck,” the vampire said, and as I craned my head toward him, I saw him kneeling next to Duane, steam still curling off his body. I opened my mouth to reply, but was cut off by the screech of sirens in the distance. Fuck was right.

## Chapter 10

I stared at the street outside. Sera’s Dodge Neon had been reduced to little more than a pile of debris beneath the ravaged tanker truck. The street and surrounding area sort of looked like a huge snowplow had smashed everything into the parking lot of the supermarket across the street. I stared at the destroyed landscape with its smoking, twisted cars and let loose a breath. I’d done that, and I hadn’t even meant to do it. What if there’d been people in those cars? People I’d hurt? The thought made my blood run cold.

Something about all the carnage made me feel sick on an intrinsically human level. Even though I was pretty sure I wasn’t a nice guy because nice guys don’t make deals with the devil himself, all the damage upset me in a way I couldn’t quite quantify. I’d done this, and the wrongness of being able to do this to normal, everyday people filled me with a horrible feeling. Had I been like them before I’d made my deal? Just some schlub destined for little more than collateral damage in a high stakes game played by supernatural weirdos?

Was that why I’d traded my soul to a demon for power? Had I encountered something I couldn’t beat by being a normal guy and gotten myself a supernatural boost? The idea seemed to resonate within me, and as I thought about it, I was pretty sure it was the answer. I’d needed power to take on something powerful, something like I was now. If only I could remember what it was.

It was still possible that I’d find myself facing off against something I couldn’t defeat even after trading away my soul, but one thing was certain, I might be able to use my power to save Sera from that other Cursed. Even if he was older than my country, that didn’t make him invincible. It just made him experienced. Besides, he’d been the type of guy to have a tanker truck crashed into a bar during the middle of the day just to kidnap one woman. That didn’t exactly strike me as cautious. No, it spoke of unspeakable arrogance, and if there was one thing I knew, it was that arrogance bred mistakes.

Could I exploit his pride to save Sera and rescue her from his clutches? Maybe... I stopped myself before I could fall farther down that particular rabbit hole. Just because I might be able to save her, didn’t mean I should. I needed to stop while I was ahead. I had things to do, a memory to recapture. I did not have time to go dick around with werewolves, vampires, and an assorted host of other monsters. None of that was my problem.

Sure, Sera had been nice to me, but at the same time, she had been kidnapped by a goddamned demonic henchman. Sera might be able to explain away most of her actions by saying she was protecting her child, but for all I knew, she was a

demon too. I had half a mind to find out for myself, although I'll be honest, walking away was starting to look good right now.

So far, I'd been greeted with nothing but questions, and I was no closer to finding out who I was. That was no good because the clock was ticking. With every passing second, the urgency inside me to fix an unknown problem grew stronger. It was like watching a towel thrown on a puddle of water. The towel slowly soaked up the water, turning darker and wetter with each moment. Right now, I was that towel, and unless something changed right now, I was going to be all used up before I got the chance to right the wrong I'd gone and sold my soul to the Devil for the chance to correct.

"Goddamn it!" I snarled, still staring into the wreckage as the sound of sirens filled my ears. They were far away still, far enough away that I knew I could disappear long before they showed up. Not that I needed to escape them. All they'd do is look at me, take down my name, and send me on my way.

"I don't have time for this," I growled to myself and forced myself to take a step away from the bar. I followed it with another. It was time to leave and sort out my problems on my own. No matter how nice she'd been to me, I couldn't waste time going after her right now.

Still, the idea of leaving Sera in the hands of that other Cursed irked me, and not just because she was a woman with a young child, a woman that had helped me even though she didn't have to do anything. No, it was because I wondered what would have happened if I had walked out of the laundromat to look for my wallet instead of going with her. Would she have stayed home with her son and avoided this whole mess? Would she be sitting at home right now safe and sound? Or would those bastards have taken her to meet the mysterious Ricky anyway? Would they have taken her away from her child?

My breath caught in my throat as a memory exploded across my vision. In my mind's eye, I watched a small boy about four years old being jerked away from a house. His tiny hands gripped at the doorway as he screamed and shouted for me to help him. Blood was spattered across his white T-shirt, and he struggled vainly, but he was no match for the muscle-bound behemoth dragging him away.

The guy, if you could call someone nearly eight feet tall with stitches, staples, and bolts barely holding his rotting flesh together a guy, curled one huge hand into a fist. He drove that fist into the boy's stomach, knocking the wind from him. The kid's face clenched in pain as his fingers released the doorframe. He was tugged free.

His mother was already in the back of a black SUV with tinted windows. She was tied up and beaten into a pulp. Her blonde hair was streaked with blood, and the right side of her face was swollen and bruised.

The giant traversed the lawn in quick steps, crossing paths with a short, squat man dressed in one of those pinstripe suits like straight out of an Al Capone gangster movie. He pulled his thick cigar from his lips with a hand the color of charcoal and exhaled a blast of smoke into my face. I tried to make out any discernible feature, but his face was a blur of color.

"Finish the job I paid you to do, or I kill them both." The man's voice ripped across my brain like barbed wire and snake venom. I didn't know who he was, but

I knew I would kill him and save the boy and his mother. I knew this right up until his expensive Italian leather shoe came crashing down on my face.

The memory vanished as quickly as it came, leaving me standing there in the too bright sunlight. I gulped. That was why I'd sold my soul. I'd done it to save that boy and his mother. I had to save them. It resonated deep within me with such urgency, I could barely think past it. Who knew how much time I had left? Hell, for all I knew, they were already dead. As that ugly thought filled my brain, I knew it wasn't true. I still had time. Maybe not much, but some.

Time enough to save Sera and reunite her with her child. I could do it, but doing so would cost me time I might wish I had later. I might save Sera at the cost of that other woman and her child. Even though I couldn't remember who they were, something told me saving Sera might be worth the risk.

So far, Sera had given me every answer I currently had. If I went after her, perhaps I could pick up some more answers along the way. If I left now, my only plan of action was to check the alley for my wallet. If that failed, I would be lost and on my own with no one to help me through this monster-infested supernatural world. Then I'd be stuck coming back here and begging her friends for help, assuming I could even find them then.

I began walking faster than before. I wasn't going to waste any more time. Sera didn't matter. Her son didn't matter. I'd go back to the laundromat and start searching from there. Surely, I'd pick up on a clue. Sera would just have to get herself out of her jam on her own, and if she didn't, well that wasn't my problem. Only she had a kid, and I'd sold my soul to save one just like him. What if those cultists went after Sera's son John anyway? What if they needed to use him as collateral because she didn't give them what they wanted? What if she didn't have what they wanted? Men like that weren't known to be swayed by things like truth and logic.

A vision of Sera's body lying bloody and broken at the feet of the Asian Cursed filled me. I could almost see him wiping his hands on a bloody rag, could almost hear him whispering, "Well, if she knew where it was, she'd have talked, but she didn't. Too bad."

I stopped and gritted my teeth. Nearly everything in me was screaming at me to go, to ignore Sera's plight, to use this time to save the people from my memory. But I couldn't do that. Not if it meant John could get hurt, and if the guy I'd seen in the bar was any indication, he wasn't messing around.

And, even though I shouldn't have done it, like Lot's wife, I turned and looked back. Thankfully, I didn't turn to salt, but I might as well have because I could feel everything inside me screaming at me to go, to leave and never turn back. The sirens were so loud now, I knew I had only a minute or two. Now was my chance to leave. But I couldn't. I wasn't sure if the old Mac would have left Sera and her son to their fate, but I couldn't do it.

"Why?" I screamed, looking up at the sky. "Why is this happening now?"

"Because," came the voice on the wind. "Because..."

I looked toward the sound, but there was no one there. The only thing in front of me was the burned out bar. Against everything in me, I walked back toward it. Hopefully, Duane and the vampire would know where to find Sera. It would cost time, but I had to try to save her. Not because of what she'd done for me. No, I was

going to do it for her son. I wasn't sure what had happened to his father, but there was one thing I knew for certain. No child deserved to have his mother taken away.

## Chapter 11

"Where do I find Ricky?" I asked, my voice hard and flat as I stepped back into the inside the burned out husk of the bar to see the vampire kneeling next to Duane, a look of dismay on his features.

"Why do you want to find Ricky?" the Indian vampire replied as he scooped up Duane's unconscious body with no more effort than it'd take to lift a napkin. He threw the unconscious senior over one shoulder and stood before heading toward what remained of the door.

"You guys said earlier that Ricky was in charge of the werewolves, and the werewolves were trying to capture Sera." I gestured at the dead cult members. "I'm not going to begin to try to understand that cluster, but I'm sure the guy who took her is connected to the werewolves. If that is true, I can go through the wolves to get Sera back."

The vampire stopped and spun on his heel. The movement was so quick, it was more like he was just turned around. Sunlight cascaded through the room, shrouding him in shadow. His dark eyes burned into mine, and I got the distinct impression of a great white shark swimming through the proverbial water trying to decide if I'd taste good. "Why do you care, son? You haven't known Sera for more than a few minutes. I've known her quite a bit longer, and I'm still not sure I want to risk the wrath of a werewolf pack to get her back."

I gritted my teeth, barely resisting the urge to grab him by the throat and throttle him. Why wouldn't he just tell me? Did it matter why I was willing to help her? As that thought filled my brain, I stopped. Maybe Sera didn't mean anything to him. I'd assumed they were friends based on his defense of the place and their friendly banter, but maybe I was wrong. Sure she was a girl and was in trouble, but he was right. I'd just met her. Why was I going to go take on werewolves and a death cult to get her back when the smart play was to shove my hands in my pockets and walk away whistling?

"Because she has a son, and he needs his mother," I said, my voice returning to that deep dark place.

The vampire studied me for a long while, and I got the distinct feeling he was seeing more than he let on. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad because something about the look he gave me was definitely off. I tried to think about it, to reach back into my mind for a hint as to what his expression might mean, but it was like reaching into a blazing fire filled with rage. Maybe I was using Sera and her child as a stand in for the girl and child I really needed to save, but even if that was true, that didn't make their plight any less real.

The vampire stared at me for a moment longer before nodding. He let out a slow breath. "Well, in that case, I won't stop you." He stepped aside and gestured for me to pass into the sunlight. "But be warned, the guy who took Sera isn't working for

the werewolves. They are working for him. As far as the local wolf pack is concerned, helping us amounts to treason. Even if that wasn't the case, getting Ricky to help us won't be easy. The wolves don't like outsiders, no matter how nicely they ask."

"It's a good thing I'm not very polite." I moved past him into the sunlight, and as I did so, the vampire followed me.

The smell of burning flesh hit my nostrils, and I spun to see his flesh smolder like he was getting a terrible sunburn. He cursed under his breath and reached under his shirt. He pulled out a cloudy ruby emblazoned with gold filigree. When the sunlight struck the gemstone, it turned a sickly gray color. Like magic, the vampire's skin went back to normal, and the smell of burning flesh faded from the air like it'd never been there at all.

"Neat trick," I said, pointedly shifting my gaze to the gemstone before returning it to his face.

"Can't go out in direct sunlight without it," he said, catching my eye and giving me a wink. "Otherwise I'll sparkle like a bonfire."

"Good to know," I replied as he caught sight of the wrecked vehicles and let out a low whistle.

"If you want to avoid doing something like that again," the vampire waved his free hand at the decimated parking lot, "You'd better get a handle on your powers right quick." Without another word, he led me around the corner and stopped in front of one of those old nineteen fifties white ford pickups. He dumped Duane in the bed of the truck next to several bags of topsoil. Without a word, he ripped open the top bag, spilling dark, fertile earth over the old man.

"What are you doing? Shouldn't we get him to a hospital?" I asked as the vampire finished burying the senior and unlocked the front door.

"Duane's a druid. Give him a few minutes in the dirt and he'll be as good as normal." The vampire slid into the car and gestured at the sky. "Especially with all this sunlight." He made a face. "It does wonders for some of us."

"And being covered in bargain brand soil is going to do that how?" I asked, but even as I stared at Duane, I could see color starting to return to his features.

"No, he's not hurt in the traditional sense. Vassago's Cursed just sucked the mojo out of him. He just needs to recharge a bit." The vampire grinned. "That stuff won't work as well as the premium stuff, but I'll be damned if I'll keep expensive soil in the back of my truck for any yahoo to just take."

"Good to know, I guess," I said as the vampire reached over and unlocked the passenger door. "What's a druid?"

"A druid is a like a crazy hippy who actually draws magical powers from the earth. Duane is an oak druid specifically. Now get in. Ricky is across town, and I want to be out of here before the cops turn my place into a zoo. If we don't miss them, they'll want to ask me all sorts of questions." The vampire stuck the key into the ignition as he spoke, not bothering with his seatbelt. Then again, I wasn't even sure if the truck had seatbelts. "I'm guessing we don't have time to spend the next several hours answering the same questions over and over again."

Since he had an excellent point, I moved around the car to get in. I had just yanked the door open when the vampire started pulling away from the curb. Apparently, he was leaving with or without me. I stanchued my fear at leaping into



a moving vehicle and jumped inside. I landed on the red vinyl seat as the vampire threw the coughing truck into gear. We lurched forward with a shudder that rattled every part of the old beast before driving away from the smoking crater of Jack's.

"Wait, your place?" I asked as I played his words over in my mind.

"Yeah, I'm Jack." He tossed me a wry smile. "And before you ask, yes, I'm coming with you. Not for whatever noble reason you've cooked up though. I need to make a point. My bar is supposed to be off limits to supernatural hijinks. That's the whole point of it being neutral ground. If I let people just waltz in and blow the place up, well, that puts a damper on the whole safe haven thing. For me, it's a matter of principle. One that Cursed seems to have forgotten."

"So the only reason you're going to help me save Sera is because those guys messed up your bar?" I asked and I must have let the surprise leak into my voice because Jack laughed.

"Well, that and because I need to make the wolves chip in for repairs." He let out a sigh. "The deductible for a gas line explosion like that is going to be a bitch, and somehow, I bet I'll get saddled with the whole thing."

"Gas line explosion?" I said, feeling numb as I glanced back over my shoulder to watch the black smoke curl into the sky above Jack's. "There was a huge tanker truck. Should be easy to prove it wasn't your fault."

"You make an excellent point," Jack said, and I caught a hint of laughter in his voice. "Guess I'm just used to taking the fall for people doing stupid shit in my bar. It's why I keep the place the way it is. Jack's may not be the most comfortable place in town, but most people don't have to clean up after slime demons."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, trying to imagine what a slime demon looked like but found myself only picturing Slimer from Ghost Busters. Big, green, and disgusting. As far as mental images went, it'd have to do.

"You do that," he replied with a shrug. "The Spartan look grows on you after a while, mostly because it really cuts down on cleaning. I didn't think I'd ever get used to the whole industrial warehouse look, but what can I say, I'm adaptable. I know it's supposed to bring a tear to my eye being that I'm an Indian and all, but ever since that Ent held me up in the middle of the black forest and demanded my wallet at knife point, I've found I'm quite fond of the antiseptic, nature is dead vibe."

"You got held up by an Ent? One of those walking tree monsters from Lord of the Rings?" I asked, hardly able to stop the words from spilling out of my mouth. It seemed ridiculous to think one of them had mugged a vampire at knife point. What was next, a unicorn drug dealer?

"More or less. Let me tell you right now, you don't want to find yourself anywhere near an Ent. Those books and stories talk a good game, putting them out was real good PR on behalf of the elves and their buddies, but you don't want to mess with any of those woodsy creatures. If you see an Ent, you do like the rest of us do. You drop your wallet and run." He glanced toward my black arm. "Even if you do have that."

"Speaking of which," I paused trying to figure out my words. "You said that Sera was taken by Vassago's Cursed. I've never even heard that name before." It was a

little weird because as I said the name Vassago a spurt of rage that had nothing to do with Sera's abduction sprang up inside me.

"You probably wouldn't have heard of him even if you could remember your past. Vassago is a demon prince. He rules something like twenty-four realms of Hell." The vampire gripped the steering wheel a little tighter and stared straight ahead for a long moment.

"Twenty-four realms? How many realms of Hell are there?" I swallowed hard. Hopefully, I didn't have to traverse across all of them to find Sera. I might not have that much time.

"Only Lucifer could tell you for certain, but there's way more than you'd think. See, Lucifer got bored with that whole 'King of Hell' thing eons ago. He's content to sit back on his burning throne and do whatever it is he wants to do and let his minions run the place. Vassago is one of those minions. Thankfully, he doesn't come to Earth much himself nor does he empower Cursed very often. When he does, they tend to be bad asses over and above their magic. The fact that your demon seems to get riled up every time I mention the name, and yes, I noticed the way your face tightens when I say it, is worrisome."

"Why? Shouldn't that mean I can win?" I asked as a bad feeling crept down my spine. Vassago was some kind of mega demon, and the thought of him made me think of a petulant child needing to be smacked around. No, it was worse than that. It was like thinking of an impudent ant daring to bite me. Who the hell had I contracted with?

"It may or may not." The vampire shrugged. "I'm inclined to think that in the short term you might be able to beat that other Cursed. That's good for us since I'm pretty sure his plans for Sera aren't something we'd want to celebrate with cake and pie. However, it makes me worry about associating with you, especially since I have no idea who the hell you are."

"So why are you really taking me to see Ricky?" I asked, hoping I wasn't going to bring down more trouble on Jack. Even if he was a vampire, I still sort of liked him. I guess I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. "And don't give me that crap about making them pay for your bar."

"I like Sera. She's like the daughter I never wanted." He shot me a wry smile that revealed a flash of fang. It was weird because I sort of got the feeling he approved of me, and while I wasn't sure why, that made me strangely happy.

"Why does the cult want her?" I asked, trying to decide how long they'd known each other. Something told me it was a while.

"Who knows? I try to stay out of supernatural politics. Normal politics aren't fun and people have the attention span of gnats. Most entities I know count time in millennia. They're like elephants who never forget *and* never forgive." Jack smacked his steering wheel with his fingers, banging out a sad tune I didn't quite recognize. "Besides, Ricky should get put down a notch or two. I think you can do that."

"Why is that? For all I know, I'm some two bit hustler in over my head." Even as I said the words, I got the feeling it wasn't quite true. I may have been in over my head, but something told me the demon I'd contracted with wouldn't have done it if I was some nobody. At least, I hoped that was the case. If it wasn't, well, I was probably going to be dead within the hour.

“Oh, I have no doubt of that. You’re definitely in over your head, but that doesn’t make your demon any less territorial,” Jack said, turning onto a narrow street lined with office buildings. “It’s what I’m counting on.”

“My demon has territory?” That sort of made sense. Hadn’t Jack said Vassago was the prince of like twenty-four realms?

“Not in the way you’re thinking about it. See, most demons are like those Siamese fighting fish.” Jack’s eyes went distant as he spoke like he was remembering a particularly disturbing memory.

“The ones that kill each other when you put them together?” I asked, pictured the colorful fish destined to live out their lives in tiny plastic cups. I’d never seen them fight before, but I could hardly imagine it being a traumatic experience.

“Yeah, the very same. When one catches sight of another, Hell tends to break loose, figuratively speaking.” He smirked. “I’m counting on your inner demon to go ape shit on that other Cursed and save Sera. If that doesn’t happen, well, I’ll figure something out.”

“So your plan is to hope, I, the guy with no memory, can control a demon I’ve never met, to save Sera?” I asked, feeling slightly stupid because that had been my plan. Yet, as I said it, the realization of how absolutely insane it was filled me. Still, as I thought about it, I knew I needed to try. It wasn’t because I was some heroic jackass either. Deep inside me, I knew the demon who had cursed me wanted me to save Sera, if only to prove a point to Vassago. Something told me that if I succeeded, I’d collect some major brownie points with my own demon, and I was pretty sure I needed all the points I could get.

“I didn’t say it was a good plan,” Jack said, throwing the truck into park outside a nondescript office building with the type of landscape that screamed professional service that wasn’t too expensive. You know the kind, cheap colorful flowers and freshly-mowed grass. “I just said it was a plan. Now get out, Ricky will be on the top floor. The wolves own this building.”

## Chapter 12

We’d been waiting in the lobby for about ten minutes when a short black woman in her mid-twenties wearing a conservative blue suit stepped out of the elevator and fixed Jack with a look that made me want to run for cover. It was the a look that said, “I’ve seen you naked and wasn’t impressed.” She flipped her blonde ponytail in annoyance and gestured for us to approach with one long-nailed finger while clutching a clipboard to her chest with her other hand.

“You might think that’s a dye job,” Jack said, not bothering to lower his voice as he made his way toward the elevator, a smirk painted across his lips. “But I can assure you, the carpet does match the drapes.” He glanced at me and raised his hand conspiratorially. “Werewolves can change their hair color, but she’s the only one I know who does it down there too.”

The girl’s face hardened into granite as she glanced from him to me and back again, and I suddenly had the horrible feeling I was being played for a fool. I felt like I’d stepped into a college frat party as the guest of the guy known for throwing

up in the punch bowl and starting fights. I took a deep breath and shot the girl my nicest smile as I followed Jack into the tiny metal elevator.

“You shouldn’t say things like that to me, Jack. One day Ricky won’t be around, and on that day, I’ll chop off your balls,” the woman replied, stabbing a button on the elevator hard enough for me to feel sorry for the inanimate object. “I already have a special place in my purse all picked out for them.”

“Honey, you may want to get in line. If I had a nickel for every girl who wanted to chop off my balls, I’d be richer than Warren Buffett.” Jack shot her a wry grin, and I was starting to think his natural M.O. might be to piss people off. It made me wonder how long he’d been alive. Something about his face made me think he was ancient, but jackasses tended to get killed early on. I’d have to watch him closely.

She raised an eyebrow at Jack, and I swear to God, her nails grew a little longer and little sharper as she looked him up and down. She stood in one of those wide, open stances that dared him to try something. “Keep it up Jackie. I’ll bet soprano suits you.”

Jack chuckled, and the sound of it seemed to fill the tiny elevator as he turned his back completely to the woman and gave me a knowing smile. He *was* playing her. I just wished he’d let me know why. “Cursed, I’d like you to meet Loraine, Ricky’s second. She’s not powerful enough to even lick Ricky’s boots, but she is nice to look at. It’s probably why she hasn’t tripped and fallen on something sharp quite yet.”

Loraine stiffened like she’d been struck and fury filled her dark eyes. The smell of wet dog caught my nose as her mouth bared just a touch, reminding me of when I’d faced down the two thugs in the laundromat. Unfortunately, unlike then, I was currently enclosed in a metal coffin hurtling up who knew how many floors. A fight here would likely not end well.

“I’m sorry my friend is a jackass,” I said, pushing past Jack and offering her my hand. “I’ve only known him a few minutes actually. We’re not even really friends, more like acquaintances.”

Loraine looked at my hand like it was covered in dung, and then, with a loud sigh shook her head and painted a smile across her lips that died well before his eyes. “I’ll do my best not to hold it against you, *Cursed*.”

“She won’t be shaking your hand, so you might as well put that away,” Jack said, reaching out and pushing my right hand down to my side. “Even if she wasn’t a germophobe, which she is even though werewolves can eat raw chicken and not have to worry about salmonella, she wouldn’t touch your demon flesh since it’s an affront to Gaia or some other stupid shit.”

“Just because no werewolf has ever gotten food poisoning does not mean we’re immune to some weird demonic pathogen. Maybe all it takes is for me to get demon AIDs is to touch his arm. Call me crazy, but I do not want to be the black swan that destroys my species.” Loraine pursed her lips, apparently choosing to ignore the Gaia crack. She opened her mouth to say more when the elevator beeped, and we lurched to a stop on a floor with no number.

The metal doors opened, revealing a room bigger than a breadbasket, but not by much. The ground was covered with soft cream colored carpet, and while one of the walls was encompassed by a huge window, the other two were paneled in

redwood. It reminded me of a cabin only modern and comfortable, if a bit cozy. A sleek chrome desk sat directly in front of the elevator, taking up the majority of the room. On the wall behind it was a painting of a Nordic looking blonde wearing a wolf skin cloak standing on a snow capped cliff overlooking a forest of pine trees.

Loraine stepped out of the elevator still clutching her clipboard to her chest as though trying to hide her ample cleavage from Jack's eyes, but all that made him do was smile lasciviously. It was the kind of gaze that made me think he probably had seen her naked, and the fallout had not been friendly. Man, I was going to be so dead.

Before I'd even made it out of the elevator, Loraine was across the tiny room, standing next to a door I hadn't noticed before. It was the same shade as the rest of the wall so it nearly blended in with the surroundings, which I suspected was the point.

"I'd caution you to mind your tongue when speaking with the alpha, but I know you won't bother," Loraine said, her voice hushed and strangely reverent as she pressed her hand against the wall.

A little wooden panel slid away to reveal one of those biometric hand readers. Loraine touched it, and green light flashed from between her fingers for several seconds before the door opened, exposing a long dark tunnel. The only light from within came from a strip of white LEDs set into the cement floor.

"Please tell me we aren't going into a dark tunnel," I murmured as Jack shot me a look that had a frailness to it I hadn't expected. It shook me. He'd been cocky a second ago, but now he was scared. Well, screw this.

Loraine shot me a pleased smile rimmed with wicked intentions. "Ricky is just through there—"

I cut off her words with a bullet to the face. The right side of her skull evaporated in a cloud of blood and thicker bits. Not bad for a left-handed shot. Instead of falling, she staggered backward, her remaining eye fixing on me with hate. For good measure, I fired the Beretta twice more. The two shots caught her in the center of the chest, knocking her body to the ground with a thud I couldn't hear over the sudden ringing in my ears.

"How about you get Ricky out here before I get mad?" I barked as the crack of the gunshots faded.

I stepped up to the woman as blood gushed from her perforated chest, staining both the carpet and her blue blouse scarlet. I ground the toe of my cheap loafer into the wound. She half-gasped, half burred a cry of pain that let me know she was still very much alive. Good, I hadn't wanted to kill her.

Truthfully, after what I'd seen from the two low level werewolves I'd tangled with earlier, I wasn't exactly worried about killing her. I wanted to let the wolves know I was serious. Since I could already see her bone and tissue starting to knit itself back together, I decided to kick it up a notch. If I let up for long, Loraine would be fully healed and pissed. That wouldn't help.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Jack cried, reaching out toward me, but I held up my right hand as the smell of rotten eggs filled the air. He stopped midstride and stared at me, mouth agape. "You're going to get us both killed."

I ignored him and turned back to the woman struggling beneath my shoe like a wounded animal. Her skull had already reformed in a way that reminded me of

watching a candle melt in reverse. I'd definitely have to hurry. I sucked in a breath, filling my lungs with the coppery tang of her blood and the tattoos along my right arm blazed to life. Scarlet light pulsed along my arm as I bent down and grabbed her by the throat with my right hand, careful to keep my gun at the ready in my left. If anyone came through that hallway, I wanted to be ready.

As I tightened my grip on her neck, hellish light spilled from my tattoos, and just like that, her healing stopped. A surge of energy rushed through me, bringing with it the scent of pine forest and brisk nights. I wasn't quite sure how, but I was somehow directing her energy into me. My heart hammered excitedly as her eyes went wide in sudden fear. I shot her my biggest grin, and a shudder shook her bleeding body.

"See, I'm tired of doing things all crazy. You people helped them take Sera," I said, lifting Loraine into the air and marching her toward the big window along the left wall. "That is not allowed."

With an almost absent effort, I put a round in the glass. The sound of it shattering filled me with a sense of triumph, but the look on the werewolf's face when I held her outside the window by her throat was positively priceless. It told me one thing. She hadn't expected this. Good, neither would her alpha. Now, it was time to kick things up a notch. "Tell me where to find these Stars and Moons clowns, or I'm going to drop your second."

"I'm surprised you knew I was here," said a low, silky voice from just to my left. I didn't even bother to look in her direction. It wasn't like she could do anything to me before I flung Loraine out the window. Best case scenario right now was me joining the girl on the way down. Somehow, I was pretty sure Loraine couldn't survive such a fall.

Loraine gasped, trying to say words that bubbled out of her mouth. It was a little surprising because I didn't normally expect people with holes in their faces to talk, but hey, first time for everything.

"I'm going to guess this is where you threaten me. Well, I know a thing or two about healing, and while I'm not sure if your friend will survive the fall, I'm pretty sure if she does, she won't enjoy the sudden stop at the bottom of twenty or so stories." I relaxed my grip, allowing Loraine to slowly slip from my fingers. "But she is heavy, so I hope you'll just hurry up and tell me."

"Your friend is a dead man," the woman to my left growled, and this time I gave her a quick once over. She looked no more than seventeen with short red hair, freckles, and a body that screamed "I'm just one of the guys." Her white teeth were marred by braces with flecks of gunk sticking to them, but the snarl on her lips nearly made me want to go run and hide.

"Time's a wasting." I gestured at her with the gun. "Tick fucking tock."

"You're going to regret this," the redhead said, taking a menacing step toward me. Her eyes absolutely filled with amber so it was like she was staring at me with a pair of solid-colored marbles.

I let go of Loraine, and she fell a few inches before I grabbed her by her stupid blonde ponytail. "Whoops. Guess she was slipperier than I thought. Still, I wonder how long her hair can support her weight. Give me Sera's location, and we won't have to find out."

“Ricky, you should just do as he says. He’s a Cursed. You know what they’re like,” Jack pleaded, and his eyes were full of worry. I wondered if he thought we’d get out of this alive. I was giving us fifty, fifty odds.

“Go ahead, drop her. If you do, you’ll have zero leverage—” I cut Ricky off by putting another round into Loraine’s chest, spraying her insides out across the expanse of air.

“What was that?” I asked, tapping my ear with the Beretta. “I must have missed the part where you told me where to find Sera’s captor.”

Ricky snarled and bunched her hands into fists so tightly I could see blood dripping from her palms. Thought flashed through her eyes as she presumably weighed her options.

“Okay,” she said, slowly relaxing her fists before telling us an address. Watching the calm ripple over her features and settle there was one of the most unnerving things I’d ever seen.

“Do you know where that is, Jack?” I asked. When the vampire nodded to me, I let out a sigh of relief. “Good. Get the elevator will you?”

Jack did as he was told and hit the button beside the elevator without a word. Ricky continued to stare at me with flat, empty eyes and edged a hair closer, no doubt about to spring at me. Her movement made me wonder if she had expected me to see it. I was as good as dead in her mind, so it could have gone either way. That was fine. I could live with her wanting to kill me.

“So what’s your play now, Cursed?” Jack asked as the elevator behind him opened, and he stepped inside, keeping one foot out to block the door from closing. Well, that was nice of him. Part of me wondered if he’d just leave me here to die. I really hoped not because after we rescued Sera, I had another mother and son to save.

“We go get Sera,” I replied and dropped Loraine. The next few moments were sort of a blur as Ricky dove for the falling girl while I leapt for the elevator. Her hands grasped empty air as she hit the ground on her chest and slid half out the shattered window frame. She turned, rage painting her face into a gruesome mask as the elevator doors closed, and we lurched downward.

## Chapter 13

“So that happened,” Jack said as our elevator rocketed downward like an express straight to Hell. “Your mother never really taught you how to converse with people, did she?”

“Is this where you tell me you were excited to walk into a dark hallway in a wolf’s den?” I asked, raising an eyebrow as I reloaded the Beretta with the extra 9mm rounds I’d pocketed from the downed cultists. It wasn’t as many as I’d have liked. “Let’s be real here. They weren’t going to tell us squat. They were going to lead us into a nice dark room, probably with cement floors for easy cleaning and quietly kill us before dumping our bodies in a dumpster.”

“You give them too much credit. They’d have totally eaten us. Well, not us, but you for sure.” Jack’s lips curled into an amused smile as he reached under his

shirt and pulled out a revolver with a four inch barrel and eyed it to make sure it was filled with cartridges. "They don't much like the taste of vampire meat. We taste too much like garlic evidently."

Before I could digest his words, the elevator dinged. We'd reached the lobby in record time. I spun my gaze toward the already opening elevator doors. A hand wreathed in thick fur the color of chocolate burst through the opening and gripped me by the lapels of my trench coat.

My face was slammed into the metal doors with enough force to shatter my nose and make my vision go twelve kinds of blurry. I wasn't sure how I managed to raise the Beretta, but I did, pointing the barrel through the crack in the still opening doors and firing as quickly as I could. The explosion of sound within the tiny elevator splintered my hearing into irreparable shards.

The Beretta clicked, signaling I'd run out of shots as the hand gripping me loosened a fraction before slamming me back into the doors. Thankfully, they'd opened wide enough for my nose to miss the metal, but my shoulders weren't so lucky. I was torn free of the elevator, my bones screaming in pain as they impacted the slowly widening doors.

A ten foot tall nightmare of fur and teeth glared at me with cold amber eyes. Froth dripped from its jaws as it hoisted me into the air like I weighed less than a deflated balloon. Hot, fetid breath sprayed across my face as the creature spun on its heel and flung me like a rag doll. I slammed into the empty receptionist's desk with a crack that made stars flash across my eyes.

The room swam as I put my left hand against the cool white tile and tried to hoist myself to my feet. I'd scarcely managed to move in the time it took the werewolf to cross the thirty-foot distance and wrap his large, clawed hands around my throat. The half-man, half-wolf lifted me into the air, cutting off my air supply as my feet dangled uselessly in the air.

The crack of gunshots exploded across the huge lobby, and a spray of steaming blood hit me in the face. It was hotter than I'd expected, and I tried to scream as it scalded my flesh. Unfortunately, I couldn't breathe enough to make more than a peep. My lungs ached from the lack of oxygen as another shot took the creature in the same spot, and this time the hold loosened enough for air to rush into my throat like a freight train made of fire and razor blades. It burned all the way down, but the dimness in my vision was held at bay enough for me to lift my empty Beretta and put the barrel against the chest of the wolf.

"What do you plan on doing with an empty gun?" the creature asked, voice a strange mix of barks and rage as it spun in one slow circle so my body was between it and Jack. The vampire stood just in front of the elevator, hastily reloading his revolver. Two werewolves lay on their backs on either side of him, their heads split open by gunshots. Even still, they crawled toward him like broken cockroaches. He had maybe ten seconds before they were on him, good as new.

"I plan on shooting you with it," I squawked, unsure how I managed to make words come out of my mouth. Admittedly, I knew it wasn't much of a plan since the gun was out of bullets, but I was really hoping I could use my demon powers to make it shoot hellfire at him or something.



The werewolf's mouth opened to reveal a mouthful of shark-like teeth, and its tongue snaked outward. It scraped against my cheek with that same scratchy texture I associated with a cat's tongue. A shiver ran down my back as my left hand fell uselessly to my side.

"You taste like arrogance," the wolf replied, cocking its head to the side before flinging me across the room. I smashed into the big window at the front of the building. Like any good glass window, this one shattered under the impact of my body. Razor sharp glass shards rained down on me as I flew outside. While my trench coat thankfully kept most of the glass from slicing me open, my face and hands weren't so lucky. I hit the sidewalk in a bloody heap, bounced once, and rolled into the street next to a black Toyota Camry that had been smashed flat by a falling body. A gob of warm, sticky blood dripped off the broken car and splattered against my forehead.

I squinted my eyes, trying to block out the blinding sunlight as the werewolf bounded through the broken window and landed lithely next to me. It sauntered toward me, claws clicking on the cement like it was one of those raptors from Jurassic Park with each step. It grabbed me by the lapels, hoisting me back into the air as my hands fell uselessly to my sides.

My eyes shot open to see the creature staring past me at Loraine's body. A look of hatred rippled across its features as I tried desperately to raise the Beretta once again. Before I made it halfway, my arm gave out and fell limply to my side, the Beretta all but slipping from my grip. My pathetic attempt was met by derisive laughter, and then, almost as an afterthought, the werewolf reached down with its free hand and gripped my left wrist. It squeezed so hard, I felt the bones in my wrist threatening to break.

"Go ahead and shoot," it said, holding the gun against its chest, laughter in its eyes. "It'll do about as much good as your bullets did. Then I'll carve out your liver and eat it while you lay on the ground bleeding."

My vision swam and my gut lurched. Blood pounded in my temples as I shut my eyes, concentrating as hard as I could. The faintest glow began to emanate from my tattoos as something in the back of my mind stirred just a touch, like a lazy cat looking up from its post nap stretch and eyeing the surroundings.

I pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

Laughter filled my ears, making my throbbing head pound in pain. I stared up into the amber eyes as the werewolf licked its chops, its black tongue slipping around its gleaming yellow teeth. I pulled the trigger again.

*Click.*

"Guess you didn't want it bad enough, eh?" the werewolf asked, opening its mouth wide as I pulled the trigger one last time.

The werewolf's head evaporated in an explosion of gore that threw it backward. I tumbled from its spasming grip and struck the concrete hard enough for everything to go black around the edges. I tried to get to my hands and knees, tried to crawl away from its body as a thick pool of crimson began to spread out from the werewolf. As I struggled, its wolfish body melted away into still more slime until all that remained of the creature was Jock's headless form.

I collapsed to the cement, my cheek slapping against the sticky, wet concrete as Duane ambled toward me with a shotgun over one shoulder. With practiced ease, the old man knelt down next to me and grabbed me by the left arm, pulling me to my feet with a grunt of effort. He threw my arm over his shoulder and began mostly dragging me toward Jack's pickup. The old vampire was already in the truck, engine running.

"Next time you decide to shoot werewolves, try using silver," Duane whispered in my ear. His words thumped against my temples like a pair of baseball bats. "It's a lot more permanent." Then he flung me into the bed of the truck and leapt in after me. My head smacked against the soil-covered metal as we raced off in a screech of tires that left the smell of burning rubber in its wake.

## Chapter 14

Something slammed into the side of the pickup, throwing me across the bed as we fled the wolves' den. I smacked into the metal wall and little tweety birds flapped around my skull singing mocking tunes.

Duane crouched down next to me, his shotgun resting against one shoulder as he fired the weapon off to the side. The shriek of broken glass and screeching metal filled my ears before something rammed into us again. Duane lost his balance and toppled sideways into the dirt next to me. As our pickup fishtailed, the shotgun slipped out of his grip and slid across the soil-strewn truck bed.

The truck's back window exploded in a spray of glass that rained down on top of me. Jack cursed from within the cab of the truck before we whipped sideways, skidding across the road in a screech of rubber. The truck fishtailed, and I was thrown across the bed once again. I stuck my legs out to keep myself from crashing into the wall and the impact ran down my entire body. I slumped to the ground, my face in the dirt as I tried to orient myself to my surroundings. My head pounded so hard I could scarcely get a hold of myself over the crescendo between my ears.

Duane crawled forward on his hands and knees, trying desperately to reach his weapon. We swerved again, and he lost his balance, sprawling in the dirt. Another burst of gunfire tore into the truck's tail, blasting the tailgate open and revealing a black Camry similar to the one I'd crushed with Loraine's body. This one, unfortunately, was filled with muscle-bound goons, three of whom were leaning out the vehicle's windows and packing serious heat in the form of 9mm Uzis.

I flattened myself against the debris-covered metal as they opened fire, filling the air with bullets as their guns jerked around in their hands like flopping fish. Jack's swerving wasn't the only thing that kept them from mostly missing the truck, but it was what caused Duane's shotgun to fly across the bed and hit the wall next to me.

I flopped forward on elbows, ignoring the pain that flashed along my forearms and snatched the weapon even though the tiny burst of movement made my guts revolt. I pushed down my nausea and concentrated on pointing the shotgun at the Camry. It swerved back into view, and I fired into the car's windshield. The sound

of busted glass filled my cotton swabbed brain. The car swerved sideways, clipping an old VW bug and tearing off its driver's side mirror in a spray of sparks.

"Good shooting," Duane called, giving me a thumbs up.

I tried to smile at him and wound up throwing up into the dirt. Thankfully, there wasn't much inside my belly because a moment later, I found myself lying face down in the mess. Duane scrambled over to me and reached out for the gun clasped in my right hand. The moment he touched me, my tattoos flared to life and a surge of energy shot through my body, bringing with it the smell of oak and a vision of multicolored leaves dancing in fall breezes.

The cotton filling my brain vanished as Duane snatched his hand away like he'd been bitten by a snake. Shakes overtook him in an instant, and his flesh paled.

Before I could ask what the hell had happened, the Camry swerved back behind us. Adrenaline surged through me, and I threw myself on top of Duane, knocking him flat as a spray of bullets passed over our heads and smacked into the toolbox at the back of the truck before ricocheting inside the truck bed like a pinball machine of death.

I don't know how I avoided getting perforated, but I didn't stop to find out. Feeling better than I had in a while, I cocked the old pump action and let loose another blast of silver buckshot into the shooter on the passenger side. It caught him full on in the chest. His Uzi fell from his hand, hit the asphalt, and disappeared under the tires of the Camry.

As I tried to pump the shotgun again, we swerved around a school bus. I lost my balance and fell. The weapon slipped from my grip as I toppled ass over elbows toward the back of the truck. I hit the tailgate and kept going as the Camry veered back into view in time to catch me with its spider webbed windshield.

Pain exploded through my back as I busted through the windshield in a spray of gummy safety glass and crashed into the dashboard. The movement made the driver slam on his brakes, and the car jerked to a stop hard enough for me to fly forward across the hood and fall to the pavement. I landed hard on my elbows, and even though my insides felt scrambled, I looked for Jack's truck. It skidded to a stop several meters away, but I instantly knew they were too far away to possibly help me. I was on my own.

That thought filled me as the car doors opened. A surge of anger ran through me as my arm flared bright enough to blot out the sun, and a sudden calmness descended over me. I wasn't alone at all. A smile crossed my lips as I leapt to my feet, no longer bound by things like injuries and pain. My mind focused in an instant as I met the charge of the closest werewolf, tearing his Uzi from his hands and driving my right fist through his chest with one blow. My knuckles punched out his back in a shower of gore as I whirled around, careful to keep the screaming thug's body in front of me to block the spray of bullets coming toward me while firing my stolen Uzi at the shooter.

My rounds caught the shooter in the chest, throwing him backward into the path of an oncoming minivan. The driver of the vehicle must have seen what was going to happen because she slammed on her brakes and tried to swerve around him, but it was no use. The blue Honda Odyssey smashed into the werewolf, pitching him up onto the hood and over the top of the vehicle with bone crunching

force. He smacked into the pavement on the other side with a wet slap and lay there unmoving.

Sirens filled the air, and off in the distance, I could see at least one more Camry flying toward us ahead of the blue and red gumballs. Giddy laughter tore from my throat as I inhaled the smell of blood and death. Power leapt from the bleeding werewolf still stuck to my arm, healing me in an instant and my tattoos flared like star fire. I jerked my arm backward, ripping it free of the werewolf's corpse in one smooth motion while I emptied the rest of his gun into the driver who was still struggling to get free of the seatbelt twisted around him.

The cars were almost upon us now, but strangely, I wasn't all that worried. I spun on my heel, dropping the empty gun onto the ground before sprinting toward Jack's truck. I caught the flash of Jack's eyes in the mirror and the wheels started spinning. I reached down, feeling for the power coursing through my body and leapt the last several feet. I crashed onto the bed and lost my balance, toppling over as the old pickup took off in a squeal of tires.

"What the fuck are you?" Duane asked, mouth open in awe. "I've never seen someone move like that before, even a Cursed."

"Didn't you hear? I exchanged my soul for power. It wouldn't have been a good deal if it wasn't for a lot of power," I said sort of hoping the power thing was true.

Before Duane could respond, Jack stomped on the gas pedal and sent us flying up onto the sidewalk and around the gawkers. We hit open road a second later as the other cars skidded to a stop behind the mess of cars we'd left behind, and somehow, I didn't feel that bad about it. No, scratch that. I was downright giddy wondering how the werewolves, who had no doubt already healed, were going to explain a car full of automatic weapons.

"Yeah, I heard, but I've seen lots of Cursed in my time. Buddy, I've never seen someone's eyes go as dark as yours did. When I looked into them, it was like the void itself was staring back at me, threatening to rip out my soul just for the fun of it." Duane kept his shotgun pointed at my chest as he slumped to the bed on his ass and braced himself against the sidewall. "It's not cool."

"It's a little bit cool," I replied weakly. Inwardly, I was terrified he was right. I knew nothing about the demon who had given me this power. For all I knew it was Lucifer himself, and for Duane to be as scared of me as he was after everything we'd been through only reinforced my terror. What the hell had I done? And worse, why had I felt the need for so much power just to save one mother and her child? It didn't make any sense... unless the mother and child I was trying to save were being held by someone way more powerful than a centuries-old Cursed.

"No, son, it's not." He didn't even smile as he braced the shotgun against his knees so he could keep it leveled at me. The movement gave me the sneaking suspicion he didn't plan on lowering it. "Not even a little bit."

## Chapter 15

It was dark by the time we reached the location Ricky had specified earlier, partially because we'd had to switch vehicles a couple times. Jack had been more

than a little upset to exchange his classic Ford for a “Japanese piece of shit” as he called it, and his ensuing whining had been so annoying that when we’d stopped for gas, we wound up boosting a Dodge Charger, which evidently, was little better.

Still, it was a good thing we’d switched vehicles because every time I saw a black Camry on the road, I was pretty sure it was manned by werewolves. I had seen a lot of them. Too many for it to just be coincidence.

Now, I stood on the street outside a massive wrought-iron gate that blocked access to a hugely expensive looking gated community. A guard shack sat square in the middle of the gates, and even from here, I could make out several video cameras. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure how well trained the guards were, but being that I could see an honest to god Ferrari in the driveway of the first house beyond the gate, I was pretty sure they weren’t going to let me in even if I showed up with a van full of pizzas to deliver. No, this was the type of place where they escorted the pizza delivery boy to Mrs. Robinson’s door.

“You got any way of getting in there? Or are we going to go with the whole shoot our way in thing?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder at Duane. The druid stood there chewing on his lip and let out a slow sigh.

“I do, but you won’t like it,” Duane said, rubbing his chin with one hand as his gaze swung back to a manhole cover a few feet away. “And shooting our way in probably won’t work. The cops’ response time to a place like this can be counted in seconds.”

“Is this where you seriously suggest we go in through the sewer?” Jack asked, raising one dark eyebrow and giving me the impression the two of them had engaged in the particular conversation before. It made me wonder what they did when they weren’t in the bar, and as that thought crossed my mind, I realized I knew next to nothing about them. God, I was an idiot. Here I was about to break into a millionaire class gated community with a couple guys I’d met only a few hours ago.

“Well, we can’t go over the walls.” Duane pointed to the razor wire lining the twenty-foot-tall cinderblock wall. “I don’t know if you can see it, but I can actually feel electricity running through that wire. I’m pretty sure it’s a Waldorf system which means if it gets disturbed by so much as a pigeon, not only does it send fifty thousand volts running through that razor wire, it also sounds an alarm. Underground is our best bet, places like these tend not to expect it.”

“What if there’s a defense in the sewer?” I asked, trying to decide how I felt about Duane’s knowledge of alarm systems. Part of me was impressed, but most of me was worried. No one good knew that much about them.

“Look, your only other option is to charge through that gate, but you see those steel cylinders in the ground on either side of the gate?” He gestured toward it, and I spied the six-inch-diameter cylinders just poking up from the cement. They were spaced about three inches apart the entire length of both gates.

“Yeah?” I said as a bad feeling crept down my spine.

“I’m guessing those will shoot up and provide some kind of barrier that will be very difficult to get through. You could likely punch through the gate, but not before they came up, spearing your car.” Duane rubbed his chin and his eyes twinkled mischievously. “No, we need to go underground, unless you both want to give me a few days to figure out a way inside.”

“Well, we ain’t got time for that. Ricky’s no doubt on her way here right now. Hell, I’m sort of surprised she and her wolves aren’t already here,” I replied, wishing not for the first time, I hadn’t lost the Beretta. Not having the gun left me feeling naked and exposed. “But remind me later to have you help me rob a bank.”

“Banks are small time,” Duane said, and a smile broke across his aged face. “I get into them all the time when I’m feeling lazy. Mostly, I break into big corporations and government agencies.” I’m not sure what kind of look I was giving him, but his eyes twinkled. “I’m the guy they pay to try to break into their facilities to test their security.” He shrugged as if to say, “Hey, it pays the bills.”

“Why don’t I just walk up to the guards and lay my vampire whammy on them?” Jack asked, pushing past the two of us and sauntering toward the guard shack. “Even if it fails, which it won’t, it isn’t like I’ll show up on the cameras.”

“Jack never wants to go in the sewers.” Duane let out a small huff of breath as he eyed me carefully as if expecting me to comment on the vampire’s antics.

I was about to reply when the vampire sauntered over to the shack’s window and a portly man with dark eyes and a red and gray streaked Viking beard poked his head out. I couldn’t hear what was said, but as Jack made two fingers on his right hand walk across his left palm, a buzzing sound filled the air and the gate swung open. Jack gestured for us to come over, and as we caught up to him, the Viking gave us a glassy-eyed smile and waved us through.

“Vampire trumps bank thief every time,” Jack said, smirking as Duane grumbled next to me. “Now we just need to find the house.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Duane replied, practically snarling as he walked through the gate. He made it about three steps inside the compound before a sound like busting glass filled my ears. Duane’s face twisted up in agony before he was thrown forcibly backward about twenty feet. He landed hard in a grove of azaleas and lay there dazed.

“What the hell?” I mouthed as a high pitched ringing split the air like an air-raid siren and the gate started to close.

“They’ve got some kind of barrier spell,” Jack cried out as symbols all along the ground lit up with that same sickly green light I remembered seeing from Vassago’s Cursed. Jack’s gaze swung from the still unmoving Duane to the glowing green fire and horror passed over his features. “Damn.”

“What is it?” I asked, but before the words had even left my mouth, Jack had grabbed me by the collar of my trench coat.

“We tripped a magical trap that won’t let me in. They must have known I’d come after Sera. Looks like you’ll have to do this on your own,” he said, taking a step forward and using all his vampire strength to fling me through the closing gate.

My shoulder crashed into it with a bone cracking squeal that caused the metal to shudder, but my momentum kept me going anyway. I hurtled through the opening like a broken mannequin and crashed to the cement on the other side as the metal door slammed closed, leaving me alone on the other side.

I tried to shake the cobwebs from my brain as I turned back toward the wrought-iron gate. I couldn’t see through it. The entire structure was alive with green flame hot enough to turn the asphalt beneath it to slag and burn all the plant life to ash. The siren was still going off, but it seemed a lot quieter inside the compound, and as I looked around, I realized there were hazy lines of energy

drifting up from the pavement, reminding me of heat lines cast from the sun in the desert.

“Did Jack seriously just throw me through a gate of burning hellfire and tell me to save Sera by myself?” I said to myself, and as the words left my mouth, an assertion of truth rippled across the back of my brain. Still, I got the impression Jack wouldn’t have thrown me through the gate if he didn’t think I could do this. He expected me to be able to do this on my own. Was it because of my demonic arm? It had to be.

Maybe the vampire knew something I didn’t, but every time I’d used my power thus far, it’d been reactionary. Maybe there was a way to make it more purposeful? It made sense after all. There ought to be a way for me to control it. At least, I really hoped there was.

I shut my eyes, concentrating on the sensation I’d felt when I’d used my powers. Unlike before, I got the distinct impression of another person looking over my shoulder, waiting expectantly to see what I’d do.

“Hello,” I said aloud even though I was wasting time and men armed with guns, swords, and gun-swords were no doubt running toward me.

“Hello,” replied a feline voice old enough to make all of humanity feel young in comparison. “How are things?”

“Been better,” I said, shaking my head as I turned away from the gate and tried to figure out where to go. Unsure, I picked a random direction and started walking, hoping that at the very least I wouldn’t be spotted by whoever had booby-trapped the entrance. It was probably a foolish hope, I’ll admit.

“I’ll bet,” said the voice, and the sly smile in the words was obvious to me. “So, how can I help you puny mortal who is less than an amoeba’s toe slime?”

Somehow the words made me grin because I got the distinct feeling she was messing with me, and as I had that thought, another struck me. The voice was most definitely female. My demon master was a female cat. I was so screwed.

“I’d like to know where to go to save Sera,” I replied, wondering if there was a way for me to speak to her without talking aloud. I had the sneaking suspicion no one else could hear her ancient voice. Anyone looking at me would just think I was crazy, and being that we were likely to start talking about anything from demons to murder, I’d likely get reported to the nearest psychiatric ward ASAP. They probably wouldn’t look kindly on my explanation since telling them I was talking to the demon in my head was probably right there with using the “Devil made me do it” defense.

“Interesting,” the cat mused, and I got the strange sensation of it peering very closely at me. “Most people in your situation would ask for gifts or their memories, or perhaps even who I was. Without any hesitation, you ask only for help to save a female you’ve only just met.” The image of a huge toothy grin filled my mind. “I knew I chose rightly.”

Before I could respond, or even process her words, a house lit up in the distance as if overlaid with a scarlet lens. It was especially strange because I could suddenly see people within the house, along its walls and even down below. There was a ton of them, and even from here, I could tell some were a lot warmer than others. Werewolves. I didn’t know how I knew, but I did.

“Go there and you will find your girl, hero,” the voice purred as it receded into the back of my mind.

The scarlet overlay faded, and the scenery resolved to its normal serene colors. I stood there like a dumbass for a lot longer than I’d care to admit as the whump, whump of the siren faded to nothing. Behind me, the fire still raged, and while I was curious why no one had come to investigate it, I forced myself to focus. The overlay had showed me an army of cultists and who knows what else between me and Sera.

Still, as I passed by the Ferrari parked outside a lofty mansion with that fake grass people used on baseball fields, a thought occurred to me. I might not have any weapons, unless you counted my demonic arm, but I had another way inside. It’d just be big and loud which I suspected was my style anyway. And besides, I always wanted to drive a Ferrari. I think. I couldn’t be too sure about that last bit, but either way, there was a canary yellow one right next to me just begging to be driven into a house full of cultists at top speed.

## Chapter 16

Hot wiring a Ferrari was surprisingly easy, making me think I’d probably done it before. I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about that, but as I punched the car to the limit, and it roared in response, I decided to forgive myself for stealing it. As I careened down the street toward the mansion I’d seen outlined in scarlet by the cat demon in my head, I realized it was a little smaller than the rest, but what it lacked in size, it more than made up for in impenetrable walls. The damned thing even had a moat around it with a stainless steel drawbridge.

It made me wonder who was in charge of their homeowners’ association because evidently when it came to drawbridges that wasn’t over the line. Then again, every house in here looked like a several million dollar custom job. Maybe when you had that kind of money, no one cared what you did to your own house? I somehow doubted it, but I was willing to bet this particular homeowners’ association had seen its fair share of bribes.

I pushed the thought from my mind and gunned the engine one last time as I ripped up the street toward the drawbridge. As the front wheels left the pavement, I leapt from the Ferrari and landed in the moat with a splash. The icy water sucked all the heat from my body, reducing my frantic breaths to shuddering gasps. The car crashed into the mansion’s closed drawbridge with a thunderous crack, damned near tearing the metal door from its hinges as the Ferrari bent the steel structure inward like it was tinfoil.

The smell of gasoline hit my nose, and I threw myself backward beneath the water, hoping the emergency flares I’d left lit in the backseat would do the trick. Admittedly, I felt a little bad for destroying such an expensive piece of Italian engineering, but hey, them’s the breaks.

I’d managed to swim about five feet away before a shockwave sent me tumbling through the water, slamming my body along the cement bottom and shearing off skin from my face and hands. Breath burst from my lips in a stream of bubbles.



My lungs threatened to burst as I struggled to get my legs underneath me and propel myself upward.

Just as my vision was starting to go dim, my feet touched the stone bottom. I pushed off with everything I had, rocketing myself upward. Breaking the surface was like coming home, and I resolved never to go without air again. I sucked in another quick breath or ten while I took a moment to survey the surroundings from the water. The entire front of the drawbridge and gate had been blown apart. Blackened hunks of metal, stone, and burning debris were strewn across the road and once immaculate landscape.

I pushed myself back down into the water, keeping my nose just above the surface as men swarmed the hole I'd made in the gate. Their flashlight beams cut through the darkness in wide, well-practiced sweeps. It was then that I realized the once well-lit compound was pitch black. Had the Ferrari's explosion knocked out the power too? Well, that was certainly awesome. I was totally going to name my next whatever Enzo.

Thankfully, even though the guards had their guns at the ready, they were way too confused by the explosion to pay much attention to me in the half a second it took me to cross the distance between me and the hole. It was a good thing too because while there was no way their Israeli Tavor assault rifles were legal for people to use here, I got the distinct impression these guys knew how to use them.

Careful to keep myself in the shadows, I scrambled up onto the bank and grabbed the closest guard, wrapping one hand around his mouth while cinching off his air supply with the elbow of my other arm. He kicked, struggling to throw me off as I pulled him down into the water and dragged him backward. Flashlight beams immediately lanced through the space we'd occupied, but thankfully, we were already underwater.

After what felt like forever, but wasn't long at all, the guard locked in my grasp stopped struggling. I held him under as I pulled us backward several more yards before surfacing and releasing him. My hands did a quick search of his pockets, and I wound up coming away with his TAR-21, a Colt 45, and a Becker BK7 knife. Being unarmed wasn't exactly fun anyway. Hopefully, the guns would still shoot after their dip in the water.

A sly smile crossed my lips as I sighted my Tavor on the three guards clustered near the gate, no doubt trying to figure out what the hell happened because they stood back to back in a modified triangle, flashlights delving into the darkness all around them.

I had half a second to wonder whether they'd already called for backup, but decided the Ferrari's explosion had rendered that pointless. I pulled the Tavor's trigger in quick bursts, amazed at how I managed to hit them with nearly every shot even though I couldn't remember ever firing the Israeli assault rifle before.

As the guards fell to the ground in a mass of twitching crumpling bodies, a stray thought made me wonder why killing them meant nothing to me. It was a little weird, right? I'd killed or intended to kill several people today and none of their deaths had bothered me. Was I the type of guy who did this sort of thing to the point where I'd already become desensitized to the violence of death?

With that thought fresh in my mind, I pulled myself onto the bank and slipped inside, thankful for my cover of darkness even though I no longer saw any

flashlights. Whether that was because there were no more guards or they'd just shut them off to avoid becoming targets, I wasn't sure. Either way, I wasn't waiting around to find out. Besides, for all I knew, they had night vision goggles. Hey, now there was an idea.

As I sprinted toward the house, I reached out with my mind, feeling for the cat demon in my head. It perked up, and its amusement slid across my brain. Evidently, it liked what I'd done to the place.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" the cat demon purred before I got the distinct impression it was licking itself.

"I'd love for you to turn on that night vision thing like you did before, but you know, for the next several minutes," I whispered, trying to keep my voice as low as possible as I ducked beside a huge marble pillar and glanced around for guards.

It was so dark I couldn't see anyone at all. Oddly, I didn't even hear the sound of sirens or alarms. I'd half-expected police to be on their way already, especially since the front gate had burst into green flame, but now that I thought about it, the Ferrari's explosion hadn't been that loud, and my gunfire had sounded strangely muffled. Was there something on the property keeping outsiders from seeing and hearing things here? It made sense I supposed. If this was the home to a death cult, they likely wouldn't want people coming in here over a few screams. Maybe when we'd tripped the alarm at the gate, it had slammed down a magical cone of silence on the place too.

"Done and done." The scenery turned red, reminding me of that scene in predator after the alien had removed its mask. It was a lot better than pitch blackness, but not that much better. Off in the distance, I saw a gaggle of guards coming toward me in a quiet, careful formation.

I glanced around, looking for a window, and finding one only a few feet away, put a couple rounds into it before leaping inside. I hit the ground, rolling over the broken glass as gunshots chewed up the spot I'd occupied only a moment before. My Tavor came up along with me and I fired, putting several rounds in the guard standing dumbfounded a few feet away.

He flew backward, smacking into the wall with a wet thud before sliding down the wall, leaving a glistening trail of crimson in his wake. Shouts filled the air outside as I sprinted forward, pausing only to pick up the fallen soldier's Tavor on my dash into the hallway. It was lined with doors, all shut. A bad feeling crept down my neck as I stared across the hundred-foot expanse. Bullets exploded behind me, ripping apart the frame and walls as I dropped to my belly. The stairs on the other side of the hallway seemed so far away, I wasn't sure I could make it crawling like a snake before more guards found me. Still, I had to try. While I wasn't positively certain Sera was down there, something in my gut told me she was.

Before I could crawl even an inch forward, the door to my left exploded open. I threw myself sideways out of the way, firing both my guns. The one in my right hand went empty first and the left one soon followed. Not that it mattered much. The werewolf standing there wearing tattered Despicable Me pajama bottoms looked down at the bullet holes perforating his furry chest and abdomen and smiled, which was altogether crazy looking because he had the head of a wolf. I didn't even know the damned things could smile.

The next thing I knew, I was flying backward through the air. My back smashed into the drywall, cracking it. I tumbled to the ground in a rain of plaster, struggling for breath. I tried vainly to get to my feet, but all I managed to do was stumble sideways down the stairs. It was not my most graceful moment.

By the time I hit the landing at the bottom, every single part of my body screamed in agony. To be honest, I was surprised I wasn't dead. I had about half a second to contemplate being alive when several hundred pounds of werewolf slammed into the landing next to me, gouging holes in the flooring with his yellowed talons. The entire structure swayed, and the strain of wood and bolts filled the air as the stairs leaned violently away from the wall. The wolf stopped, ears going flat against his gray-furred skull. Then, very slowly, it reached out, grasping the banister with one clawed-hand and took a step toward me. The landing swayed again.

Without thinking, I raised my right hand and cried, "Ignis!" at the top of my lungs. My tattoos blazed to life as a ball of red hellfire exploded from my palm and smashed into the werewolf's chest, sending goutts of flame streaming through the air and tossing the huge creature backward into the wall like yesterday's garbage. The smell of burnt hair filled my nostrils as I sucked in a quick breath.

My tattoos lost their neon light and faded back to normal as I stared at my hand, unsure of how I'd managed to do that. Unfortunately, the werewolf was already getting back to its feet even though it looked like a Christmas ham that had fallen in the fire. It glared at me from only a couple feet away with murder in its eyes. So I did the smart thing and threw my dumbass down the rest of the stairs. Yeah, that was my idea of a smart plan, but really, since it disappeared into a dark alcove, I was reasonably sure the wolf couldn't just leap down like before. He'd need to take the stairs just like a normal wolf monster. Besides, I needed to go down anyway, why take the long way?

Somehow I came to my feet at the bottom and managed to only smash my face into the drywall and knock what I hoped was only a print of Starry Night off the wall. The sound of it crashing to the ground echoed in my ears as I dug the Colt .45 out of the waistband of my jeans and forced my bruised, battered body to continue down the stairs as they veered down and to the left.

The stairway above me creaked and groaned with the sound of something rushing down toward me. I spun, putting a couple bullets into the red haze behind me, hoping to at least slow the creature even though it probably wouldn't have done any good even if they had hit the wolf. Why, oh why didn't I bring some silver along?

I spun on my heel, racing down the stairs three at a time because, you know, predators don't chase things that run away. By the time, I reached the bottom, my chest heaved with effort. I didn't see the werewolf behind me yet, but that thought wasn't exactly comforting because I was too busy trying to figure out where to go in a room with no obvious doors. I moved into the center of the darkened room, searching for a lever or button to open a hidden passageway, but didn't see any conveniently placed bookcases.

The sense that something was watching me from the darkness was nearly overwhelming as I skidded to a stop at the end of the room, running my hands over the wall in one last desperate attempt to find a means of escape. If I didn't,

that wolf was going to be down here, and while I'd somehow blasted it with fire once, I wasn't sure I could manage the trick again.

"Been a long time," Ricky said, sauntering out of the shadows to my left. She wore only a painted on black crop top and denim short shorts. She tapped her lips with her pinky finger and flashed me a devilish grin as she looked me up and down as her eyes melted into a shade of amber that sent a chill running down my spine. Those were the eyes of a predator eyeing a rabbit in a lone field. "How's about we take a moment to get reacquainted?"

I shot her, emptying the Colt into her chest as she leapt, but all that wound up doing was covering me in her scalding blood as she landed knees first on my chest and drove me into the plush carpet. The back of my head smacked the floor and everything went dim. As she leaned in close, the only thing I could see as my vision faded were the braces on her too white teeth.

## Chapter 17

A burst of adrenaline drove the sleep from my eyes as I awoke to find myself duct taped to a chair. Both relief and horror surged through me as I struggled vainly to pull myself free. Relief because I'd partially expected not to awaken at all, horror because Ricky was sitting just a few feet away, straddling the back of a cheap brown desk chair and staring at me with a bored look on her face.

When she saw me stir, her expression vanished into a canvas of utter emptiness, and she rose slowly and gracefully, sliding her milky white thighs from beneath the arms of the chair before stepping lightly onto the floor.

She padded in a slow circle around me, not speaking as her bare feet slapped ominously against the cement. Her long red fingernails glinted in the moonlight streaming into the room from somewhere behind me, making her white skin seem almost ethereal in composition. Gooseflesh broke out across my arms, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up as she took slow, languid steps around me.

Every single time she disappeared behind my back, my heart hammered obscenely, and I almost wondered if she could hear it because her grin would be just a little wider when she reappeared on my other side even though the rest of her face remained horrifically blank.

I tried to break free of the tape holding me to the metal chair, but it was no use. I wasn't sure how much tape she'd wound up using, but from the look of it, I was betting it was nearly four or five entire rolls. It made me wonder how strong she thought I was, and that thought sparked a sudden hope in me. Maybe I was strong enough to break free.

"Your scent has changed," Ricky said, her warm breath kissing the flesh behind my right ear as she spoke. "You're starting to think you might find a way out of this. You would be incorrect." Nails punched through my white button up and into the flesh beneath causing my blood to well up and stain the fabric. A cry of pain escaped my lips even as I tried to clamp them shut around the sound.

Her amber eyes flashed in the near darkness as she spun me around with no more effort than it'd have taken me to rip open a stick of gum. Her face was so

near to my own, the tip of her pert little nose pressed against the tip of mine. Sweat glistened on her skin like tiny diamonds as she pressed her forehead against mine while simultaneously straddling my body, her thighs sliding around my waist and locking onto me with enough force to expel the breath from my body.

“What’s going on in that little brain, I wonder,” she mused with a faint lilt to her voice. She rocked back and forth on top of me, causing the chair to do the same and the scratch, scratch of it along the concrete made my teeth hurt.

“Not much,” I replied, somehow managing to keep the terror out of my voice. “I’m not really known for what’s between my ears.”

“How would you know?” she barked, and the sudden rage in her voice nearly blew out my ear drums. “You know nothing, remember nothing. That was the bargain you struck.” Something dark and sinister shifted behind her eyes, and she smiled at me sweetly before shaking her head. “I see what you’re doing. Trying to be funny or annoying, I’m not sure which, but either way...” She reached up and dragged one fingernail down my cheek. Hot, burning pain exploded down the length of my face. “After I extract my pound of flesh from you, I’ll find out who you struck your deal with, Cursed.”

Her smile widened, revealing white fangs that glinted in the moonlight streaming through the window behind her. Unfortunately, I couldn’t make out much beyond the window because all I could see beyond the glass was the full moon hanging in the air.

“Focus,” she whispered, and her words tugged at my left ear before she bit down on my lobe. Another roar of pain crashed through me. My hands tightened into fists as I struggled to reach up and grab her, but it was no use. There was nothing I could do to stop her as my own hot, sticky blood ran down my neck and spilled onto my shoulder.

Ricky pulled away and looked at me. A thin rivulet of my blood dripped down from between her lips to pool on the end of her chin like a tiny ruby teardrop. She chewed slowly as agony crashed against me in waves.

“You bit my ear,” I growled, trying to hide my panic under a layer of rage. “Bitch.”

“Guilty.” Ricky smiled and rocked again, pressing her lithe body against my chest and wrapping her arms around my neck. She grabbed my hair, pulling my head back and exposing my neck to her teeth. “Among my kind, biting down on another’s neck like this.” She nipped at my throat with just enough force to let me know she could tear out my jugular with very little effort. “Is how dominants enforce their role in the pack hierarchy.” Her tongue flicked out, trailing along my throat and up onto my cheek, lapping up the blood she’d spilled earlier. “At first, I didn’t think I’d like it, but do you know what I’ve found? I actually enjoy the taste of blood.”

“So you’re trying to show you’re dominance over to me?” I said, forcing my voice into a conversational tone as I spoke. It was a damned sight harder than I’d expected because I really didn’t want her to rip my throat out with her teeth. That would really put a damper on the whole saving Sera, or anyone else, thing. “I’m tied up. Let me loose and we can have a right good tussle.”

Ricky met my eyes, and wry smile melted across her bloodstained lips. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she asked, arching an eyebrow as she reached down with

her other hand and ran one sharp-edged nail across my inner thigh. “Is that what you want Mr. Demon Spawn? For me to let you out so you can beat me up? Is that what you’d like?” Her expression faded back into that strange emptiness that was somehow more chilling than her mania.

“No, I’d rather you just let me go so I could save Sera from the ass hat who took her prisoner.” As I said the words, Ricky cocked her head to the side and peered at me like I was a very strange bug. Then she took one long, slow breath that made her tiny chest strain against her crop top.

“Why are you so interested in saving her?” Ricky’s words were careful and measured, and as she said them, I got the feeling she wasn’t really asking me the question she wanted to ask.

While I couldn’t say why, I got the distinct impression Ricky was definitely interested in my story. Maybe there was a way to talk myself out of my current predicament. Stranger things had happened, like, oh, I don’t know, waking up in a dumpster with no memory and an arm covered in demonic tattoos.

“It’s the proper thing to do.” I let a smile play across my lips. “I know it sounds silly since I threw Loraine out a twenty-story window, but I don’t actually like seeing women get hurt. If it’d been you in that laundromat getting the shit kicked out of you by two thugs, rest assured, I would have helped you, Princess.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked, abruptly standing up and turning her back to me and her shoulders shuddered once. “What kind of answer is that? You shot my pack mates and threw one out of a twenty-story building because what? You’re some kind of knight in shining armor?”

“I’m no knight. I just can’t stand bullies,” I replied, and as I admitted it, the faintest trace of light spilled from the tattoos on my arm. I wrinkled my forehead, staring at the light peeking through lines in the tape as a sudden memory filled my brain and burst from my lips.

“When I was really little, there was this bully who always picked on me and my friends. I tried to get teachers and my parents to stop him, but nothing worked. After every attempt, the beatings just got worse and worse until finally, my friend Lefty who was blind as a bat and not half as interesting, ‘accidentally’ got his nose broken from a thrown baseball bat during recess. But I’d seen the look in the bully’s eyes when he’d let the bat go. He’d done it on purpose. I couldn’t let that stand. Not this time.”

“That day, I snuck into the bully’s house while people were going in and out, and I hid in a broom closet beneath the stairs. I waited until all the lights went out and the house was dark as night. Then I crept out from my hidey hole. I made my way up the stairs, quiet as a mouse, and as I approached his room, do you know what I saw, Ricky?”

“What did you see?” she asked, the moonlight dancing through her red hair as she turned to look at me. “What did you see?” she repeated, lips quivering.

“I saw that very same bully pinned to his bed.” I shut my eyes, and the scene filled the inside of my eyelids, bringing with it the smell of stale beer, vomit, and sweat. My mouth went onto autopilot as I stepped forward into that darkened room an eight-year-old boy once again.

My hand clutched the knife in my hand. It had belonged to my grandfather and its ornamental silver blade was sharp enough to cut the wings off a fly without the

insect even knowing. The thing pinning the bully to the sheets was huge, more like a gorilla than a person with black tufts of hair sticking out from his sweat-stained tank top. I couldn't quite see what they were doing, but the sound of it was all squishy and sloshy. The smell was worse.

I can't say why I took those last few steps, nor why I drove the weapon into the monster's back, but I did. It roared in pain and anger, but I didn't stop. I kept stabbing until the sheets were awash in blood, until I was covered from head to toe in the stuff.

It knocked me away, and the knife slipped from my grip as I hit the closet door and slid down to the pale gray carpet. In the darkness, it was little more than a shadowy beast shambling toward me bellowing and hollering. I knew that if it caught me, I was as good as dead. I scrambled to my feet, but instead of running, I ran straight at it, swinging my fists.

Whether it was from the blood loss or simply because the creature didn't expect an eight-year-old kid to charge it, the thing stepped backward just as I hit it. My weight sent it toppling backward. The back of the monster's head struck the corner of the bedframe. A sickening crack went through the room, resounding off the walls.

It was dead then, but I didn't know it. So what did I do? I retrieved my knife and went back to stabbing. Who knows how long I would have kept at it if that same bully hadn't picked me up off the ground and brought me out of the room. I still remember the look of relief on his face as he shut the door behind us.

I don't quite remember the details after. I must have gotten home somehow. I vaguely remember washing the blood off in the shower, but I remember how the whole school talked about the bully's house burning down that night because his dad had dropped a cigarette in the bed. Only he and his sister survived the inferno. They wound up moving across the country to live with their aunt. I never learned her name."

"Do you remember a similar story?" My eyes snapped open, and I stared at Ricky's tear-streaked face. "If you don't, your brother might."

## Chapter 18

"My brother never told me what happened. Never told me who saved us." Ricky's voice was fractured and brittle as she helped me to my feet. "It was the best thing that ever happened to us."

"I always wondered if everything turned out all right for you guys," I said, reaching out and brushing the hair out of my face with my knuckle. "But I couldn't remember enough to ever find out."

"You're not supposed to have any memories." She touched my hand with her slender fingers and a surge of warmth traveled along my flesh. "That's what Van told me. So how do you remember that night?"

"Van?" I shook my head slowly as she looked up at me, and I was surprised to realize I was over a head taller than her. It was weird because she'd exuded such a presence, it had felt like she towered over me. "I'm not sure who Van is, but I don't

remember much.” My hand dropped, so my knuckle trailed down across her cheek. “Only you and that night.”

“Is that so?” Ricky flushed hard enough to turn her neck and shoulders bright red. Her eyes flashed in the darkness, and I realized they were the color of green sea glass. All traces of amber were gone.

Before I could respond, she stood on her tip toes and pressed her lips against mine while her other hand wrapped around my back and pulled me into the kiss. Fireworks exploded behind my eyes. Warmth spread out across my body as her fingers kneaded desperately into my flesh.

As I reached out to touch her, she stepped backward, breaking our embrace and leaving me standing there dumbstruck. The feel of her lips on mine was so fresh, I had to fight with everything in me not to cross the distance between us and kiss her again.

“I never got the chance to thank you for saving me, Mr. Brennan.” A sly smile broke across her face as she took another step backward, allowing the moonlight to bathe her. “But if you survive, we can do even more.” She winked at me, and my breath caught in my throat and my heart hammered double time. “You’ll find I can be very thankful.”

Then, without another word, she walked across the room and pressed one pale hand against the darkened wall. The sound of compressed air firing cylinders filled my ears. I watched in amazement as the wall to my right slid sideways, revealing a rickety stairway that led down into the deep dark. Green torches flickered within, casting ominous, sickly shadows across Ricky’s face as she smiled at me one last time.

“Good luck,” she whispered, dropping her hand as she turned to leave.

“Come down there with me. We can do this together,” I said, reaching out toward her, but she slid lithely away so I wound up grasping only air.

“No. Van has bound me to him. My pack and I cannot stand directly against him. You’ll have to do this alone, but don’t worry, Sera is down there. Your princess isn’t in another castle.” With those words, she vanished in a blur of speed that sent my lapels flapping.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t wonder if I should go after her. I knew I could, hell, I was pretty sure she wanted me to leave Sera behind to go after her. She would wrap me in her arms and we’d frolic all the way to the nearest motel room. If I did that, Sera would be lost to Vassago’s Cursed who I assumed was named Van. The same man who had snared Ricky and her wolves in his web. He had to pay.

Besides, if I succeeded in taking him down, I would get to “do more” with Ricky anyway. While I wasn’t a huge fan of delayed gratification, nor was I exactly one hundred percent sure what her thanks might entail, I’d be a pretty poor excuse for a man if I gave up on saving Sera to find out. I was Mac Brennan after all, and while I was starting to get a picture of who that was, something told me even the Mac Brennan of my past would kill the villain and save the girl.

“Wipe that stupid smirk off your face,” I told myself, rubbing my temples with my fingers before taking a step toward the stairs. The distinct feeling I was stepping into a viper’s den settled around my shoulders like a well-worn cloak. “The doorway into Hell beckons.”



Part of me wondered what would lie ahead. I doubted Van expected me to get past Ricky. Hell, I very nearly hadn't. It was only dumb luck that I'd happened to save her and her brother when I was just a stupid kid, albeit a violent, rage-filled kid. It seemed insane to imagine that I'd actually done those things. I'd planned on killing her brother and it was only a fluke that made me a hero instead of a villain. The realization made my blood run cold. Even over the course of this day, I'd killed more people than I cared to admit. It made me wonder if I was better off not remembering my past. No one good could kill that many people and feel nothing.

I sighed. Either way, no good would come from dwelling on it now. If I didn't focus, I was going to get dead fast. I had no idea what was beyond that door, but I found it hard to believe I was about to just walk into his inner sanctum unmolested. I needed to be ready for anything.

With that happy thought, I moved into the stairwell. The air temperature dropped with every step I took so that by the time I was a couple floors down, I was breathing mist. My teeth chattered together despite my best effort to keep my noise to a minimum.

The sound of things slithering in the darkness set my nerves on edge, but the tunnel wasn't much bigger than I was, and while it wasn't exactly well lit, it was still lined with torches that cast emerald light into most nooks and crannies. If there was something slithering, it had to be far below me or within the rock surrounding me. Neither case boded well. I resolved to take things one at a time. If giant demonic slugs burst from the woodwork and tried to melt my face with eye lasers, I would be ready, but there was no sense getting worked up about it now.

I stopped, taking a moment to wipe my clammy palms on my jeans before moving forward. My shoe plunged through the rotten wood, and as I tried to reach out and grab hold of the banister, I teetered and fell flat on my back. The stairs beneath me broke, and I found myself careening through the darkness in a hail of debris. After what felt like forever, but was probably only a second or two, I plunged into a warm, thick river of slime, though from my screaming someone probably thought a little girl had fallen to her death.

The dark river swept me forward, the current so strong it was all I could do to keep my head above sea level as I was thrown into the concrete on all sides. I was definitely in some kind of weird sewer system that smelled like rusty nails and old pennies. Thankfully, there was a light at the end of the tunnel, only it was made up of green flames.

I threw my arms up in front of me as the river surged forward at Mach speed. Red light streamed from my tattoos as I grabbed at the stone next to me. My fingers clawed gouges in the cement walls before I was torn free by the current and thrown head over heels into the fire. I burst through it like the Fonz doing a bad motorcycle trick and smacked into the cement floor with a thwack that loosened all my teeth, even the big ones in back.

The surrounding concrete was smeared in blood, some of it was old and dried and some was fresh and glistening in the green firelight along the river behind me. Skeletons lined the wall to my left, some shackled in thick iron manacles while others had been tacked up in poses that made me hope they were already dead when it'd happened. If not... ugh...

A person dressed in one of those stars and moons robes I had seen in Jack's bar oh so long ago, turned from his perch on a bone white podium and looked at me. His face was covered in purple tattoos and even though his pierced lips were set in a grim expression usually reserved for people about to disembowel puppies, I shot him my best smile.

"Ayyy," I said, giving him a thumbs up from my position on the floor. He must not have been a fan of Mr. Fonzarelli because his first reaction was to try to gut me with the giant wavy dagger in his hand.

I rolled sideways as his blade struck the cement floor hard enough to throw up sparks. I scrambled to my feet as he came forward like the goddamned Terminator, and I knew I only had a second before he was on me. That didn't worry me nearly as much as the half-dozen guys standing behind him pointing similar knives at me.

## Chapter 19

There were so many of them I wasn't sure I could take them all on. It wouldn't take much for one of them to get lucky one time. That's all it would take to permanently end my fledgling career as a hero. That said, I wasn't about to go out without a fight. My name was Mac Brennan, and I didn't give a damn about going quietly into the good night.

"How about we all just take a minute and talk about this?" I said, holding my hands out in front of me in the universal sign for "please don't stab me, you crazy cultists" as I tried to buy myself time to think of a proper plan.

In response, the one who had tried to stab me opened his mouth wide, revealing a nub where his tongue should have been. His jaws snapped shut, and he tapped his lips with his knife.

"So I'm guessing you aren't much for conversation," I replied as a pit opened in my stomach. Here I was standing in front of a bunch of dudes crazy enough to have their tongues all cut out, and I was trying to reason with them? Nope. It was time to go with plan B. Kill them all and let God, Satan, or whoever these guys worshiped sort them out.

The lead one slashed at me. I dodged and drove my right fist into his nose. Crimson light spilled off my tattoos as my knuckles met his face with so much force his head evaporated. Blood fountained up out of his neck as the rest of his body toppled forward onto the floor to collapse into a pool of slowly spreading crimson.

I casually bent down and picked up the knife while I tried to figure out how I'd literally obliterated a man's skull with one punch. By the time I'd stood back up, the remaining cultists were closer, spread out in a wide semicircle around me.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and assume me literally crushing a man's skull with one punch means little to you all," I said, gesturing at the fallen man with my new curvy knife.

They rushed me, which was sort of expected. I sidestepped the first one while stabbing my knife into the throat of another as I slipped past them and booked it

down the hallway behind them. Footsteps followed me down the narrow stone hallway which was exactly what I wanted. A huge wooden door braced in black steel was visible only a few meters away. Sliding my bloody knife into the waistband of my pants, I spun around and splayed my right hand in front of me.

“Ignis!” I shouted and like before, fire ripped up from my palm. Scarlet light burst from my tattoos, filling the tiny corridor with hellish shadows as I unleashed a gout of hellfire that blasted into the onrushing cultists like they’d been sprayed with napalm.

They flailed and clawed at the fire as it ate across their flesh and robes alike, reducing them to twitching masses of blackened flesh in the time it took me to blink three times. The surrounding stone was red hot, and even from here, the air was almost too hot for me to breathe. Bile rose up in my throat as I turned away from them and stared at the door. Even though the cultists had been bad guys, I wasn’t sure anyone deserved to die a death like that. Hell, they hadn’t even been able to scream.

“It all comes down to life choices,” the feline in my mind whispered, and I got the distinct impression she was rubbing her cat paw across my brain. “Sometimes people choose to do good, other times bad, but what is important is the choice.”

“Still,” I whispered and because I couldn’t think of a better reason, said the word again. “Still.”

“Indeed,” the cat replied, and that seemed to be enough because a strange calmness descended over me as she receded back into the recesses of my mind, leaving me with the haunting revelation that one day very soon I might wind up burning to my death over and over again from now until eternity.

A chill crawled up my spine on icy fingernails as I turned my attention back toward the door. I must have moved the rest of the way across the hallway without realizing it because the door loomed in front of me like the last gate before a dragon’s hoard. I reached out toward it as though drawn by a magnetic force, and as my fingers brushed against the polished bronze handle, an electric spark leapt up my arm. My tattoos blazed to life like a neon sign outside a strip club.

My fingers clenched around the handle, and before I could stop myself, I’d jerked the wooden door open. It was surprisingly easy to do since, despite its immense size, the door seemed to weigh little more than a plastic bag. The room beyond was completely unlike I expected because it looked like the man cave I’d always wanted, you know, assuming I could remember wanting one.

The floor was covered in that weird gray paint with the flecks of white and blue in it I’d seen on the floor of machine shops, and the far wall was completely filled by a ginormous television playing the scene from Field of Dreams where Ray asks his father if he wants to have a game of catch in an endless loop. Baseball memorabilia, autographed by everyone from Joltin’ Joe DiMaggio to Mike Trout lined the other walls.

A bar reminiscent of the one I’d seen in Jack’s stood along the left wall, but where that one had been polished oak, this one sparkled with dark obsidian. A man about five feet tall with a shaved head and a pirate goatee stood behind the bar, eyeing me with cool cholera-green eyes.

“Care for a game?” he asked in a voice that was like the scratches outside my window late at night. He waved toward the room, and I followed his gesture to see

everything from foosball to backgammon. Every single game, machine, or table was immaculate and done in that same emerald-flecked obsidian style. It was a little weird because I hadn't remembered seeing the machines before. Had they just appeared?

"Where the hell am I?" I asked, apprehension leaking into my voice.

"You're in my game room," the man replied, wiping his pale hands on his emerald bowling shirt before snatching something from behind the bar. He placed a Pabst Blue Ribbon on the bar and pushed it toward the empty stool in front of him. "You might as well make yourself comfortable. You're going to be here a while."

I opened my mouth to say something, but no sound came out. Instead, a strange high-pitched squeak that reminded me of a dying mouse left my lips. I swallowed and tried again. Same thing. Cold sweat began to trickle down the back of my neck as the still smiling guy leveled an unblinking stare at me.

After several seconds, he shook his head and opened the tall can on the bar before setting it back down. "There, I even opened it for you. I happen to know this is your favorite brew, so you might as well come and drink it. I'd hate to see it go to waste." He quirked a mocking grin at me. "After all, beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy."

"Wait, you know my favorite beer? And it's Pabst of all things? Seriously?" I asked before clamping my hands over my mouth in shock. I'd spoken, so why couldn't I do it before?

The man's eyes sparkled as he patted the bar with one stubby hand. "I know everything there is to know about you, Mac. I'll even tell you since I'm in a rather giving mood." He gestured toward the stool again, but I was too stunned to do more than stand there and gape at him. "Stay awhile and listen." An evil glint flashed through his eyes. "It isn't like you have much of a choice anyway."

The door behind me slammed shut, and I jumped. I spun around to look at the door, but it wasn't even there anymore. Instead, there was just a big, smiling portrait of Pete Rose on a Wheaties box. Laughter that ran across my nerves like brambles and fire filled the room, and as I turned back toward the guy, I saw he was now occupying the seat beside where he'd set the Pabst.

"Why don't I have a choice?" I asked, moving woodenly toward him. Every step I took seemed to fill my mind with sawdust and packing tape, making it so I could barely think by the time I sat down next to him. Even though he couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, I got the feeling he could break me over his knee with little effort.

"My Cursed has asked me to stall you for a bit, and because I am feeling particularly generous, I have decided to help him this one time." He pushed the beer into my hand. The can was frigid in my grip and served to drive away the fuzz on my brain. "It really has nothing to do with him though. I was more curious about you, Mr. Brennan. This isn't the first time we met, and I'm very interested on seeing how you've gotten on with yourself."

"It isn't?" I asked, releasing the can of Pabst as I turned to stare at the tiny man. I had come to this guy for help? I could hardly imagine myself doing it because he seemed... evil. For me to have gone to him was truly troubling. It meant I had been

out of options, and when people are out of options, they tended to do stupid shit like make deals with demons for power.

“No, it is not, Mr. Brennan. We met when you summoned me and begged for my help.” His lips curled into a twisted smile that made me feel like a worm on the end of a hook. “I refused, naturally, but it looks like you found someone else to help you.” He flicked a hand disdainfully at my tattooed arm. “Part of me wonders who, but most of me knows you don’t yet know.” He sniffed, his nostrils flaring wide as the smell of sulfur and brimstone drifted off of him like bad cologne. “There is no mark of claim upon you. That means part of the deal has remained unfulfilled.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to figure out what he was going on about. I knew he was just trying to stall me, and while I wasn’t sure why, he was the first person to know about who I was.

“Mac, can I call you Mac?” He waited until I nodded before continuing. “Mac, you came to me seeking power to save someone or was it something?” He waved his hand dismissively through the air. “I don’t quite remember the details because I don’t go in for that whole noble savior thing. It takes too long to twist your kind of people to my whims. I’m more into the whole gamblers and rapists thing. Not hard to push them the last few steps into full on bloodthirsty Hell minion.” He shrugged and tapped out Stairway to Heaven on the bar with his fingers. “You can see why I’d opt not to help a person like you. As many people as you’ve killed, you’re not really evil at heart. At least, not my kind of evil. The big guy upstairs may disagree. You’ll have to let me know what he says when you meet him.”

“So you were too much of a douche to help me because I wouldn’t, what, kick puppies?” I cried before I could stop myself. If what he said was true, I’d likely come to him for help to save that mother and son, and he’d refused, not because I wasn’t qualified, but because he didn’t want me saving people? Seriously? Who the hell did he think he was?

“Now, now, there’s no need to curse.” He sighed at me and I got the impression he was disappointed with my outburst. “We’re just having a nice conversation here, but if you insist on being rude, it can become a not nice conversation very quickly. Trust me when I say that will not end well for you.”

I took a deep breath, forcing my sudden anger to recede. He was stalling me. If that was the case, I had to get past him. That left just one tiny problem. I didn’t see any doors or passageways.

“If you know so much about me, what’s my mother’s name?” I asked because I was sure he wouldn’t know the answer, but as I said the words, I realized he could say anything and I had no way of knowing if he was telling the truth. I didn’t remember my mother at all. It made me sadder than I cared to admit.

“Her name is Martha. She died of cancer a few years ago.” He smiled smugly at me, and as I tried to let his words sink in, he continued to talk without pause. “I also know one other important thing.” He reached out and patted the pocket of my trench coat. “You, sir, are a fine darts player.”

“A darts player?” I asked, still trying to process the fact that my mother had died of cancer, and I couldn’t remember anything about it. In that moment, I was functioning almost entirely on autopilot.

“You remember darts, right? It’s the game where people throw metal tipped cylinders at a circular board trying to get the bull’s eye?” He smiled at me, revealing a mouth full of translucent shark-like teeth. “Go on, check your pocket.”

I glanced at the spot he’d touched. There was a pocket on my trench coat I hadn’t noticed before even though I had a hard time seeing how I’d missed something that obvious. I had searched myself pretty well over the course of this little adventure. The idea that I’d missed something that noticeable made my gut tighten in apprehension. What else had I missed? I checked my pocket but not because he told me. It was because I wanted to do it.

There *was* something in my pocket. I pulled the object out and stared at it in shock. It was a silver case about eight inches long with an angel emblazoned on its lid. I flicked it open and saw, much to my astonishment, three darts lying on a bed of black velvet. They were steel tipped with pencil-shaped barrels and crimson flights.

“On average, no man who carries his own darts isn’t at least passably good at the game.” The guy at the bar said before pushing himself off his stool and leaning in close to look at my darts like the concept of personal space had no meaning. “It’s not a hard and fast rule of course. You could be a poser, or someone with delusions of grandeur. Hell, you could be someone who played for years and is still terrible at the game. Let’s face it, not everyone can play well. Just like not everyone can dunk like Jordan, no matter how hard they train. Life isn’t fair.” He tapped the darts with one finger. “But maybe that’s not the case. Maybe, you’re this side of awesome.”

“Okay, so what? What does it matter if I’m good at darts? What’s that even matter?” I said, pulling away from him a couple steps. He was being way too buddy, buddy. It was really strange because even though he was acting like we were old friends, I got the feeling he didn’t like anyone. No, his sudden interest in my dart case was weird, and it unnerved me. Another shoe was definitely about to drop.

“Well, it matters quite a lot,” he said, moving past me toward a dartboard on the wall and picked out three darts with green flights from a tray next to it. “Since we’re going to play darts.”

“Why the hell would I play darts with you?” I exclaimed in exasperation. I didn’t have time for this. I knew he was stalling me to help his Cursed, but Sera wasn’t my only concern. I had to save her *and* the woman from my memory. The last thing I needed to be doing was playing darts.

“Because we need to pass time somehow. I did promise to stall you, remember? Try to keep up, Mac.” His smile reappeared again. “But I have no desire to sit here prattling on with you. It wouldn’t really be fun. You’d argue with me or call me a liar until I eventually got annoyed and ripped out your spine. So, instead, we’re going to play darts. Understand?”

I nodded as a bad feeling swelled up in my gut.

“Good. If you don’t mind, we’ll use the traditional rules for 501. We each throw three darts, three separate times. The cumulative total of our scores is then subtracted from 501 with the goal being to reduce it to exactly zero,” he said, approaching a white line painted onto the floor with the numbers 7’ 9 1/4” stenciled onto it in green. “You know what the crazy-making part of playing any

game is? It's really tough to tell when you just haven't worked at it enough and when you really just aren't good enough and never will be no matter how much time and effort you spend at it. The line between those two things is a tough one for anybody to draw. It's why I love games like this."

"I'm failing to see why I'd play with you," I said as he nonchalantly tossed the first of his darts at the board and sank it into the triple twenty. "Barring the whole spine ripping out thing."

"See, I knew you wouldn't just trust me that this is the best way." He tossed the second dart, landing it right beside his first dart in the little square for another sixty points. "That's why I've decided to add some bonus stipulations." He threw the final dart and wouldn't you know it, got another triple twenty. "If I fail to clear the board and reduce my score to zero, I'll let you through immediately with no more delays." He moved across the floor and plucked his darts from the board. "But here's the rub, kid. If you fail to clear the board, I'm going to chop something off, though I may let you pick what it is. It depends on how annoying you are."

"You're going to chop something off?" I asked, surprised I could get the words out because it was suddenly very hard to breathe.

"Yes, but not off you." He gestured to my left, and even though he wasn't there a moment before, Sera's son John was suddenly sitting on the bar with his hands and legs bound in duct tape. The sudden appearance of the boy in his Spiderman T-shirt and jeans unnerved me to an extent I hadn't thought possible. He tried to say something when he saw me, but no words made it through the gag over his mouth. He tried again and when he failed, panic filled his eyes to near bursting.

"You can't be serious?" I cried, spinning to glare at the man as the world around me died. If I didn't play him long enough for him to miss, Sera was as good as dead, but if I missed, the boy was going to start losing pieces of his body. The room started to spin and nausea swirled up inside me. I couldn't do this, couldn't play for these odds. It was impossible.

"Like a heart attack." He appeared behind me in a flash and shoved me toward the line. "Now, throw the damned darts. You haven't got all day."

## Chapter 20

"There's got to be another way," I said as he pulled a dart from my case. He pressed it into my hand and closed my fingers around it.

"There isn't." He smiled at me and took a step back. "Normally I'd set a little timer or something to ensure you throw in a timely manner, but as I'm the one stalling you, I'll just sit back and drink beer unless you want to just give up."

"What do you mean?" I asked, swallowing hard as I looked from the squat man trolling me to the little kid bound on the bar.

He threw his arm around my shoulder and leaned in close. "If you want to go home right now, I'll let you. The only catch is I'll have to take a hand from the boy." He shrugged. "It's not really a big deal if you think about it. Jim Abbott pitched in the Major Leagues for ten years with one hand."

"I'm not letting you cut off John's hand," I said, nearly spitting the words at him.

He threw his hands in the air and backed away. "Then throw the darts, just don't miss. I'll be over here waiting."

He moved over to the bar and reached across it before pulling a crystal bottle that reminded me of the ones people kept filled with expensive scotch. This bottle was filled with viscous red fluid, and without even bothering to pour it into a glass, he took a swig from the bottle before smacking his lips.

"It's the blood of a virgin, in case you wondered." He smiled at me, showing a sheen of red teeth to me. "It's actually not that hard to get if you don't mind killing nuns." He took another swig.

I had no idea if he was really drinking virgin nun blood, but it didn't matter. He was just trying to goad me. Getting mad at him about it wouldn't help John or Sera. I turned away from him and rolled the dart between my fingers. Its weight felt familiar. I shut my eyes to tune him out when he spoke up, louder than before.

"If you throw the dart at me, it will count as a miss, by the by. Do you really want to risk it?" He chuckled, and the sound reminded me of an evil bullfrog. "I'll even let you hit me for all the good it will do. Face it, Mac, your only option is to throw the damned darts. Time's a wasting."

Ignoring his words, I opened my eyes and looked down at the line at my feet. The dart felt so familiar in my hand, and as I hefted it before bringing it up, I knew everything was going to be alright. I threw.

"Triple twenty. Nice start," the man said before slow clapping. "Whatcha going for now?"

I ignored him and picked up the middle dart from my case. I looked down at the pencil-shaped object and smiled, rolling it in between my fingers. There was a nineteen emblazoned upon it. A smirk crossed my lips. I got back in position and raised my arm before letting it fly.

The dart struck the triple nineteen. Netting me an additional fifty-seven points and bringing my total score up to one hundred and seventeen. All I needed now was a bull's eye. I snatched up the last dart and let it fly in one smooth motion, sinking it right in the center. Fifty more points for one-hundred-sixty-seven total. Exactly one third of what I needed to clear the board.

"You know, some people say that three rounds of one-sixty-seven is considered a perfect score," the man said, walking up to me and smacking me on the shoulder. "I knew I had you pegged."

With that, he flung his darts at the board in quick succession. All triple twenties, giving him one hundred and eighty more points. I dutifully threw another one-sixty-seven which he followed with a one-hundred and forty-one point checkout consisting of a triple twenty, a triple nineteen, and a double twelve which brought his score to exactly zero. I managed another one-sixty-seven and heaved a sigh of relief. We'd both cleared the board.

"Ready to go again?" he said, smirking at me. "Or do you need a breather?"

"I can go all night," I replied, glancing from him to John and back again. The boy still looked terrified but marginally less so than before, presumably because he'd seen my awesome dart playing skills. I wasn't sure how long I'd played the game, but I was confident my last game was not a fluke.



And it kept not being a fluke for the next twenty rounds, which was when the dartboard vanished in the middle of my final throw. My dart smacked into the green wood behind the dartboard and clattered lifelessly to the ground. I stared at it laying there on the gray floor in disbelief. The dartboard reappeared, my first two darts still firmly sunk into the triple twenty and the triple nineteen. I had failed to clear the board, leaving me with a final score of fifty.

"Too bad," the guy said before making a tsking noise. "Didn't you know my dartboard disappears after the twentieth round? No?" He shrugged at me from his perch on the barstool beside John.

Before I could do more than blink stupidly, he had one arm wrapped around the boy's throat while the other produced one of those old fashioned shaving razors.

"Now you remember our deal, right?" and with those words, the razor lashed out, removing the boy's hair in a flash. As it fluttered around them to the ground, my heart hammered in my chest so hard it physically hurt. "That one's a freebie on account of I'm pretty sure you didn't know the dartboard would disappear, but next time, I *will* remove something he'll want." With that, he rubbed the squirming boy's bald head before setting him back down on the bar. The whole incident had taken less than four seconds.

I hadn't even managed to pick up my fallen dart in the time it took him to stride over to me and fling his three darts one after another at the board, timing it just so the dartboard reappeared in time for his darts to strike home. I had half a mind to call him a cheater, but as I watched in disbelief, I realized the dartboard disappeared and reappeared according to a pattern.

Even though it was my turn, I watched the dartboard vanish and return for a good five minutes before I gripped my first dart in my sweaty fingers and let it fly toward the naked wall. My heart thundered, and I could barely watch as the dart sailed through the empty air toward an unknown destination. Just as the tip was about to smack into the wood, the board reappeared and my dart sank into the triple twenty.

I let out a whoop of relief and spun to see the man watching me carefully. He nodded once and a strange sense of elation fell over me. I'd done it, and if I could do it once, I could do it again. And I did. Eighty-seven more times.

In my defense, I probably would have made it that last time too if I hadn't literally caught fire. Emerald flames burst from the floor and licked up my pants, swallowing me in an agony of burning pain. The dart slipped from my fingers and clattered to the ground as everything burst into flames.

"I'm half-inclined to not count that one," the man said as he watched me writhe in agony on the painted cement. "You know on account of you being on fire, everything around you being on fire, and this being Hell and all, but well, I'm a demon, so yeah. It totally counts." He knelt down next to me and flicked out his razor, holding it over the flames filling me with indescribable agony. "Instead, be thankful this fire isn't actually damaging you. It only feels like it is." The blade began to glow under the flame, turning from dark silver to cherry red in the span of a second. "I know that doesn't feel like a consolation, but it will once you cool off." His lips twisted into a lopsided smirk as he stood and meandered over to the boy.

John's face was awash with terror as he tried to scream through his gag, but no sound sprang from his lips. I tried to crawl toward him, forcing my body to slither along the ground like a burning slug, but try as I might, I could barely make myself move, let alone reach the guy in time to stop him.

The man grabbed hold of John and slammed him backward on the bar. He began whistling as he calmly slapped John's left hand on the bar, splaying the boy's fingers on the obsidian surface. John struggled, trying to pull free as the guy leveled the razor over the boy's left pinky. "How's about we take the little one. It's a good choice all things considered. I mean it may not end there, but it's a good place to start. Why, I remember this one time in Atlantic City where I wound up walking out with a matching set of ten fingers, ten toes, and an ear besides." He shrugged. "Some people always think they're going to rally." He raised the razor.

"Wait," I cried, surprised I could make my mouth work between cries of agony, but hey, I wanted it really badly.

The guy stopped and shot me a sly look. "Yes?"

"Take my finger instead," I said, thrusting my burning hand toward him.

"That's not how this works at all." He shook his head. "It's supposed to be the boy." He nodded toward John. "But what can I say, I'm a fan of deals. I tell you what. I'll let you trade, a finger for a finger, and all I'll require is a small favor to be collected at some point in the future. How's that sound? I think it's quite generous."

"Deal!" I cried, forcing myself to my feet and slapping my hand onto the table. The blade came down in a whoosh and my left pinky went flying in a spray of blood. John screamed into his gag as I fell to the ground clutching my hand to my chest, staining my white shirt crimson. It was all I could do to lay there and keep from dying as the flames surrounding my body went out.

"You only get to do that once," the demon said, smiling brightly at me. "Now, how's about we go back to throwing."

## Chapter 21

The guy stepped into the green fire. It didn't seem to bother him much. He stood there, adjusting his feet in the emerald flames and as he did so, the shadow behind him grew horns and a forked tail. He saw me looking behind him and shot a glance at the wall. His lips curled into a smirk that made my blood run cold.

"Toasty, but not nearly as bad as it is back home." He tossed all three of his darts at once. They struck the triple twenty as one. "Oh look, another one-eighty." He put one finger to his mouth mockingly before striding over to me and kneeling down next to where I was still lying on the floor clutching my agony-ridden left hand to my chest. "Just so you know, stuff starts getting really bad at round one hundred and ten. I've had people actually go insane by round one-hundred and thirteen." His teeth flashed. "And round one fifteen makes round one hundred and ten seem tame."

I shut my eyes and sucked in a long, slow breath. As my lungs expanded, I reached out to my happy place. It was blank and empty, but strangely calming

anyway. I exhaled slowly, allowing my pain and rage to leave along with my breath. My eyes snapped open, and I got slowly to my feet, much to the amusement of the demon. He sat back on his haunches watching me with a mischievous “you haven’t seen nothin’ yet, sugar” grin on his face. It made me want to sock him, but I refrained, mostly because I was sure he was a demon who could turn me into a toad or skin me alive with the blink of an eye.

Darts in hand, I stared at the burning green fire, and something prickled along the back of my mind. I held up my demonic hand and stared at the red lines crisscrossing the flesh. I’m not sure if it was real or just in my head, but as I stared at the strange geometric tattoos emblazoned on my black flesh, a word popped into my head just like it had when I’d learned to fling around hellfire.

“Tueri,” I whispered, and the temperature in the room dropped fifteen degrees. Cold sweat formed on my skin as my arm flared like the sun, spilling crimson light down my body like running water until I was completely ensconced in a thin layer of glowing scarlet.

I stepped into the flames and was unharmed. As fire licked at my pants, unable to find purchase through the red shield covering me, a smile crossed my lips. I was protected. For now. I readied my darts. It was time for a change of plans.

This turn I didn’t go for perfection so I’d have more of a chance to come back if something screwy happened. If things kept getting worse and worse, John was going to be dead long before the demon missed a shot. I’d have to do something to change that. I let my darts fly. Three triple twenties. Our scores now matched.

“Neat trick. It reminds me of something I saw long ago,” the demon replied wistfully.

Ignoring him, I snatched my darts free of the board before standing aside to let him throw. His gaze had something strange in it as he looked my shield up and down, almost like he was puzzling over something at the edge of his memory. He let out an exasperated sigh and shook his head before stepping into the fire. He threw his darts in quick succession for another one hundred and eighty points.

I matched him, scoring one eighty on my second round as well. Now I had several combinations left to me for the final round. I just needed to score one hundred and forty one points, but I could do it however I wanted. If the board started spinning at the last second, I wanted the best chance possible. Oh and the cat in the back of my head told me to do it. I may have neglected to mention that.

As the green-eyed demon stepped into the flames for his final round, a strange tune filled my head. Before I could stop myself, I began to hum along to it. The sound spilled out of me like a wave breaking onto a beach bringing with it the promise of power, victory, and death. The demon glanced at me as his first dart left his hand. It struck the wire on the triple twenty and fell to the floor with a near inaudible thud that seemed to resound across the room.

“You know, you can’t win now,” I said after finishing the tune. “There’s no way to clear one-hundred and forty-one points with two darts.”

He waved his hand dismissively at the board. “Where did you hear learn that melody?” he asked, and I could have sworn there was an edge of fear to his voice. Then, before I could tell him it just popped into my head, he recovered, and a smug look filled his features. He glanced back at the dartboard and shrugged. “You are correct, sir. The best I could do now is bring my score down to twenty-

one. That means you may pass.” He stood aside, making a sweeping gesture toward a door that appeared on the far wall.

It was framed in black steel with an emerald V etched into the center of its polished ebony surface. It slowly swung open, scraping along the bottom with a sound that would make a cat go all poofy and scared. I know because that image flashed across my brain. When I turned back to look at the guy, he was gone, but the spot where he’d been standing was marred by two charred footprints.

“I guess he lived up to his end of the deal,” I murmured, somewhat surprised he’d done as he said and let me through. Even though I’d played by his rules, I’d half expected him to come up with some excuse as to why I still could not pass. Evidently, he’d been a demon of his word. For some reason I couldn’t explain, that knowledge filled me with apprehension.

John yelled at me through his gag, snapping me back to reality. I ripped my gaze away from the burned floor and settled it on John. I don’t think I’d ever seen someone wearing a Spiderman T-shirt look so relieved.

It only took me a moment to have him free of the tape, and the first thing he did was wrap his arms around me and bury his face into my chest.

“Thank you for saving me,” he whimpered and though I don’t know why, I wrapped my arms around him and held him close, trying to stifle the sudden bout of sobs that poured out of him. I wasn’t sure how long we stood like that, but when he pulled away and looked up at me, tears glistened in his blue eyes. Sera’s eyes. “Are you going to save my mom too?”

“Yes,” I replied, and he put on a brave face and nodded at me.

“I’m sorry for glaring at you before.” He looked down at his battered tennis shoes. “She’s all I have left so I get sort of protective.” He kicked at the floor. “But I’ll try to be nice to you, okay?”

I laughed and reached out to rub his head with my demonic hand because sadly, it was the one not covered in my own blood.

“That’d be great,” I said, trying to give him a reassuring smile. I wasn’t sure how long the demon had delayed me, but I hoped there was still time to save his mom. The thought of marching the kid through that door to find his mom already dead filled me with horror. No, that wouldn’t be the case. I wouldn’t be too late. I knew it in my bones.

The boy smiled at me like an idea had taken shape in his brain, and before I could stop him, ran around the bar in a Spiderman-colored blur. He rummaged around for several seconds before reappearing. He held out a small plastic Ziploc bag to me. There was an object wrapped in a bloody rag inside along with several ice cubes.

“Here,” he said, shoving the baggie into my hands. “I saw it fall over there.” He gestured back behind the bar with one hand. “My mom’s a really good nurse. She might be able to put it back on for you.”

“Did you seriously just give me my severed finger in a bag of ice?” I asked, still partially in shock as he picked up my dart case and handed it to me like he could somehow pay for me saving him by fetching me things. To be fair, it was a good start, but I was really more of a beer and slippers type of guy.

“Yes. I wrapped it in a towel first like mom taught me so it wouldn’t get frostbite from the ice.” He beamed at me, filled with pride at having remembered this crucial detail as he handed me the dart case.

“And you’ve done this before?” I asked, arching an eyebrow as I took my case from him.

“Once, at a mother-son camping trip. One of the other kids chopped the tip of his finger off when he was trying to carve something out of wood. There was blood everywhere, but my mom was able to help him. She told the people to wrap the severed bit of finger in a towel and put it on ice from the cooler or it wouldn’t be any good.”

“Sounds scary,” I replied, sliding my dart case back into its original pocket while I examined the bag with my finger critically. I wasn’t sure about the whole wrapping it and putting it on ice thing, but since I didn’t have any experience dealing with my own severed limbs, I opted to trust him. That’s right. I trusted the fate of my severed left pinkie to an eight-year-old boy’s medical knowledge. I was so screwed.

“It was a little scary.” John looked at the ground sheepishly, color filling his cheeks. “But I got to see a real life ambulance and paramedics. It was cool, and they wound up putting Tommy’s finger back on, although now he has a wicked scar.”

“I’ll bet.” With those words I realized I rather liked the boy. It was going to make the next part even harder because I couldn’t leave him here, and I wasn’t sure what was through that door. For all I knew, I was going to step through it and find myself standing before a fire-breathing dragon. If that happened, I really hoped I knew the magic word for dragon-slayer.

I pushed that thought out of my mind and shoved the finger-laden bag in my pocket next to my darts, glad my trench coat had enough storage for all my knickknacks. Squatting down to look John in the eye, I smiled at him as confidently as I could. “I need you to stay behind me, and if something happens, I want you to run and find a place to hide, okay?”

He nodded, biting his lip as he tried to be brave. I tried to smile reassuringly back at him, but I wasn’t sure it worked because he swallowed really hard and took a step back from me.

“Okay.” He swallowed again. “But, I’m sure you’ll be able to beat up any monsters that come our way.” He reached out and touched the back of my right hand very lightly with his index finger. “You’re a good guy, and good guys always beat bad guys.”

“I hope you’re right,” I whispered as I got to my feet and turned back toward the open door, careful to keep the boy behind me. I really hoped he was correct. Not just about me winning and being able to save his mom, but about being a good guy. If I wasn’t, well, I almost hoped I didn’t remember that part of my life, unless, you know, it helped me kill a dragon and save a princess. If it meant saving his mom, I was ready to be Jack the goddamned Ripper.

I moved toward the door, careful to shield John with my body, and the sulfuric scent of brimstone filled my nose and turned my stomach. One quick glance behind me revealed John standing only a couple feet away. I wouldn’t say he was

cowering, but the way he looked reminded me of a scared toddler hiding behind his mother.

“Ready?” I asked, barely resisting the urge to reach out and grip his shoulder. Even though his knees were visibly shaking, he nodded.

A high pitched keening erupted from the doorway as I turned back around. I took a quick step forward, my heart hammering in my chest as I tried to look through the door. I couldn’t see a damned thing. The darkness beyond the threshold was way too thick. Gooseflesh rose on my flesh and dread twisted my guts as I tried to will myself to step through. Another screech ripped through the entrance, setting my nerves on edge, but this one sounded vaguely familiar.

“Mom!” John cried, and before I could stop him, the boy lunged past me through the doorway. He instantly disappeared from view, and I cursed loudly and colorfully before running after him.

## Chapter 22

Somehow, somehow, I burst into an ice cave. Effervescent algae ran through the patches of snow all around me, casting an emerald glow across every last jagged icicle. My breath came out in a cloud of mist as I stumbled, slipping on the slick ice beneath my feet. My arms flew out as I wind-milled wildly, trying to catch my balance.

It was useless. I wound up flat on my ass. Pain and cold shot through me as I sat there, trying to figure out not only where I was, but where John had gone. Near as I could tell, I was at the top of a winding staircase straight out of Frozen, only you know, more demonic. Stone sculptures of gargoyles chewing on crystalline skulls hung from the ceiling. Their eyes seemed to follow me as I got slowly to my feet and made my way over to the frozen guardrail. A pentagram of emerald fire blazed a few stories below, but near as I could tell, John wasn’t down there. Where could he have gone?

Worry crept down my spine as I turned in a slow circle, desperate to find the boy. Even though it wasn’t a very large room, I couldn’t find any trace of him anywhere.

“John?” I called, not caring if my voice alerted people to my presence because as far as I could tell, I was the only one in this frosty prison. My voice echoed across the icy landscape, and as it faded away, a chill that had nothing to do with the cold settled over me. Something was watching me. I spun just in time to avoid one of those gargoyles as it swung a massive claw at my head.

As I ducked, its thick nails gouged scratches over an inch deep in the ice behind me. Without thinking, I threw myself bodily into the creature. My shoulder struck its torso, and it didn’t even wobble as I slid down its body and collapsed to the floor. Agony radiated from my shoulder. It felt like I’d slammed into a goddamned statue. Which, in retrospect, was probably exactly what had happened.

Unperturbed by my assault, the thing raised one giant, clawed foot into the air and brought it down with crushing force. I barely moved in time to avoid having my skull splattered like a cassava melon. Its foot kept going, punching through

the icy floor like it was made of balsa wood. It fell bodily sideways, still swiping at me as I rolled away.

It wasn't my best decision because I wound up tumbling down the frosty staircase. Even though I'd done this a couple of times already, I still didn't enjoy repeating the whole stairs impacting my bones thing. By the time I reached the bottom, I wasn't sure if I was seeing double or if there really were two gargoyles unfurling their stony wings above me. They released the frozen ceiling and fell toward me like dive bombers. Not double vision. Damn.

My cheap loafers slipped on the ice as I tried desperately to get out of their way. The monsters crashed into the ice on either side of me, sending a shockwave through the ground that knocked me from my feet. I fell sprawling onto the ice and slid several feet as they turned their beady red eyes on me and gnashed their horrible teeth.

"Ignis!" I cried at the top of my lungs. Hellfire filled my palm just like it had both other times. I flung it at the closest of the pair. The blast struck its stone chest and melted clean through it in a hiss of steam. Molten rock dripped from around the ragged edges of the hole in its torso. The creature looked down at the injury, and then, very carefully, prodded it with one stumpy finger. It pulled a gob glowing rock from its wound and held it up as if trying to figure out where it had come from.

Its eyes shifted from the glob to me and back again as understanding filled its monstrous features. A roar loud enough to shatter my eardrums exploded from its gullet before it launched itself forward, claws scrabbling on the ice like a dog on linoleum. Evidently, having a hole punched through its chest by hellfire wasn't much of a deterrent. Good to know.

I rolled backward in a somersault that would make any gymnast laugh hysterically and tried to come up on my feet, failed, and crashed back to the ground a couple meters away. The gargoyles were almost upon me, and I wasn't quite sure what to do since apparently my magic was worthless. Still, I wasn't going to go down without a fight. Red light streamed off my arm, lighting it up like a Christmas tree as I called forth another blast of hellfire and launched it at the uninjured gargoyle to my left.

As it lumbered closer, the blast struck the monster on the shoulder, obliterating its arm and sending it spinning backward across the ice like a broken ballerina. Its compatriot, undeterred by its partner's sudden plight, swung a huge fist at me. I barely ducked the blow. Wind from the closeness of the attack stung my cheek as I straight up punched the thing in the face with my demonic fist.

The creature's head snapped backward with a heavy thwack that reminded me of boulders being smashed against one another. As the monster wobbled backward, I stuck one foot in the melted hole in its chest and boosted myself up into the air. Scarlet flames leapt from my tattoos as I brought the heel of my hand down onto the side of its neck with all the force my gravity-aided punch could muster.

A satisfying crunch filled the air as my hand sliced cleanly through its rocky body, splitting it from the neck to the underside of its right arm in one blow. As my feet touched the ground, the creature slid sideways in two separate pieces. It was strangely satisfying.

I had half a second to applaud myself and relish the fact I'd just cut a rock monster in half with my bare hands when the landing behind it collapsed. The gargoyle that had gotten itself stuck earlier was already pulling itself free of the rubble. I didn't have long until it got here.

So I did the smart thing. I threw another blast of hellfire at the one-armed gargoyle advancing on me and ran my ass away. I didn't see if my fireball connected, but I was pretty sure if I had hit the monster, it likely wouldn't have done much good anyway.

I was almost to the pentagram in the center of the ice when I realized I was sprinting toward a demonic symbol made from emerald fire. Why had I run this way? My last experience with the stuff hadn't been exactly positive. I threw on the brakes and wound up sliding straight into the flames.

My arms came up instinctively to shield my face from the fire. I'll be honest, I shut my eyes and cringed waiting for the impact. Only nothing happened. I sat there for longer than I'd cared to admit before slowly opening my eyes and lowering my hands. The ice cave was gone.

I stood in a darkened room about the size of a basketball court. Black curtains covered the several man-sized windows along the walls and sconces illuminated the room with that same emerald flame I'd accidentally flung myself bodily into. I took a deep breath and tried to orient myself to my new surroundings. It was a little harder to do than I'd expected because only a second ago I'd been fighting gargoyles in an ice cave and I was more than a little amped up.

My feet crunched on the gravel-strewn ground as I took a step forward. The floor appeared to be an intricate web of cobblestones in various shades of green. They were clearly laid out in some kind of pattern I didn't immediately recognize, but then again, ancient demonic hieroglyphics was never my strong suit. At least, I didn't think it was. I couldn't remember for sure.

I strained my eyes, trying to see through the gloom, but nothing was visible beyond the dancing shadows cast by the sconces. Worse yet, I couldn't hear anything either. It was like being enveloped in a bubble of silence. Like with the gargoyles, my spider sense began tingling, only as I whirled around this time, fists raised, I encountered all of nothing.

A long slow breath escaped me as I turned back around to find myself staring straight into the face of Van, the man who had abducted Sera. He grinned at me, revealing a mouthful of off-white teeth. He had John clutched by the back of the neck with one hand. He slowly raised his demonic hand in amicable greeting, and his tattoos glowed brightly, casting the boy in sickly green light.

## Chapter 23

"It would seem you got past my master and the gargoyles," Van said. His voice seemed more annoyed than anything. "You must be really good at bar games. Usually I have a lot more time." He stared past me and rubbed his chin. "One time, I managed to leave the country in the time it took for Vassago to miss during a game of pool."



“I’ve played darts a couple times.” I ran my left hand through my hair, trying to play off how nervous I’d suddenly become.

Amusement filled Van’s eyes, and he gestured to my bloody hand. “Apparently not that many times.”

“You can’t win ‘em all.” I shrugged again. “Now, let John go before I do something you won’t like. I’ll be honest, I’m not exactly sure what it will be because no one has ever refused to give me the hostage before, but I’m open to the possibilities.”

“You honestly expect me to just give you—”

“I’m also a little excited by it.” The look of rage on his face filled me with a sick sense of glee. I guess no one had interrupted him with snark in a long time. I grinned.

“Whatever the girl is offering you, I can make you an offer so much better that hers will seem insignificant. What do you say?” He held out his glowing hand, offering it to me. It was a little weird because he seemed genuine about it. Shouldn’t he have just gutted me like a fish and moved on? No, there had to be a reason why he had bothered to have Vassago detain me and was now trying to deal. Did he think I could stop him?

I stared at his hand for a long time, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about taking it. Doing so wouldn’t have been the nice thing to do nor was it the heroic thing to do, but it was probably the smart thing to do. I was really, really sure this guy could probably help me find the people from my memory. Hell, being that he’d talked his demonic sponsor into delaying me, he could probably snap his fingers and save them. All I had to do was walk away right now.

“Don’t do it!” John squeaked before his voice was cut off by a harsh slap. The sound of it rocked my entire world, and I felt my pulse speed up in response.

My vision went red around the edges as I looked from the boy to Van and back again. John was trying to be tough, trying not to whimper as a red handprint became more and more visible on his cheek. That couldn’t stand. That had to be answered for even if it was the dumb play. Sometimes there are things that are just plain wrong, things that need to be avenged because if they aren’t, they will seep into us and change us. That is how a good man dies. Not through one terrible act but with one tiny transgression after another.

“I can see the wheels spinning in your brain, Mac,” Van said, and his voice was more confident now. “Let me tell you what your hamster will find at the end of this road. It will find that you should have just walked away right now.”

“I know,” I said as I curled my right hand into a fist. Scarlet light exploded from my arm so brightly even my trench coat and shirt couldn’t diminish it. Instead, my clothing came awash in hellish flames. “Ignoring the plight of others is always the smart play, but it’s never the right play.” I took a step toward him, leaving molten footprints in my wake.

“And what do you know about being right?” Van sneered, flinging the boy behind him. John struck the cobblestones hard, bounced once, and skidded to a stop just beyond the edge of shadows. “You sold your soul to a devil just like me.” He smacked his hand with his chest, and the sound of skittering claws on rock filled my ears as millions of green eyes peered at me from the surrounding darkness.

“Well, clearly I’m better than you,” I replied before sticking my tongue out at him in a massive show of maturity.

His lips turned into a snarl that should have rendered my insides into quivering jelly, but something about it seemed like an act. “So you do think you’re better than me!” He took a menacing step forward, blocking my view of John. He raised his hand and the flames in the sconces leapt from their holders, filling his open palm. The room darkened into a sea of black that left me unable to see beyond the flickering emerald fire shrouding his face.

“Uh, yeah. I thought that was obvious.” I raised my own hand and flicked it absently behind me in a show of casual arrogance while I inwardly pleaded with the cat demon in my brain to do something awesome. Our conversation went something like this.

“Please, please, please don’t let me look like a dumbass,” I begged furiously.

She stretched, yawning so her cat mouth revealed all its dagger-like teeth before settling an annoyed, sleepy gaze at me. “I was taking a nap.”

“I know, and I really hate to bother you since I really do appreciate a good nap, but if you could just help me out here, I’d really appreciate it.” Then I shot a pleading smile at her and started sniveling. In my mind. It was pathetic.

The cat watched me for a moment, her expression fading from annoyed to slightly less annoyed. “And what would you have me do, exactly?”

“Oh, I don’t know, blast this guy into twain?” I offered, but since she narrowed her cat eyes at me in an expression of hatred I couldn’t quite withstand without turning into a puddle of goo, I quickly added, “But if not, lighting all those torches with hellfire would be awesome too!”

“Very well,” she said, flicking her tail.

Molten lava leapt from my fingertips and splashed across the wall behind me. It snaked across the dark plaster like a living, breathing thing in a slowly spreading web that not only lit each and every sconce with scarlet flame, but illuminated the entire room so completely that scarcely a shadow was left in its wake.

Van’s eyes went wide with shock, and the cholera-green flames in his hand flickered. It was a good thing too because when I saw what looked like a billion rats glaring at me from the once dark recesses in the room, I very nearly lost it. I also realized one tiny problem. I was scared shitless of the creatures. I couldn’t tell you why or how, but the sudden sight of all those rodents turned my knees into jelly.

Worse yet, I finally saw Sera. She was bound to the far wall with heavy silver manacles emblazoned with symbols I didn’t understand. She’d been stripped down to her underwear, presumably for better access since tubes were taped to her wrists and thighs. The tubes trailed down beneath her into a large stone basin half-filled with viscous crimson fluid. Her head lay slumped against her chest so her hair fell around her in a tangled, frumpy mass, but I could tell she was still breathing. Barely.

“I’ll give you this one chance to back the fuck off,” I snapped, my voice a lot higher pitched than I wanted it to be as a million rat stares bored into me. “Or I’ll show you what I can really do.” I held my demonic hand out in front of me.

My words seemed to startle Van and something dark and reptilian flitted across his eyes. His face settled into a scowl as he stepped forward, his expensive leather shoes scratching against the stone floor.

“Pass,” he said before snapping his fingers. The rats surged toward me in one scratching, chittering mass. “I wasn’t quite sure why Vassago insisted I keep all the mice around, but now it’s all become crystal clear. Evidently, you’re scared of rodents. Who knew?”

The last thing I saw as the first of the creatures leapt at me was the glint of his teeth as he turned away from me. I flung a handful of hellfire at him, but rats leapt in front of him in a giant mass of flesh and fur. My blast burned the rodents to cinders along with a good helping of cobblestone, but did little to stop Van who brushed aside the remnants of my attack with ease. More rats swept over the corpses of their friends, and without thinking I turned and ran, sprinting across the huge room in a mad dash for safety that wasn’t immediately visible.

I spun on my heels, forcing myself to stop and face the onslaught of rodents. Laughter filled my ears as Van reared back like a Major League pitcher and flung his version of a flaming Randy Johnson fastball at my face. Luckily, the blast didn’t hit me in the face. Less luckily, it hit me in the chest as I tried to leap away from it.

White hot agony shot through my body as I tumbled head over heels across the broken cobblestones. I smacked into the wall with a thud that left stars shooting across my eyes. I struggled, trying to get back to my feet as Van’s hand began to glow with ominous emerald light. Fortunately, I didn’t have time to worry about it because the rats hit me in a ginormous wave of claws, teeth, and disgusting lizard-like tails.

## Chapter 24

They say the world will end with a whimper rather than a bang. I’m not sure if that will be true or not. I know one thing though. My world was about to end in a cacophony of rat teeth and claws. Their tiny rodent jaws fought for purchase in my flesh as I rolled over the cobbles, crushing tiny bodies beneath me as I tried vainly to fling them away.

Adrenaline surged through my veins, blocking out the pain and fear as I climbed slowly to my knees, beating my fists at the rats clinging to my chest, but for every creature I dislodged, three more seemed to take its place. I slumped forward under their onslaught, falling forward onto my hands and losing much of the ground I’d fought so hard to gain.

My fingers gripped the cobbles as the creatures scabbled onto my face and into my hair. One bit down on my earlobe and a scream tore from my lips. Another bit my tongue. My jaws closed reflexively and something crunched beneath my teeth. Warm blood filled my mouth, and my stomach roiled in sudden protest as I realized what I’d done. I’d pulled a goddamned Ozzy Osborne and bit the head off a rat.

I spit out the bleeding rat head. It was lost beneath the sea of squirming bodies swarming over me, and I'm not sure why, but as I watched the head disappear beneath the bodies of its brethren a sudden thought filled me. I wasn't some normal fucking person. I was Mac Brennan, and I'd made a deal with the Devil. For magic.

As I reached down into that place inside me where I'd learned to grab hold of hellfire, smoke began to rise off my body. A door made of burnished silver with a ruby encrusted handle took shape in my mind. A calico cat with an orange patch over one eye was emblazoned upon its surface in startling relief. My mental hand extended, and as my fingers curled around the door's handle, my physical hand dug into the cobbles beneath me. Flame spit from the cracks between the door and its frame as I jerked it open. In an instant, the blood in my veins turned to lava. Sweat poured from my skin and evaporated into steam just as quickly.

"Flame on!" I cried at the top of my lungs, and the whole goddamned room shook.

Scarlet fire exploded from my body, cooking the rodents clinging to me in a heartbeat. I stood in a cascade of falling ash as the smell of burned flesh and hair filled my nostrils. Bits and pieces of charred rat flitted through the air around me like burned paper. I waved my hand in front of me. The fire surrounding my body crashed across the stone floor as a wave of burning lava, driving the remaining rats before me in a flurry of rodent lamentation. Good, they could tell their brothers what they witnessed here.

Van slammed a goddamned sledgehammer into my ribs. I hadn't seen him step out of the darkness, hadn't even known he was next to me, but I sure felt the impact of his presence, let me tell you. I flew sideways and skidded across the stone floor, leaving a trail of superheated stone in my wake.

My vision went blurry around the edges as I tried to push myself back to my feet. Not that it mattered because Van caught me in the side of the head with his heel and drove me face first into the stone. He held me there like a goddamned croquet ball as he reared back with his blue-handled sledgehammer. As the flames around my body died away, I had the sudden realization that after everything, I was about to be brained by a bargain bin Home Depot hammer. That would not stand.

"Say goodbye, Johnny Storm. It's been *fantastic* getting to know you!" Van cried, smiling at me like he was about to burst through the wall and shout, "Here's, Johnny!"

"You know, I must have missed the issue where Doctor Doom wins," I wheezed, trying my best to buy time as I reached into my pocket.

"There's a first time for everything," he replied, bringing the hammer down in an arc that would splatter my brains across the cobblestones.

I drove my darts into the side of his knee, and the man buckled like a cheap umbrella. The hammer slipped from his hands and shattered the stone next to my nose. Bits of rock cut into my face as I grabbed onto his belt with one hand and dragged myself up his body. My elbow lashed out along the way, smashing into his groin as I pulled myself to my feet by his belt.

His eyes went wide with pain, and a cry died in his throat as his mouth opened and closed several times. He probably would have kept on like that if I hadn't

decked him across the face with my demonic fist. His eyes went glassy as he fell backward in a boneless heap. I leapt on top of his chest, pinning his arms to the rock with my knees. Then I smashed my fists into his skull over and over again.

Everything around me burned bright red, blurring together as I continued to hit him. Screaming erupted from a few feet away, and it shook me from my fury. Barely. I looked up from Van's unconscious, bloody form to see John standing only a few feet away. His eyes were filled with panic. How long had he watched me pummel an unconscious man? From the look of it, the whole time.

I slowly lowered my hands and sat there for a moment, trying to overcome the unending stream of rage coursing through me. I shut my eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Then I did it again. Over and over until I felt I could control myself. I opened my eyes and got slowly to my feet. My knuckles were throbbing, raw, and bloody. Van was a mass of torn flesh and goo, but he was still breathing. I hadn't killed him. That seemed important, although I was unsure why because it felt careless. I shouldn't have stopped. I should have killed him. That was the smart play.

John stood a few feet away, and as I stood, he nodded to me. "You didn't kill him." His words were barely a whisper, but they seemed to reverberate within the space.

"Yeah." I glanced down at Van and watched his chest rise and fall for a few breaths. I still had time to finish him. "It's a mistake."

"Yeah, it is, but even with everything the Joker has done, Batman has never killed him." John quirked a smile at me before coming over to me and grabbing me by the hand. His fingers were strangely cool, and while I can't say why I did it, I didn't immediately shake him away. "And if I've learned one thing, it's that you should always be yourself, unless you can be Batman. Always be Batman."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "That's an excellent point."

"Now, let's go get my mom." Without another word, he began dragging me toward Sera. I let him although I should have stopped him, should have killed Van. It would probably be one of the worst decisions I'd ever wind up making, and not just because it meant I was going soft. No, it was because Van would eventually get up, would eventually recover, and a guy like that would want revenge. He was a bully, plain and simple, and bullies never really learned. They just waited in the shadows, plotting until they could rain down vengeance upon you. It's why things always got worse before they got better.

Unfortunately, I had no way of explaining that to an eight year old, and even if I did, I wasn't sure I wanted to do so. I could still do it anyway, but I *really* didn't want to kill someone in front of him. There would be no coming back from that.

We'd made it halfway across the room when hideous guffaws filled the room to bursting. We whirled around in unison to see Van sitting up. How had he recovered so quickly? Then I saw it. His arm was glowing, spilling green fire down the length of him, filling in his wounds with emerald light. His demon was healing him.

Blood sprayed from his lips as he continued to laugh and shake his head. His tattoos flared so brightly I had to look away to keep from going blind. With one hand, I shoved John behind me and stepped forward, calling upon my own power.

It roiled up inside me as Van pulled my darts from his leg and smiled. His teeth were a bloody mass, but that was somehow less creepy than the green tendrils spreading out from his body like emerald vipers.

“You should have killed me,” he said, and the darts melted to slag in his grip, filling the air with the acrid smell of burning plastic. Van stood, green tentacles writhing around his body like he was some kind of radioactive octopus. “But you didn’t. It will be your last mistake.”

“You’ve not yet begun to see me make mistakes,” I yelled back as I attempted to put some distance between John and me. I wasn’t sure what was about to happen, but there was no way it could be good. The farther away the boy was when Van attacked, the better.

“Well, you better hurry then. You won’t have much longer.” Van’s tentacles lashed out in a crackling arc. Green sparks leapt across their surface as they smacked into the stone where I’d been standing, melting the cobbles into molten puddles.

Fortunately, I’d thrown myself out of the way. I hit the ground in a roll that made my shoulder scream in pain and came to my feet just in time for a tentacle to smack me across the stomach. Electricity exploded through my body like I’d been stabbed with a live wire. My muscles spasmed and my teeth snapped together as I was flung sideways across the room. I smashed into one of the huge, curtained windows with a bone-breaking crack, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still.

I found myself looking at John, urging him with my eyes to run, to free his mother. The boy was staring back at me, mouth agape. Something must have passed through our mental gaze because he nodded. As he turned toward Sera, the glass behind me shattered, and I fell backward, tearing the black curtain from its rod. The dark fabric wrapped around me like a funeral shroud filled with razor-sharp shards.

The cement outside broke my fall, pushing the breath violently from my lungs as dark spots swam across my vision. I lay there, trying to make my body tear away the curtain blanketing me in darkness, but I couldn’t even remember how to inhale. Something grabbed me, wrapping around my torso like a boa constrictor. It hauled me to my feet before lifting me into the air, causing the curtain to fall away in a shimmering, sparkling rain of glass and debris.

I hung there, suspended a few inches above a balcony a floor below the shattered window. The ground looked to be at least ten stories away. It was more than enough distance to have killed me if I hadn’t landed on this balcony. As that thought hammered into me, Van stuck his head out of the window above and waved.

“This is where you think I’m going to drop you, huh?” he asked as the tentacles wrapped around me began to slowly retract, pulling me toward him. “Well, that’s not going to happen, at least not yet. I haven’t lived for so long by being silly. Maybe you’d die from such a fall, maybe not, but I’m not willing to take that chance.”

I jerked to a stop about two feet away from him, and he met my eyes. Fear and anger clouded his vision, making him seem insane. It reminded me of a drug lord storming around his safe room threatening his bodyguards while the hero picked

off the men outside one by one. It was a little weird because I should have felt terrified. There I was, completely at this madman's mercy, but I just didn't feel scared. I felt, strangely enough, calm. Something told me I had been in this situation before. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but it meant one thing. I'd survived before. I could survive again.

"This is where you find out I am not above just shooting my enemies in the head." Van's black arm whipped out in front of him, pointing a chrome Desert Eagle at my skull. The tattoos along his flesh glimmered in the light of the moon above. "It's easy, and it's sensible." His finger began to depress the two stage trigger through the travel distance. It would only be another moment before he encountered the resistance of the final stage, and I had no doubt he'd continue blindly through to obliterate my skull with a fifty caliber round.

"You know what I've always hated about Green lantern?" I asked as I struggled to get free, and that's when I realized my arms weren't bound, just my torso.

His finger stopped on the second stage of the trigger, and he paused, thinking over something. It was less than a nanosecond, but it felt like forever, and forever was exactly what I needed.

"What?" he asked, and the tentacles tightened around me. My ribs gave way in a shriek of bone that tore a scream from my lips. He pulled me closer so the barrel of the gun rested against my forehead. It was an amateur mistake. It would be way easier to dodge from here.

"It's the whole magic ring thing. Every time I read the damned comics, and he fights someone, he does well, until inevitably, he loses his ring. Why I remember this one time..." My right hand came up gripping the ritual dagger I'd stolen from the cultist what felt like years ago. The blade caught him in the armpit, slicing his demonic arm off his body like his flesh and bone were composed of little more than warm butter.

The emerald tentacles gripping me vanished, and I plummeted backward in a rain of scarlet. Van shrieked in pain, his left hand gripping at the missing stump of his arm as blood gushed through his fingers.

For the second time in as many minutes, the concrete balcony broke my fall. Van's arm hit the cement beside me with a wet slap as I lay there struggling to breathe. My body was covered in blood as it cascaded down from above. I shut my eyes and called upon my cat demon, hoping to beg her for one last ounce of strength to finish this.

Only this time, I saw her watching me from my mind's eye. Her whiskers twitched as she walked around me in a slow circle, her green and yellow cat eyes filled with amusement.

"That was clever," she said in a sing song voice that rippled along my mind like icy spider's webs.

"I thought so. I wasn't sure if it'd work, to be honest." I fought the urge to shrug. "Could you help me out?"

"Oh, I've already done that. Open your eyes."

## Chapter 25

I was still on the balcony with the cultist's knife in my hand. Van was still above me screaming. I'd been out less than a second. There was just one trifling difference. I didn't feel pain anymore. Oh, and my body was wrapped in a fading cocoon of crimson light. Sitting up was one of the easiest things I'd ever done. Whatever the cat in my head had done to help me was better than a shot of morphine followed by a Vicodin chaser. It was a little weird.

My eyes surveyed the moonlit surroundings as I sheathed the knife before pulling Van's Deagle from the still warm fingers of his severed arm. As I hefted the weapon, I found the weight surprisingly familiar. A thin smile flashed across my lips as I checked it over. It was sticky with blood, but seemed otherwise undamaged by the fall. Thank God it was made out of metal. If it'd been made of cheap polymer and plastic, the drop might have cracked something important. It was still possible, but I was willing to give myself pretty good odds on it still working. Either way, I'd know in a minute.

I dropped into a weaver shooting stance, placing my right foot back and turning slightly because I wasn't exactly worried about Van putting a bullet through my left armpit and into my heart since he was disarmed. I craned my weapon upward, sighting the chrome pistol on his chest and let loose three quick shots. They echoed across the landscape like thunder, and Van's body jerked backward out of sight in a spray of blood and thicker bits.

The gun fell to my side, and I stood there, chest heaving in the cold night air. I needed to get back up there, but the wall in front of me was covered in slick plaster. Without the proper equipment, I wouldn't be climbing it very easily. Besides, while I felt pain free, I could feel my ribs jostling in a way that wasn't exactly pleasant. I was reasonably sure one hadn't punctured my heart or my lungs, but for all I knew, whatever the cat had me hopped up on was masking those symptoms too. If I risked trying to climb it, I could wind up puncturing something I'd rather like to keep puncture-free. No, I needed a new plan.

I raised my right hand toward the broken window and concentrated, picturing Van's armada of tentacles. Red light began to seep from my tattoos like blood from an old wound. My fingers extended slowly as I tried to copy what Van had done. Sweat broke across my body, chilling me in an instant. My teeth chattered together and pain stabbed at me from my ruined ribs. Sparks leapt across my flesh, and millions of spots danced across my eyes like a swarm of fireflies.

My skin began to writhe as viscous, red slime pulled itself from my tattoos, reminding me of that scene from Freddy Krueger where the screaming faces of the damned pressed out of his flesh. My legs gave out on me, and I collapsed forward, barely catching myself with my left arm. Pain shot through me and with it, came the roaring agony that had been suppressed by the cat's power. My vision went dark around the edges as I called up every bit of willpower I had and reached out one last time toward the window above.

Thick red fluid exploded from my palm like a gunshot, bursting through the open window and smacking into the ceiling within with a wet thwip. Elation filled me as the tentacle snapped taut. Then it jerked me violently upward with enough force to nearly wrench my shoulder from its socket. I cried out as I was pulled up into the room like the goddamned Batman.



The moment my feet touched the cobblestone floor inside, the tentacle detached from the ceiling, retracting into my tattoos with a glistening, wet glow. My ribs felt like someone had smashed me with a sledgehammer which, of course, had actually happened, but as I stood there panting, the pain started to recede, not as much as before, but enough to let me function without curling into a ball on the floor.

Van lay on his back in an ever-widening pool of blood. I wasn't sure if he was dead because the only light in the room was coming from the moon behind me. I took a step toward him, my hand clenching the Desert Eagle so tightly the knuckles on my white hand were white with effort. This was my chance to end this.

"Mac, help me!" John cried from the darkness. My head snapped toward the sound of his voice. I could barely make out the vague outline of the boy struggling with a form on the wall. He was trying to rescue Sera, but from the looks of it, had thus far been unsuccessful.

"Coming," I called back, and as I changed my trajectory to meet him, I glanced one last time at Van's unmoving body. A bad feeling settled over me as I stared at him so I did the sensible thing and chased it away by putting three more shots into the man's chest. The sound boomed inside the room, reducing my hearing to a sharp whining sound. I couldn't see how well they connected, but if his jerking body was any indication, I hadn't missed. Hopefully, it would be enough to keep him down.

With that happy thought, I shoved the weapon into the front of my pants and jogged toward John and his mother. Each step jerked at my nerves with rusty fishhooks, but that didn't bother me. I had won, had defeated Van, had stormed a cult, and had fought off werewolves. I had done all this to save my princess, and now, all I had to do was walk over to her with broken ribs stabbing into my body.

I was Mac Brennan, and I could manage that.

Despite John's best effort, he'd done little more than pull the tubes from her body, probably because she was bound with chains and manacles. She was still breathing despite the blood loss, but one thing was certain. She needed a doctor, fast. We both did. That's when the sound of sirens filled my ears. My head turned toward the open window, and I saw the strobe of the blue and red gumballs in the distance. They'd be here in minutes. I did not want to be here when that happened.

"Resero," I said, touching the manacles on her left wrist with my right index finger. A small spark of power that made stars flash across my eyes leapt from my fingertip. The manacle unlocked, and I could have sworn I heard feline laughter in the distance. So that little trick was her doing. Well played, head-cat. Well played.

I made short work of the rest of the bindings, and Sera slumped forward into my arms. John wrapped his own arms around her. We stood like that for several moments while I tried to ignore the sound of the sirens coming closer and closer.

"We need to go," I said not sure how to make good on my words.

"Maybe I can help with that," Jack said, his winged form casting an ominous shadow across the floor in front of the broken window. He began striding toward us, and while I couldn't see the expression on his face as his bat wings folded up behind him like a cape, I got the distinct impression he was smiling at me.

“How are you here?” I wheezed and realized I could taste blood in my mouth. That wasn’t good. That wasn’t good at all. It spoke of internal injuries.

“When you did whatever it was you did to Van, the flames died away, and the alarms went berserk.” The vampire jogged toward me, and much to my surprise, John seemed happy to see the Indian. It made me wonder what kind of mother Sera actually was if the boy was relieved to see a vampire. Then again, I was also relieved to see him.

“So what’s the plan?” I asked as the vampire took Sera into his arms, hefting her easily over one shoulder.

“First you drink this,” Jack said before tearing open the flesh on his wrist with his teeth to reveal thick viscous fluid that reminded me of raspberry jam. He held it out to me, but before I could do anything, John reached out and tugged on his arm.

“Mac lost his finger,” John said before pointing at my pocket. “He still has it in there.”

“Well, go on and get it out and hold the pieces together before you drink then.” Jack grinned widely at me, and I got the distinct impression he was enjoying the squeamishness on my face. “Vampire blood has all sorts of healing properties, assuming you don’t die with it in your system. If you do, well, I’ll be seeing you in three days with a stake. Comprende?”

“Yeah, don’t die with vampire blood in my system or you will wax me like a gym floor,” I said, and strangely enough, I was okay with him killing me if I came back as an undead bloodsucker. Something told me that Jack might be the exception rather than the rule when it came to his kind.

“Pretty much. It’s nice to see we’re on the same page,” Jack replied, nodding at me as I fished the plastic baggie out of my pocket and pulling out my shriveled pinkie.

“Well, here goes nothing.” I pushed my severed finger against the wounded stub on my left hand, and even though every part of me revolted at the thought, I put my lips to his wrist and sucked.

“That’s a boy, drink up,” Jack slurred as his eyes rolled back in his head.

My throat convulsed as I swallowed, and for a second, I thought Jack’s blood was going to come rocketing up out of me, but then the strangest thing happened. Heat began to build up in the pit of my stomach. Warmth spread out inside me, filling me up from within and taking all my pain along with it. My bones snapped back into place, knitting themselves together in an instant, and somehow, my finger reattached itself without so much as a nasty scar.

“Holy shit,” I exclaimed as the vampire jerked his wrist away from my greedy lips.

“No, vampire blood. Now let’s get out of here before we have to explain to the cops why we’re here.” He squatted down to gather up John like the boy was a toddler before making his way toward the window. His wings unfurled behind him like he was a giant bat, and before I could protest, he’d leapt from the edge.

Even though I knew he was probably fine, I cried out in surprise, racing over to make sure he landed okay. I needn’t have bothered. Jack the vampire landed lightly on the grass below. I saw a strange fog roll over the top of him, and then he, along with Sera and John were gone.

I'll be honest, I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but something told me Jack would make sure Sera and John were okay. Whatever their relationship with the vampire was, I got the feeling he was on their side. At least, I sure hoped so. I'd hate to have to visit a twenty-four-hour home improvement store and be forced to explain why I was buying wooden stakes in the dead of night.

Since I could see flashing lights about a block away, I was especially anxious to get out of here. Fortunately, I didn't have many promises left to keep, nor did I have miles to go before I slept. I only had one thing left to do. Stop being Batman.

I crossed the cobblestone floor and picked up Van's sledgehammer. I hefted it in my hands, getting use to the weight as I walked over to Van. He wasn't moving, but for all I knew, getting his demonic arm lopped off and taking six fifty-caliber rounds to the chest would result in nothing more than a bad hangover. I wasn't interested in finding out.

I raised the hammer high into the air, and when I brought it down, I didn't miss.

## Chapter 26

Much to my surprise, the space in front of me ripped apart like torn fabric, spilling orange light across the room. Heat unlike I'd ever felt before, hit me full in the face, sucking the moisture from my body as I staggered backward, clutching the hammer for dear life.

Death sat within the tear's swirling depths astride his pale horse. The creature whinnied, and he kicked it hard in the side with one black-soled heel. The horse put its head down and trotted forward until its feet clomped onto the cobblestones in front of me.

"I always told you this day would come, Van." Death's words scurried across my flesh as panic reared its head up and swallowed me whole. "You always tried to tell me you were invincible, and what did I do? I laughed." Ghastly laughter spilled from between his too white teeth. "I find I am still laughing now."

Death reached out with one bony hand and grabbed at the air just in front of Van's body. He pulled and some wiggling, squirming thing tore free of Van. It writhed, struggling in Death's grip, but the reaper didn't seem to mind. He turned to regard me and held up Van's soul like he was the predator showing off a new skull for his collection.

"Thanks," he said in that wind blowing through a graveyard voice of his. "I've been after this one for a while." I got the impression he was grinning at me even though his face was little more than a hollow skull. "But don't think this means you'll get any special treatment from me."

His pale horse turned, and he began trotting toward the portal. I was glad. Even though he hadn't come to reap me personally, just being near him was enough to make me hope I never died just so I wouldn't ever have to meet him again. It was a foolish thought since death, especially for a guy with a demonic arm, was an inevitability, but still. Still.

As his horse clopped back into the depths from whence it'd come, the reaper turned back to regard me carefully. "Thank you again," he said, and shifted on his

saddle, allowing a slip of paper to fall from his pocket and drift lazily to the ground at my feet. His skeletal grin returned, and he chuckled once more before turning away from me and disappearing into the rent in space and time.

It vanished without a trace, leaving me standing there dumbfounded. I half-wondered if I'd just hallucinated the whole episode, but as I stood there gaping like an idiot, I realized the slip of paper that had fallen from the pocket of his dark robe was still there.

Woodenly, I picked up the note. An address was written on it, and something about it filled me with a sense of dread I couldn't explain. I knew that place. It was important to me. And if it was important to me, did it hold the key to saving the woman and child from my shards of memory? I had to know.

I muttered a silent word of thanks to Death and turned back toward the window as police cars came to a stop outside. I was out of time. So what did I do? I readied myself to jump from the window. It wasn't my best play, especially since I had no idea if I'd survive such a fall or if I could use magic to slow my descent, but I was out of options. You know, until I came to the window's edge and saw Jack standing on the ground below me.

"I'll catch you, Princess," he called and because I knew I wouldn't do it if I thought about it at all, I waited exactly no seconds before throwing myself from the window.

He caught me. It hurt more than I expected, and even though Jack had moved with the force of my fall, I was really sure I'd have monumental bruises in the morning. It made me wonder how Lois Lane managed to survive being caught by Superman, but then again, the Man of Steel had superhuman reflexes. He could probably compensate.

Jack dropped me roughly onto the ground, and as the mist closed up over the top of me, I saw Duane grinning at me from a few feet away. He had one hand driven deep into the dark earth while his other was outstretched toward the mist like he was controlling it.

"Neat trick, eh?" he said, and I smiled by way of reply.

Sera sat a few feet away, hugging John to her chest. It made me wonder how long I'd been alone up there. It hadn't felt very long, but maybe it was longer than I thought since she was awake and hugging her son fiercely. She looked like she still needed to visit an emergency room, but being that Jack had healed my broken bones in the space of a second, I was willing to bet she wouldn't be seeing a doctor.

"So how do we get out of here?" I asked, glancing down at the slip of paper clutched in my fist.

"We walk," Duane said, pulling his hand from the earth and standing up. He looked wearier than he had a second before, but as he pushed past me, I realized the shroud of mist had descended across the whole of the neighborhood, making it so I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me. He must not have had a similar problem because only a few minutes later we emerged on the outside of the gate and made our way past the several officers surrounding our "borrowed" car.

"So what's the plan?" I asked as we kept walking toward what looked like a strip mall in the distance.

“We get the hell out of here,” Duane replied, glancing at me over his shoulder as he moved forward. “You got somewhere you need to be?”

“Yes, actually,” I said, holding up the slip of paper, still not sure if it was real. “I think this might help me find out who I really am.”

Duane nodded, but it was Jack who grunted. As I turned toward him because he was taking up the rear, he reached past Sera and snatched it from my fingers. I’d barely realized he had taken the note in the time it took him to read it and offer it back to me like it was a live snake.

“That is bad mojo,” he said, shaking his head. “It smells of death.” He tapped his chest. “And as an upstanding member of the undead community, I know a thing or two about death.” He took a deep breath, and I immediately wondered if he needed to breathe, being a vampire and all. “And even though I know you won’t listen to me, I’m going to tell you, do not go there.”

“It’s my only chance,” I whispered and held out my right arm. “I don’t know why I got this, but the only thing I remember was someone kicking the shit out of me while a woman and her child got abducted. If this note leads me to a clue, I have to take that chance.”

Jack looked like he was going to say something when Sera reached out and took the note from his hand. They exchanged a glance that must have had some sort of psychic communication in it because he looked away.

“Be careful,” she said, pushing it into my hand.

“I will,” I said, smiling at her. She smiled back. It wasn’t the nicest smile I’d ever seen. It was tired and ragged around the edges, but it was definitely the most relieved smile I’d ever seen. The gratefulness shining through made me happy from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. No matter what happened next, I had saved her and her son from a monster. How bad could I possibly be?

“Good,” she replied, and with that she kissed me on the cheek. I’ll be honest, it threatened the structural integrity of my legs and made it a little hard for me to breathe.

“He doesn’t need to be careful,” John said, wrapping his arms around me as the surrounding mist lifted, revealing the sunrise high above. The sun’s rays spilled across the sky like an over easy egg in a glittering pan of orange and purple. “He’s a hero, and the hero always wins.” He pulled me down into a hug, and I let him do it. Then he leaned in close to my ear. “Even if the hero thinks he’s a bad guy.”

## Chapter 27

I stood in front of a modest, ticky tack house in a modest ticky tack neighborhood where all the lawns were well-manicured and all the bushes were meticulously trimmed. It hadn’t taken me long to get here. Apparently, Duane was able to summon a driver on his phone who arrived all of ten minutes later. So there I was, not a half hour after meeting Death himself, standing in front of the address he’d given me.

Its stone facade seemed cheap, making me think the builders of this particular neighborhood had wanted to differentiate their three different models in the least

expensive way possible. This was made more obvious by the brick facade sported by the houses on either side of the one indicated by the address I'd gotten from Death.

One of the lights on the outside of the garage was shining brightly with all its LED induced intensity, while its compatriot was dark, making me wonder whether it had burned out or if the illuminated one had a bad photo sensor and was supposed to shut off automatically. It was a little disconcerting because it spoke of neglect, but I tried to tell myself people delayed fixing things all the time. As it stood, the lights were probably last on a very long "honey do" list.

More worrisome was the green garbage can was still out in front of the sidewalk. It was the only trashcan not up by its house. Why hadn't this one been put away? It didn't bode well. As I approached the tall black front door, I took a deep breath to calm myself. There was no use freaking out now. Doing so wouldn't help me at all. I was Mac Brennan, and it was time to man the fuck up.

I rang the doorbell, ignoring the note taped on top of it saying to please not ring the doorbell and waited. I glanced around nervously, hypersensitive a neighbor would find my presence here just after sunrise disconcerting and do something stupid like call the cops, or even worse, try to talk to me. I rang again and followed with a loud knock. No response.

After what felt like forever, I tried the door knob. It twisted easily. That probably wasn't good. Even though everything inside me was screaming it was a horrible idea, I pushed open the door and when I didn't hear the sound of an alarm beeping, peered inside. I hadn't really expected an alarm since I hadn't seen a sign posted out in front of the house warning me, but the lack of one made me feel slightly better.

The next thing I noticed was the smell, like week old garbage. It hit me full in the face, and I flinched backward, instantly brought back to my horrific nap in the dumpster yesterday. It was hard to believe that had only been yesterday. It seemed like it'd happened a lifetime ago.

"Hello?" I called through the threshold. There was no response. "Hello?" I called again, louder this time. The result was the same. Apprehension began to prickle along the back of my neck, and I rubbed it as I tried to figure out what to do. Could I just walk inside? No doubt someone would call the police if they saw a strange person just walk inside but then again, maybe not. This seemed like the type of neighborhood where the neighbors didn't get together for block parties. Most of them probably hadn't even met each other.

I sighed and stuck my head inside, but all I could see was the narrow line of the entryway and a splash of hallway wall. This place was deserted. That left one ominous question. Why would someone leave a house and not lock it up? Especially if they'd been gone for such a significant length of time that the trashcan had neglected to be put away?

Against my better judgment, I stepped through the door and onto the white and gray marble floor. I swept my gaze right and left. Right led to a series of closed doors, likely bedrooms and bathrooms. Left led to what looked like a family room. I went left. The last thing I wanted to do was burst in on someone changing. What would I say? "Oh, Death appeared on his pale horse and sent me to make sure you remembered to wear clean underwear?" Yeah, that'd go over real well.

I resisted the urge to draw the Desert Eagle still tucked into my pants even though a small voice in the back of my head urged me to clear the room with military precision. Instead, I slowly poked my head around the corner and did a quick scan of the room.

A coffee table with cherry finish. Beige leather couches. An end table matching the coffee table with a small beige lamp sitting atop it. No people.

I released a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding and stepped out into the room. My foot crunched on something, and I looked to see I'd stepped on a plastic toy. A green tyrannosaurus rex.

A jolt of memory exploded through my brain. I had the tiny dinosaur in my hand, only my hand wasn't blacker than the hair of Satan's ass. I was offering the toy to someone in front of me, someone I couldn't quite picture. I strained, trying to force the details into being, but as I did, everything slipped through my fingers until I was left staring at the dinosaur beneath my shoe once again.

Fear gripped me as I snapped back to reality. I knew whoever had lived here well enough to have given the dinosaur to them as a gift. The thought made my blood run cold.

"Hello?" I cried much louder than before, but the only response was deafening silence. Panic swelled up inside me as I hurried through the room and pushed through a door along the far wall. It opened into a kitchen with granite counters and professional looking stainless steel appliances. No people again, but judging by the smell, the trashcan was somewhere in here. I didn't stay long enough to confirm.

The next room was the dining room, complete with a bar height oak table and chairs. A china cabinet stood along the far wall, displaying a set of dishes that looked expensive. The floor was covered by that tile meant to look like wood. Also expensive. The type of expensive that was too expensive to be in a house like this. Something was definitely off.

I drew my gun, not caring if I scared someone. I shoved my way through the door on the other side of the dining room. Another room done in the same tile greeted me. An enormous black television was immediately visible mounted to the far wall situated between foot tall marble statues of the Justice League and the Avengers respectively. I swung my gaze and my gun around as I stepped into the room. My heart leapt into my throat.

Spray painted across the far wall in dripping red paint was a message.

"You have three days to finish the job or we kill the girl and her kid."

A date was written underneath in black. The date was from two days ago. Today was my last day to finish the job. The only problem was, I had no idea what it was.

